

**“It’s Not Just About Me”: A Social Realist Study of
Responsibility, Voice, and Becoming for Humanities
Students at a South African University**

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degree of
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Abstract

This thesis explores how the experience of pursuing a humanities degree contributes to shifts in students' identities. Located at Rhodes University in South Africa, the study is situated within a higher education context marked by ongoing structural inequality, slow institutional transformation, and emerging responses to the challenges raised during the #MustFall movements. It draws on Margaret Archer's Social Realism, using her concepts of reflexivity, agency, and identity to understand how students navigate the structural and cultural conditions that shape both their pre-university lives and their experiences within higher education, and how these conditions influence their internal conversations, decision-making, and identities.

Using narrative inquiry, the study engages with the conditions that contribute to identity formation during the course of a humanities degree. Through in-depth interviews with 15 postgraduate humanities students within the Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science and International Studies, and Philosophy departments, it traces how students make sense of their decisions to enter university, their expectations of what a degree will offer, and how these expectations shift over time. The research focuses on students in the humanities, a field often undervalued within an increasingly market-driven global higher education context, and shows how their experiences are shaped by socio-economic constraints, family and community responsibilities that emerge from Black Tax, and broader cultural ideas of success.

The findings suggest that while students often enter university with clearly defined goals centred on financial stability and social mobility, the humanities disciplines provide opportunities for critical engagement, self-reflection, and new ways of thinking about the world and their place in it. These shifts in identity are complex and layered, as students work to align the changes they experience with social and cultural expectations, familial responsibilities, and the realities of life after graduation.

By foregrounding student narratives, this thesis shows that identity formation is not a secondary outcome of higher education but a central, situated process through which students navigate cultural obligations, structural constraints, and institutional expectations, revealing both the potential and limits of the humanities as spaces for personal transformation.

Keywords: Student Experience; Humanities Education; Identity Formation; Reflexivity; Higher Education Purposes; Transformation

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CHE	Council for Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
HBU _s	Historically Black Universities
HWU _s	Historically White Universities
LLB	Bachelor of Laws
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
RU	Rhodes University
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UCT	University of Cape Town
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UP	University of Pretoria
WITS	University of the Witwatersrand

Chapter 1: Introduction

Framing the Student Journey in South African Higher Education

“The humanities is where black students come to die.”

Student, course feedback focus group

This was not a line from a protest or a manifesto. It was a quiet, candid moment in a routine course feedback session, a space meant for reflection on teaching and learning. But it landed heavily, and it has stayed with me.

As someone working in student academic development, I am deeply invested in creating learning environments that are inclusive, meaningful, and supportive. This makes comments like these especially difficult, as they point to a persistent and painful disconnect between what institutions aim to provide and what many students actually experience as they navigate the layered realities of post-apartheid higher education.

It was not simply about academic struggle. It spoke to something more profound: a sense of disillusionment, exhaustion, and perhaps even betrayal, where a space that promises change is experienced instead as alienating or exclusionary. As an academic developer, I have seen how students often describe their degrees as something to ‘get through’ rather than something that enables growth. Their reflections speak to tensions present across many higher education systems between instrumental and developmental purposes, and between inclusion and exclusion. In South Africa, these tensions are intensified by the legacies of apartheid and the slow pace of systemic change.

This study is situated at the intersection of persistent tensions in South African higher education, where policy ideals and institutional commitments to equity, inclusion, and transformation often diverge from students’ lived realities. It focuses on undergraduate students in the humanities at Rhodes University, whose degrees unfolded within a layered and significant context: they began their studies three years after the national #MustFall student protests, during a period of notable demographic transformation at the institution, and experienced part of their academic journey amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, the research explores how students understand the purpose and value of

their degrees. It examines how their socio-economic circumstances, cultural expectations, and institutional structure and culture shape their identities, aspirations, and plans for the future.

Using Margaret Archer's theory of Social Realism, this study examines how structural and cultural conditions intersect with student agency to shape how students engage with their degrees, interpret their relevance, and navigate an institution that, while responding to demands for transformation, remains deeply contested.

The students at the centre of this study began their degrees in 2019, three years after the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall national student protests in 2015 and 2016, which brought issues of access, belonging, and institutional transformation to the fore in South African higher education (Chapman, 2019; Hlatshwayo, 2022). While these movements were initially sparked by concerns about unaffordable fees and financial aid shortfalls, they quickly grew to include broader critiques of institutional culture, questioning whose knowledge is valued, who the university is designed for, and whether post-apartheid reforms had led to meaningful change (Morreira, 2017; Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Hlatshwayo, 2020). At Rhodes University, the protests drew particular attention to its colonial heritage, the symbolic landscape of the campus, and ongoing challenges in creating an inclusive environment for black¹ working-class students (Alasow, 2015; Mnyanda, 2015; Prinsloo 2016; Mkhabela, 2017).

Although the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests had ended by the time the study's cohort of student participants entered university in 2019, their influence remained present in ongoing debates about transformation, curriculum, and institutional culture (Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). The students who participated in this study enrolled during a period marked by heightened awareness of inequality in higher education and continued calls for structural and cultural change (Hlatshwayo, 2020).

During the time the student participants were completing their degrees, Rhodes University, like many institutions in the sector, was undergoing notable demographic and structural shifts. One of the most visible shifts during this period was the changing demographic profile of the student body. In 2003, black African students made up 36% of the undergraduates at Rhodes University, and white students accounted for 50% (Rhodes University Statistical Digest, 2005). Among first-time entering undergraduates that year, 38% were black African and 47% were

¹ I am using this term as inclusive of black African, Coloured and Indian.

white. By 2013, the proportion of black African students had grown to 56% of total enrolments, and by 2023, it increased to 88% (Rhodes University Statistical Digest, 2023). Among first-time entering undergraduates, the proportion of black African students increased from 57% in 2013 to 87% in 2023. Over the same period, the proportion of white students declined from 35% in 2013 to 3% in 2023. These demographic shifts are illustrated in the figures below.

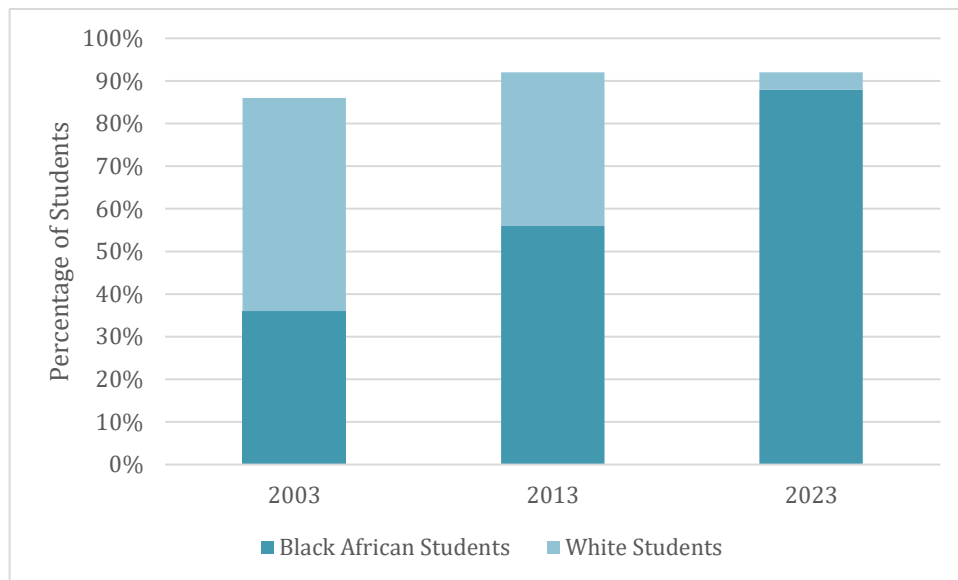


Figure 1: Rhodes University Demographic shifts in undergraduate students 2003-2023

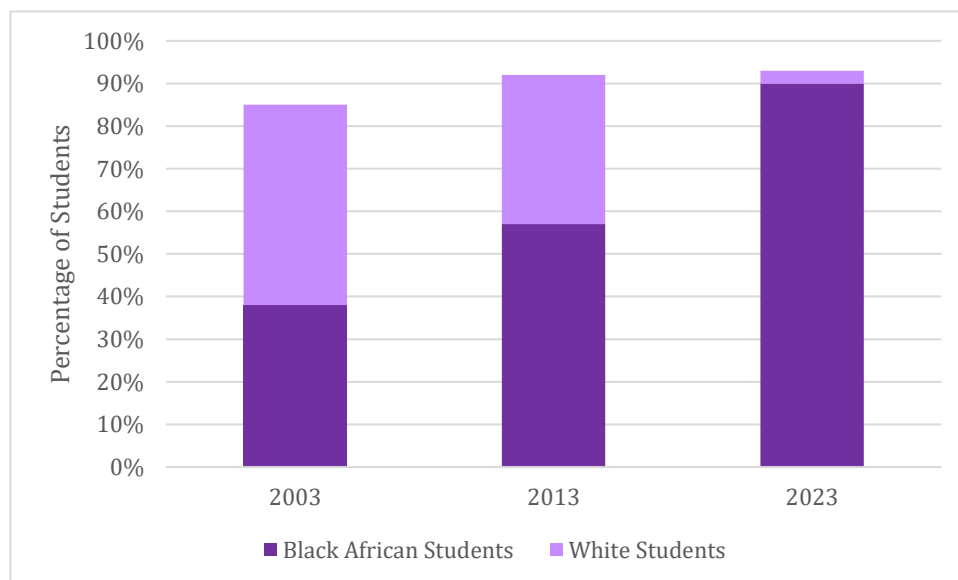


Figure 2: Rhodes University Demographic shifts in first-time entering students 2003- 2023

These shifts reflect a national trend of massification and improved access (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2007), but they also raise critical questions about how well universities, and historically white institutions in particular, have adapted to meet the needs of the students they now serve (Ntombana et al., 2023; Naidoo et al., 2020).

The demographic shift at Rhodes University from a student body that was previously majority white to one that has become majority black African has important implications for disciplines like the humanities, which have long held a distinctive place within historically white institutions. These disciplines were historically shaped by Eurocentric traditions and liberal humanist ideals and played a central role in preparing white men for leadership in public life, law, education, and civil service (Jansen, 2009; Heleta, 2016; Matthews, 2020). These traditions were developed in contexts that largely excluded black students, both materially and epistemologically, and have been slow to adapt in ways that reflect the experiences, knowledge systems, and aspirations of South Africa's majority (Matthews, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022).

While the formal exclusion of black students has ended, the legacy of these knowledge systems remains embedded in curricula, assessment practices, and disciplinary norms (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). This has created a context in which students from working-class and rural backgrounds, now the majority in many humanities classrooms, often find themselves navigating a curriculum and institutional culture that does not reflect or affirm their social realities (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements brought these tensions into sharp focus, challenging universities not only to widen access but also to fundamentally reconsider what knowledge is taught, valued, and legitimised. Students called for the decolonisation of curricula, greater recognition of African intellectual traditions, and a shift away from academic cultures that had long excluded black voices (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Naidoo et al., 2020). In this context, the humanities became both a site of critique and a space of possibility, a place where questions of power, identity, and transformation could be explored, but also where inherited epistemic frameworks often failed to value the perspectives and experiences of a new generation of students.

It is within this nexus of shifting student demographics, enduring institutional legacies, and the contested role of the humanities in a transforming society that this study is situated. Through close attention to students' narratives, the research explores how personal histories, cultural expectations and wider institutional and national pressures intersect in the everyday student experience of university life. It questions what a humanities degree means to students in this contextual moment, and how that experience shapes, or fails to shape, their evolving identities, aspirations, and sense of possibility.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem and Focus

This study explores how undergraduate students in the humanities understand the value and purpose of their degrees within the context of post-apartheid South African higher education. While access to historically white universities has increased significantly since 1994, persistent structural inequalities, funding pressures, and slow institutional transformation continue to shape students' experiences in complex ways (Badat, 2016; Ntombana et al., 2023; McKenna, 2024). The study focuses on the intersection of students' personal histories, socio-cultural contexts, and the institutional conditions they encounter, particularly within the humanities — a disciplinary space that has come under scrutiny both globally and locally for its relevance, employability, and embedded epistemic hierarchies (Desierto & De Maio, 2020; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Heleta, 2016; del Cerro Santamaría, 2019).

Although policy frameworks position higher education as key to enabling social mobility, personal development, and national development, particularly in response to redressing issues of the apartheid legacy (DHET, 2007), the realities of students' lives often expose tensions between these ideals and their everyday experiences (Kanyopa et al., 2024; Walker et al., 2022). The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements surfaced these contradictions, calling attention to the disconnect between access and inclusion, and raising questions about whose knowledge is valued and what kind of transformation is taking place in universities (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). In this context, the humanities have become both a site of critique and a contested space where students negotiate questions of identity, belonging, and purpose, often within institutional environments not fully aligned with who they are and where they are from (Matthews, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Luckett, 2022).

This study aligns with research that centres student experience in understanding the value and purpose of higher education. McLean et al. (2018), in a United Kingdom-based study of sociology students across universities with different status levels, challenge the assumption that educational quality is best found at elite institutions. They show how students' socio-economic backgrounds and the ways disciplinary knowledge is taught and made relevant shape their engagement with learning, identity, and contribute to personal transformation. Their work calls for a socially just understanding of quality, one grounded in students' ability to connect meaningfully with knowledge and reimagine their futures (McLean et al., 2018). Similarly, Case et al. (2018), drawing on student narratives from South African universities, highlight

how financial pressures, limited university guidance, and family expectations shape students' decisions and trajectories, particularly for those who are first-generation university students. Building on these insights, this study examines how students, from different socioeconomic backgrounds, engage with a humanities education at a historically white university in South Africa. Like McLean et al. (2018), it explores how social background and the framing of disciplinary knowledge influences students' capacity to reflect, make meaning, and consider their identities. It also echoes Case et al.'s (2018) attention to the constrained and uneven pathways students navigate, tracing how structural and cultural conditions shape their expectations of university, their experiences within it, and how those expectations evolve over time.

This study seeks to understand how students navigate the tensions between personal aspiration, institutional culture, and broader structural conditions. Drawing on Margaret Archer's theory of social realism, it examines how cultural norms, institutional structures, and student agency interact to shape students' engagement with their degrees and their reflections on who they are becoming through higher education (Archer, 1995, 2000, 2007). This study contributes to ongoing debates about the role of higher education in South Africa by foregrounding student voice and lived experience as a lens for understanding what the university comes to mean in students' lives. Through a focus on meaning-making and identity, the research offers insight into how the university is encountered and interpreted by those it seeks to serve, and how these experiences shape students' understandings of themselves, the purpose of their degrees and the value it has for their imagined futures.

1.1.1 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

- (a) How do students in the humanities understand the purpose and value of their undergraduate degrees?
- (b) What structural and cultural conditions shape their academic trajectories and aspirations?
- (c) How does their experience as humanities students inform their sense of self, their identities, and their expectations for the future?

These questions are examined through a social realist lens, which provides a framework for analysing how structural conditions, cultural contexts, and individual agency interact to shape student experience and identity (Archer, 1995, 2000, 2007). The study is not only concerned

with what students experience, but with how they make sense of their degrees in relation to who they are and who they are becoming.

In a higher education system still grappling with the legacies of exclusion, financially, epistemically and culturally, uneven transformation, and intensified pressures to produce market-ready graduates, understanding how students interpret the value and purpose of their degrees is both timely and necessary. As they navigate institutional expectations, socio-economic demands, and their own personal commitments, students offer rich and often underexamined insight into what the university is and what it might still become (Ashwin, 2024; Walker et al., 2023).

1.2 Contextual Background

This section outlines the global, national, social, disciplinary, and institutional conditions that shape students' experiences in South African higher education.

1.2.1 The Contested Purposes of Higher Education

Globally, higher education is shaped by competing and often conflicting expectations. Universities are increasingly positioned as spaces of economic preparation, tasked with producing skilled, employable graduates who can contribute to national development and compete in a global labour market (Mintz, 2021; McArthur, 2011; Marginson, 2016). At the same time, they are expected to serve the public good by equipping students to engage thoughtfully with complex social issues, participate meaningfully in democratic life, and contribute to the well-being of their communities (Ashwin, 2020; Ellery, 2011; Smith & Bauling, 2013; McLean, 2015). These dual demands reflect broader tensions between higher education as a private investment and as a public good (Nussbaum, 2010; Ashwin, 2020; McArthur, 2011; Walker, 2018).

These tensions have been intensified by the rise of neoliberal discourses, which emphasise market logic, individual responsibility, and performance metrics, contributing to the view of higher education as a private investment (Mintz, 2021). Within this framing, the university is constructed as a site for credential accumulation, and students are positioned as consumers responsible for maximising the economic return on their studies (Mintz, 2021; Ashwin, 2020). This has contributed to a narrowing of how educational value and purpose are defined, often prioritising employability over other purposes such as personal and social development (Ashwin, 2024; Lockett & Shay, 2017).

However, scholars continue to argue that the purpose of university education should extend beyond economic preparation (McArthur, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010; Ashwin, 2024; Abbas et al., 2012; Ashwin et al., 2023; Ellery, 2011; Smith & Bauling, 2013; McLean, 2015). Ashwin (2020), for example, highlights the central role of personal transformation, the process by which students develop new ways of understanding themselves and the world, as a core purpose of higher education. He argues that this kind of transformation is not incidental but fundamental: it is what enables students to engage meaningfully with knowledge, imagine new futures, and contribute to social development (Ashwin, 2020, 2024).

In South Africa, these global dynamics intersect with the legacies of apartheid and the ongoing project of national reconstruction. Higher education is expected to serve as a mechanism for redress, mobility, and development, while also addressing the epistemic and structural exclusions that have long characterised the system (Badat, 2010; DHET, 2013). For many students, particularly those from historically excluded communities, the promise of a university degree is deeply layered. It needs to open doors to employment, affirm intellectual and social belonging, and offer tools for both personal and community transformation. These overlapping expectations place pressure on institutions and students alike, raising critical questions about what higher education is for and how that purpose is being realised.

1.2.3 Higher Education in South Africa

Higher education in South Africa continues to reflect the historical ideologies and inequalities shaped under apartheid. During that period, universities were a key part of the broader system of racial classification and segregation. Historically white universities were well-resourced and structured to preserve the social and economic dominance of the white minority, offering academic and cultural capital that reinforced existing hierarchies (Badat, 2010; Jansen, 2009; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). Historically white universities functioned not only as sites of learning but as pathways to economic mobility, professional networks, and social capital. In contrast, historically black universities were underfunded and restricted in terms of infrastructure, staffing, and programme offerings. They were expected to serve a subordinate function in the economy, preparing black students for limited roles in teaching, clerical work, or the public service (Jansen, 2009; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). As a result, access to academic and professional opportunities was closely tied to race and institutional affiliation, and the sector played a direct role in sustaining racial and class hierarchies (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012).

In the South African context, race and class remain analytically distinct but historically fused categories shaped through what scholars describe as a system of racial capitalism (Nengwekhulu, 1986; Seekings, 2010; Chetty, 2014; Clarno & Vally, 2023). Under apartheid, racial classification determined access to land, labour, education, and mobility, while class position was produced and reproduced through these racialised structures (Levenson & Paret, 2023; Nengwekhulu, 1986). This linkage meant that class exploitation was mediated through race, and race was continually made functional for capital accumulation, producing what has been termed a form of “double exploitation” for black South Africans on both racial and class grounds (Nengwekhulu, 1986). Although race operated as the primary mechanism of social stratification during apartheid, class divisions have intensified in the post-apartheid period, particularly within the black population, where intra-racial inequality has widened alongside the emergence of a black middle class and elite (Levenson & Paret, 2023).

While formal apartheid racial hierarchies have been dismantled, the relationship between race and class has been reconfigured rather than resolved. In the democratic era, class has increasingly become the overt mechanism through which exclusion and inequality are maintained, even as race continues to structure life chances, opportunities, and access to higher education (Chetty, 2014). Class-based exclusion in education functions through marketisation, fee-based access, and meritocratic selection, yet these dynamics remain racialised in outcome because black working-class youth bear the brunt of systemic poverty, schooling inequalities, and high unemployment (Chetty, 2014; Seekings, 2010). As a result, the distinction between race and class is necessary for analytic clarity, but the two cannot be understood in isolation; race continues to shape who is likely to occupy particular class positions, and class processes sustain racialised inequalities across generations.

After 1994, higher education was positioned as key to advancing South Africa’s democratic and developmental goals towards dismantling racial and class stratification. The transformation agenda was thus developed and became central to policy efforts aimed at addressing the structural inequalities inherited from apartheid. The 1997 White Paper on Higher Education articulated transformation as a multi-dimensional process, structured around six core principles: equity and redress, democratisation, development, quality, effectiveness, and efficiency (DHET, 2007). Transformation, in this context, refers not only to expanding access but also to reshaping institutional cultures, diversifying staff and leadership, reforming curricula, and reimagining the role of the university in a democratic society (Soudien, 2008;

Badat, 2007). Expanding access for historically excluded groups has been prioritised over the other aspects of the transformation agenda (Badat, 2007, 2012; Lange, 2020). Over the past three decades, student enrolments have increased substantially and the demographic profile of the student body has become more reflective of the broader South African population. This expansion of access was essential in addressing the exclusionary structures of the past and has marked one of the most visible shifts in the post-apartheid sector (CHE, 2022; Lange, 2020).

However, access alone has not been enough. While more black students have entered university, many continue to encounter institutions where the pace of change in curriculum content, staff representation, and institutional culture has not kept up with shifts in student demographics (Lange, 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2020; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Jansen, 2017). Post-apartheid reforms have been criticised for placing disproportionate emphasis on access while giving less attention to other key aspects of the transformation agenda (Badat, 2016; Lange, 2020). Although black students now form the majority in many universities, they often study in environments where staff diversity is limited, course content remains Eurocentric, and institutional cultures reflect slow progress toward meaningful transformation (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Badat, 2020; Zembylas, 2018). Transformation, in this sense, is not only about who enters the university, but about what kind of institution they enter: what is taught, whose knowledge is valued, and how power is distributed (Soudien, 2008; Heleta, 2016; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2018).

Additionally, the financial landscape of higher education has undergone significant shifts, shaped by both global policy trends and the demands placed on South Africa's democratic government to advance social and economic redress (Cini, 2019; Cele et al., 2016). Post-1994, South Africa, as a newly democratic nation, needed to re-enter the global economy and thus had to align with globalisation and neoliberal economic frameworks that prioritised cost-sharing, reduced state expenditure, market responsiveness, and institutional accountability (Cele et al., 2016; Singh, 2001; Badat, 2007). While these shifts mirrored international trends in higher education policy, they unfolded within the South African context marked by deep structural inequality and the urgent need for post-apartheid reconstruction. As the state sought to redress decades of systemic exclusion, public spending was spread across competing national priorities such as basic education, healthcare, and social welfare, leading to a steady decline in per-student funding for higher education (Cele et al., 2016; Cini, 2019; CHE, 2022; Rossouw & Goldman, 2023).

This funding reduction coincided with the prioritisation of access for redress, creating a growing resource gap between the state's ability to subsidise higher education and the increasing demand for access. To bridge this gap, universities became increasingly dependent on student fees and third-stream income, such as research grants, private partnerships, and donor funding (Cele et al., 2016; Cini, 2019; Hlatshwayo, 2024). Over time, the pursuit of external funding and institutional sustainability has contributed to universities needing to align more closely with global research interests (Hlatshwayo, 2024; McKenna, 2024). As a financial survival strategy, institutions have increasingly adopted a logic of global relevance, prioritising research output, graduate employability, and international rankings to attract donor funding, partnerships, and competitive grants (Rossouw & Goldman 2023). These shifts have taken place even as many institutions continue to operate under severe financial constraints.

Within this context, the ideals of South Africa's multifaceted transformation agenda have become increasingly difficult to realise. Universities are expected to simultaneously advance social justice by enabling access, redress, and inclusion for black and working-class students and meet market-oriented imperatives tied to financial sustainability through global recognition. These overlapping demands have impacted how institutions are managed and contributed to the broader marketisation of higher education in line with global neoliberal trends (del Cerro Santamaría, 2019; Mintz, 2021; McArthur, 2011; Badat, 2020; Lange, 2020). For institutions required to transform to enable the success of historically excluded students, this has intensified the tension between access, quality, and sustainability, with institutional choices often shaped by the compromises required under limited funding and competing mandates (Lange, 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2020; Jansen, 2022).

The result is a sector that is changing in important ways but remains marked by uneven progress. While the work towards expanding access has opened the doors to a greater number of students, this expansion has not always led to meaningful inclusion or success (Lange, 2020; Vorster & Quinn, 2017). High dropout rates, limited academic support, growing student debt, and underrepresentation in postgraduate and academic pathways continue to signal the limits of access without deeper transformation (CHE, 2022; Kanyopa et al., 2024; Naidoo et al., 2020). This contributes to students experiencing the university as a space of both opportunity and constraint, where the promise of higher education is expected, but not always fully realised.

1.2.4 The Lived Experience of Students

While policy frameworks have promoted access and redress, the structural realities facing many black working-class students remain deeply challenging. Gaining entry into university does not erase the socio-economic constraints that continue to shape students' everyday lives. These constraints include not only material hardship, but also the emotional and cultural weight of navigating institutions that are not always responsive to their lived realities (Fomunyan, 2020; Walker et al., 2022; Morreira et al., 2020).

Many students arrive at university carrying the hopes of their families and communities, often as the first generation to access higher education (Walker et al., 2022; Masutha, 2022). These aspirations are closely tied to the idea that a degree will lead to social and economic mobility, for both the student and their families (Masutha, 2022). However, the burden of expectation is frequently accompanied by ongoing financial responsibility. The pressure to support one's family is shaped by the cultural expectation known as Black Tax: the responsibility placed on many black South Africans to contribute financially to their households (Fongwa, 2021; Dube, 2022). This ongoing obligation can create tension between the pursuit of education and the immediate demands of care and survival (Masutha, 2022). This reality is made worse by delays and shortfalls in financial aid systems like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which can disrupt students' ability to register, access materials, or cover basic needs, leaving them in increasingly unstable and vulnerable situations. (Wangenge-Ouma & Cloete, 2008; Webb, 2020; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022).

Beyond the material pressures they face, many working-class black students must also navigate an enduring cultural and epistemic misalignment between their home environments and university spaces (Hlatshwayo, 2020). While policy changes have opened access for all students to institutions that were once exclusionary spaces, the deep structures of these universities, shaped by colonial and apartheid histories, have been slower to transform. For students entering these spaces, language, accent, dress, and social codes can mark them as outsiders, while curricula and teaching practices often reflect Western knowledge traditions that fail to recognise, engage with, or affirm their own lived realities and cultural frameworks (Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). The result is a sense of exclusion and misrecognition: being present, but not fully acknowledged.

This can produce what some scholars describe as a struggle for ontological and epistemic belonging: a sense of not quite fitting in, not because students lack the academic potential to succeed, but because they are asked to assimilate into a dominant culture that does not reflect their own (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Morreira, 2017). Students may internalise these dynamics, interpreting academic difficulty or discomfort as personal inadequacy rather than a reflection of structural exclusion. Such experiences are not incidental, they are shaped by the enduring institutional cultures, rituals, and assumptions of historically white universities that continue to privilege whiteness and Western ways of knowing (Morreira, 2017; Hlatshwayo, 2020; Nyamnjoh, 2020).

Efforts to decolonise higher education, including the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, have called attention to these conditions, insisting that belonging is not simply about demographic representation, but about the transformation of curricula, pedagogies, and institutional cultures so that students can feel, and be recognised as, fully part of the academic community. Belonging, in this sense, is not about assimilation but about recognition, affirmation, and the creation of spaces in which students can say: *This is my home. I do not have to apologise to be here. I belong* (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the affective labour required to constantly translate between home and institutional worlds, to be academically present while emotionally and financially stretched, can take a profound toll on students' sense of belonging and self (Masutha, 2022). These experiences are not incidental to academic performance, they are central to how students engage with their degrees, imagine their futures, and construct their identities within and beyond the university.

1.2.5 The Humanities in a Massified, Market-Oriented System

At their core, the humanities engage with questions of meaning, interpretation, and value (Nussbaum, 1998, 2002; Vale, 2008). These disciplines explore how people make sense of the world, how knowledge is produced and challenged, and how culture, language, and identity are shaped across time and place (Nussbaum, 1998, 2002; Davidson & Goldberg, 2004). They invite critical reflection on what it means to be human and offer space to engage ethically with complexity, diversity, and difference (Gregory, 2011; Duarte, 2015). However, in a massified and market-oriented higher education system, the role of the humanities is increasingly under pressure (Markham et al., 2025). Their longstanding contribution to fostering democratic

citizenship, intellectual freedom, and public debate now sits uncomfortably alongside demands for measurable outputs, graduate employability, and economic relevance (de Cerro Santamaría, 2019; McArthur, 2011; Coffield et al., 2018).

Globally, neoliberal trends have redefined the purpose of universities around economic outcomes: knowledge is valued for its ability to generate measurable impact, increase graduate employability, and contribute to innovation and competitiveness (Mintz, 2021; McArthur, 2011; Marginson, 2016). These shifts have placed pressure on disciplines that offer less easily commodified, or ‘practical,’ forms of value. Calls for accountability and ‘value for money’ have led to declining investment in the humanities, with institutions often prioritising professional fields seen as more economically productive (Agmata, 2019; de Cerro Santamaría, 2019).

In South Africa, the position of the humanities is shaped by their complex and often contradictory history. Under apartheid, these disciplines were simultaneously used to legitimise state power and racial hierarchies, while also offering space for critique and resistance (Vale, 2008, 2011; Breckenridge, 2018). In historically white institutions, subjects like history and anthropology frequently advanced colonial worldviews, sidelining African intellectual traditions and reinforcing structural inequality (Breckenridge, 2018; Morreira, 2017). Meanwhile, at historically black institutions such as Fort Hare, the humanities played a very different role, fostering critical thought, cultural pride, and political consciousness, even within deeply constrained and under-resourced environments (Breckenridge, 2018). This divergent history reveals that the humanities in South Africa have never been neutral. They have always been entangled in broader struggles over who gets to produce knowledge, whose knowledge is legitimised, and what purposes the university is meant to serve.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the humanities became key sites of political resistance. Black Consciousness and Marxist traditions reshaped curricula and pedagogies, centring the lives and struggles of the working class and rural poor (Breckenridge, 2018; Vale, 2008, 2011). But the transition to democracy brought a different set of pressures. While transformation policies called for equity and redress, universities were also restructured to align with global norms of efficiency, productivity, and responsiveness to labour market demands (Lange, 2012; Badat, 2007). These contradictory imperatives narrowed the space for critical, contextually embedded scholarship and limited the epistemic transformation many had hoped would follow political liberation.

This has important implications for the present. For working-class black students, entering the humanities is layered with meaning. On one hand, these disciplines offer tools for personal transformation (Ashwin, 2020), identity exploration, and critical engagement with social injustice (Nussbaum, 2002). On the other hand, they can be considered as risky choices, due to narratives of what is considered a valuable degree, in a context where students face financial pressures. Many students must navigate a difficult tension: they are drawn to fields that help them make sense of their lives and contexts, while also facing pressure to secure economic security and provide for their families (Coffield et al., 2018; Masutha, 2022).

However, the potential of the humanities, in relation to personal transformation and social development, is undermined by their continued entanglement with colonial legacies. While often framed as spaces for critical reflection and social engagement, many humanities disciplines remain shaped by Eurocentric intellectual traditions that exclude African knowledge systems and ways of being (Matthews, 2020; Lockett, 2022). This creates a layered contradiction: students are invited into disciplines that promise liberation, but often encounter curricula and classroom practices that do not recognise their histories or lived realities. The dissonance between disciplinary content and students' social contexts can result in feelings of misrecognition or exclusion, even within spaces that claim to be transformative (Matthews, 2020; Morreira, 2017; Naidoo et al., 2020). In response, some students and lecturers have sought to work within these constraints, challenging, reinterpreting, and expanding inherited frameworks to include African scholarship, shift pedagogical practices, changing the idea of knowledge as static towards needing to be questioned, and foster greater epistemic inclusion (Matthews, 2023; Gaillen, 2020; Lockett, 2022). These efforts are not just about adding content, but about reimagining who counts as a knower and what knowledge is considered legitimate. In this way, the humanities become a contested space: simultaneously enabling and constraining, inviting critical engagement while still negotiating the weight of their colonial inheritance.

Adding to the tension of the potential of the humanities is their undervaluing due to the perception that humanities degrees lack clear economic utility (Agmata, 2019; Breckenridge, 2018). This framing obscures the deep and enduring public value of the humanities. These disciplines cultivate critical engagement with the past and present, foster cross-cultural understanding, and provide tools for imagining alternative futures (Nussbaum, 1998; Delanty, 2001). In South Africa, they remain essential for reckoning with the ongoing legacies of

apartheid and colonialism. Calls for decolonisation and epistemic justice make this particularly urgent: what is at stake is not just what is taught, but whose knowledge is recognised, whose identities are affirmed, and how students are enabled to see themselves as knowers and agents within the academy (Lebakeng, 2018; Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014).

For black students entering the humanities at historically white universities, these questions are not abstract, they are lived. Studying disciplines that have historically excluded or misrepresented them often involves navigating complex terrain: seeking affirmation in spaces not built with them in mind, while grappling with course content, pedagogies, and institutional cultures that may not reflect their experiences or values. The choice to pursue the humanities may be driven by a desire to make sense of their social worlds, challenge inherited narratives, and locate themselves within broader intellectual traditions, or based simply on admission eligibility. Still, this pursuit is often accompanied by uncertainty about the value of their degree, its potential to lead to stable employment, and how their families and communities will receive their academic paths.

1.2.6 Rhodes University Institutional Context

Rhodes University, the site of this study, occupies a distinct place within South Africa's higher education landscape. Established in 1904, the university has been shaped by its origins as a colonial institution explicitly tied to British imperial interests (Maylam, 2017). Founded to promote English cultural ascendancy in the Eastern Cape, Rhodes University was consciously modelled on elite British institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge (Maylam, 2005). Its naming, identity, and initial structures² were all part of a broader strategy to consolidate white English privilege in South Africa. In its early decades, Rhodes University operated as a segregated institution that admitted black students only under 'exceptional circumstances' and required them to live in separate residences (Maylam, 2005). These segregationist practices were in place even before the formalisation of apartheid and continued in line with its policies, with the university often demonstrating caution, and at times compliance, in its interactions with the apartheid regime (Maylam, 2005).

² The university was named after Cecil John Rhodes, a British imperialist whose legacy is deeply tied to colonial expansion and racial segregation in southern Africa. Its architectural style, academic dress, governance model, and curriculum were deliberately shaped to emulate British traditions. This alignment with elite British norms was part of an intentional effort to create an institution that would serve the white English-speaking elite in South Africa, reinforcing colonial hierarchies and social exclusion (Maylam, 2005).

Despite its history of segregation, a progressive intellectual culture also emerged within the university, particularly from the 1970s onwards, through the work of engaged departments and activist students. Departments such as Philosophy, Sociology, and Journalism fostered pockets of resistance and critical thought, even when institutional culture remained conservative and exclusionary (Hendricks & Vale, 2005). Still, as former students and scholars have noted, black students often experienced Rhodes University as 'colonial subjects in a white world,' navigating both material and symbolic exclusion in their daily academic and social lives (Pillay, 2005; Jaffer, 2005; Beard, 2005; Hendricks & Vale, 2005).

Since the advent of democracy, Rhodes University has undergone important demographic and institutional shifts. In line with national policies to widen access and redress past inequalities, the university was opened more broadly to black South African students and staff. Between 2005 and 2022, there were notable increases in student and academic staff diversity, alongside efforts to reframe the institution's identity and role in a democratic society (Maylam, 2017). While these shifts signal progress, they have unfolded within a context of constrained resources and contested transformation, echoing broader national dynamics.

Rhodes University is classified as a traditional university and has long been recognised as a research-intensive institution, consistently ranking among the top performers for research output per capita (Mabizela & Clayton, 2022). Its small, residential, and rural character sets it apart from larger, urban universities, contributing to a culture of close academic interaction, low student-to-staff ratios, and an emphasis on high-quality teaching and scholarship (Mabizela & Clayton, 2022). However, its status as a research-focused institution has not been without tension. Like other research universities globally, Rhodes University has had to navigate the unintended consequences of performance-based funding frameworks, which reward research output more than teaching innovation or support (McKenna & Boughey, 2014). This has shaped institutional priorities and affected the day-to-day practices and pressures experienced by academic staff.

Over the past two decades, the university has seen an increasing number of students from historically excluded groups, many of whom are first-generation students. In 2022, 70% of first-year students were NSFAS funded (RU, 2024), which, while vital, is also marked by delays, administrative challenges, and insufficient support (Lewin, 2024; Paoli, 2025). These layered conditions have the power to shape the student experience in profound ways,

considering the lived experiences of students, as discussed in section 1.2.4, and are particularly relevant to the context in which this study is located.

It is within this historically complex and ideologically layered institution that this study is situated. The study focuses specifically on the Faculty of Humanities, a space that carries its own legacy of intellectual critique and social engagement, but also one that is contending with shifting perceptions of relevance, value, and purpose in a rapidly changing social and economic landscape. In doing so, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how broader structural and cultural legacies continue to shape individual student trajectories, aspirations, and identities within this institutional context and in relation to students' lived experiences.

1.2.7 Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The students who participated in this study completed a portion of their degrees during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that profoundly disrupted the rhythms of academic life and intensified many of the structural challenges already present in the South African higher education system. The rapid shift to online learning exposed and deepened longstanding inequalities, particularly for students from rural and working-class backgrounds, while also reshaping how teaching, learning, and student support were delivered (Mpungose, 2020; Mncube et al., 2021; Dube, 2020).

The transition to emergency remote teaching in South Africa was marked by uneven access to devices, data, and stable internet connectivity. Many students experienced significant barriers to participation, with the digital divide cutting across lines of geography, class, and race (Mphahlele et al., 2021; Mpungose, 2020; Woldegiorgis, 2022). While some institutions attempted to mitigate these challenges by providing laptops, modems, and data bundles, the effectiveness of these interventions was often limited by broader infrastructural and economic constraints (Mcube et al., 2021; Sonn et al., 2021). These limitations were especially pronounced among students who had returned to home environments not conducive to learning, further entrenching patterns of exclusion (Dube, 2020; Olawale et al., 2021).

For many students, the disruption extended beyond technical access. The shift to online learning brought psychosocial strain, isolation, and heightened anxiety. The absence of in-person academic and social interactions made it more difficult to feel connected to peers, lecturers, and the university itself (Mestry, 2023; Olawale et al., 2021). Academic staff, too,

faced substantial challenges, often receiving minimal training on online pedagogy and having to rapidly redesign courses while dealing with their own personal and professional disruptions (Mestry, 2023; du Plessis et al., 2022).

At a systemic level, the pandemic highlighted the fragility of the higher education sector and the uneven capacity of institutions to respond to a crisis. While some universities were able to innovate and adapt, others, particularly historically black institutions, struggled to deliver consistent and equitable learning experiences (Mtshweni, 2022). The pandemic further underscored the urgent need for a more socially just, inclusive, and digitally capable higher education system, one that is better prepared for potential disruptions in the future and more responsive to the realities of its students (Woldegiorgis, 2022; Mhlanga et al., 2022).

The effects of this period continue to reverberate. Students' academic trajectories were shaped not only by the formal shifts in curriculum delivery but also by the emotional, financial, and intellectual strain of studying during a global crisis. These experiences form a crucial part of the backdrop to this study and help to illuminate how students negotiated their identities, aspirations, and sense of purpose within an already complex higher education environment.

1.3 Theoretical Framework: Archer's Social Realism

To examine how students' identities evolve through their experience in higher education, my study draws on Margaret Archer's Social Realism. Grounded in the philosophy of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978), this framework assumes that social structures and cultural norms exist independently of individuals' perceptions but are experienced through their situated engagement with them. Critical realism enables a layered understanding of reality, acknowledging both the constraints posed by structures and cultures and the capacity of individuals to reflect, respond, and act within these contexts. Archer's Social Realism builds on this foundation by offering a detailed account of the interplay between structure, culture, and agency in shaping individuals' experiences, personal projects, and identities. It provides a lens to explore how students' identities are conditioned by the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts, while also highlighting their agency in navigating, internalising, and potentially resisting these constraints.

1.3.1 Structure, Culture, and Agency

At the core of Social Realism are the concepts of structure, culture, and agency, which Archer (1995) argues are mutually constitutive and interdependent.

Structures refer to the institutional frameworks and material systems within which individuals operate, such as the university's curriculum, assessment practices, and social roles. These structures have the potential to both enable and constrain students' opportunities for self-expression and self-definition. In the context of my study, these structures include not only the formal elements of academic life at Rhodes University (e.g., curricula, assessments) but also the broader societal structures such as race, class, and family expectations.

Culture represents the shared values, beliefs, and discourses within society that guide and condition individual behaviour. In the university setting, culture shapes students' educational experience by framing what knowledge is valuable, how success is defined and understood, and how students relate to their academic and social worlds. In the humanities, cultural mechanisms can either enable or constrain how students respond to different perspectives that challenge their previous ways of thinking and encourage the development of new ways of understanding themselves and their social environment (Archer, 1996).

Agency refers to individuals' capacity to reflect on and act in the world, making choices that shape their lives and have the power to condition the social structures and cultural norms around them (Archer, 2000). This active role is necessary in understanding identity transformation in higher education, as students exercise their agency in response to the academic and social contexts they encounter. However, as Archer emphasises, agency is not exercised in a vacuum; it is always shaped by the structural and cultural conditions students experience (Archer, 1996).

1.3.2 The Role of Reflexivity in Student Identity Formation

A key element of agency in Social Realism is reflexivity — the internal conversation individuals engage in as they reflect on their experiences and the world around them (Archer, 2000). Through the internal conversation, students consider and decide on their personal projects and ultimate concern — the deep, existential issues or values that an individual is most committed to, and which guide their decisions, actions, and worldview (Archer, 2000). Reflexivity plays a central role in how students process and make sense of their university experiences, in relation to that ultimate concern. It enables them to evaluate the social structures and cultural norms they are exposed to in relation to who they are and, in doing so, how they exercise their agency.

In this study, Archer's (2000) reflexivity is particularly important for understanding how students negotiate their identities in the humanities, a field often associated with critical thinking and the questioning of societal norms. The process of reflexivity allows students to reconsider their values, beliefs, and aspirations in light of their academic engagement. This dynamic process, termed agential morphogenesis, highlights how students have the power not only to reshape their understanding of themselves but also the potential to influence the academic structures they engage with (Archer, 2000).

1.3.3 Why Social Realism?

Archer's Social Realism provides a valuable framework for exploring the complexity of student experience in higher education. By focusing on the interplay between structure, culture, and agency, it offers tools to examine how students navigate institutional conditions and cultural discourses while making sense of who they are and who they want to become. Central to this approach is the idea that students are not passive recipients of education, but reflexive agents who interpret, negotiate, and respond to the opportunities and constraints they encounter.

This framework is particularly useful in the context of Rhodes University, a historically white institution undergoing transformation, where students' experiences in the humanities are shaped by both the institution's history and their own evolving aspirations. Social Realism allows for a nuanced analysis of identity formation as an ongoing, situated process shaped by structural conditions, cultural meanings, and students' internal conversations.

In this study, I draw on Social Realism to understand how students engage with the university environment, revise their assumptions, and reshape their identities over time. It also acknowledges that meaning-making is shaped by the researcher's own social positioning. As Archer (2003) notes, analysis is always mediated by the standpoint of the researcher. The next section offers a brief reflection on my own positionality and the ways it has shaped the questions I asked and the interpretations I offer in this thesis.

1.4 Situating the Researcher — My Positionality

In qualitative research and particularly in studies informed by interpretive and critical realist approaches, the researcher's positionality is not incidental but integral to the research process. From the formulation of research questions to the interpretation of data, the researcher's own social location, concerns, and internal deliberations shape the trajectory of inquiry. Drawing

on Archer's framework, this research is grounded in the understanding that the researcher is a reflexive agent whose internal conversations mediate between personal concerns and wider social contexts (Archer, 2003, 2007). Rather than assuming either value-neutral objectivity or relativistic subjectivism, critical realism allows for an account of how reasons become causes of action through reflexive deliberation (Archer, 2003), including the actions involved in knowledge production itself.

Given the focus of this research on student meaning-making, identity, and the perceived value of a humanities education, it is essential to acknowledge the standpoint from which the study is conducted. My own educational journey intersects with many of the themes explored in this thesis: aspiration, transformation, and socio-economic pressures. My positionality thus cannot be treated as a neutral backdrop. Instead, following Archer, it is understood as shaped by my own internal conversations, which orient me toward certain concerns and influence how I engage with participants and interpret their narratives (Archer, 2008).

As a first-generation university student, my journey into higher education was shaped by unspoken expectations and continuous encouragement. From an early age, it was simply assumed by my school and my family that I would go to university. It was positioned as the key to entering the world, the next logical step after school, and the path that would set me up for a successful life. While the destination was clear, however, the journey itself was uncertain. I had no real understanding of what university involved, what kinds of subjects existed, or what the possibilities were. With little guidance available to me on subject choices, I made my decisions based on what I enjoyed at school and what careers seemed meaningful and achievable.

My family supported whatever decision I made. They encouraged me to choose something I was passionate about, and they made it clear that I did not need to succeed for their benefit. They encouraged me to pursue what would make me proud of myself. Still, I carried a deep, internalised sense of responsibility. I was very aware of the sacrifices being made to support me: student loans taken out with my brother as surety, my parents quietly making plans to send money for toiletries or transport home, and extended family, especially my aunts and grandmother, putting my needs first. Even though there was no pressure from them, I felt that my success belonged to all of us. I could not think about my achievements outside of their care and commitment.

When I began my degree at Rhodes University, I initially chose subjects that aligned with a plan to become a high school English teacher, a career I could see myself enjoying and felt would be stable. I selected Anthropology on a whim, but it ended up reshaping my path. It gave me language and tools to critically engage with things I had always felt but had not known I was allowed to question, such as race, gender, identity, and knowledge. Studying Anthropology became personally transformative for me. It shifted how I saw myself and how I understood the spaces I moved through, especially when navigating the distance between home and university. I became more aware of how I had changed and how those changes affected how I related to the world around me.

For me, the value of my humanities education lies in that transformation. It gave me the means to think critically and feel differently about my place in the world. But that did not protect me from the realities of life after graduation. I struggled to find work. I felt unsure of how to translate my degree into the world of employment. The weight of my loans, the desire to contribute to my family, and the uncertainty of how to move forward left me feeling both grateful and overwhelmed. My degree had been framed by myself and by others as an investment in my future. But that investment was not easily or immediately returned.

It is from this place of deeply valuing the transformative potential of humanities education while also experiencing its economic precarity that I approach this research. I do not see personal transformation and economic opportunity as mutually exclusive. In fact, I believe they should be intertwined, even though they are not always equally supported or recognised. My own history shapes how I listen to students' stories and how I interpret their reflections. It also reminds me of the emotional, material, and intellectual labour that comes with pursuing a degree under conditions of uncertainty.

In drawing on Archer's theory of Social Realism, which foregrounds the relationship between structure, culture, and agency, I am also attentive to my own position as a researcher. Reflexivity is not just a methodological tool; it is a stance that recognises that who I am shapes what I see and how I see it. My social background, academic path, and lived experiences are all part of the lens through which this study unfolds.

This section offers an initial account of my positionality, acknowledging how my background and experiences inform the lens through which I engage with this research. I return to these

reflections in the concluding chapter to reflect on how the research process, and the narratives shared by participants, have shaped me in turn.

1.5 Value, Rationale, and Contribution of the Study

This study offers insight into how working-class black students in the humanities reflect on the value and purpose of their degrees within a South African higher education system marked by inequality, shifting institutional priorities, and contested ideas about the purpose of university. It contributes to ongoing debates about the purposes of higher education, particularly the tension between personal transformation, social justice, and economic opportunity, by grounding these abstract questions in the lived experiences of students navigating them in real time (Ashwin, 2020; McArthur, 2011; Nussbaum, 1998 Ashwin et al., 2023).

In the context of massification, constrained resources, and growing pressure for universities to demonstrate impact and employability, the humanities have come under increasing scrutiny (Coffield et al., 2018; Agmata, 2019). This study engages with this context, not to defend the humanities in the abstract, but to explore what they come to mean for students whose educational trajectories are shaped by structural precarity, cultural dislocation, and the weight of generational expectations. It draws attention to how students negotiate the symbolic and material value of their degrees, and in doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how higher education is experienced by those who have historically been excluded from it.

Much of the literature on higher education transformation in South Africa focuses on policy developments, access, and institutional reform (Badat, 2020; Lange, 2020; Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). While this work is vital, there remains a need to centre student experience as a form of knowledge in its own right, particularly in relation to identity, belonging, and meaning-making (Walker, 2020; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014; Fataar, 2015). This study contributes to that body of research by using a narrative approach to foreground the reflexive accounts of students in a historically white institution, allowing for an exploration of how they interpret and inhabit the university space.

Using Archer's theory of Social Realism, the study contributes methodologically and conceptually to research that seeks to understand the interplay between structure, culture, and agency in higher education. It positions reflexivity as a key mechanism through which students engage with and respond to the contradictions they encounter, both within the university and between the university and home. In doing so, it offers a layered account of identity

transformation, not as a linear or inevitable outcome, but as a negotiated process shaped by material conditions, social positioning, and institutional cultures.

Finally, the study adds to the growing body of scholarship on decoloniality and transformation by highlighting how debates about epistemic justice and curriculum reform are not simply institutional or theoretical concerns but are deeply felt in how students make sense of themselves and their futures. It underscores the importance of understanding the university not only as a site of learning but as a space where students seek legitimacy, recognition, and a sense of becoming, and where those aspirations are sometimes enabled, but often constrained, by broader social and structural forces.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured across nine chapters, each contributing to the overarching aim of understanding how students in the humanities make sense of the purpose and value of their degrees within the broader context of South African higher education. Two interludes are included to offer a more personal and grounded connection to the students whose experiences shape this study. These short sections of vignettes present glimpses into each participant's life, highlighting their backgrounds, hopes, and lived experiences. By foregrounding their personal contexts, the interludes ground the themes explored in the chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction situates the study within broader debates about the purposes of higher education, particularly in South Africa, where questions of transformation, access, and inequality remain pressing. It introduces the humanities as a contested but potentially transformative space and foregrounds student experience as a key site for exploring identity, meaning, and aspiration. The chapter also outlines the study's theoretical framework, drawing on Archer's Social Realism to explore the interplay between structure, culture, and agency in shaping student identity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores the existing literature on the student experience in South African higher education, starting with the broader context of transformation and decoloniality. It begins by examining the historical and institutional factors shaping the purpose of higher education in South Africa, particularly in the context of post-apartheid transformation and the ongoing

challenges around decolonisation. The chapter then moves to the student experience, exploring how students' perceptions of university are shaped prior to arrival, influenced by family background, availability of resources and support in schools, and socio-economic context. It also considers the perceived value of a university degree, with particular attention to how students weigh its symbolic, material, and social worth. The role of Black Tax is discussed in terms of how it conditions students' university experiences, particularly regarding financial pressure and familial responsibility. Additionally, the chapter engages with scholarly debates about the purpose of higher education, considering how students' aspirations for personal development, critical engagement, and social contribution intersect with structural barriers. These themes highlight the key influences on student experience and identity formation, offering insight into the mechanisms that shape students' academic journeys.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical foundation for my study. It further details Archer's theory of Social Realism as a lens for understanding how structural conditions, cultural norms, and agency interact to shape students' experiences and identities. The chapter explains key concepts in more depth: structure, culture, agency, reflexivity, and ultimate concerns. The social realist approach enables a nuanced analysis of how students respond to and are shaped by their academic environments. It provides a framework for identifying the causal mechanisms behind their choices, perceptions, and identity shifts.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological approach employed in the study. It outlines the decision to adopt a qualitative, narrative inquiry methodology well-suited to exploring students' lived experiences and meaning-making processes. The chapter details participant selection, ethical considerations, and the data collection process, which included in-depth interviews. It also explains how the data was analysed using thematic and realist principles, ensuring alignment with the theoretical framework and research questions.

Interlude: Crossing the Threshold

This set of pre-enrolment vignettes offers glimpses into participants' reflections of their lives before university. It traces the responsibilities, identities, and aspirations they carried with them as they crossed into higher education. The vignettes do not offer full biographies but provide

context for understanding the layered realities that shaped each student's path into the humanities.

Chapter 5: More Than a Qualification

This chapter presents the first set of empirical findings. It explores the key conditioning factors that influenced my research participants' decisions to pursue a university education, specifically, a humanities degree. Themes include the impact of socio-economic status, the influence of families and communities, exposure to career guidance, and the role of personal aspirations or "ultimate concerns." The chapter unpacks how students made sense of their choices within contexts often marked by constraint, pressure, and uncertainty.

Chapter 6: From Knowing to Becoming

Focusing on students' experiences during their degrees, this chapter examines how academic engagement, institutional culture, and peer interactions shaped shifts in students' sense of self. Drawing on Archer's framework, the chapter discusses the enablements and constraints students encountered and how these contributed to evolving understandings of knowledge, purpose, and personal identity. It interrogates how curriculum content, facilitation styles, and discursive practices within the humanities shaped students' views of the world and their place in it.

Chapter 7: Becoming with Purpose

Chapter 7 explores students' reflections after completing their undergraduate degrees. It examines how their perspectives on the value and purpose of the humanities evolved over time, particularly considering career prospects, economic pressure, and post-university uncertainty. The chapter highlights the disjuncture many students feel between their academic learning and the demands of the 'real world,' while also showing how some articulate growth in confidence, critical thinking, and broader worldviews. These reflections shed light on the tensions between personal transformation and economic utility.

Interlude: On the Other Side

This set of vignettes captures how participants envisioned their futures. Drawing from their reflections on university, these narratives consider what their studies have meant, what

questions remain, and how they imagine life beyond graduation. Rather than offering closure, the stories frame becoming as an ongoing and unfinished process.

Chapter 8: Discussion

The discussion chapter synthesises the findings, the theoretical framework, and broader literature. It interrogates the contradictions and complexities students navigate in their academic journeys, particularly within the context of South African higher education's transformation agenda. The chapter explores themes such as the tension between institutional expectations and lived realities, the impact of neoliberalism and market-driven logics, and shifts in students' sense of self and worldviews. Drawing on Archer's Social Realism, the chapter maps the structural and cultural conditions that shape students' agency and identity, highlighting both constraint and possibility. In doing so, it positions the student experience as a vital lens through which the progress and limitations of transformation can be considered.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The thesis is concluded with a summary of key findings and their implications for higher education policy, pedagogy, and transformation. It reflects on the significance of centring the student voice in discussions of institutional change. It offers the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research, particularly in relation to how universities can better align their educational purposes with the diverse needs and aspirations of their students.

Chapter 2: The Struggle for Meaning

Student Experience, Higher Education and Transformation

2.1 Introduction

Higher education has always carried multiple, and sometimes conflicting, purposes: to prepare individuals for the labour market, to develop critical thinkers and informed citizens, and to advance knowledge and social progress. In recent years, however, global shifts toward neoliberalism, massification, and the knowledge economy have intensified tensions between these aims, often narrowing the university's role to one of economic utility. These debates are not abstract. They shape the conditions under which students pursue their studies, especially in societies like South Africa, where deep inequalities and a still-unfolding transformation agenda heighten the stakes of what higher education can and should provide.

In South Africa, where higher education is both a site of redress and a product of apartheid's enduring legacies, questions of purpose are complex. Universities are expected to offer opportunities for personal and economic transformation while also challenging the historical exclusions that continue to be reproduced. These tensions are particularly visible in the humanities, where disciplines are expected to help students grapple with questions of power, justice, identity, and historical context, all while being increasingly pressured to demonstrate economic value.

This chapter reviews key conceptual, global, and local debates about the purpose of higher education, transformation, and the role of the humanities. It highlights the emergence of decolonial critique as a call for deeper, systemic change, and explores how student experiences, shaped by histories, aspirations, and social conditions, offer a crucial lens into what higher education means and what it enables or constrains in the post-apartheid university.

I have chosen to emphasise the student experience because it offers a grounded perspective on how the broader tensions in higher education are lived, felt, and negotiated in everyday academic life. These dynamics are not fully captured through policy or institutional analysis alone. By focusing on students, particularly those in the humanities, this study highlights how individuals engage with, make sense of, and respond to a university system shaped by both historical injustice and contemporary market pressures. The humanities provide a particularly rich site for this inquiry, as they are disciplines positioned to question dominant social

structures, explore personal and collective identity, and confront the institutional legacies of colonialism and epistemic exclusion.

2.2 More than Access: Pre-enrolment Realities and the Making of Student Journeys

Students enter university with lives already in motion. Their identities, expectations, and ways of engaging are shaped long before their first lecture by family structures, community dynamics, school environments, and broader socio-economic conditions. These lived histories travel with them into the university, shaping how they interpret its demands, promises, and constraints (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). In South Africa, where inequality remains structurally entrenched along lines of race, class, and geography, many students from poor backgrounds arrive on campus carrying the weight of intergenerational struggle, resilience, and sacrifice. For these students, gaining access to higher education is not only a personal achievement, but a communal victory and, often, a strategic act of survival.

Understanding how students make decisions about their degrees, what they expect from the university, and how they define success requires close attention to these social foundations. This section explores how students' lives before university, shaped by class, cultural capital, financial pressure, and social obligation, influence their perceptions of higher education, their sense of belonging, and their everyday navigation of academic life.

2.2.1 Inherited Expectations: Family, Aspiration and the Weight of the Degree

For many students in South Africa, the journey to university is shaped by a backdrop of socio-economic hardship and historical exclusion. The long legacy of apartheid, with its systematic denial of quality education and professional opportunities to the black majority, continues to influence how higher education is perceived and valued (Kanyopa et al., 2024; Timmis et al., 2019), especially by those who were excluded from it. In this context, gaining access to university is often seen as a powerful act of redress, a step toward breaking cycles of poverty and exclusion, and a means of reclaiming spaces once reserved for the white privileged elite (Masutha, 2022; Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2024).

These aspirations are not purely individual. For many students, the decision to pursue a degree is deeply embedded in intergenerational narratives of sacrifice, resilience, and communal advancement (Walker & Mathebula, 2020). Education is understood not only as a path to personal mobility but as a means of lifting entire families and communities. It carries profound symbolic weight, representing both the fulfilment of past struggles and the promise of a better

future (Case et al., 2018). A degree becomes a marker of dignity and social legitimacy, a way of challenging inherited exclusion and contributing to collective progress (Walker et al., 2022).

This collective orientation is further shaped by cultural expectations around reciprocity and care. The concept of *Ubuntu*, often expressed as “I am because we are,” captures this sense of interconnectedness, where personal achievement is seen as inseparable from communal well-being (Walker et al., 2022). One of the clearest expressions of this ethos is the practice commonly referred to as Black Tax. While not a formal tax, this term describes the informal but deeply felt expectation placed on many black South Africans, particularly those who are the first in their families to access higher education or stable employment, to provide financial support to their extended families (Fongwa, 2021; Mangoma & Wilson-Prangley, 2019; Dube, 2022). Rooted in a history of structural inequality and intergenerational poverty, Black Tax is both a strategy for survival and a moral economy of care (Fongwa, 2021; Mangoma & Wilson-Prangley, 2019; Dube, 2022). For students, this responsibility often begins during their studies, not after graduation. Many feel compelled to stretch their bursaries, NSFAS stipends, or part-time earnings to contribute to household needs, support siblings’ education, or ease the financial strain at home. In contrast to individualistic framings of success, which position education as a private investment, many South African students understand their degrees as collective achievements, milestones that must yield shared benefit and signal a commitment to uplifting those who enabled their academic journey (Walker, 2023; Woldegiorgis et al., 2024).

In deciding to go to university, students exercise a form of practical reason (Nussbaum, 2000), weighing complex and morally charged decisions about their futures. They must balance the need for economic stability expected to emerge when obtaining a degree with the pressure to honour the sacrifices of their families, often choosing degrees that promise both financial security and social impact (Thomas & Maree, 2022; Webb, 2021). This is not simply a matter of individual choice, but a deeply relational act, reflecting a commitment to the well-being of others.

A university degree is thus both a shield against precarity and a potential space for personal growth that can be used to the benefit of their families and communities (Walker & Mathebula, 2020). It holds layered meanings, simultaneously representing survival, social mobility, and self-actualisation. Students navigate these complex and often conflicting expectations as they enter higher education. On the one side, they carry the weight of their families’ hopes and their communities’ needs, driven by a sense of collective responsibility and the desire to uplift those

who have supported their journey (Walker et al., 2022). At the same time, they also aspire to personal growth, self-actualisation, and financial stability, goals that can sometimes stand in tension with the immediate demands of family support and the pressures of Black Tax (Fongwa, 2021; Case et al., 2018). Balancing these aspirations requires students to make difficult, often emotionally charged decisions about how to prioritise their futures while remaining accountable to those who depend on them (Fongwa, 2021; Walker et al., 2022).

Considering the responsibilities and expectations that come with pursuing a degree, university is not just about gaining access for students; it is about navigating multiple, often competing, pressures. It involves moving between the logic of individual advancement and the collective cultural expectation of care and responsibility, and between the desire for personal growth and the moral imperative to uplift others. To fully understand the student experience in South Africa, these intersecting realities must be placed at the centre of analysis, revealing how deeply personal aspirations are embedded within broader social, economic, and historical contexts.

While these inherited expectations and collective responsibilities shape students' motivations for entering higher education, the pathways they follow are often shaped by immediate constraints and circumstantial opportunities (Moosa & Langsford, 2021). For many, the decision to pursue a particular degree is less a carefully planned choice and more a response to the realities of their socio-economic context, family pressures, and the limitations of available options. This next section explores how these constraints influence the degrees students choose, revealing the often fragmented and contingent nature of their educational journeys.

2.2.2 Circumstantial and Constrained Decision-Making

While gaining access to university is often framed as a key marker of progress, the path to that point is rarely straightforward. For many students from historically excluded and under-resourced communities, the decision to pursue higher education is shaped less by personal aspiration and more by structural limitations and urgent socio-economic realities (Thomas & Maree, 2022; Walker & Mathebula, 2020). In contexts where career guidance is minimal and information about academic options and funding is fragmented or inaccessible, students are often left to navigate complex institutional systems with little support (Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Thomas & Maree, 2022). As a result, choices about what to study and where to enrol are frequently made under pressure, driven by what is known, what is affordable, or what is seen as the safest or quickest route to employment.

For students entering higher education without a familial roadmap, especially those from households historically excluded under apartheid, the absence of academic capital can be particularly disorienting (Kanyopa et al., 2024). Many are first-generation university students who have not been exposed to how university life works and what different disciplines entail (Thomas & Maree, 2022). Rather than being guided by informed academic interests or long-term career planning, their decisions are often shaped by proximity to home, the urgency of financial need, and a desire to pursue any qualification that might provide a path out of poverty (Walker & Mathebula, 2020; Thomas & Maree, 2022; Kanyopa et al., 2024).

Funding considerations further constrain student choices. For those reliant on NSFAS, the pressure to succeed within strict financial and academic timelines can be particularly intense. While literature highlights how affordability shapes access and decision-making (Thomas & Maree, 2022; Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2024; Kanyopa et al., 2024), it is also worth considering how NSFAS funding policies, such as the *n+1* rule, which limits support to the minimum duration of the qualification plus one additional year, may inadvertently influence student choices. For example, this rule likely discourages students from enrolling in degrees perceived as risky, high-failure, or less directly linked to employability. In this way, financial pressure may nudge students toward qualifications that appear safer or more market-aligned, even when those options are misaligned with their interests or strengths.

In this context, pursuing higher education becomes less about choosing freely and more about surviving within a constrained set of options. The degree becomes a means to an end, securing employment, supporting family, and avoiding financial penalties, rather than the outcome of careful deliberation about academic passion or intellectual growth. As a result, students are often making decisions under pressure, driven by what is available and acceptable, rather than by what is truly desirable.

These constraints do not end once students are enrolled. The weight of familial and communal expectations continues to shape their academic experiences, often in ways that intensify stress and emotional burden. For many, university is not simply a space of individual growth, it is a site where the ongoing demands of home, including financial contributions and emotional support roles, intersect with academic responsibilities. The next section explores this dynamic more fully, examining how students navigate these overlapping pressures and how their sense of self, success, and belonging is shaped by the need to constantly move between two demanding worlds.

2.2.3 Between Two Worlds: Navigating Home and University Life

Students do not leave their socio-economic realities behind when they enter university. For many, the journey to higher education is not a clean break from home, but a continuation of the cultural conditions and expectations that have shaped their lives. As Walker and Mathebula (2020) argue, poverty does not pause at the campus gate. Instead, students carry with them the burdens of inequality, including food insecurity, unstable housing, limited access to technology, and the emotional weight of being far from home, often without a financial safety net (Kanyapo et al., 2024; Thomas & Maree, 2022; Moosa & Langsford, 2021). These material pressures are compounded by the emotional and relational connections that tie students to their families and communities, as discussed in the section above about shared expectations, deeply influencing how they experience student life.

Studies show that these connections are not merely psychological but profoundly material. Financial aid, including bursaries and NSFAS stipends, is often seen not as individual income, but as a shared resource, or ‘our money,’ to be used for household needs (Thomas & Maree, 2022). Students remain emotionally tethered to their home responsibilities, managing both their own needs and those of their families. This ongoing relationship with home shapes everyday decisions, from budgeting to time management, and contributes to the framing of the university not as an individual journey but as a collective investment (Masutha, 2022; Fongwa, 2021; Webb, 2021).

This sense of collective responsibility is intensified by the realities of Black Tax (Fongwa, 2021; Mangoma & Wilson-Prangley, 2019; Dube, 2022). Rather than focusing solely on their own advancement, students are expected to uplift entire households, many of whom have made significant sacrifices to enable their education (Case et al., 2018; Thomas & Maree, 2022; Walker, 2020). This responsibility is not deferred until after graduation. Students often contribute portions of their financial aid to household expenses, take on part-time work, or act as informal caregivers, balancing these roles alongside full academic loads (Mkwanzani, 2017; Walker & Mathebula, 2020; Walker et al., 2022). Even with financial support, the pressure to ‘make it count’ remains. The expectation is not just to achieve academically, but to persist in the face of exhaustion, homesickness, and institutional exclusion, honouring the investments made by their families (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). This emotional labour is deeply personal and often invisible within institutional structures. It shapes how students understand their purpose at university and their broader sense of self. The stakes are not just academic, they are

existential. Failure is not merely a personal setback but a collective disappointment, a breach of trust, and a threat to the fragile stability of those they care for (Masutha, 2022).

This is not to romanticise hardship. The costs are significant, and the absence of adequate institutional support often compounds these challenges. Students without stable family structures, due to estrangement, bereavement, or strained relationships, are especially vulnerable (Walker et al., 2022). Without someone to call in a crisis or to send emergency funds, these students often experience university as a space of deep isolation. The assumption that all students arrive with a baseline of familial support fails to account for this precarity, rendering them invisible within institutional systems (Moosa & Langsford, 2021).

Ultimately, these pressures do not erase motivation but shape it. Students exercise agency within the narrow margins available to them, making difficult choices about how to balance academic demands with familial responsibilities. This is not simply a matter of survival but a form of relational resilience, driven by a deep sense of duty and care (Walker & Mathebula, 2020; Masutha, 2022; Thomas & Maree, 2022). Students strive to honour the sacrifices made on their behalf, while also attempting to carve out futures of their own. In this way, university is not a detour from family obligation, but a new way of carrying it, layered with academic pressure and future expectations.

Students arrive at university carrying the weight of complex social, economic, and cultural histories. Their decisions to pursue higher education are rarely straightforward, shaped by a mix of circumstantial opportunities, family expectations, and collective aspirations for upliftment. These pre-enrolment realities influence not only what degrees they choose, but also how they define success, manage their daily lives, and navigate the pressures of academic life.

These experiences reflect broader tensions within higher education itself. As students bring their lived histories into the university, they encounter institutional structures and cultures that are not always responsive to the complex social worlds they inhabit. The expectations they carry from home often clash with the market-oriented logics and bureaucratic demands of the academy, creating friction as they attempt to bridge these worlds.

To fully understand the student experience, it is essential to consider not only who students are and what they carry with them, but also the broader context in which they study. This includes the contested purposes of higher education, where economic imperatives, social justice goals, and personal transformation are often in tension. The next section explores these broader

debates, setting the stage for a deeper consideration of how students negotiate the promises and constraints of university life.

2.3 The Contested Purposes of Higher Education

The purpose of higher education has been debated for many years, reflecting its evolving and contested role in society. Historically, universities have served as spaces for knowledge production, critical inquiry, personal development, and democratic engagement (Barnett, 2000; Delanty, 2002; Nussbaum, 2010). However, over the past several decades, global shifts – economic, political and ideological - have significantly reconfigured how higher education is understood and structured.

Central to these shifts is the rise of neoliberalism: an ideology that emphasises market competition, individual responsibility, privatisation, and reduced state involvement in social provisioning (Mintz, 2021; del Cerro Santamaría, 2019). Neoliberal reforms in higher education emerged in response to broader fiscal crises and shifts in public policy that questioned the role of the state in funding social goods. As governments across the world reduced subsidies and embraced austerity, universities were increasingly expected to generate their own income through student fees, research outputs, and partnerships with industry (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Marginson, 2016). This restructuring positioned higher education as a private investment rather than a public good.

Within this paradigm, universities became sites of market logic. Knowledge was reframed as a commodity, students as consumers, and degrees as credentials purchased for the promise of economic return (del Cerro Santamaría, 2019; Ashwin et al., 2024). This commodification intensified pressure on institutions to prioritise cost-efficiency, performance metrics, and employability outcomes, particularly in disciplines perceived to yield immediate economic value (Gyamera & Burke, 2018; del Cerro Santamaría, 2019; Mintz, 2021). As a result, vocational and STEM fields expanded while disciplines like the humanities were marginalised (Mintz, 2021; Marginson, 2016). The value of higher education became narrowly defined in terms of graduate income, employment statistics, and institutional rankings.

This dominant framing masks the broader purposes higher education has historically served. Scholars such as Ashwin (2020), McArthur (2011), and Nussbaum (2010) argue that universities must be more than credentialing factories. They should foster critically engaged, ethically grounded graduates capable of contributing to democratic life, social justice, and

collective well-being. These scholars call for a more expansive understanding of educational value, one that moves beyond economic utility to include personal, civic, and societal development.

Drawing on Biesta's (2009) framework, Marginson (2024) identifies three overlapping purposes of education: (i) qualification, which involves acquiring skills and credentials necessary for employment and societal participation, (ii) socialisation, which refers to the process of becoming integrated into existing cultural, institutional, and professional norms, and (iii) subjectification, which refers to the formation of students as individuals who are capable of questioning dominant norms, engaging meaningfully with complexity, and making ethical and thoughtful contributions to society. While qualification and socialisation tend to dominate in neoliberal systems where performance, standardisation, and employability are prioritised, subjectification offers a vital counterpoint. It reframes education as a deeply personal transformative process: not only about what students can do, but about who they become. This includes cultivating the capacity to think independently, question dominant assumptions, and act with purpose and ethical awareness in a complex world.

However, this transformative potential is not guaranteed. Accessing university alone does not enable subjectification or self-formation. These require inclusive curricula, critical pedagogies, supportive environments, and structural conditions that enable students to engage deeply with knowledge and with themselves (Ashwin, 2020; Walker & McLean, 2013). When universities become overly focused on employability and cost-efficiency, they often neglect these dimensions of learning, limiting students' opportunities to develop a meaningful sense of purpose and social contribution (McArthur, 2011; Ashwin, 2020). This landscape is further complicated by massification.

Massification, as framed by Trow (1973), refers to the shift from elite to mass higher education systems, characterised by rapid growth in enrolments and a more diverse student body. While this shift has expanded access and created new pathways to social mobility, it has also brought significant challenges, particularly in contexts of constrained resources and declining public investment (UNESCO, 2018; Badat, 2020). Institutions often struggle to adapt structurally and pedagogically to the needs of a broader student population. As Marginson (2024) argues, opportunities for self-formation, understood as students' capacity to reflect, grow, and reimagine themselves, are unevenly distributed. Those from historically excluded backgrounds

frequently face exclusionary curricula, limited academic support, and institutional cultures that fail to affirm their identities or respond to their lived realities.

These contradictions have prompted growing calls for a systemic rethinking of the purposes of higher education (Ashwin, 2022; McCowan, 2016; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Rather than choosing between social transformation and economic growth, scholars advocate for a more integrated model in which human development, equity, and justice are not seen as opposing goals to employability, but as interdependent aims. As Walker and McLean (2013) argue, universities should enable students to flourish, not only by gaining employment, but by contributing to others' well-being, critically engaging with society, and leading meaningful lives.

This integrated framing is particularly urgent in contexts marked by inequality and democratic fragility. In such settings, universities have a dual responsibility: to equip students with the tools to navigate an increasingly competitive economy, especially considering the pressures students face discussed above, and to cultivate their capacity for critical citizenship, ethical reflection, and social responsibility. These are not luxuries or add-ons; they are central to building inclusive, resilient societies. However, realising this potential depends on institutional commitment, public investment, and an expanded vision of what higher education can and should be.

This global context of contradiction between public good and private investment, inclusion and exclusion, personal transformation and instrumentalism, provides the backdrop for understanding higher education in South Africa. Here, the legacies of apartheid, the imperatives of transformation, and the demands of global competitiveness intersect in particularly complex ways. Before turning to the South African context more directly, the next section explores the potential of higher education as a space of personal transformation, a dimension often overshadowed by economic imperatives, but central to how students experience and assign meaning to their university journeys.

2.3.1 Beyond the Market: Personal Transformation through Knowledge

In increasingly market-driven higher education systems, the university's role in supporting students' personal development, how they make sense of who they are, how they relate to others, and how they interpret the world around them, has been neglected. As institutional focus shifts toward employability, performance indicators, and economic returns, there is less

emphasis on how sustained engagement with disciplinary knowledge can influence students' understanding of their place in society and the values they hold (Ashwin, 2020). This narrowing of purpose risks neglecting a core educational function: enabling students to examine their assumptions, make informed judgments, and respond to the social conditions they encounter (Ashwin, 2020; McArthur, 2011).

The ability to analyse one's context and make informed, purposeful decisions is especially vital in South Africa, where historical inequality and ongoing socio-economic pressures shape not only how students access higher education but how they navigate it and make sense of what it means for who they will become. As discussed in 2.1, students' expectations of their degrees are closely tied to the role higher education plays in enabling both economic mobility and social contribution. While there is a strong emphasis on securing market value, many students also carry the responsibility of returning home to support their families and uplift their communities, expectations that add further weight to how they experience and interpret their university education. This section foregrounds that broader purpose, positioning personal transformation, through meaningful engagement with knowledge and developing a deeper awareness of the social world, as a central, though often undervalued, aim of higher education.

Ashwin (2020, 2024) argues that universities should be spaces where students undergo a process of becoming, not simply developing skills, but fundamentally reshaping how they understand themselves and their place in the world. This vision challenges dominant narratives that position students as consumers and degrees as commodities, and instead highlights the potential of disciplinary knowledge to foster deeper shifts in identity, purpose, and social engagement.

The idea that education should support students in reimagining themselves and their place in the world is further elaborated in Biesta's (2009) framework, expanded by Marginson (2024), who argues that the often-overlooked purpose of subjectification is vital. In contrast to the dominant emphasis on qualification and socialisation—aimed at preparing students for the labour market and social integration—subjectification refers to the formation of the self. It centres education as a transformative process that fosters independent thought, ethical awareness, and the capacity to question and reconfigure inherited norms. Within market-driven systems, this dimension is frequently marginalised, even though it is essential for developing socially conscious graduates able to contribute to more just and reflective futures (Marginson, 2024).

However, personal transformation, or subjectification, is neither automatic nor universally experienced (Marginson, 2024). It depends on how students encounter knowledge, and on the pedagogical and institutional conditions that shape and facilitate that encounter. Ashwin et al. (2022) show that while many students begin university with instrumental goals, such as obtaining a credential, they often describe their university journeys as personally transformative. In their longitudinal study of Chemistry students in South Africa, England and the United States, for example, participants shifted from seeing Chemistry as a technical discipline to understanding it as a framework for interpreting the world at a molecular level (Ashwin et al., 2022; Ashwin et al., 2024). These shifts were not only cognitive but existential, involving new ways of seeing and relating to the world.

This process of becoming can also be understood using Archer's (2003) Social Realism in relation to the broader interplay between structure, culture, and agency that shapes student experience. While Dubet (2000) frames student life through the interaction of personal projects, social integration, and intellectual engagement, his emphasis on how students navigate and internalise the meanings of education resonates with Archer's (2003) social realist perspective. For Archer, individuals are reflexive agents who engage with the structural and cultural conditions around them to shape their own pathways. Personal transformation, in this framing, is not a given, it occurs when students are able to align their own internal concerns and aspirations (personal projects) with the opportunities and constraints presented by institutional structures (curriculum, teaching, access) and prevailing cultural logics (norms about success, employability, and value). When students are denied access to inclusive pedagogies, or when the curriculum feels disconnected from their lived realities, this alignment becomes difficult to achieve, undermining the conditions necessary for deep learning and transformative engagement at a personal level.

The capability approach used by Walker and McLean (2013) and later extended in Walker et al. (2022) offers another way of understanding how higher education can contribute to human development. Their research defines personal transformation not by credentials or outcomes alone, but by the expansion of students' freedoms: to reason about their lives, form meaningful relationships, and contribute to the wellbeing of others. Here, the personal transformative potential of knowledge is explicitly social. It is about the kinds of graduates a society produces and the kind of society they are equipped to help build.

For students entering university from contexts shaped by material constraint, social obligation, and historically limited educational opportunity, as explored in 2.1, this kind of transformation carries significant weight. The expansion of capability is not simply about self-realisation, it represents a shift in what becomes imaginable and possible within the bounds of their social realities. Personal transformation, in this sense, is inseparable from social meaning — it has the potential to enable students to see themselves as agents of change within their families, communities, and broader society, not only through economic contribution, but also through the development of judgement, responsibility, and the ability to use knowledge to make meaningful social contributions in the world. This highlights the socially embedded nature of personal development as a purpose of higher education, especially in contexts where success is measured not individually, but collectively.

Personal transformation, then, is not in conflict with instrumental goals. As Ashwin et al. (2023) argue, students often pursue degrees for economic reasons while still developing a profound connection to their discipline. The presence of instrumental motivations does not preclude the possibility of deep engagement with knowledge. On the contrary, when supported by inclusive learning environments that encourage students to examine what they are learning, understand its relevance, and explore how it connects to their identities and broader social realities, students' economic goals can coexist with a desire for meaning, social contribution, and long-term growth. This dual aspiration, financial security and personal significance, is especially evident in South Africa, where many students enter university with the aim of uplifting their families and communities (Masutha, 2022; Thomas & Maree, 2022).

Recognising personal transformation through knowledge as a legitimate and necessary purpose of higher education shifts the conversation. It challenges narrow definitions of value based solely on income or productivity, and re-centres the human, social, and ethical dimensions of learning. In South Africa, where the university is often imagined as a vehicle for both personal and national renewal, this work is urgent. Supporting students to reflect, grow, and become, alongside preparing them to work, is not a luxury. It is a democratic and developmental imperative.

The next section turns to the national context in which these possibilities are situated, tracing how post-apartheid higher education in South Africa has attempted to balance economic imperatives with the transformation agenda goals of equity, justice, and inclusion, and what this has meant for how students experience the university post-apartheid.

2.3.2 South Africa: A Post-Apartheid Higher Education System in Tension

South African higher education operates within a persistent and deeply embedded tension: universities are tasked with redressing the injustices of apartheid and advancing social justice, while simultaneously navigating the pressures of a global market economy, reduced public funding, and growing enrolments (Badat, 2016; Badat, 2020; Lange, 2020). These dual imperatives — economic viability and social transformation — contribute to structural contradictions that are not only institutional challenges but also shape the everyday realities of students, particularly those from historically excluded backgrounds.

Understanding the student experience in contemporary South African higher education requires more than an institutional analysis; it needs engagement with the broader historical and economic conditions that shape what higher education has become, and what it means for those who enter it. While 1994 marked a formal break from apartheid governance, it did not dismantle the economic and institutional foundations of inequality that underpin it (Badat, 2007). The new democratic government inherited a racially stratified university system marked by exclusion and epistemic violence (Badat, 2009; Cooper, 2015), and tasked higher education with the dual responsibility of driving national development and redressing historical injustice. The White Paper on Higher Education (1997) articulated an ambitious transformation agenda: expanding access, producing skilled graduates, and contributing to the reconstruction of a more just and inclusive society (CHE, 2000; DHET, 2014).

However, this vision unfolded within a global economic climate increasingly shaped by neoliberal logics. As South Africa re-entered the global market, the higher education system was restructured along principles of efficiency, performance, and global recognition (Singh, 2001; Habib, 2004). Funding models thus shifted accordingly. Declining state subsidies forced universities to adopt cost-sharing strategies, relying more heavily on student fees and third-stream income (Badat, 2007). In this environment, the university was repositioned as a service provider, students as consumers, and degrees as commodities whose worth was measured through income and employability metrics (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Rossouw & Goldman, 2023). The language of public good was not discarded, but it was increasingly eclipsed by a logic of individual investment and return (Badat, 2020).

This shift has had significant implications for students, especially black and working-class students. Higher education became a space of aspiration, but also one of deep precarity

(Masutha, 2023; Walker et al., 2022). For many, the decision to pursue a degree came with debt, stress, and instability, factors that shaped not only access but the entire learning experience (Kanyopa et al., 2024). Financial strain, insecure housing, and food insecurity are not peripheral issues. They form the backdrop to students' academic lives and compound the emotional and cognitive demands of navigating an unfamiliar and often alienating institutional environment (Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Thomas & Maree, 2022).

Crucially, this economic burden is carried within institutions that have themselves struggled to reconcile the demands of equity with those of efficiency. The pressures to be recognised globally through rankings, output metrics, and graduate employment statistics, have often worked against the deeper cultural and epistemic changes required for meaningful transformation (Hlatshwayo, 2024; Mintz, 2021). While the post-1994 era brought important gains in access, particularly for black and working-class students, the expansion of enrolment was not matched by equivalent investment in infrastructure, student support, or institutional reform (CHE, 2004). The result is a university system stretched between its role as an engine of social justice and its need to remain financially viable.

This tension is particularly visible in the experiences of students at Historically White Universities (HWUs), where the demographic makeup may have shifted, but institutional cultures remain shaped by Eurocentric norms and values —such as the privileging of Western epistemologies, English as the dominant medium of instruction, and expectations of student ways of being that reflect white, middle-class cultural norms (Jansen, 2004; Heleta, 2016; Walker, 2005). While students may be formally included, they are often expected to assimilate to dominant cultural expectations, rather than seeing the institution adapt in ways that reflect their realities (Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Hlatshwayo, 2024). At the same time, Historically Black Universities (HBUs), still affected by decades of underfunding and neglect, continue to face systemic infrastructure deficits, which limit opportunities to be globally recognised, which can lead to potential funding (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). These uneven conditions reinforce broader inequalities, with institutional advantage and symbolic power still concentrated in spaces historically designed to exclude.

Financial aid schemes such as NSFAS were introduced to address these barriers, but have struggled under the weight of growing demand, underfunding, and administrative dysfunction (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). For students who rely on NSFAS, the promise of support is often undermined by delays, policy shifts, and bureaucratic breakdowns. Instead of providing

stability, financial aid has become a source of anxiety and disruption, compromising students' academic focus and sense of security (Kanyopa et al., 2024; Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Walker & Loots, 2018).

Together, these conditions reveal the double bind facing South African universities: they are expected to be both responsive to historical injustice and aligned with global market imperatives. However, these goals often pull in opposite directions, producing a higher education system defined by contradiction. The formal expansion of access has not guaranteed equity in experience, success, or belonging. As Boughey and McKenna (2021) argue, without attention to the structural, cultural, and epistemic dimensions of participation, transformation remains incomplete. For many students, the university is not only a space of learning, but one of negotiation between personal aspiration and structural exclusion, and between symbolic inclusion and financial constraint.

The following section examines how the transformation agenda has been interpreted and implemented in this complex policy and sector terrain. It discusses how students themselves understand and engage with transformation, and how its gaps, limitations, and contradictions are lived in practice.

2.3.3 The Transformation Agenda: Between Vision and Reality

In South Africa, the concept of transformation in higher education is both necessary and contested. Rooted in response to the legacies of apartheid and the promise of democratic redress, transformation has been positioned as a national imperative, intended to create a more just, inclusive, and socially responsive university system (Badat, 2007). The post-1994 moment called for higher education institutions to become engines of national development, not only by advancing individual mobility and economic growth opportunities, but also by confronting structural inequality and rebuilding a fractured society (DHET, 2007; Soudien, 2008; Badat, 2001; van Schalkwyk et al., 2021).

The intentions of this transformation agenda were expansive. It aimed to restructure institutions both materially and epistemologically: to broaden access, challenge exclusionary cultures, diversify knowledge systems, and promote social justice through equity and inclusion (Soudien, 2008; Lange, 2020; Lockett & Shay, 2017). Social justice, in this context, includes not just demographic representation but meaningful participation, ensuring students are supported, valued, and able to succeed regardless of background. Importantly, transformation

was envisioned as both socially and economically responsive by addressing inequality while contributing to national growth (DHET, 2007; Soudien, 2008).

However, the implementation of this vision has been uneven and often superficial (Badat, 2001, 2020). As Singh (2001) argues, the absence of a coordinated national strategy led to a fragmented interpretation of transformation. In the absence of clear guidance, many institutions equated transformation with compliance by meeting enrolment targets, changing demographics, and aligning with performance metrics (Badat 2020; Lange, 2020). This narrow focus on access masked the deeper work of structural, cultural, and epistemological change (Jansen, 2017). Institutions were left to define transformation on their own terms, often influenced more by global ideals due to the need for external funding, than by the lived realities of South African students (Badat, 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2024).

At the same time, the rise of neoliberal policy frameworks intensified this tension. Global logics of efficiency, competition, and cost-recovery reshaped the higher education landscape, intersecting uncomfortably with the goals of transformation. As a result, the pressure to increase enrolments without proportional support reinforced inequality, limited student support services, and reduced transformation to surface-level shifts (Badat, 2020; Maylam, 2020; Lange, 2020).

Although access expanded significantly after 1994 and institutions' demographics began to represent South Africa's population, the student experience has not reflected a transformation in deeper institutional cultures or pedagogies. Morrow (2009) distinguishes between formal access and epistemological access, i.e., the ability to engage meaningfully with disciplinary knowledge and participate equally and legitimately. While a greater number of students from historically excluded communities now enter universities, disparities in success, retention, and academic inclusion remain stark (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The slow pace of change is especially felt by black, working-class, and first-generation students who encounter universities that remain shaped by historical elitist ideals, Eurocentric curricula, and institutional norms that do not fully reflect their realities (van Schalkwyk et al., 2021; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022).

This disjuncture between policy rhetoric and lived experience, came into sharp focus during the student-led #MustFall protests. These movements laid bare the frustrations of a generation whose expectations of transformation had not been met in practice. They demanded more than

structural inclusion. They called for epistemic recognition, institutional accountability, and a redefinition of what it means to belong in higher education. As Vorster and Quinn (2017) note, this marked a significant shift in higher education — a ‘decolonial turn’ that repositioned the student voice and experience at the centre of transformation debates.

The #MustFall protests also disrupted dominant discourses that positioned students as deficient or in need of adjustment. Instead, students demanded that institutions change; to recognise the value of diverse knowledges, to create space for epistemic justice, and to support the conditions for meaningful learning and belonging (du Preez et al., 2016; Vorster & Quinn, 2017). Transformation, they insisted, could not be reduced to policy metrics or demographic representation. It had to include a reflection on institutional culture, curriculum relevance, and power.

Despite these challenges to the status quo, many institutions continue to approach transformation as a compliance exercise (Jansen, 2017; Lange, 2020). The work of reimagining institutional identity, interrogating pedagogical norms, and confronting the legacies of whiteness and coloniality has remained limited, especially under the strain of financial constraints and massification (Lange, 2020). Even as strategic plans reference inclusivity, few institutions have embedded transformation as an ongoing, reflective institutional practice, which Lange (2020) argues is critical for the ongoing transformation work. Badat (2020) cautions that in this context, transformation risks being stripped of its critical potential, becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

My study seeks to understand how this gap between vision and reality is experienced by students themselves. While institutional documents may signal progress, they often fail to capture how transformation, or its absence, is lived in everyday academic life (van Schalkwyk et al., 2021). I explore how structural, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of transformation are navigated from students' perspectives. This study questions whether the institutions students enter are responsive to their social realities, recognising the many expectations that come from their success in higher education, and whether the education they receive enables or constrains the development of meaning, identity, and purpose.

Transformation, as originally intended, was never meant to be a one-off achievement. It is a continuous, adaptive process, one that must remain responsive to changing student demographics, emerging social challenges, and the evolving knowledge landscape (Lange,

2020). The next section explores the #MustFall movements in greater depth, examining how students gave public voice to dissatisfaction with the slow, surface-level progress of transformation and opened space for new questions, critiques, and demands around the future of South African higher education.

2.3.4 #MustFall Student Protests: Exposing the Gaps in Transformation

The #MustFall protests of 2015–2016 marked a critical rupture in South Africa’s post-apartheid higher education landscape. Emerging from two intersecting movements, #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, students articulated a broader critique of a transformation agenda that had failed to confront the lived realities of exclusion and inequality. While #FeesMustFall centred on the unaffordability of higher education and demanded the right to study without financial burden, #RhodesMustFall challenged the enduring presence of colonial symbols and Eurocentric curricula, highlighting how institutional culture and epistemology continue to marginalise black students (Chikane, 2018; Vorster & Quinn, 2017). Together, these movements exposed how access, on its own, was not enough. They demanded that universities be held accountable for how they include, support, and recognise students once admitted.

The protests gave visible form to long-standing tensions between formal inclusion without structural reform, increasing enrolments without adequate support, and the symbolic language of transformation without substantive change (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyan, 2019). While student activism has characterised historically black universities for many years, the scale and intensity of the 2015 protests, particularly at historically white universities, brought these contradictions into sharper public and political focus (Maylam, 2020). As Jansen (2017) observes, financial exclusion had long been normalised in the sector, but only gained national urgency when it disrupted the functioning of privileged historically white institutions.

In response, the government introduced a major policy shift by expanding the NSFAS Scheme. Between 2018 and 2023, funding more than doubled, and the scheme was restructured to provide bursaries to students from households earning under R350,000 per year (Masutha, 2023; DHET, 2023). This shift addressed core concerns about affordability and was an important recognition of students’ economic struggles. However, administrative failures, delayed disbursements, and changing eligibility criteria have continued to undermine its effectiveness (Webb, 2020; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). For many students, financial aid remains

unstable and unpredictable, leaving them to navigate higher education in conditions defined by uncertainty and stress (Matthews, 2020).

These dynamics reinforce Badat's (2020) argument that while financial access is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure meaningful participation. Transformation cannot rely on expanded enrolment or funding models alone; it must also address the institutional cultures, pedagogies, and systemic structures that shape student experience. As Jansen (2023) notes, policies that overlook students' everyday realities risk entrenching exclusion rather than dismantling it. The #MustFall protests made clear that students encounter higher education not as neutral recipients of opportunity, but as individuals negotiating complex academic, cultural, and economic demands, often with limited institutional recognition or support.

The protests also disrupted the deficit-based framing of students as individuals who must adapt to institutions. As Hlatshwayo (2022) argues, students are frequently positioned both as beneficiaries of access and as individually responsible for navigating the structural challenges of university life. This framing is particularly burdensome for black and working-class students who enter higher education not only with limited resources, but with expectations to succeed on behalf of their families and communities (Walker et al., 2022). The protests challenged this narrative, reasserting the need for systemic accountability rather than individualised resilience.

Perhaps most significantly, the protests re-centred student voice as a vital source of insight and critique. By placing student perspectives at the forefront of national discourse, the #MustFall movements challenged the assumption that institutional transformation can be fully understood through policies, plans, or performance metrics. As Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue, understanding students in context, recognising their social, cultural, and economic realities, is essential to any meaningful account of higher education. The protests affirmed that transformation must be judged not only by who enters the university, but by how that access is experienced, supported, and made meaningful in practice. This study builds on that insight by exploring how students in the humanities navigate and interpret their university experiences within a landscape marked by inequality, aspiration, and institutional contradiction.

Despite these disruptions, many of the structural and epistemic issues raised by the protests remain unresolved (Ntombana et al., 2023; Hlatshwayo, 2024). Financial precarity continues to shape student life, and epistemic transformation across institutions has been uneven. Without sustained reform to curriculum, governance, pedagogy, and student support, the contradictions

that sparked the protests persist, limiting the depth and reach of the transformation project (Maylam, 2020).

In confronting who is included, what is taught and whose knowledge is recognised, the #MustFall protests forced a reckoning with deeper epistemic questions. They called on universities to reimagine their purpose, and to take seriously the intellectual and cultural contributions of students historically excluded from the centre of academic life. The next section turns to these challenges, exploring how the framework of decoloniality has reshaped the transformation agenda by demanding not only access and representation, but also epistemic justice and curricular change.

2.3.5 Decoloniality: Beyond Surface-Level Transformation

The #MustFall protests did more than call for affordable education and the removal of colonial symbols. They exposed the limits of a transformation agenda that, while expanding access, failed to disrupt the deeper structural and epistemic foundations of South African universities (Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Prinsloo, 2016). Students demanded that transformation include not only material redress, but also a fundamental rethinking of the knowledge, values, and cultural norms embedded in institutional life. These protests pushed the conversation beyond demographic change toward a more sustained interrogation of power and knowledge.

This shift has brought renewed attention to the distinction between decolonisation and decoloniality. Decolonisation often refers to visible institutional reforms: renaming buildings, increasing representational diversity, and dismantling formal colonial symbols (Mbembe, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). While necessary, these changes remain limited if they do not challenge the epistemic assumptions that underpin academic life. Decoloniality, in contrast, engages with the enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to shape what knowledge is valued, whose voices are heard, and how universities define legitimacy and authority (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mignolo, 2007; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022).

A central concern in this discourse is epistemic violence, i.e., the systemic exclusion of African, indigenous, and locally-grounded knowledges from curricula and classrooms (Hlatshwayo, 2024; Morreira, 2017; Zembylas, 2018). As Matthews (2020) notes, universities continue to be shaped by the "colonial library," where Eurocentric texts and theories dominate and African perspectives are peripheral. This exclusion is not abstract. Students encounter it in reading lists that marginalise African scholarship, in classroom practices that silence multilingual

expression, and in disciplinary traditions that fail to acknowledge the lived realities of much of the student body.

Decoloniality does not call for the complete rejection and exclusion of Western knowledge. Rather, it affirms the principle of pluriversality, an approach that values multiple ways of knowing and resists the dominance of any single epistemic tradition. The aim is not to invert hierarchies, but to challenge the assumption that knowledge is neutral or universal. As Mignolo (2011) argues, this requires epistemic disobedience — a conscious effort to question how knowledge is produced, legitimised, and used (Gallien, 2020; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). Gallien (2020) and Matthews (2020) similarly contends that transformation should go beyond adding excluded perspectives into existing frameworks. It requires rethinking the frameworks themselves. Understood this way, decoloniality involves shifting the relationship students have with knowledge from passive acceptance to critical engagement with its assumptions, histories, and exclusions. This resonates with the discussion in 2.3.1 on personal transformation, where students should not only acquire information, but develop the capacity to reflect on their position in relation to knowledge (Ashwin et al., 2016; Matthews, 2022). Whether engaging with Eurocentric or African traditions, Matthews (2022) argues that students should rather learn to see knowledge as situated, political, and open to contestation. It is this shift from consuming knowledge to interrogating it that lies at the heart of both decoloniality and meaningful personal transformation. Matthews (2020, 2022) further argues that this potential is realised through changing how academics think about their curriculum and practice.

Realising decoloniality in practice calls for a reconfiguration of how knowledge is produced and shared. Fataar (2022) describes this as a knowledge-building approach, one that encourages institutions to create pedagogical and curricular environments that are inclusive, dialogic, and grounded in context. As Blackie and Adendorff (2022) show, however, long-standing disciplinary norms often inhibit such reform. The autonomy granted to traditional knowledge structures means that curricular content is frequently disconnected from the social realities of students, reproducing exclusion even in settings that appear transformed on the surface.

While institutional discourse has increasingly embraced the language of decoloniality, implementation remains uneven (Jansen, 2022). Hlatshwayo et al. (2022) note that curriculum change is often reduced to symbolic inclusion, an additional reading or occasional reference, rather than a fundamental rethinking of knowledge and pedagogy. These superficial responses are compounded by global pressures such as university rankings, third-stream income

priorities, and international benchmarking, all of which encourage standardisation over context-responsive practice (McKenna, 2024).

Resistance also emerges from within the academy. Efforts to re-centre African knowledge systems are frequently met with concerns about declining academic standards or institutional credibility (Hlatshwayo, 2022). As Fataar (2022) argues, these objections often rest on an assumption that certain forms of knowledge are neutral or superior, rather than historically produced and culturally specific. Without sustained institutional commitment and a coherent national framework, efforts to implement decoloniality remain fragmented and vulnerable to co-option.

These unresolved tensions have direct consequences for students. For many students, as raised in the #MustFall movement, the university is experienced as a space of epistemic and cultural alienation. Naidoo et al. (2020) argue that transformation needs to include epistemological access (Morrow, 2000), i.e., not only the right to be present, but the opportunity to access and engage with knowledge that allows students to become valued members of a disciplinary community. When this kind of access is absent, students are left navigating a system that privileges assimilation over belonging and treats their knowledge as deficit rather than as a legitimate resource.

This study engages with these questions by exploring how students in the humanities experience and interpret the tensions between transformation and decoloniality in their everyday academic lives. It considers how students make sense of the dissonance between institutional rhetoric and classroom reality, and how they position themselves within disciplines that may both invite critical engagement and reproduce exclusion. For many, decoloniality is not a theoretical abstraction, but a demand for institutional recognition, academic relevance, and the right to participate in knowledge-making on their own terms.

As argued in this section, decoloniality is not a discrete goal or policy measure. It is an ongoing process that requires sustained reflection, institutional responsiveness, and pedagogical transformation. The #MustFall movements made this visible, compelling universities to confront not only who they serve, but how, and through what knowledge. These debates are especially pressing in the humanities, where questions of meaning, value, and identity are central to both the curriculum and the student experience. The next section turns to this disciplinary space, examining how students in the humanities negotiate the tensions between

market value and social meaning, and what these negotiations reveal about the broader possibilities and contradictions of post-apartheid higher education.

2.4 Studying the Humanities: Between Market Pressure and Social Meaning

The tensions explored across this chapter between social justice and market utility, access and belonging, transformation and constraint, are sharply illuminated within the humanities. Long regarded as disciplines that engage with meaning, identity, ethics, and social life (Nussbaum, 2000; Vale, 2020), the humanities occupy a contested position in a higher education landscape increasingly driven by economic imperatives. In South Africa, where universities are tasked with redressing historical injustices while also contributing to economic development, the humanities are often recognised for their ability to deepen social understanding and engage with pressing questions of justice. At the same time, they are devalued in public and policy discourse due to their perceived lack of direct economic utility (Croft & Bradshaw, 2025; Pillay & Yu, 2010; Butler, 2022).

This section explores what this context means for students studying in the humanities who are situated at the intersection of these tensions. It builds on earlier discussions of socio-economic pressures, familial expectations, and aspirations for upward mobility, and considers how the humanities are shaped by histories of exclusion and cultural dissonance. While not neutral spaces, the humanities also hold the potential to foster personal transformation in students and contribute to broader social change.

For students from working-class and historically excluded communities, the choice to pursue a humanities degree often emerges through a negotiation between aspiration and precarity (Masutha, 2022; Botha & Botha, 2022; Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). Students from these contexts arrive at university with ambitions shaped by collective histories and communal responsibility, as discussed in 2.1. Within this context, the widespread perception that the humanities are impractical is not just an institutional stance but becomes a personal dilemma. At Rhodes University, the Humanities Faculty includes a route into a Bachelor of Laws (LLB), where students have the option to pursue a Bachelor of Arts that progresses into the LLB programme. Many of the students in this study enrolled in the humanities with this goal in mind. Their degree choice was therefore not incidental but aligned with a longer-term professional aspiration, which is considered financially lucrative, that suited their and their

families' hopes. Students are frequently required to defend their academic choices to families and communities that see education as a path to economic security (Masutha, 2022).

This pressure is heightened by broader public narratives that frame educational value primarily in terms of graduate earnings and employability. Policy and media discourse tend to privilege professional and STEM fields, framing them as more responsible or realistic options in a context marked by high unemployment and financial precarity (Croft & Bradshaw, 2025; Pillay & Yu, 2010). As a result, students who find personal meaning and intellectual engagement in the humanities often must contend with the potential economic risks associated with their degrees.

However, this very tension underscores the distinctive role of the humanities. These disciplines invite students to explore moral, political, and social questions that are central to democratic participation and to the development of a thoughtful, responsive sense of self (Nussbaum, 2002; Davidson & Goldberg, 2004; Vale, 2020). For students living the reality of structural inequality, the humanities offer interpretive tools for understanding their circumstances and imagining alternatives for themselves, their families and communities who consider this a shared success.

Earlier sections have highlighted the importance of epistemological transformation in South African higher education. The humanities, with their focus on knowledge, identity, and power, are particularly well-positioned to drive this shift. As Matthews (2020, 2022) and Lockett (2022) observe, however, they remain entangled with colonial intellectual traditions that prioritise Eurocentric frameworks and marginalise African perspectives. While the humanities are often associated with resistance and valuing positionality, many of their curricula continue to exclude the voices and histories of the very students they now serve.

This contradiction can be felt acutely in the classroom (Matthews, 2020). Students are often asked to engage with abstract theoretical traditions that are far removed from their lived realities (Matthews, 2020; Morreira, 2017). This dissonance between curriculum and context creates a sense of exclusion, even within spaces that claim to promote transformation (Naidoo et al., 2020). The challenge is not only to understand disciplinary content, but to locate oneself within it, to find relevance and legitimacy in knowledge traditions that have historically marginalised African voices.

In response, some students and lecturers have embraced what Matthews (2023) calls "subversive appropriation", working within disciplinary structures to question, reinterpret, and expand them. This includes engaging more deeply with African scholarship, rethinking pedagogies, and cultivating learning environments that are more dialogic and inclusive (Matthews, 2020; Morreira, 2017; Zembylas, 2018). These strategies affirm students' agency as legitimate participants in knowledge production, rather than passive recipients.

As the previous section has shown, decoloniality is not a rejection of knowledge, but a reimagining of what knowledge is valued, whose histories are legitimised, and how learning is made meaningful. In the humanities, this requires a fundamental shift in how curricula are designed, how pedagogy is enacted, and how students are positioned within the academic community (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Fataar, 2022). For students, these questions are not abstract. They speak directly to whether students are seen, heard, and supported in their academic journeys, as raised in the #MustFall movements.

The Faculty of Humanities at Rhodes University provides a focused case through which to explore these dynamics. Between 2013 and 2023, black undergraduate enrolment in the faculty rose from 69% to 97% (Rhodes University Digest, 2023, 2024). While this demographic shift signals progress in terms of access, it also prompts deeper questions. Has the curriculum evolved in ways that reflect this changing student body? Have teaching practices become more inclusive and responsive? Do students feel a sense of belonging in disciplines that have historically excluded them?

This study takes these questions as its starting point. It explores how students in the humanities navigate the contradictions of a transforming university system, where economic and symbolic inclusion do not always translate into intellectual or cultural recognition. It asks how students make sense of their disciplines, what value they attach to their studies, and how they locate themselves in relation to the knowledge they are asked to engage with. In doing so, it considers how the humanities might be reimagined as spaces of belonging, personal transformation, and responding to students' aspirations.

2.5 Conclusion: Navigating Constraint, Aspiration, and Meaning

This literature review has mapped the layered terrain of student experience in South African higher education, beginning with the formative conditions that shape how students arrive at university and extending into the contested institutional and disciplinary spaces they must

navigate. The first section highlighted how students' pre-enrolment realities, marked by socio-economic hardship, familial obligation, and constrained decision-making, profoundly shape their expectations of higher education. For many, decisions are driven less by academic interest than by the promise of social mobility and the moral imperative to uplift their families and communities, grounded on the foundation of Black Tax and Ubuntu.

The review then turned to the shifting purposes of higher education, both globally and within South Africa. As universities are increasingly required to respond to both social and economic goals, market logics have narrowed the perceived value of a degree to its potential for employment and economic gain. In South Africa, these tensions are particularly pronounced; universities are expected to redress historical, both social and economic, injustice while also operating as financially viable institutions in a global neoliberal context. As shown in the sections on transformation, #MustFall, and decoloniality, access has not guaranteed belonging, success, or epistemic inclusion, especially for students from historically excluded backgrounds.

These dynamics shape how students engage with the university and make sense of the value of their education. Students do not enter higher education as passive recipients of knowledge. They arrive with complex social histories, strong ties to family and community, and aspirations informed by both personal ambition and collective responsibility. These backgrounds influence how they interpret academic content, navigate institutional cultures, and define what success means. In response, students draw on a range of strategies, adjusting to institutional expectations, resisting practices that feel alienating, and making decisions that balance immediate pressures with long-term goals. Their agency is expressed through how they manage these competing demands, grounded in the realities they bring with them and the futures they seek to build. This study explores their agency not only as a means of navigating higher education but as a way through which students come to understand who they are, what their studies mean, and how they might shape their futures and contribute to the world around them.

These dynamics are especially visible in the humanities, which offer a compelling lens through which to examine how students engage with meaning, identity, and social purpose. These disciplines have the potential to equip students with the language and frameworks to make sense of themselves and the world around them. Still, they are also marked by historical exclusions and public scepticism about their economic value. For many students, especially those navigating financial constraints and Black Tax, the decision to pursue a humanities degree brings both the weight of justification and the possibility of meaningful intellectual and

personal engagement. The humanities thus become spaces where broader questions about knowledge, recognition, and future contribution come into sharp relief.

The sections in this chapter suggest that student experience in higher education is best understood as a complex, relational process shaped by structural constraints, cultural expectations, and institutional conditions, but also by students' own meanings, strategies, and forms of participation. Understanding this complexity requires more than describing social or institutional contexts. It requires analytical tools that can explore the interplay between structure, culture, and agency.

The next chapter turns to this task. It introduces the theoretical framework that underpins the study, building the case for a social realist approach that allows for a nuanced analysis of how students navigate higher education and the conditions that impact their journeys. Rather than reducing students to passive recipients of inequality or portraying them as entirely self-determining individuals, this framework offers a way to explore who students are, who they become through their degrees, what conditions their experience as humanities students, and how they engage with and respond to the meaning of their degree in South Africa.

Ultimately, this study argues that any meaningful understanding of student experience in South African higher education must begin with students themselves, with where they come from, how they make sense of the university, and how they reshape it in the process of becoming.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Archer's Social Realism

Building on the literature review, this chapter presents the theoretical framework used to analyse how students navigate the conditions of their humanities education and how these shape their identities. As the previous chapter demonstrated, student experience is shaped by a complex set of structural, cultural, and personal factors. Understanding this complexity requires a theoretical approach that can hold these elements in relation without reducing one to the other.

This chapter elaborates on Social Realism, drawing on the work of Archer (2000, 2007), as the framework that enables this kind of analysis. Social Realism offers a way of thinking about how structure, culture, and agency interact in shaping student experience. It provides a way of understanding students as being shaped by their social context, including their educational background, economic positioning, and cultural environment, while also emphasising their capacity to reflect on and respond to these conditions in diverse ways. This makes it possible to explore identity not as fixed or determined, but as something continually shaped through the dynamic relationship between context and reflexive engagement.

The chapter begins by outlining how the nature of the social world is conceptualised within a social realist framework. It introduces its ontological foundations, particularly the idea of a stratified reality drawn from Bhaskar's (1975) Critical Realism and explains how this informs Archer's key concepts of structure, culture, and agency. The chapter then discusses how Archer's theory accounts for knowledge and emotion through the natural, practical, and social orders of reality, and expands on the concept of ultimate concerns as a way of understanding what matters most to individuals in shaping their actions and self-understanding. The chapter also explores Archer's model of reflexivity, focusing on the internal conversation and the different ways people reflect on their lives and make decisions through the four reflexivity modes. Although not all the concepts discussed in this chapter are applied directly in the findings chapters, they are presented here because of the interdependent nature of Archer's framework. Understanding how one concept functions often requires at least some engagement with how it relates to others. For example, agency cannot be fully grasped without a sense of the structural and cultural conditions it works within. Similarly, reflexivity, the central concept

in this study, rests on a broader understanding of how individuals form projects and concerns in response to the interplay of enabling and constraining conditions.

The chapter shows how Social Realism offers both a theoretical and analytical foundation for understanding how students make sense of their education, respond to its challenges, and reflect on who they are becoming. In concluding, the chapter sets out why Social Realism is a valuable framework for this study and how it aligns with the methodological approach used in my study.

3.1 Overview of Social Realism

Archer's (1996, 2000) Social Realism offers a framework for understanding how individuals engage with the social world as active agents rather than as passive products of their contexts. Her work builds on earlier theorists such as Geertz (1963) and Lowe (1981), who explored how modern societies shape identity. Geertz (1963) introduced the concept of Modernity's Man to describe how individuals are formed by the cultural forces of modernisation, including industrialisation, urbanisation, and secularisation. Lowe (1981) extended this perspective through the idea of Society's Being, which positions individuals as products of dominant social norms and systems, reflective of their historical contexts.

While Archer (1997, 2000) draws on these foundational ideas, she moves beyond them by foregrounding human agency. She argues that individuals are not merely shaped by their social contexts, as Geertz (1963) and Lowe (1981) suggest, but are reflexive beings who interpret, respond to, and have the potential to either transform or maintain the structural and cultural conditions they encounter (Archer, 2000). Her theoretical framework centres on the dynamic interplay between structure, culture, and agency, highlighting how this interaction contributes to identity formation and how individuals exercise their agency (Archer, 1997, 2000). Social Realism thus provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals are conditioned by their contexts, but not fully determined by them.

Social Realism (Archer, 1996, 2000), drawing on Bhaskar's (1975) Critical Realist ontology, is grounded in the understanding that social reality is stratified. Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1975) distinguishes between three interrelated levels of reality: (i) the empirical, i.e., what is experienced or observed, (ii) the actual, i.e., all events that occur whether they are observed or not, and (iii) the real, i.e., the underlying structures and mechanisms that generate these events. Although the mechanisms at the level of the real are not directly observable, they are considered real because they have causal effects that shape both individuals' actions and experiences

(Danermark et al., 2005). Archer (1996) positions Social Realism within this ontological framework to explain how structure and culture can have causal power — the capacity to shape, enable or constrain the possibilities available to individuals in specific contexts.

For example, the potential of causal power is evident in the South African higher education context. As highlighted in the literature review, students entering university often do so having navigated under-resourced schools and financial issues which then constrain their higher education pathways. In addition to these structural conditions, students also encounter cultural influences, such as the pressure to pursue economically ‘useful’ degrees or to meet family and community expectations. These intersecting structural and cultural dynamics shape how students position and consider the purpose of higher education, the value of a humanities degree, and what kinds of futures they envision for themselves.

Social Realism provides a framework for examining how structural and cultural factors interact with students’ agency, shaping how they navigate and respond to their social worlds. Central to Archer’s (2000) theory is the idea that individuals exercise agency through reflexivity — the internal conversation through which they deliberate on their circumstances in light of their personal concerns and commitments (Archer, 1996, 2000). This process enables individuals to evaluate their contexts, consider alternatives, and make decisions about how to act. In this view, agency is not unbounded freedom but is shaped and enacted through reflexive engagement with structural and cultural conditions.

In the context of this study, the humanities within contemporary higher education are shaped by a complex interplay of structural and cultural conditions. These conditions include the positioning of higher education as a private good within a global neoliberal landscape, which has contributed to the increasing prioritisation of the economic utility of degrees. As outlined in the previous chapter, this shift has influenced how value is understood in higher education, shaping policy decisions, funding allocations, and institutional priorities that tend to emphasise employability and market relevance. These broader dynamics form the backdrop against which students pursue their studies, influencing curriculum content, pedagogical practices, and the expectations placed on students. However, as Archer (2000) argues, individuals are not passively shaped by these conditions. Students engage with them reflexively, interpreting, negotiating, and responding to the structural and cultural conditions they encounter.

Central to her framework is Archer's (1995) concept of analytical dualism, a methodological approach that treats structure, culture, and agency as analytically distinct in order to examine their interplay. While these dimensions are deeply intertwined in lived experience, separating them analytically allows researchers to trace how structural and cultural conditions shape action, and how agency, in turn, contributes either to the reproduction or transformation of those conditions (Archer, 1995). This approach enables a non-reductive analysis of social life, one that can account for both constraint and possibility, emphasising that there is value in understanding the social world through the dynamic relationship between, as Archer (1995) calls them, 'the parts' (structure and culture) and 'the people' (agency). To understand how this framework theorises causality, power, and the potential for change, I discuss the ontological foundations on which it is built. The next section turns to Bhaskar's (1975, 2008) Critical Realism, which underpins Social Realism's understanding of reality as layered, structured, and open to transformation.

3.2 The Nature of Reality — Critical Realism

Bhaskar's (1975, 2008) Critical Realism provides the ontological grounding for Archer's (1996) Social Realism, offering a framework to understand reality as layered, or stratified. Central to the critical realist ontology, as previously indicated, is that reality is stratified into three domains: (i) the empirical (what is experienced), (ii) the actual (what occurs, whether observed or not), and the (iii) real (the underlying structures and conditions that generate events) (Danermark et al., 2005). The domain of the real refers to social and cultural conditions, such as institutional structures, normative systems, or belief formations that pre-exist individual actions and interactions (Bhaskar, 2008). These conditions are not directly observable, but they are considered real because they have identifiable effects, i.e., they shape how individuals enact their agency, influence how situations are interpreted and experienced, and establish constraints or enablements within a given context.

Importantly, within this ontological framework, causal power is not understood as deterministic or automatic, but as potential. Structural and cultural conditions do not directly determine action. Rather, they generate a range of tendencies, constraints, and enablements that shape the conditions under which individuals enact their agency (Danermark et al., 2005). The potential of structural and cultural conditions to shape reflexivity, behaviour, or outcomes is explained through the concept of generative mechanisms. These are underlying structures or processes such as organisational structures, regulations, and widely accepted beliefs about appropriate

behaviour, that possess causal power. While not directly observable, they can generate specific effects when activated by agents in particular contexts. Generative mechanisms do not determine action, but they shape the conditions under which individuals make decisions, consider constraints, or pursue certain courses of action. However, these mechanisms only become active under certain conditions and do not produce the same effects in every situation. Their causal efficacy depends on if and how they are engaged with by agents. Without such engagement, the power of these mechanisms remains latent, real, but unactualised. It is through agency, exercised through reflexivity, that these powers are experienced either as an enablement or a constraint (Archer, 2000). In this way, reflexivity serves as the means through which structural and cultural conditions are filtered, evaluated, and translated into courses of action.

For example, a student's decision to major in Sociology is observable through enrolment data, survey responses, or personal testimony, placing it at the empirical level, where experiences are recorded or reported. This decision is influenced by events at the actual level, such as conversations with friends and teachers, attending a career day, or reflecting on a meaningful school project, which occur whether the student consciously recalls or emphasises them in their decision-making process or not. Beneath these events, at the real level, lie the deeper generative mechanisms that make such experiences possible — institutional funding priorities, admissions policies, or patterns of social stratification that shape which degrees are accessible, desirable, or prestigious. These mechanisms do not determine individual choices but they structure the field of possible actions, shaping what is seen as viable or valued, even when not consciously recognised by the student.

Bhaskar (2008) argues that these underlying generative mechanisms do not always lead to observable outcomes and can exist and remain dormant. Their influence depends on whether and how they are activated by agents within specific contexts. The concept of depth ontology — that what we see is underpinned by what we do not see — is central to Critical Realism. It enables researchers to move beyond only what is observable and to examine the structures and conditions that shape them and the ways in which individuals navigate them.

The layered view of reality in Critical Realism refers to two related but distinct framings: first, that reality is made up of different domains, i.e., the empirical, the actual, and the real; and second, that reality is stratified in terms of complexity (Bhaskar, 2008). Complexity refers to the way reality is composed of different kinds of phenomena — physical, biological,

psychological, social, and cultural — each organised at its own level with distinct properties and causal powers (Bhaskar, 2008). These different levels of reality influence and depend on each other, but they cannot fully be explained in terms of one another. One example of this is that although individual actions contribute to the formation of social systems, these systems develop patterns and structures, such as rules, norms, and institutions, that are not reducible to the actions of any single person. These systems then influence how people act, creating a two-way relationship. In the same way, cultural ideas like values or ideologies are expressed by individuals, but they are not simply personal beliefs. They exist as shared meanings that shape thinking and behaviour across society. By recognising this layered complexity, Critical Realism offers a way to understand how different aspects of reality — individual, social, and cultural — are connected, but operate with their own specific effects. This makes it possible to explore social life without reducing it to either individual psychology or abstract social forces.

The concept of emergence is a consequence of this stratification. Emergence refers to the process by which interactions at one level give rise to new phenomena at a more complex level with properties and causal powers of their own. A useful example of emergence within South African higher education is the #MustFall movement discussed in the previous chapter. Although the protests were initially driven by individual students' concerns ranging from experiences of financial hardship to cultural alienation, the movement itself cannot be reduced to any one student's experience or intent. Rather, it emerged from the interaction of these concerns within a broader national and historical context of structural inequality and higher education exclusion. As students came together, a new collective phenomenon took shape with its own internal coherence, properties, and causal powers.

Once constituted, the movement was able to mobilise thousands of students, disrupt university operations, and shift national debates on decolonisation, access, and the role of the university. These outcomes were not simply the sum of individual actions but reflected the emergence of new social structures and shared meanings that arose from the interaction between individual agency, institutional conditions, and historical legacies. In this way, the #MustFall movement exemplifies emergence: it developed from specific social and psychological conditions, but acquired properties such as coordinated resistance, a shared political discourse, and cultural impact that were irreducible to those initial elements.

The movement also illustrates the stratified nature of social reality in its complexity. It cannot be adequately understood through a single lens, whether psychological, institutional, or

cultural. Rather, it arose from the dynamic interplay of multiple layers of reality, including students' personal experiences and emotional responses (psychological), exclusionary institutional practices and governance systems (social), and broader historical legacies that inform narratives around race, colonialism, and social justice (cultural). These levels were not isolated from one another. Students' experiences of exclusion were conditioned by current institutional structure and the historical remains of apartheid, while the cultural discourse of decolonisation shaped how students made sense of and responded to these experiences.

What makes the #MustFall movement analytically significant is how these layers interacted. Psychological reactions, such as frustration, alienation, and solidarity, were not just individual sentiments. They were mediated by and expressed through existing cultural and political frameworks, particularly the slow pace and implementation of the transformation agenda and the call for decolonised education. These responses combined into a collective mobilisation that disrupted institutional logics and challenged national policy. The causal powers of the movement thus cannot be located at a single level but emerged through the interaction of agents and structures across multiple strata of social reality. This reinforces the critical realist insight that social phenomena are complex, layered, and cannot be explained through reductionist accounts but also needs to be understood in relation to one another.

Importantly, emergence is contingent. For example, not all students experienced the protests in the same way, nor did all choose to participate, even though many were subject to similar structural and cultural conditions such as declining public funding and colonial curriculum and institutional culture. The emergence of the #MustFall movement depended on how students exercised their agency through reflexive engagement, shared grievances, and collective action. This underscores the role of agency in activating generative mechanisms. Structural and cultural conditions create the potential for transformation, in this case personal and institutional, but outcomes vary depending on how individuals reflexively interpret and engage with those conditions. The same structures can thus lead to different effects depending on context, interaction, and agency.

The understanding of reality as layered and emergent underpins Archer's (1995) use of Critical Realism as an underlabourer for her Social Realism framework, a philosophical foundation that works to clear away conceptual confusion and provide the ontological grounding upon which her sociological analysis is built. Drawing on Bhaskar's (1975) depth ontology, Archer (1995, 1996) distinguishes analytically between structure, culture, and agency. While structures and

cultural systems have potential conditioning effects, agents reflexively deliberate upon their situations and act in ways that may sustain or transform the social world. Critical Realism provides the ontological scaffolding on which Social Realism is built, offering a way to understand the social world as shaped not only by observable events, but by the underlying generative mechanisms that condition them. Social Realism draws on this foundation to examine how structural and cultural conditions influence human action, and how individuals, through reflexivity, respond to and potentially reshape those conditions.

3.3 Social Realism

Building on the ontological grounding of Critical Realism, Social Realism offers a framework for examining how the social world is conditioned both by structural and cultural contexts and shaped through human agency. Central to Archer's (1996, 2000) framework is the recognition that structure, culture, and agency are analytically distinct dimensions of social life, each with their own properties and causal powers. Although deeply intertwined in practice, distinguishing them allows for a more detailed analysis of how social conditions influence human action and how individuals, through reflexive engagement, can reproduce or transform those conditions over time. The sections that follow examine each of these dimensions in turn. Together, these components form the foundation of Archer's Social Realism and provide the conceptual tools for analysing the dynamic interplay between 'the parts' and 'the people' in social life.

3.3.1 Structure

One of the core aspects of Social Realism is the concept of structure, which is central to understanding the social world. According to Archer (1995), structure refers to society's underlying patterns and arrangements, including material systems, resources, and social institutions such as social class, race, gender, marriage and social roles. In reference to my study, structures could refer to students' family structure, socioeconomic background, and schooling system. In terms of their time at university, it could refer to admission policies, curriculum and funding. These structures are not static and unchanging but are subject to ongoing transformations and adaptations. A structure transforms or adapts through interaction with an agent, thus highlighting why Archer (1995) emphasises that the social world exists through the interplay of structure, culture and agency. Through the interplay, structures also play a significant role in shaping individual behaviour and action, providing the context within which individuals operate (Archer, 1995, 1996). Archer's (1995) concept of structure is important because it recognises the complex and multifaceted nature of the social world and

the interdependence of social structures and individual agency. By emphasising the causal influence of social structures on individual behaviour, Social Realism offers a way of understanding social phenomena beyond simplistic views of society as either the product of individual actions or the result of fixed and unchanging structures.

For example, many students from working-class backgrounds in South Africa have historically faced financial constraints that limited their access to and success within higher education, such as rising tuition fees, limited financial aid, and the burden of student debt (Kanyopa et al., 2024; Walker et al., 2022). These structural conditions shaped the possibilities available to students, often forcing them to take on part-time work, drop out, or forgo further study altogether (Case et al., 2018). However, the emergence of the #FeesMustFall movement illustrates how students exercised collective agency in response to these constraints. Through mass mobilisation, protest, and sustained advocacy, students challenged the dominant framing of higher education as a private good. Their actions contributed to a significant policy shift: the transformation of NSFAS from a predominantly loan-based model to a bursary scheme for qualifying students. This outcome illustrates Archer's (1996) interplay of structure and agents. While financial structures conditioned students' experiences, agents, through exercising their agency, contested and reshaped those very structures.

As illustrated by the example above, social structures are not reducible to the sum of individual actions but instead have a causal influence on those actions (Archer, 1995). This means that social structures can shape and constrain individual behaviour, even when individuals are unaware of this influence. However, this does not mean that individuals are entirely passive in the face of social structures (Archer, 1995, 1996). Instead, individuals can modify and transform social structures through their actions, albeit within certain limits and constraints. In Archer's (1995) view, social structures have a morphogenetic quality, which means that they are both structuring and structured by individual actions and decisions. Structuring highlights the active role of social structures in conditioning and influencing individual behaviour, while structured emphasises individuals' positioning and context-dependent nature within these structures. For example, considering gender roles, values and norms in society, structuring refers to how these norms and values may influence how people choose to respond to the world, i.e., whether men and women opt for gender specific roles and responsibilities as deemed suitable by the society they live in. Structured refers to the structures that exist because of these gender values and norms that impact the opportunities afforded to men and women. The

structured aspect can enable or constrain an individual's agency, depending on their societal position.

This dialectical relationship between structure and agency means that social structures are not independent of individuals but are instead the product of ongoing interactions between individuals and their social context. This perspective challenges the notion of a one-way causal relationship where social structures completely determine individuals' behaviour. It shows that individuals can exercise agency and influence the social structures in which they are embedded. There is also a recognition that individuals are not completely free from the influence of social structures, as they can enable or constrain individuals' choices and actions.

Understanding this dialectical relationship is significant because it provides a more nuanced and comprehensive view of human behaviour and social reality. It highlights the dynamic and reciprocal nature of the interaction between individuals and their social context. It goes beyond simplistic understandings of individuals as passive products of social structures or as completely autonomous agents. By recognising the interplay between structure and agency, Social Realism offers a deeper understanding of how social structures are created, maintained, and transformed through the actions and interactions of individuals. It also provides a way to examine how individuals navigate and negotiate their agency within existing social structures and how they may work to change or challenge those structures. This idea challenges deterministic perspectives and offers a more complex understanding of the relationship between individuals and society. It underscores the importance of considering structural and agential factors in analysing human behaviour and social dynamics. Social structures, therefore, have stability and dynamism, as they are both the result of past actions and decisions and the context within which present actions and decisions occur.

In Lockett's (2016) study investigating the student protests at a South African university, where the #RhodesMustFall collective advocated for the 'decolonisation' of the curriculum, social realism is used to uncover the underlying structural factors that have played a role in shaping the university's colonial history. Social realism allowed Lockett (2016) to understand the complexity of the relationship between students and the university and how this relationship has impacted their overall experiences. Lockett (2016) highlights the value in Archer (1995, 1996) distinguishing between structural conditioning and cultural conditioning because, for the purpose of her study, it allowed her to see that “while black middle-class students may be structurally (i.e., materially) enabled to take their place as citizens in the academy, culturally

they must still work against contradictory institutional logics that ... make them feel devalued and misrecognised by institutional cultures” (Lockett, 2016, pg. 420). Analytical dualism, viewing structure and culture separately, allows researchers to gain a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the study, which may help uncover overlooked aspects, as shown in Lockett's (2016) study.

3.3.2 Culture

Culture, a key dimension of Social Realism, refers to the shared values, beliefs, and practices that exist within a society and that shape individual behaviour and decision-making (Archer, 1996). According to Archer (1996), culture is an important aspect of the social world because it provides the normative frameworks within which individuals operate. These normative frameworks shape individual behaviour by establishing expectations about what is appropriate or desirable. Cultural norms can vary across different societies and communities and can be influenced by various factors, including history, geography, religion, and politics (Archer, 1996). Culture can also play an important role in shaping social structures. For example, cultural beliefs and practices can inform the development of institutional frameworks and the establishment of laws and policies. In turn, these social structures can shape and reinforce cultural norms, creating a feedback loop between culture and structure. This once again highlights that social realist concepts do not exist in a vacuum but are only decontextualised for analysis purposes.

Expanding on the example of Lockett's (2016) study above, it again illustrates this dynamic. While black students may be structurally admitted into the university, she argues, they continue to confront cultural conditions that devalue their presence and knowledge traditions. This disjuncture exemplifies how cultural and structural mechanisms operate concurrently, and why analytical dualism, the separate but interrelated analysis of structure and culture, is central to Social Realism.

3.3.3 Agency

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act in the world and to make decisions that shape their lives and the social structures and cultures around them (Archer, 1996). Agency is a fundamental aspect of social reality, as it is through individual action that social structures and culture are created, maintained, and transformed (Archer, 1996). Importantly, Archer (2000) conceptualises agency as a temporally structured process. Individuals are shaped by their past

structural and cultural conditioning but, through reflexivity, they engage with their present concerns and make decisions oriented toward future goals and projects.

This temporal dimension is central to Archer's (1996, 2000) framework. The morphogenetic cycle is the process through which structure and culture condition agency, which in turn feeds back to either reproduce (*morphostasis*) or transform (*morphogenesis*) those very conditions over time. The cycle unfolds in three analytically distinct phases. First, structural and cultural conditioning refers to the pre-existing arrangements, such as institutions, norms, and resource distributions, that shape the context in which individuals act. Second, during the phase of social interaction, individuals engage with these conditions through reflexivity, making decisions and acting in response to their concerns. Finally, structural or cultural elaboration involves the outcomes of this interaction, where existing arrangements may be sustained or altered. This framework enables researchers to trace how individuals respond to their social context and, through their actions, contribute to continuity or change within the social world.

One key aspect of agency is the idea of reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their own actions and to critically evaluate the social structures and cultural norms that shape their lives (Archer, 2000). This capacity for reflexivity is seen as a key element of agency as it allows individuals to recognise and challenge the constraints that limit their choices and opportunities. This explains the variation in how individuals who face similar conditions may nonetheless respond differently. For instance, students from under-resourced schooling backgrounds often face comparable structural challenges such as financial constraints, limited academic preparation, and restricted subject choices. Culturally, many carry expectations linked to communal responsibility, including the imperative to pursue financially lucrative careers to support their families.

However, students interpret and engage with these conditions in different ways. One student might decide to pursue a humanities degree despite pressure to choose what is perceived as a more marketable field, seeing it as aligning with their personal values or long-term goals. Another student, facing the same constraints, may opt for a degree perceived to offer greater economic returns, even if it does not match their interests. These divergent choices arise not from structural or cultural factors alone, but from how individuals reflect upon and respond to these factors through reflexivity. Rather than offering a deterministic account, Social Realism provides a framework for understanding how agency is exercised differently, even under

similar conditions, by focusing on the role of individuals' internal conversations in shaping their responses.

Higher education scholars have shown the usefulness of Social Realism's concept of reflexivity in understanding student agency (Czerniewicz et al., 2009; Ellery & Baxen, 2016; Case, 2015; Luckett & Luckett, 2009). In their study on developing student agency through mentorship, Luckett and Luckett (2009) used Social Realism to explore how participation in a mentorship programme influenced the way students understood their personal projects, the goals, commitments, and concerns they prioritise in shaping their lives. This, in turn, shaped their agency, particularly in how they navigated and worked to overcome cultural constraints. In essence, the study examined how students were shaped by their involvement in the programme, highlighting the interplay between the structure and culture of the programme and students' agency (Luckett & Luckett, 2009). While Luckett and Luckett (2009) focus on the internal conversation and reflexivity in relation to agency, Case (2015) shows how the relationship between agency and structure and culture can lead to agential morphogenesis, where the agent changes, or morphostasis, where the agent remains the same.

Case (2015) argues that understanding how university structures and cultures constrain students' agency is important and necessary research. Understanding the role the university plays in enabling or constraining student agency allows institutions to reflect on what they need to change to ensure the space is accessible, both epistemologically and ontologically, for all. Furthermore, she believes Social Realism provides a valuable framework for this work.

A central feature of agency in Archer's (2000) framework is its relational dynamic with social structures and culture. While structure and culture hold the potential to enable action, they can also constrain agency by limiting the options available or shaping which paths seem attainable. For example, a student from an under-resourced school may technically qualify for university but find their choices limited by a lack of access to information about degree programmes or financial aid. Thus, this relationship is not one of determinism but of interplay, i.e., structure and culture shape the conditions under which people act, but individuals also act back on those structures through their reflexivity.

The interplay between structure, culture, and agency is not only central to how individuals act, but also to how they come to understand themselves (Archer, 2000). Archer (2000) distinguishes between a continuous sense of self and identity — individuals are born with a

basic, enduring awareness of themselves over time, a foundational sense of selfhood that provides continuity across experiences . However, in Archer's (2000) terms, identity is not present from birth; it emerges through ongoing reflexive engagement with the social world. As individuals encounter structural constraints and cultural expectations, they interpret and respond to these in relation to their own concerns and commitments through the internal conversation. It is through this deliberative process that individuals come to define their roles, responsibilities, and purposes (Archer, 2000). Over time, these reflections contribute to the formation of identity, not as something imposed from outside, nor entirely self-generated, but as the evolving outcome of how people negotiate the conditions they face and the agency they exercise in response.

This foundational, continuous sense of self provides the necessary continuity for individuals to engage reflexively with the social world, but it is through this engagement that identity is progressively shaped (Archer, 2000). As individuals reflect on their concerns, make decisions, and act within particular structural and cultural contexts, they encounter outcomes that, in turn, influence how they understand themselves (Archer, 2000). Identity thus takes form through a continuous feedback loop between action and reflection. It is neither a passive product of social conditions nor a wholly autonomous creation, but the evolving result of how individuals interpret their experiences and respond to them. Archer (2000) refers to this process as double morphogenesis: individuals act within the world and thereby contribute to its transformation, while simultaneously being shaped by the structural and cultural conditioning of those actions. Through this iterative dynamic, identity emerges, not as a fixed entity, but as an ongoing negotiation between social conditioning and reflexive self-understanding.

Archer's (2000) framing of identity offers a valuable conceptual lens for my study, particularly in understanding how students' identities are shaped within the structural and cultural conditions of higher education. Her framework allows for a nuanced analysis of the relationship between identity and agency, emphasising that identity is not a fixed attribute carried into the university, but something that is shaped and reshaped through students' reflexive engagement with the social world.

Archer (2000) refers to the shaping and reshaping as agential morphogenesis, i.e., the process through which individuals' identities and concerns evolve over time through ongoing internal deliberation. It focuses on the transformation of the person, rather than on systemic or institutional change. In the context of this study, agential morphogenesis provides the tools to

explore how humanities students engage with the constraints and possibilities of the structural and cultural conditions of their degree experience, and how, through their internal conversations, they come to re-evaluate their roles, goals, and sense of self. This framework supports an analysis that prioritises the lived experiences of students, while also acknowledging the power of the broader conditions that shape those experiences.

Nudelman's (2021) study offers a useful example to understand the process of agential morphogenesis. Using Archer's (2000) framework, Nudelman's (2021) study illustrates the intricate relationship between agency and identity through the lens of professional identity development in higher education. Drawing on agential morphogenesis, the study traces how students' identities change during their educational journeys, highlighting how their agency interacts with structural and cultural mechanisms within the university context (Nudelman, 2021). She demonstrates that identity formation in higher education is a complex, dynamic process driven by the interplay of agency, reflexivity, and structural and cultural factors (Nudelman, 2021). This study provides valuable insight into how students' professional identities evolve, highlighting the transformative potential of higher education in shaping not only students' career trajectories but also their broader sense of self (Nudelman, 2021). This approach offers a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying identity development, emphasising the role of agency.

Archer's model of Social Realism thus offers a nuanced understanding of how individuals shape and are shaped by their social realities through the interplay of structure, culture, and agency. By foregrounding reflexivity and analytically separating these dimensions, it becomes possible to explore how students actively engage with their contexts. The next section turns to Archer's concept of orders of reality to further examine how individuals encounter and interpret their environments through layered emotional, social, and practical experiences.

3.4 A Laminated Ontology: The Natural, Practical, and Social Orders of Reality

Archer's (2000) concept of laminated reality builds upon Bhaskar's (1975) ontology, particularly his idea that reality is stratified into three levels: the empirical, the actual, and the real. While Archer (2000) aligns her framework with this vertical layering, she adds a further dimension by proposing that within the domain of the real, there are also different kinds of reality, specifically, the natural, practical, and social orders (Archer, 2000). These are not

separate or isolated spheres but are interwoven layers of experience that shape how people think, feel, and act in the world (Archer, 2000).

- **Natural Order** includes biological, physical, and material conditions (physical and tangible aspects of the environment that affect human life and action). It encompasses aspects such as health, illness, and other bodily or environmental factors that shape how people function and act.
- **Practical Order** includes everyday activity, routines, and physical engagement with the world. It involves the habits, skills, and actions developed through repetition and lived experience.
- **Social order** consists of cultural meanings, institutional structures, social norms, and symbolic systems. It is where roles, identities, and values are shaped through interaction with society.

Each order of reality has its own structures, causal powers, and forms of knowledge and emotion (Archer, 2000). The natural order gives rise to embodied knowledge, shaped by the body's physical interactions with the world, and to basic emotions such as pain, fear, or pleasure. The practical order is the domain of tacit and procedural knowledge, gained through repeated activity and habit, and it elicits emotions like frustration or satisfaction related to success or failure in action. Discursive knowledge emerges from the social order, based on language, reflection, and reasoning, and generates complex emotions such as guilt, pride, or shame, responses to how individuals see themselves in relation to others and to their core values.

These orders operate simultaneously and influence each other in lived experience. Archer (2000) refers to this interconnected but non-reducible relationship as lamination. While these layers are experienced together in everyday life, each has its own logic and must be understood on its own terms. This concept is central to Archer's (2000) framework as it explains how people engage with the world through a dynamic interplay of biological embodiment, practical engagement, and cultural meaning-making. It also lays the foundation for understanding how individuals reflect on their circumstances and form intentions.

Each of the three orders of reality — the natural, practical, and social — contains its own structural elements that shape how students live, act, and make sense of their university experience. These structures do not determine behaviour, but they create the conditions that

enable or constrain what students are able to do, feel, or imagine as possible (Archer, 2000). For example, within the natural order, factors such as fatigue, mental health issues, or neurodiversity may constrain a student's capacity to concentrate, manage stress, or participate fully in academic life. The practical order involves the routines and habits that students develop through navigating coursework, using university spaces, and engaging in everyday academic practices, such as figuring out how to structure an essay, meet deadlines, or balance study with part-time work. In the social order, institutional structures like assessment policies, access to support services, and broader cultural narratives around success or belonging shape students' expectations, identities, and sense of legitimacy within the academic environment. Thus, each order has the potential to both constrain and enable, shaping how students respond to challenges, make decisions, and develop strategies for moving forward. The interaction between these orders mediates how individuals relate to the university as a social world, influencing not only their behaviour but also how they come to understand themselves and their place within that world.

Importantly, it is through the interplay of these laminated realities that individuals come to form, pursue, and revise their ultimate concerns — the deeply held values and priorities that give direction and meaning to their lives. These concerns are not created in isolation or simply chosen at will. Rather, they emerge through reflexive engagement with the layered conditions of embodied, practical, and social life. For example, a person's health or bodily state may shape what they are capable of pursuing (natural order), while cultural expectations and access to resources influence what goals are seen as legitimate or achievable (social order). Meanwhile, everyday activities and routines (practical order) provide the space in which aspirations are considered and experienced

This interrelation means that ultimate concerns are both personal and socially embedded (Archer, 2000). They reflect an individual's identity, beliefs, and commitments, but are continually shaped and reshaped through ongoing interaction with the structural and cultural conditions of the world (Archer, 2000). For Archer (2000), ultimate concerns represent the most significant values, or life aims a person holds, those that guide decision-making, motivate long-term projects, and inform their sense of self. These may include, for example, a commitment to social justice, personal achievement, spiritual growth, or family responsibility.

While ultimate concerns are deeply felt, Archer (2000) argues they are not fixed or innate. Rather, they are developed over time, refined through experiences, and re-evaluated as

individuals reflect on how well their actions align with what matters most to them. This process of reflection, of monitoring, reassessing, and reorienting one's concerns in light of changing structural conditions, is central to Archer's (2000) framing of agency and will be developed further in the following sections on the internal conversation and reflexivity.

These dynamics are reflected well in Ellery and Baxen's (2016) study, which investigates the role of structural conditioning in shaping a student's academic experience in a South African university. Using Social Realism, they demonstrate how a student's ultimate concern, in this case academic success, was shaped by the constraints of socioeconomic background, institutional expectations, and broader cultural norms (Ellery & Baxen, 2016). Their study shows how the student engaged in reflexive deliberation, assessing their concerns against what was structurally possible and culturally supported, and adapting their strategies accordingly (Ellery & Baxen, 2016). This example illustrates how concerns are always socially embedded, not formed in isolation, but continually shaped by the interplay between individuals and laminated structures across all three orders of reality.

Social Realism offers a valuable framework to understand how identity, motivation, and decision-making are deeply embedded in this interconnected ontology. Ultimate concerns are not static or given but are responsive to the agent's interaction with context. A student's ultimate concern may shift over time, especially as their knowledge of the social world develops, allowing for new evaluations and redirection of their projects. For example, a student originally motivated by career success might, through exposure to critical humanities discourses, begin to prioritise equity or public engagement as higher concerns.

Understanding how individuals navigate laminated reality requires examining each order in detail. The following sections consider the natural, practical, and social orders separately, drawing out the distinct forms of structural conditioning within each. The discussion begins with the natural order, which anchors human experience in biological and physical conditions and sets the groundwork for how individuals act, feel, and respond in everyday life.

3.4.1 The Natural Order

According to Archer (2000), the natural order refers to the domain of existence where individuals respond to the world through non-discursive, embodied engagement. It is characterised by actions and reactions that do not require conscious deliberation. Rather, it is

about how responses occur automatically, as if by instinct. These are the kinds of behaviour Archer (2000) describes as happening ‘thoughtlessly,’ like second nature.

The form of knowledge associated with the natural order is known as embodied knowledge, which Archer (2000) identifies as having three defining features:

- It is developed through direct bodily experience, by physically interacting with people, objects, and surroundings.
- It works below the level of conscious thought. This knowledge is not usually put into words but is shown through habits, movements, and ways of acting.
- It cannot be learned through theory or abstract thinking. Embodied knowledge is practical and felt, not something explained through language or reflection.

Archer (2000, pg. 162) contrasts this embodied ‘knowing how’, an intuitive, pre-reflective competence, with the discursive ‘knowing that’ typical of the social order. Through embodied knowledge, individuals develop a basic orientation toward the world — a sense of how to exist and act within it — long before they engage in reflective thought. This formative, ongoing process shapes not only action but also emotional tendencies and dispositions.

Archer (2000) argues that although embodied knowledge originates in the natural order, it is not confined to it. There is a dynamic relationship between the natural and practical orders, particularly when actions performed repeatedly in everyday contexts become internalised over time (Archer, 2000). In this way, practical knowledge, initially learned through conscious effort, has the potential to become embodied, operating at a pre-reflexive level.

For example, within the context of higher education, a student may initially experience anxiety when speaking in tutorials, marked by physiological stress responses such as increased heart rate or nervous tension. These reactions emerge from the natural order. However, with repeated participation, the student may develop confidence and familiarity. Over time, the practical skill of contributing to academic dialogue becomes part of their embodied disposition. The tone of their voice, posture, and rhythm of engagement no longer requires deliberate control; they are enacted automatically, thoughtlessly.

The example above is used to illustrate how Archer (2000) frames the laminated nature of human experience, where knowledge and action move between orders rather than remaining static within one. It also introduces the focus of the next section, i.e., the practical order, the

domain in which knowledge is gained through doing, shaped by routine, and embedded in the flow of everyday activity.

3.4.2 The Practical Order

In Archer's (2000) framework, the practical order refers to the domain of reality shaped by individuals' everyday engagement with the material world through things like tools, technologies, spaces, and routines that structure how people go about their daily lives. This is the realm where people learn through doing, through repeated interaction with physical and social environments (Archer, 2000). Unlike the natural order, which is grounded in instinctive or embodied responses, the practical order is governed by deliberate, goal-directed activity in response to concrete tasks and situations (Archer, 2000).

The form of knowledge that emerges at this level is practical knowledge, a kind of know-how developed through situated, often trial-and-error learning (Archer, 2000). According to Archer (2000), this knowledge is not abstract or discursive but is acquired through repeated activity, refined over time through feedback, and shaped by the specific material conditions in which it is used. It involves conscious engagement with tasks and environments but can become automatic and habitual through repetition and practice, as highlighted in the previous section.

In the context of higher education, practical knowledge is evident in how students learn to operate within academic systems. For example, using library databases to find peer-reviewed articles or formatting references in discipline-specific styles involves learning through doing, guided by practical interaction with institutional tools and systems. These tasks are often not explicitly taught through theoretical instruction but are learned through practice, repetition, and feedback. Over time, such competencies become second nature, demonstrating how practical knowledge can become embodied, blending with the natural order through habituation.

Archer (2000) frames the practical order as distinct from the natural order, which is rooted in biological or instinctive responses, and from the social order, which involves discursive reasoning, cultural meanings, and institutional norms. What sets the practical order apart is that it is grounded in purposeful action and learned routines, developed through hands-on interaction with the material world (Archer, 2000). However, it does not exist in isolation. There is constant interaction with both the natural and social orders, drawing on embodied capacities and functioning within socially structured environments (Archer, 2000). To illustrate this, a student's ability to participate meaningfully in university life is shaped not only by their

intellectual skills but also by their practical mastery of routines, such as navigating lecture halls, submitting assignments through digital portals, or accessing support services. These routine competencies either support or constrain their engagement with more complex social and discursive practices.

Archer (2000) positions the practical order as playing a crucial mediating role as it connects the embodied capacities rooted in the natural order with the cultural and institutional demands of the social order. While practical routines shape how students function day to day, these routines are always embedded within broader social contexts that give them meaning and structure (Archer, 2000). The tools students use, the expectations they internalise, and the norms they navigate do not arise solely from individual practice but are socially constructed and institutionally maintained. To fully understand how Archer (2000) frames how individuals make sense of and act within their contexts, the next section discusses the social order, in which discursive meaning, social roles, and normative structures shape identity, interaction, and the pursuit of ultimate concerns.

3.4.3 The Social Order

The social order refers to the domain of cultural, institutional, and symbolic structures in which individuals engage with meaning, norms, and values (Archer, 2000). Unlike the natural order, which is grounded in bodily response, or the practical order, which is rooted in routine activity, the social order is shaped by discursive interaction, the process through which individuals use language, reasoning, and dialogue to engage with ideas, exchange perspectives, and negotiate meanings within social and cultural contexts (Archer, 2000). It is within this order that individuals interpret the world, reflect on their identities, and engage with wider society.

Central to the social order is what Archer (2000) calls propositional culture, a component of the cultural system, which, alongside the structural system, forms part of the conditioning context within which agency operates. Propositional culture refers specifically to the conceptual and intellectual content of culture, i.e., the ideas, arguments, value claims, and theories that circulate in society as knowledge claims (Archer, 2000). These include ethical principles (e.g., ‘justice requires equality’), political ideologies (e.g., liberalism or socialism), scientific theories, and academic discourses. They are ‘propositional’ because they are expressed in the form of statements or assertions that can be questioned, debated, refined, or rejected.

This differs from broader notions of culture, which encompass aspects such as implicit beliefs, shared practices, traditions, symbols, and rituals, and which are forms of meaning that are often taken for granted and not necessarily articulated (Archer, 2000). These elements operate within the socio-cultural context of everyday life and tend to shape behaviour in habitual, pre-reflective ways (Archer, 2000). While individuals can and do bring such elements into reflexive awareness, particularly when they encounter contradiction or dissonance, this reflective engagement typically occurs after experience prompts questioning (Archer, 2000).

In contrast, propositional culture refers specifically to the discursive and conceptual dimension of the cultural system (Archer, 2000). It comprises structured sets of ideas, theories, arguments, and normative claims that are explicitly formulated and open to evaluation. What makes propositional culture distinctive is not that it is the only cultural content subject to reflexivity, but that it is already expressed in language and presented as knowledge claims, statements that invite critical engagement (Archer, 2000). Archer (2000) thus clarifies that it is designed to be interpreted, debated, accepted, or rejected through discursive reasoning and reflective thought.

Engagement within the social order involves interacting with this propositional culture. While individuals may passively absorb propositional culture ideas uncritically, Archer (2000) emphasises that it also holds potential for agents to interpret, evaluate, and negotiate these ideas in light of their own experiences, concerns, and identities. Engagement with propositional culture is therefore not automatically passive. Rather, it involves varying degrees of reflexive engagement, depending on how individuals relate to the content they encounter. Drawing from the previous chapter, this dynamic can be illustrated by how students encounter and respond to narratives about the value of certain degrees.

For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, dominant discourses often frame professional, career-focused degrees as more legitimate or economically valuable than the humanities or social sciences. Understanding this using the Social Realist framework, these ideas circulate as propositional culture in the form of widely shared perspectives such as ‘arts degrees have less market value’ or ‘STEM guarantees success.’ While some students may internalise these propositions without reflection, others may question and reflect on them. Students pursuing non-STEM degrees may question their career potential in the future, weighing it against personal values, interests, and socio-cultural expectations. This kind of reflexive engagement illustrates Archer’s (2000) position that propositional culture does not

determine behaviour, but instead offers meaning frameworks that agents can interpret, challenge, or rework based on their concerns and lived experience.

The engagement with propositional culture relies on a particular form of knowledge — discursive knowledge. Discursive knowledge emerges from communication, through language, reasoning, and dialogue (Archer, 2000). Through discursive knowledge, individuals can reflect on abstract concepts, evaluate truth claims, and participate in intellectual exchange (Archer, 2000). In a university context, this engagement can occur in lecture halls, seminars, and tutorials, where students debate ideas, ask critical questions, and interpret theoretical concepts. For example, during a tutorial discussion, students may collectively examine the concept of decoloniality (propositional culture), using reasoning and dialogue (discursive knowledge) to assess its meaning, relevance to their discipline, and implications for knowledge production. Through this kind of engagement, students can refine their discursive understanding of propositional culture, potentially challenging, expanding, or reinterpreting the knowledge claims it presents.

Importantly, discursive knowledge is distinct from but connected to other forms of knowing (Archer, 2000). It differs from embodied or practical knowledge in that it is explicitly reflective and language-based, but it often builds upon those other modes (Archer, 2000). For example, students might use discursive knowledge to explain or share insights they gained through practical activity (e.g., learning a research tool) or to interpret a bodily response (e.g., stress or discomfort in unfamiliar academic spaces). In this sense, discursive knowledge serves as a bridge — it links embodied and practical experience with conceptual understanding and enables individuals to make sense of their position within the wider social world.

However, Archer (2000) cautions against treating discursive knowledge as superior or self-sufficient. While it plays a central role in shaping identity and reflexivity, it needs to be understood in relation to the natural and practical orders. Individuals do not encounter cultural propositions in a vacuum. Their interpretation is always conditioned by prior embodied and practical experience. Understanding how these layers interact provides a fuller account of how knowledge is formed, identity is shaped, and action is made possible.

3.4.4 Relationship between Embodied, Practical, and Discursive Knowledge

In Archer's (2000) laminated ontology, different types of knowledge correspond to the three interwoven orders of reality: embodied knowledge to the natural order, practical knowledge to

the practical order, and discursive knowledge to the social order. While analytically distinct, these forms of knowledge are deeply interconnected in lived experience. Understanding how they relate, Archer (2000) argues, is essential for understanding how individuals develop and exercise their agency.

Together, embodied and practical knowledge enable individuals to perform actions, develop routines, and operate within material and social contexts. Discursive knowledge introduces a conceptual and reflexive dimension that enables individuals to articulate, evaluate, and refine both their experiences and their actions. As Archer (2000) explains, discursive knowledge allows people not only to do things but to understand why they do them, to assess their meaning, and to imagine alternatives. Rather than replacing embodied or practical knowledge, discursive knowledge builds on and interrogates it, often leading to new insight or a transformation in how individuals understand their actions, interpret their experiences, or orient themselves within the world.

Archer (2000) explains that the relationship between these forms of knowledge is relational and dynamic, not hierarchical. Practical knowledge often acts as a bridge, linking the intuitive, non-verbal familiarity of embodied knowing with the reflective, conceptual depth of discursive thought. It is often through repeated activity that people begin to reflect on what they are doing and eventually connect those actions to broader ideas or concerns.

Practice also plays a formative role in the development of agency (Archer, 2000). As individuals engage in practical tasks, they gain a sense of their own capacities and limits. This learning contributes to their ability to act intentionally, as they begin to shape their actions in light of their concerns and evolving self-understanding.

The interrelation of these knowledge forms can be illustrated through the example of a student preparing an academic essay:

- **Embodied knowledge** is engaged when the student may sense anxiety, mental fatigue, or excitement as they begin drafting their essay. These physical and emotional states, felt in the body as tension, restlessness, or focus, affect how the student approaches the task, shaping their initial orientation to the work before any conscious strategy is applied.

- **Practical knowledge** develops as the student learns how to find academic sources, manages time, organises ideas, and applies referencing conventions. These abilities improve through repetition and become more fluid over time.
- **Discursive knowledge** is used as the student interprets course readings, engages with theoretical concepts, and constructs an argument in response to the essay question.

In this process, practical knowledge acts as a bridge between the student's embodied experience and their discursive engagement. As they repeatedly carry out academic tasks, such as sourcing materials, managing deadlines, or organising content, these actions become more familiar and integrated into their routine. This practical fluency supports the student's ability to focus on and engage with more abstract and theoretical dimensions of their work. Over time, the student not only becomes more effective in completing academic tasks but also begins to internalise a sense of competence and legitimacy as a participant in academic discourse. In this way, the interplay of embodied, practical, and discursive knowledge can contribute not just to skill development but to the student's evolving academic identity and agency.

This integrated development illustrates the laminated nature of human learning and agency. Rather than being shaped by one type of knowledge alone, students engage with the world through a layered interplay of embodied familiarity, practical skill, and discursive reflection. Recognising this interdependence is valuable for understanding higher education not just as intellectual activity but as an experience that is also physical, emotional, and socially embedded.

This layered relationship between embodied, practical, and discursive knowledge also gives rise to distinct emotional responses within each order of reality. Understanding how emotions emerge and function across these layers further deepens insight into how individuals experience and navigate their social worlds.

3.4.5 Emotions Emerging in the Orders of Reality

Archer (2000) positions emotions not as purely internal, fleeting states but as socially and materially embedded responses that emerge through interaction with the natural, practical, and social orders of reality. In this view, emotions are both shaped by and shape agents' engagements with the world. They condition actions, influence reflexive deliberations, and contribute to the ongoing formation of identity.

To clarify this layered understanding, Archer (2000) distinguishes between first-order and second-order emotions.

- First-order emotions are immediate, affective responses that originate in the natural order. They are not mediated by conscious thought and may include anxiety, fear, or pleasure in response to environmental stimuli.
- Second-order emotions, by contrast, emerge from reflection and evaluation. These develop when individuals interpret their first-order feelings in relation to their concerns, cultural meanings, and social context. As such, they draw from the practical and social orders, involving discursive awareness and deeper engagement with meaning systems.

For example, a student who initially feels homesick after moving to university experiences a first-order emotion rooted in physiological and affective discomfort. Over time, as they adapt to their new routines and begin to value their independence, they may experience second-order emotions such as pride, satisfaction, or contentment, reflective feelings shaped by internal conversations and reassessments of what matters to them.

Emotions are therefore not bound to a single order of reality but emerge through and influence all three:

- In the natural order, emotions are linked to physical and physiological states, such as stress, exhaustion, or excitement, which influence an individual's energy, focus, and readiness to act. For example, a student's high stress may undermine their ability to concentrate in or contribute to class, constraining their agency at a biological level.
- In the practical order, emotions arise in response to success or difficulty in carrying out tasks. Feelings of satisfaction or frustration are central to how individuals evaluate whether their actions are aligned with their personal goals. As noted by Archer (2000), individuals monitor themselves in the practical order, using emotional feedback to assess their achievements and decide whether to persist, modify, or abandon their efforts.
- In the social order, emotions are shaped by cultural values, social norms, and discursive positioning. Feelings such as shame, pride, recognition, or alienation often emerge in response to how individuals perceive themselves within social contexts. For example,

engaging with discourses of justice or inequality may evoke strong emotional responses that inform a student's alignment with particular values or commitments.

These emotional responses do not operate in isolation. Archer (2000) explains that they often interact across orders, creating complex affective experiences. For example, frustration with a failed task (practical) may be intensified by fatigue (natural) or compounded by fear of disappointing others (social). Similarly, a sense of belonging experienced in a classroom discussion (social) may motivate perseverance through difficult coursework (practical), even in the face of stress (natural).

For Archer (2000), these emotional dynamics are central to the way individuals evaluate and prioritise personal projects. Emotions act as signals within the internal conversation, shaping how agents decide what matters and what course of action to take. As she puts it, “dissatisfaction is related to cessation and satisfaction is linked to increasing competence” (Archer, 2000, p. 213). Through emotion, agents assess not only the outcomes of their actions but also the alignment of those actions with their ultimate concerns.

This interplay of knowledge, emotion, and concern plays a key role in the formation of identity (Archer, 2000). Each order of reality contributes uniquely:

- The natural order influences identity through bodily dispositions and emotional temperament.
- The practical order shapes identity through developing competencies, routines, and evaluations of self-efficacy.
- The social order refines identity through engagement with cultural narratives, roles, and norms.

Together, these emotional experiences inform the reflexive processes through which individuals understand who they are, what they value, and how they position themselves in relation to the world. In Archer's (2000) view, emotion is not separate from reason or agency. It is central to how agents navigate the world. This connection between emotion, identity, and agency leads directly to Archer's (2000) concept of the internal conversation, the reflexive process through which individuals interpret their circumstances, evaluate their concerns, and make decisions.

3.5 The Internal Conversation

Building on the interplay of knowledge and emotion across Archer's (2000) stratified orders of reality, the internal conversation is the mechanism through which individuals make sense of their experiences, prioritise concerns, and make decisions. It is a reflexive process that enables agents to navigate the world by integrating information, emotion, and personal values in ways that shape their identity and guide their actions (Archer, 2000).

Archer (2000) defines the internal conversation as “a ceaseless discussion about the satisfaction of our ultimate concerns and a monitoring of the self and its commitments in relation to the commentaries received” (pg. 195). It is not a passive process, nor is it purely cognitive. Rather, it is a dynamic form of self-talk that integrates emotional feedback, contextual awareness, and social positioning to support purposive decision-making.

Through the internal conversation, individuals assess their situations, reflect on the viability of their personal projects, and evaluate how well their actions align with their ultimate concerns, i.e., the core values and priorities that orient their lives (Archer, 2000). Although this process is shaped by cultural and structural influences, Archer (2000) highlights its agential character — it is the individual who weighs alternatives, considers emotional and practical consequences, and commits to a course of action.

3.5.1 The ‘I’, ‘Me’ and ‘You’

Archer (2000) frames the structure of the internal conversation as involving a reflexive exchange between three temporal positions of the self:

- The ‘I’ represents present self-awareness, what the individual feels, thinks, and confronts in the moment.
- The ‘Me’ refers to the past self, whose actions and commitments are evaluated.
- The ‘You’ points to imagined future selves, reflecting possible identities or paths that might be taken.

In this internal dialogue, agents move between reflecting on past decisions, assessing present circumstances, and projecting into possible futures. This triadic exchange underpins how individuals make sense of their identity across time and shape their trajectory within the laminated orders of reality.

3.5.2 Stages of the Internal Conversation

Archer (2000) outlines three analytical stages within the internal conversation: Discernment, Deliberation, and Dedication. These are not rigid steps but overlapping phases that characterise how agents engage in reflexive thought.

Discernment involves an initial evaluative review of an individual's circumstances and context (Archer, 2000). It is a reflective but inconclusive phase where individuals register emotional and practical feedback from their environment without making immediate decisions. Archer (2000, pg. 232) describes this as a "preliminary review of those projects we have reason to deem worthwhile." During this stage, individuals acknowledge various constraints or enablements such as well-being, financial pressures, or social expectations that may support or hinder their concerns. Emotional responses are also taken into account but they are not yet acted upon. This stage sets the groundwork for more focused evaluation.

Deliberation builds on discernment by introducing a dialogical process between the different versions of the self (Archer, 2000). During this phase, agents engage in internal debate, considering alternative actions and their potential implications. Archer (2000, pg. 236) describes it as "question and answer, re-questioning and following up, of amended questions and modified responses." This phase involves weighing possibilities and exploring emotional, practical, and social outcomes. Although decisions are not finalised, deliberation enables agents to better understand the conditions of their concerns and to anticipate how different courses of action may affect their sense of self (Archer, 2000).

Dedication is the phase where a decision is reached, and commitment is made. The agent selects a course of action and ranks their concerns according to what they decide to be most meaningful and emotionally sustainable (Archer, 2000). As Archer (2000, pg. 237) explains, "the subject has to arrive at a personal judgement of worth and one with which he or she can live emotionally." Emotions here play a decisive role; they act as the validating (or dissonant) response that confirms whether a chosen project aligns with the agent's identity and concerns (Archer, 2000).

3.5.3 The Internal Conversation as Identity Formation

The internal conversation is key to identity development because it offers a structure for interpreting emotional feedback and integrating it into one's self-understanding (Archer, 2000).

Each stage of the internal conversation enables agents to assess how well their current projects resonate with their ultimate concerns and to revise them if needed.

As shown in the previous section, emotions are embedded in each order of reality. Within the internal conversation, these emotional cues become part of the evaluative process (Archer, 2000). They help agents identify what is satisfying, what is misaligned, and where change may be needed. In this way, identity is not simply the product of past actions or social roles but is continuously negotiated through reflection and emotional responsiveness (Archer, 2000).

The internal conversation, therefore, is not a detached mental exercise. It is a socially and emotionally grounded process that shapes how individuals define themselves, commit to certain projects, and exercise agency within the laminated social world. It is through this ongoing dialogue that people navigate complexity, maintain coherence in identity, and pursue concerns that matter most to them. Archer's (2000) framing positions the internal conversation as the bridge between structure and agency. It is through reflexivity that individuals interpret their structural conditions and decide how to act within or against them. This includes weighing their capacities, evaluating social expectations, and managing emotional investments

3.6 Reflexivity: Mediating Between Structure, Culture and Agency

Reflexivity, as developed by Archer (2003, 2007), is central to understanding how individuals mediate between structural conditions and personal agency. Archer (2003) conceptualises reflexivity as the mechanism through which individuals evaluate their concerns in relation to their contexts, shaping the courses of action they pursue. This capacity enables people to respond differently to similar structural conditions, as reflexivity mediates how structural enablements and constraints are interpreted and acted upon. In this way, it provides a useful explanatory link between the conditions individuals confront and the dedication they make to their ultimate concern and personal projects. Archer (2007) identifies four modes: communicative reflexivity, autonomous reflexivity, meta-reflexivity and fractured reflexivity.

These reflexive modes are not rigid or mutually exclusive. Individuals may shift between them over time, depending on circumstances or particular challenges (Archer, 2003). Each mode reflects a distinct pattern of engaging with social reality and contributes to the ongoing formation of identity. Reflexivity, in this sense, is not just a decision-making process but a fundamental expression of agency. It allows individuals to navigate their concerns across the laminated orders of reality and to adjust or redefine their identities in response to changing

conditions. The mode of reflexivity adopted shapes how agency is experienced and whether continuity or change unfolds (Archer, 2003).

3.6.1 Communicative Reflexivity

Communicative reflexivity involves completing one's internal deliberations through dialogue with trusted others (Archer, 2007). Individuals in this mode clarify concerns and reach decisions in conversation with family, friends, or peers. Speaking aloud serves not just to share but to shape meaning. Because decision-making is socially embedded, these agents tend to seek validation before acting, aligning their concerns closely with the expectations of others.

Archer (2007) links this mode to the reproduction of existing norms, as reflexive processes occur within established relational frameworks. However, this orientation does not negate agency. Rather, it reflects a form of action shaped by interpersonal interdependence. Communicative reflexivity fosters social cohesion but typically supports continuity over change.

3.6.2 Autonomous Reflexivity

Autonomous reflexivity describes a mode of internal conversation where individuals reflect independently, without needing external validation or input (Archer, 2007). Agents who use this mode complete their deliberations privately and rely on their own considerations to guide decisions and actions (Archer, 2007). Unlike communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives do not depend on relational feedback to feel confident in their choices (Archer, 2007). Their reflexivity is internally driven, often focused on achieving personal goals, maintaining coherence between values and actions, and pursuing self-defined success.

This mode is linked to a greater ability to question and resist existing social norms, as individuals are less influenced by what others expect of them. Although they still operate within social and cultural structures, autonomous reflexives make sense of these environments in their own way, enabling them to act independently and pursue their goals with direction. Their sense of identity and agency is built through independent deliberation and internally resolved priorities.

3.6.3 Meta-Reflexivity

Meta-reflexivity involves thinking critically not only about one's own goals and values, but also about the wider social conditions that shape them (Archer, 2007). Agents who make use

of this mode reflect on whether their aims, and the norms around them, are fair, worthwhile, or in need of change.

This form of reflexivity is moral in nature. It often leads individuals to seek alignment between their actions and broader ideals such as justice or social transformation. However, the gap between personal values and societal realities can create tension or uncertainty, making it harder to act decisively. Still, Archer (2007) views meta-reflexivity as essential for driving social change, as it encourages people to question the status quo and imagine alternatives for themselves and society.

3.6.4 Fractured Reflexivity

Fractured reflexivity refers to a situation where the internal conversation breaks down, leaving individuals unable to think clearly about their concerns or turn reflection into purposeful action (Archer, 2007). This mode is often marked by confusion, emotional distress, or paralysis, and typically arises when people face overwhelming social pressures, conflicting demands, or experiences that destabilise their sense of self. Archer (2007) suggests that fractured reflexivity stems not only from external difficulties such as unstable life conditions, but also from internal contradictions, when individuals are pulled between competing beliefs, goals, or roles they cannot reconcile.

Unlike other forms of reflexivity that support decision-making and identity formation, fractured reflexivity disrupts these processes. Individuals may struggle to prioritise what matters, evaluate their options, or act with clarity. Although reflexive capacity is not entirely lost, it becomes so impaired that sustaining a coherent sense of agency or direction becomes challenging.

3.6.5 Relationship Between the Modes of Reflexivity

The four modes of reflexivity are not rigid categories but fluid orientations that individuals may shift between depending on context, life stage, or personal challenges (Archer, 2007). While each mode reflects a distinct pattern of deliberation, they often intersect in practice. For example, reliance on communicative reflexivity may evolve into more autonomous reflection as individuals gain confidence and experience. Likewise, exposure to new ideas or moral dilemmas may prompt meta-reflexive questioning. Periods of fractured reflexivity can arise when tensions between values, expectations, or roles become overwhelming.

To illustrate how this dynamic may be evident in student experience, for example, a first-year student may initially depend on family input when selecting a degree (communicative reflexivity), later develop independent academic and career goals (autonomous reflexivity), and eventually engage critically with broader debates that reshape their worldview (meta-reflexivity). However, these transitions are not always smooth. Moments of uncertainty, identity conflict, or institutional pressure can lead to fractured reflexivity, manifesting as doubt, disengagement, or emotional strain.

Archer (2007) emphasises that reflexivity is not a fixed trait, but an ongoing process shaped by structural conditions, emotional responses, and evolving concerns. Understanding how individuals move between modes offers a nuanced perspective on agency, one that recognises how individuals sustain, resist, or reconfigure their positions within social contexts.

3.7 Justification for Using Social Realism

Social Realism, as developed by Archer (1995, 2000, 2007), offers a coherent and layered framework for investigating how students' identities are shaped through their engagement with a humanities degree. In my study, I am concerned with understanding the conditions under which identity shifts occur, that is, how structural and cultural influences within higher education are interpreted and negotiated through students' reflexive processes. Social Realism is particularly well-suited to this task as it provides the conceptual tools to examine the interaction between structure, culture, and agency without reducing experience to any single dimension.

Rather than viewing identity as a fixed trait or as entirely determined by external factors, Social Realism allows for a generative understanding of identity as something emergent, shaped over time through the student's internal conversation as they interpret their experiences, engage with dominant discourses, and align their actions with their evolving concerns. This framework is especially valuable in the context of narrative inquiry, where students share their stories and articulate how their values, priorities, and sense of self are being shaped and possibly reshaped, surfacing the phases of discernment, deliberation, and dedication that condition their internal conversations.

Importantly, Social Realism supports a causal-explanatory approach that moves beyond surface-level description. By distinguishing between structural mechanisms (such as curriculum design or assessment practices), cultural mechanisms (such as pre-enrolment

cultural expectations), and the agential processes through which students reflect on and respond to these, it enables a deeper analysis of how identity shifts are conditioned and enacted. This is useful in understanding the personal transformation potential, or limits, of humanities education in shaping how students come to understand themselves and their place in the world.

Social Realism aligns with both the aims and the methodology of this study. It offers a robust theoretical foundation for analysing students' identity formation in higher education, capturing the complexity of the relational, reflexive, and emotionally embedded processes at the heart of personal transformation.

3.8 The Value of Social Realism to My Study

In my research, I ask how students have been shaped by their experience of a humanities degree. To explore this, I needed a framework that could account for several interconnected aspects: who the student was before university, the reasons behind choosing a humanities pathway, how the experience changed them, the aspects of the degree that contributed to those changes, how they viewed themselves by the end of their studies, and how they made sense of its value. Each of these aspects required a way to think relationally about structure, culture, and agency, not in isolation but as part of a lived and unfolding process.

Social Realism (Archer, 1995, 2000, 2007) provides precisely the kind of conceptual architecture needed to make sense of this complexity. Rooted in critical realism, it enables a layered understanding of identity formation, attending not only to external influences like institutional arrangements or disciplinary discourses, but also to how individuals reflexively engage with these in light of who they are and their personal projects and concerns.

The framework supports my analysis of students' narratives by offering tools to explore how the degree experience was not just something that *happens* to students, but something they process, reflect on, and actively negotiate. Through concepts such as reflexivity, internal conversation, identity, and ultimate concerns, which are deeply embedded within, and informed by, the broader architecture of Archer's theory, I can trace how students respond to structural and cultural conditions, not as passive recipients but as agents engaging in internal conversations about what matters to them and why.

Social Realism is well-suited to the use of narrative inquiry. As students share their stories, they reveal how they make meaning of their degree through various phases of discernment,

deliberation, and dedication. This offers a way to map shifts in identity and purpose without reducing them to either psychological traits or institutional effects. Instead, I can explore how meaning emerges at the intersection of identity, structure, and cultural context, mediated by reflexive agency.

This approach also aligned with existing work in the South African higher education context, where scholars such as Czerniewicz et al. (2009), Ellery and Baxen (2016), Case (2015), Luckett and Luckett (2009), and Westaway et al. (2020) have used Archer's (1995, 2000, 2007) framework to investigate how students navigate inequality, constraint, and opportunity. Like these studies, my research uses Social Realism to shift the focus away from deficit perspectives and toward a richer understanding of students' active role in shaping their trajectories.

In practical terms, the framework enables me to explore why students experience their degrees and understand the value of their degrees differently. It provides a way to understand how similar conditions could lead to different outcomes, depending on how students interpret their experiences, how they locate themselves in relation to cultural discourses, and how they prioritise their concerns. These differences are not random but intelligible when analysed through the layered logic of Social Realism.

Ultimately, the value of Social Realism is in its capacity to hold together the structural conditions of higher education, the cultural narratives of the humanities, and the inner lives of students working out who they are and what they care about. It shows identity not as a fixed state, but as a dynamic and negotiated process, shaped by context but negotiated through agency.

3.9 Conclusion

Archer's Social Realism offers a conceptually robust framework for understanding identity as an emergent and dynamic process shaped through the interplay of structure, culture, and agency. In the context of this study, it provides the theoretical grounding to explore how humanities students in South African higher education reflect on, navigate, and make meaning of their academic journeys. By analytically distinguishing between structural constraints, cultural influences, and reflexive agency, Social Realism enables a layered account of how identity is both conditioned and actively constructed over time.

Rather than positioning students as either shaped by external forces or acting in isolation, this approach captures the dialogical relationship between context and self. Choices are not treated as surface-level behaviours, but as reflexive responses informed by students' values, identity, and imagined futures. This makes it possible to understand how studying the humanities becomes a site of identity negotiation and potential personal transformation.

The framework's concept of laminated social reality allows this study to trace how identity is formed across three analytically distinct but interrelated orders of reality: the natural, practical, and social. These orders structure the emergence of different kinds of knowledge, emotions, and concerns, which shape how students interpret their experiences and evaluate what matters to them. Through engagement with university life and disciplinary discourse, students encounter new ways of thinking and being, which may affirm, challenge, or reorient their existing self-understandings.

The internal conversation, sustained through reflexivity, is central to this process. It is through reflexive deliberation that students weigh competing priorities, make sense of institutional messages, and decide how to act in ways that feel personally meaningful. This is where identity work happens, through continual engagement with concerns, values, and the social contexts that condition them. Reflexivity allows for both adaptation and resistance, and thus becomes key to understanding how educational experiences shape identity and agency.

While reflexivity is the central analytical lens of this study, it cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation. It is embedded within a broader conceptual architecture that gives Social Realism its explanatory power. Although the analysis engages most directly with reflexivity and agency, these concepts are grounded in Archer's wider theoretical system, including her accounts of structure, culture, and the nature of the social world. Engaging with these elements provides the necessary foundation for understanding how reflexive processes unfold and why they matter. Outlining the full conceptual framework, even if not all components are applied in the analysis, enforces the coherence of the study and its theoretical basis. In doing so, the engagement with Archer's overall framework affirms her conception of agency as an emergent property, shaped through the ongoing interplay between personal concerns and the structural and cultural conditions that students must navigate. Overall, Social Realism provides not only a conceptual map for analysing students' agential morphogenesis, but also the analytical tools needed to investigate it in practice. It enables me, through my study,

to explore how educational conditions, disciplinary cultures, and the self converge to shape how students come to understand who they are and who they are becoming.

This theoretical foundation directly informs the study's methodological approach. The next chapter outlines how Social Realism shaped the research design, participant selection, and narrative methods used to explore identity formation through the lived experiences of humanities students

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Researching Student Experience through a Social Realist Lens: A Narrative Inquiry Approach

Exploring how the experience of pursuing a humanities degree contributes to shifts in students' identities required a methodological approach attentive to both lived experience and the broader conditions shaping it. This study is grounded in an interest not merely in what students think about their degrees, but in how navigating university, academically, socially, and structurally, shapes their sense of self.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the study draws on Archer's (1997, 2000, 2007) Social Realist framework to examine how the interplay between structure, culture, and agency shapes identity. This framework offers a way to understand not just who students are, but how they exercise agency through internal conversations, reflexive positioning, and responses to the conditions they encounter.

The literature review demonstrated how students' educational trajectories are shaped long before university by socio-economic positioning, family expectations, and dominant narratives about the purpose of higher education. At university, these pre-existing dynamics intersect with institutional culture, curriculum demands, and the everyday pressures of student life, including planning for the future, defining success, and managing cultural responsibilities such as Black Tax. These influences shape how students understand the value of their degrees and how they negotiate their place within the institution. This made it important to adopt an approach that could trace how students navigated the conditions they arrived with alongside those they encountered at university and how, in doing so, they made sense of their experiences, reflected on their priorities, and pursued their emerging concerns and commitments.

This chapter outlines the research paradigm and design, the rationale for using narrative methods, and the processes of sampling, data collection, and analysis. It also details the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Central to the research design is a commitment to centring student voice, with a focus on how students narrate their university experiences and reflect on the personal, social, and academic shifts that emerge throughout their journey.

4.1 Research Paradigm

This study is situated within a critical realist paradigm, which informed both the theoretical framing and the research design. Critical realism provides a stratified ontological framework that grounds the complexity of social reality, supporting an exploration of both lived experience and the underlying generative mechanisms that shape it (Bhaskar, 2008). Rather than viewing student experiences as isolated or purely individual, this paradigm enabled an analysis that took seriously the structural and cultural conditions students encountered, as well as the meanings they made and the decisions they took in response.

The decision to adopt this paradigm was closely tied to the study's focus on identity as a reflexive and evolving process, with a specific interest in how this happens within students' degree experience. As outlined in the previous chapter, Archer's (1997, 2000, 2007) Social Realism framework offers conceptual tools for understanding how individuals navigate and reflect upon their conditions, negotiate their personal projects and ultimate concerns, and orient themselves towards particular futures. This focus on reflexivity and agency, situated within a broader structural context, aligned well with my aim to explore how students make sense of who they are becoming through the course of their degree journeys.

Within a critical realist paradigm, reflexive processes such as the internal conversations through which individuals interpret their circumstances and deliberate on possible courses of action, are understood to have causal powers. This stems from the view that reality is not limited to what can be observed directly as it also includes the underlying mechanisms that give rise to observable outcomes. From this perspective, individuals' interpretations, beliefs, values, and intentions are not treated as secondary to material conditions but as integral to how social life unfolds. As Maxwell (2012, pg. 40) explains, these internal dimensions are "as real as observable events" and actively shape how people act and interact within their contexts. This ontological framework provided a basis for treating students' experiences, articulated from their perspective, as real and significant aspects of social life.

4.2 Qualitative Research

A qualitative design was selected for its ability to support an in-depth exploration of complex, context-dependent processes (Fossey et al., 2002). It enabled attention to how participants described and made sense of their experiences in ways that were situated, nuanced, and reflective of the broader conditions shaping their lives. This approach was particularly valuable

for tracing interpretive and reflexive processes that unfold over in relation to both structural and cultural influences.

Qualitative research is well-suited to examining the richness of subjective experience and the ways in which individuals construct meaning within particular social and institutional contexts (Fossey et al., 2002). Rather than applying predefined variables or hypotheses, it allows for an inductive approach that can capture the layered and sometimes conflicting experiences and perspectives that shape people's lives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was essential for my study as it is concerned with the interrelation of social structures, personal histories, and identity work.

A qualitative design also aligned with my use of a critical realist paradigm, which frames how both observable events and unobservable, underlying, mechanisms contribute to shaping human behaviour and social experience (Bhaskar, 2008). Working within this paradigm required a research approach that could hold in view both what participants said and how their accounts revealed, reinforced, or challenged the structural and cultural conditions shaping their lives. Additionally, a qualitative design made it possible to explore students' experiences as the central focus of this study.

This approach also supported my commitment to keeping students' voices at the forefront. Their narratives were not treated as isolated stories but as reflections shaped by and embedded within broader institutional, cultural, and social contexts. The following section outlines the narrative inquiry approach used to engage with these accounts and explore how students made sense of their experiences over time.

4.2.1 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study because of its ability to illuminate how individuals make sense of their lives through storytelling (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, 2007). It focuses on the temporal, contextual, and meaning-making dimensions of lived experience, attending to how people interpret their past, navigate the present, and imagine their futures (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, 2007). This emphasis on unfolding, reflective sense-making aligned closely with my interest in the dynamics of identity and how it is shaped and shifts.

Narrative inquiry provided a way of accessing the reflexive processes central to Archer's (2000, 2007) conceptualisation of identity. Students' stories revealed how they deliberated over the conditions of their lives, negotiated personal responsibilities and institutional demands, and imagined futures. These accounts offered insight into how individuals engaged in internal conversations in response to the constraints and possibilities they encountered, shedding light on the underlying mechanisms shaping their identity trajectories.

Beyond its theoretical alignment, a key strength of narrative inquiry in my study was its methodological capacity to represent participants as meaning-makers embedded within particular sociocultural contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, 2007). Rather than isolating individual experience, it allowed for an interpretation of stories as both personal and socially situated. This approach foregrounded participants' agency while also attending to the ways their accounts were shaped in relation to broader systems of meaning, revealing the dynamic interplay between structure and self in shaping identity.

In addition to enabling analysis that aligned with my research aims and paradigm, the narrative process itself created opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences in new ways. As Strong-Wilson (2006) suggests, revisiting one's story can allow individuals to see their past through 'fresh eyes,' sometimes leading to new insights or reinterpreting earlier events. This reflexive potential was particularly valuable in my study as it focused on how students engaged in internal conversations to reinterpret their experiences, clarify their concerns, and make sense of who they were becoming in relation to the structural and cultural contexts they navigated.

Narrative inquiry offered more than an approach for data collection — it enabled space for how students understood their journeys through higher education as layered, evolving, and deeply relational. It offered a way to capture the complexity of their positioning within unequal systems and make visible the ways they navigate competing demands, aspirations, and expectations. In doing so, it provided a textured account of identity formation that could remain obscure through more abstract or decontextualised approaches. The next section expands on how attending to individual stories can deepen a study's analytic and interpretive insight.

4.2.2 The Power of the Particular

This study was grounded in a specific institutional and historical context: the humanities faculty at Rhodes University during a period marked by significant demographic change and the aftermath of the 'decolonial turn' that followed the #MustFall protests and the disruption of the

COVID-19 pandemic. The student participants were part of one of the first cohorts to enter university after the protests and to graduate following a discernible shift in student demographics. These contextual conditions were not background details; they directly shaped how students engaged with their studies, how they moved through the institution, and how they came to reflect on the value and purpose of a humanities education.

Focusing on this particular group of students within a defined moment made it possible to explore how broader structural and cultural forces were experienced and interpreted at an individual level. As highlighted in Chapter 2, research on South African higher education pointed to persistent inequalities, the slow pace of transformation, and the disjuncture between institutional culture and student experience, as emphasised by the #MustFall movement. My study contributes to that body of work by showing how students engaged with these contextual conditions not abstractly, but as part of their everyday university lives. Their accounts offered insight into how these dynamics were felt, navigated, and understood from the perspective of those living through them.

Clandinin (2007, pg. 21) offers that “the particular deserves as much attention as the generalisable,” a principle that is central to narrative inquiry. By focusing closely on a specific group of students, my study foregrounds their narratives not as anecdotal reflections, but as meaningful accounts of how identity is shaped through lived engagement with context. The choice to work with a specific cohort of students was not a limitation, but a way of engaging deeply with the intersection of personal and structural dynamics that often get flattened in large-scale studies (Clandinin, 2007).

Focusing on a specific cohort of students within the humanities faculty also provided a way to engage more directly with the broader debates surrounding the value and purpose of a humanities education. Public discourse often positions the humanities as being in crisis, framing their relevance through concerns about employability, economic utility, or cultural decline. By situating the study within a defined global, national and institutional context, it allowed me to explore how these wider narratives might intersect with the everyday realities students face. Focusing on this particular context aligned with my study’s aim to investigate how the value of the humanities is shaped not only by public discourse, but also by the lived conditions under which students pursue their degrees.

Ultimately, attention to ‘the particular’ (Clandinin, 2007) allowed me to explore identity as shaped not in the abstract, but through lived engagements within a particular context. In doing so, the study also aimed to provide insight into how context shapes students’ experiences, highlighting the importance of understanding higher education from the perspective of those living through it, particularly in a landscape marked by ongoing change and transformation. With the paradigm and methodological approach established, the next section outlines the research design used for my study, including the research aims and approach to data collection.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of my study is to investigate how students’ experiences of a humanities education are shaped by the conditions they encounter and how, through reflection, they come to understand the meaning and significance of their studies. The research questions were developed to explore how students’ identities take shape through their everyday experiences and their engagement with broader structural and cultural conditions that enable or constrain their agency both within and beyond the university context. By examining the interplay between context, agency, and identity, I aimed to uncover the underlying mechanisms that condition personal transformation during the degree experience.

To guide this inquiry, the following research questions were developed:

- (a) How do students understand the purposes and value of a humanities degree?
- (b) What are the structural, cultural, and agential conditions that shape their academic trajectories and aspirations?
- (c) How does their experience as humanities students inform their sense of self, their identities and their expectations for the future?

Through these questions I aimed to develop a situated and layered account of the student experience, one that foregrounds student voice while also illuminating the structural and cultural conditions within which identity is negotiated and transformed.

4.3.2. Data Collection

4.3.2.1 Sample

I interviewed 15 humanities honours (postgraduate) students at Rhodes University. Participants were drawn from four departments within the humanities faculty: Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Political and International Studies. I acknowledge that the humanities is defined differently across institutions. For this study, I followed how Rhodes University positions the humanities as including the liberal arts, languages, social sciences and a pathway to a Bachelor of Laws with a Bachelor of Arts undergraduate. The four disciplines selected form part of what the university categorises as formative degrees, which are not directly linked to specific professions or work-ready pathways. This made them a useful site for exploring how students reflect on the purpose and value of their studies in the context of a market-driven higher education system within a neoliberal global world.

Honours students were chosen because they had completed their undergraduate degrees and had opted to continue in their chosen disciplines. This gave them a retrospective vantage point from which to reflect on how their experiences across different years, learning environments, and institutional conditions had shaped their sense of identity, their understanding of their degree's purpose, and the value they attached to their education. Most had experienced at least one full year of in-person teaching prior to the shift to emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed for reflection across contrasting learning contexts, as well as consideration of how institutional conditions and personal orientations may have shifted throughout their degree journeys. My intention was to explore whether, and in what ways, these shifts were experienced in relation to Ashwin's (2020) framing of personal transformation and what kinds of structural and cultural enablements or constraints had shaped students' trajectories.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants who had completed their undergraduate humanities degrees at Rhodes University and majored in one of the four selected disciplines. I reached out to departmental networks to circulate a call for participants, specifying that students needed to be enrolled in an honours programme and have completed their undergraduate studies at Rhodes University in one of the identified departments. This non-random, guided approach aimed to ensure a range of demographic backgrounds, including race, gender, and sociocultural contexts — factors likely to shape how students navigate the

university and interpret their experiences, as articulated in the pre-enrolment literature discussed in Chapter 2.

While the experiences of black students are a central focus of my study, given their historical exclusion from higher education and the ongoing role of race in shaping access and belonging, the sample also includes white participants whose perspectives offer additional insights into the dynamics of identity and transformation in the post-apartheid university. This was a deliberate decision. Including students from a range of racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds allowed me to explore how differently-positioned individuals engage with the university and make sense of their academic journeys.

Drawing on a Social Realist perspective, I recognised that while all students encounter structural and cultural conditions, their responses are shaped by their particular locations within the social structure. Factors such as family background, schooling, financial pressures, and broader cultural expectations influence how students make decisions about their degrees, navigate constraints, and interpret the value and purpose of their education. As Robinson (2014) notes, purposive sampling is particularly valuable when a study's theoretical orientation requires engagement with participants who can offer varied, context-rich accounts. Given my interest in how identity is shaped through reflexive engagement with structural and cultural conditions, it was important to include students whose differing socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, across and within racial categories, could shed light on the diverse ways these mechanisms are encountered, interpreted, and navigated.

4.3.2.2 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

My primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This approach aligned with the study's narrative inquiry framework, which emphasises lived experience, temporality, and the ways individuals make sense of their lives through storytelling (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; McAlpine, 2016). In-depth interviews offered the flexibility to follow participants' accounts as they unfolded, while still allowing for attention to the key themes guiding the research.

The use of semi-structured interviews created space for participants to reflect on their educational journeys in their own words, while ensuring that discussions remained focused on the study's central concerns, i.e., identity, reflexivity, the internal conversation, and the perceived value of a humanities education. I developed an interview guide to prompt dialogue

that addressed students' lives pre-enrolment, motivations for choosing their degrees, their experiences during undergraduate study, the challenges and shifts they encountered, and how they framed the purpose and value of their degrees, especially in relation to their personal projects and ultimate concerns. Open-ended questions encouraged narrative depth and enabled participants to raise themes that mattered most to them and surface the conditions that impacted their experience.

Although I entered each interview with a clear sense of the kinds of insights I hoped to explore, I intentionally created space for participants to shape the direction of the conversation. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. Each began with the prompt: *"Can you tell me your story? You can start by telling me about how you grew up, your family, school life, and then take it from there."* This opening allowed participants to begin their narratives before their arrival at university, surfacing their 'pre-Rhodes University' cultural and structural conditioning that informed their decisions and trajectories. In this way, students were able to locate their degree experiences within a broader personal and social history.

Throughout the interviews, I remained an engaged and attentive listener, drawing from participants' reflections to probe further where needed, asking for clarification, prompting elaboration, or inviting them to critically reflect on parts of their journey. While students were encouraged to share their experiences in ways that felt natural to them, I offered gentle prompts where needed to keep the conversation aligned to my focus on personal transformation (Ashwin, 2020) and the potential of a university experience in shaping identity.

The choice of in-depth interviews was informed by my focus on reflexivity and the processes of identity formation, as articulated in Social Realism. This interview approach enabled participants to articulate their deliberation process, providing insight into how they navigated structural and cultural constraints through their internal conversations while forming their identities. Additionally, this approach allowed me to delve into the ways students made sense of their academic and life journeys and how these experiences shaped their aspirations, values, and sense of self.

4.4 Data Analysis

Maxwell (2005) identifies three core strategies for qualitative analysis: (i) categorising, coding, and organising data into themes; (ii) connecting, by examining relationships and sequences across data; and (iii) memo-writing, which captures analytic reflections throughout the process.

These strategies provided a flexible and iterative structure for working with narrative data in a way that aligned with the study's critical realist and social realist paradigm. They enabled close engagement with participants' narratives while also surfacing the deeper structural and cultural dynamics that shaped those experiences.

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti, beginning with open coding to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and expressions across the narratives. This initial inductive phase was followed by a more focused stage of analysis in which the data were recontextualised through a social realist lens. Drawing on Archer's (2000) model of analytical dualism, I used the categories of structure, culture, and agency to explore the distinct yet interrelated dimensions of students' experiences. These were later refined into structural, cultural, and personal emergent properties, which allowed for a more layered analysis of how students' internal conversations were shaped by the broader conditions they navigated.

Guided by a critical realist ontology, which views empirical experience as shaped by deeper generative mechanisms at the level of the real (Bhaskar, 2008), this layered coding approach supported a nuanced analysis of student narratives. Rather than treating structural, cultural, or agential elements as separate or fixed, I focused on how they surfaced and intersected dynamically in students' accounts. This intersection illustrated how and why participants understood the value of their degrees, negotiated enablements and constraints, and reflected on their evolving identities over time.

To move beyond surface-level description, I used both abductive and retroductive reasoning in my analysis. Abduction, as described by Danermark et al. (2002), involves hypothesising an explanation that best accounts for the evidence at hand. Often referred to as 'reasoning to the best explanation,' it does not aim to produce definitive proof, but rather the most plausible interpretation of complex phenomena (Danermark et al., 2002). Abductive reasoning is particularly valuable in qualitative research and narrative inquiry because it enables movement between empirical data and theoretical concepts, allowing for the generation of explanations that remain attuned to the complexity and nuance of human experience. In this study, abduction allowed me to interpret participants' narratives through a social realist lens, drawing connections between individual accounts and the broader structural and cultural conditions in which they were situated.

Retroduction, informed by Bhaskar's (1975, 2008) Critical Realism, provided an additional layer of reasoning. It involves working backwards from observed patterns to ask what underlying mechanisms must exist for these patterns to occur. This approach was especially useful for identifying the generative mechanisms shaping how students made sense of their degrees, aspirations, and identities. Retroduction allowed me to move from empirical description to causal explanation, deepening the explanatory power of the findings.

The use of abductive and retroductive reasoning was accompanied by continuous memo-writing, which formed an integral part of the analytic process. Memos allowed me to reflect and question how I was interpreting the data, track emerging insights, and trace connections across narratives. As Maxwell (2005) argues, memo-writing is not simply a record-keeping tool but a means of stimulating analytic insight and deepening engagement with the data.

Ultimately, this analysis approach, combining inductive coding, theory-informed recontextualisation, and abductive and retroductive reasoning, provided a valuable and coherent framework for examining how structural conditions, cultural expectations, and personal agency interact to shape students' experiences in higher education. By applying connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2005), I was able to trace the relationships between these dimensions and surface the causal mechanisms that underpinned students' reflections. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of how identity is formed through ongoing negotiation with the intersecting and evolving dynamics of structure, culture, and agency.

4.5 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of my study is grounded in the use of a critical realist ontology, which frames reality as layered and complex. While reality exists independently of perspectives, it can only be understood through the knowledge we construct about it — knowledge that is shaped by context, influenced by perspective, and always open to further development (Bhaskar, 2008). Rather than relying solely on what is observable, critical realism holds that human experiences, mediated through agency, are shaped by deeper causal mechanisms. These mechanisms operate at the level of the real and influence what is expressed at the empirical level. From this perspective, student narratives were understood not just as stories, but as real, meaningful accounts shaped by underlying structural and cultural conditions.

Informed by critical realism and social realism theories, I understand subjective experiences as real, meaningful and socially situated. Grounding the study in a critical realist depth ontology

allows students' experiences to be understood as shaped through their internal conversations, and being embedded within real social, cultural, and structural conditions. These experiences are not isolated or arbitrary, but conditioned by underlying structural, cultural, and agential dynamics operating across different levels of the social world. This ontological framework supports an analysis that recognises meaning-making as both meaningful and shaped by context, with significance rooted in real conditions that can be examined in relation to those structural and cultural conditions.

As Maxwell (2012) argues, trustworthiness in research depends on coherence between the methods employed, the context in which they are applied, and the purposes guiding their use. In my study, narrative inquiry allowed participants to articulate their own interpretations, while a critical realist lens provided the analytical tools to recontextualise those narratives in relation to broader social dynamics. The goal was not to seek definitive truth but to generate plausible explanations using judgmental rationality, evaluating competing interpretations, and arriving at the most coherent account of how identity is shaped through interaction with structural and cultural contexts.

My own reflexivity was an integral part of the analytic process, not only as a methodological safeguard but as a necessary practice within a study concerned with meaning-making and interpretation. Aligning with the study's ontology, I approached the data recognising that my positionality would shape how I engaged with participants' stories, the questions I asked of the data, and the interpretations I formed through the analytic process. My position as a researcher familiar with the institutional context brought valuable insight, but also the potential for assumptions to impose meaning on the narratives. To address this, I engaged in sustained memo-writing throughout the analysis, using these memos to track emerging patterns, question initial analysis, and reflect on how my own positionality may have shaped my engagement with participants' narratives. As part of this reflexive process, I shared the vignettes I developed with participants to ensure that their stories were represented in ways that were accurate and meaningful to them. This process of returning to participants helped surface potential misreadings, deepened the analysis, and contributed to the interpretive rigour of my research process.

I do not claim to offer a generalisable truth to my study, nor do I claim to offer a full account of students' experiences. My study was shaped by the narratives of a specific group of students, interpreted through a particular theoretical lens. However, by foregrounding students'

perspectives, situating their experiences within context, and analysing the underlying causal dynamics, my study offers a situated account that provides meaningful insight into how students' experiences are shaped and understood. My aim was not to present students' narratives as uniform or universally shared, but to explore how their reflections emerged in response to the structural and cultural conditions they navigated during their studies.

While the research is limited to student perspectives and shaped by my interpretation, I argue that those perspectives hold significant value. They offer insight into how the humanities are experienced and made sense of by students navigating a changing university landscape, insight that is often overlooked in broader institutional or policy accounts. In this way, the study contributes not just to the understanding of student identity and reflexivity, but also to wider debates on the role and relevance of the humanities in South African higher education.

4.6 Positionality

At the time of this study, I held two roles within the Rhodes University community: a member of the academic staff and a residence warden. I am also a Rhodes University Humanities graduate, an experience that shaped not only the design of this research but my relationship to it. From the beginning of the study, I knew that my role as both an academic staff member and residence warden could influence the interviews. I was concerned that students might hold back or feel hesitant to speak openly because of how they saw my position. I wondered whether the potential power dynamics between us, whether real or simply felt, might affect the openness or direction of our conversations.

As I began the interviews, however, these concerns gradually gave way to a different kind of dynamic. I introduced myself not through my institutional titles, but by sharing my own connection to the humanities at the institution. I explained to students that I, too, had sat in their classrooms, wrestled with similar questions, and considered the value of the humanities in relation to my goals. That familiarity seemed to contribute to a sense of ease. I felt that participants spoke openly and generously and were responsive to my probing questions. I felt that their willingness to reflect deeply did not seem constrained by my role. If anything, it was shaped by a shared understanding of the space we were speaking about.

My insider position carried both advantages and responsibilities. It meant I understood the institutional language and cultural reference points. I could follow the shorthand in students' stories without needing explanation and this made the interviews more fluid. However, I was

also conscious of the risks. I knew I had to be careful not to assume too much, or take understanding for granted, especially when participants described experiences that echoed my own. I had to remain conscious of not projecting my interpretations onto their words or mistake recognition for understanding, to the best of my ability.

To manage this, I consciously positioned, as far as possible, my own perspective at a reflective distance, remaining focused on understanding participants' experiences on their own terms. I used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency across interviews and to keep me grounded in the research aims. I kept a reflective journal where I recorded not just emerging patterns in the data, but the moments when I caught myself making assumptions or felt particularly moved by what a participant shared. These entries became part of the analytic process, helping me stay alert to how my own experiences could colour my interpretations and surfacing aspects of their narratives that I may need to clarify with them.

Being close to the context of my research meant I had insight, but it also required vigilance. I approached this study aware that insider knowledge is not neutral. It can help you hear more, but only if you are careful not to listen for what you expect to find. This tension stayed with me throughout the project, and it shaped both how I engaged with participants and how I worked with their narratives they entrusted to me.

Collectively, the coherence between my theoretical framework, methodological choices, and reflexive practices strengthens the trustworthiness of my study. By grounding the research in a critical realist ontology and using narrative inquiry to elicit and interpret students' accounts, I was able to respond to both the meaning participants ascribed to their experiences and the broader conditions that shaped them. Ongoing reflexive engagement, transparent analytical processes, and participant validation through shared vignettes contributed to strengthening the authenticity of students' narratives and the depth of the findings. While my study does not claim representativeness or completeness, its value lies in offering a situated, thoughtful account that illuminates the complex dynamics of identity, context, and meaning in the pursuit of a humanities education.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

I received ethical clearance from the Education Higher Degrees Committee (EHDC). This committee's approval confirmed that the research design met institutional ethical standards, particularly in relation to participant protection, informed consent, and data confidentiality.

Ethical practice in this study was guided by the core principles of respect, transparency, accountability, and care (Mack et al., 2005; Silverman, 2000). Given the deeply personal and reflective nature of the interviews, particular attention was paid to fostering an interview space where students could feel seen and heard without judgment. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. These forms were discussed in person to ensure clarity and understanding. Participants were also given the contact details of my supervisor and the Rhodes University Ethics Coordinator should they have any concerns.

Informed consent extended beyond a signed form. It involved an ongoing process of dialogue and mutual understanding. As part of this commitment, I shared the written vignettes developed from each participant's story with them after the interviews. This was done to ensure that their experiences were represented in a way that felt authentic to them and that their voices remained central to how I developed my research.

I took care to protect the identities of my research participants to the best of my ability. I have used pseudonyms throughout my thesis, and any obviously identifying details were removed or altered where necessary. However, given the specific institutional context and the small size of the participant group, I discussed with participants the possibility of deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009), where someone familiar with the context might infer their identity. These conversations were approached with openness and sensitivity, and participants were given the opportunity to express any concerns about how their data would be presented. All participants affirmed their willingness to have their narratives included in the study.

Throughout the research process, I remained conscious of the ethical responsibilities of being both an insider and a researcher. I recognised that my institutional roles, as an academic staff member and residence warden, could shape how participants perceived me and what they felt comfortable sharing. To mitigate this, I made my researcher role and positionality explicit and clarified the purpose of my study. I worked to establish a respectful and open dynamic in which participants could speak freely. This involved careful attention to the timing and format of interviews and ensuring that participants were comfortable with where the interviews were conducted.

Ethical responsibility did not end with the data collection. I remained mindful of how the narratives were analysed and represented, aiming to do justice to students' personal stories while also critically engaging with them through my theoretical lens. This approach reflects my broader commitment to a research ethic grounded in care, humility, and accountability.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological choices that shaped the approach taken to understanding how humanities students understand the value and purpose of their degrees and how their experiences relate to shifts in identity. Framed by a critical realist ontology and Archer's social realist theory, the research design aimed to surface the layered and situated nature of student experience, foregrounding both personal meaning-making and the broader structural and cultural conditions that shape it.

The qualitative, narrative approach enabled participants to reflect on their journeys in ways that centred their voices while also offering analytic entry points into the conditions shaping their choices, constraints, and aspirations. The use of purposive sampling, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis, guided by abductive and retroductive reasoning, provided a means to link individual narratives with underlying conceptual frameworks. My own reflexivity and attention to ethical care were central to the research process, helping to strengthen transparency, thoughtfulness, and integrity in how my study was conducted and how claims were made.

What follows is a presentation of the findings drawn from students' narratives. These chapters trace the key patterns that emerged from the data, attending to how students navigate, contest, and make sense of their educational experiences within a changing institutional and social landscape. Preceding the first findings chapter is an interlude of pre-enrolment vignettes, which offer brief glimpses into each participant's background and the personal histories they carried with them into university.

Interlude: Crossing the Threshold

Pre-enrolment Vignettes

Before the formal beginning of their university journeys, each student in this study had already begun a quieter, often unacknowledged process of becoming. These short vignettes offer glimpses into their lives before enrolment, the histories, responsibilities, and aspirations they carried with them as they crossed the threshold into higher education. Far from arriving as blank slates, these students brought with them complex identities shaped by family, community, and context. This section does not aim to provide full biographies, but rather to situate each participant in relation to the layered realities that informed their decision to pursue a humanities degree, and the expectations, both internal and external, they navigated from the outset.

Sibu – Sociology

Black African Woman

For Sibu, education was always framed as the pathway out of poverty, a message instilled by her mother, who worked to secure Sibu's place at a private boarding school before her passing. Both her parents passed away when she was just 12. Taken in by her mother's best friend, the school became more than a place of learning; it was a source of structure, care, and affirmation that she credits with shaping who she is. As the eldest girl, and with no immediate family nearby, Sibu carried a deep sense of responsibility. Her goal was clear: to do well enough at university to create a stable future for her younger sister and honour the sacrifices that had been made for her education.

Nathi – Sociology

Black African Man

Growing up, Nathi associated success with becoming a lawyer, a respected path that carried both symbolic and material weight in his community. Though he longed for a learning environment where his experiences as a young black man were acknowledged and where critical thinking was encouraged, his initial degree choice was shaped by the pursuit of financial stability. Law seemed like the right path. But beneath that decision was a deeper desire: to engage with knowledge in ways that felt personal, intellectually challenging, and affirming of his identity.

Steve – Anthropology

White Man

Steve's path into the humanities did not follow a conventional arc. Raised in a family where professionalism was measured through medicine and trade, he initially prioritised practicality and financial stability. After completing school, he chose to rewrite his matric exams, work as a lifeguard, and even explore anti-poaching, all while cultivating a growing interest in learning. Entering university at 21, his decision to shift into the humanities reflected a deeper curiosity about people and society, marking a personal departure from earlier ideas about what counts as success.

Liya – Sociology

Black African Woman

Liya's journey to Rhodes University was shaped by limited exposure, financial uncertainty, and a deep sense of responsibility to her family. Growing up in a small village without access to career guidance, she fixated early on becoming a lawyer, a decision sparked by a classmate's parent and left largely unchallenged. However, her dissatisfaction with her academic performance in Law made her shift her focus from Law to her minor, Sociology, in her second year. When her initial university plans fell through, a teacher introduced her to Rhodes University, setting in motion a path marked by unexpected turns. Even after enrolling at another university, the confirmation of her funding at Rhodes University reignited her determination. Her story reflects a pattern of navigating uncertainty with quiet resolve, driven by hope, family guidance, and the desire to access better opportunities.

Shae – Philosophy

White Woman

Shae's educational journey was shaped by a deep desire for safety and financial stability, priorities forged through personal experiences of violence and instability. Raised by a mother who valued independence and practical skills, Shae grew up fixing plumbing and wiring, convinced that self-sufficiency was the surest route to survival. At one point, she considered leaving school altogether, feeling disillusioned and directionless. But her mother's insistence that she repay her education if she quit spurred her into action. Determined to be awarded a scholarship, she threw herself into her studies, eventually excelling and earning the funding needed to access university. For Shae, education became a way to reclaim control and imagine a different life.

Layla – Philosophy

Coloured Woman

Layla's schooling, shaped by a strong academic culture and a rigid focus on math and science, often left little space for reflection or personal expression. Attending a predominantly white school, she struggled to make sense of her experiences as a coloured student, grappling with feelings of exclusion and anger but without the tools to unpack them. When it came time to choose a degree, Layla was drawn to fields that would allow her to think freely and engage meaningfully with the world around her. Supported by university-educated parents who encouraged her autonomy, and with a scholarship that eased financial pressure, Layla entered university searching for understanding.

Lerato – Politics*Black African Woman*

Raised by her grandmother with her cousins, Lerato's school years were marked by a playful spirit and a balanced sense of discipline. University was never a firm expectation, but the stories shared by her older cousins lit a spark of curiosity and excitement in her. The idea of discovering who she was outside of home, embracing independence, and shaping her own path made the university experience deeply appealing. Lerato entered higher education with the hope that it would offer both personal freedom and the space to define herself on her own terms.

Dimpho – Sociology*Black African Woman*

Dimpho's curiosity about the world was shaped early on by her unconventional family structure and the silences within her deeply Christian home. With her grandfather and uncle taking on father roles in her life, she began to question the meaning of family, identity, and later, religion itself. These early questions laid the foundation for her critical outlook and sense of inquiry. When introduced to Karl Marx at school, something clicked, and she realised she wanted to pursue a degree that allowed her to interrogate social structures and their effects. Her own research led her to Anthropology, where she saw the potential to better understand both herself and the world around her.

Rumi – Sociology*Black African Woman*

Rumi never imagined herself at university. Raised in Zimbabwe, she had hoped to pursue a nursing qualification and begin working directly with children in her community. But with both her parents being university graduates, higher education was seen as non-negotiable, a proven path to success. Guided by their belief in practical, career-oriented degrees, Rumi enrolled, despite feeling uncertain about the academic route. Beneath this, however, was a quiet but deep-rooted desire to address the gaps she observed in her community, especially around mental health and child support, concerns that continued to shape her sense of purpose.

Nyasha – Politics*Black African Woman*

Growing up in Zimbabwe, Nyasha was shaped by a family culture that valued practical, career-oriented degrees, an ethos passed down by her university-educated parents. When her A-Level results placed her in the humanities stream, the only degree path seen as viable by both her school and family was Law. It was considered the respectable, worthwhile option. Though she complied with these expectations, Nyasha entered university carrying the weight of cultural assumptions about what kinds of education were valuable and what kinds were not. Over time, however, she decided to shift her focus to Politics, after finding that her experiences in the Law

department left her feeling unsupported and unable to thrive in the ways she had hoped. This move was not a rejection of academic ambition, but rather a search for a space where she felt better able to reach her potential.

Ontha – Politics

Black African Woman

For Ontha, attending university was never a question of “if” but “how.” It was expected by her family and reinforced by her schooling, with the clear message that professional, financially secure degrees were the only worthwhile options. Alternative futures were not acknowledged as valid. Still, Ontha never questioned her desire to go to university. She saw no other path for herself, even if she wasn’t entirely sure what it would mean or where it would lead.

Phumi – Politics

Black African Woman

Phumi always knew she was going to university; it was the expectation. But while the destination was clear, the direction was not. She felt uncertain about what she wanted to study and wished for time to figure it out. A gap year, however, felt out of reach due to her financial circumstances. In the end, her academic results determined her degree path, rather than a clear sense of personal interest or career ambition.

Nozi – Politics

Black African Woman

Nozi’s educational path was shaped by movement and adjustment. She changed schools often in her early years, attending primary school in the rural “homelands” before relocating to Johannesburg, where she struggled to adapt to English-medium schooling. When Nozi was not accepted at her top-choice universities, her mother, who worked as a nail technician, shared her situation with some of her clients. One of them suggested Rhodes University as an option. Intrigued, Nozi looked it up and decided to apply. She was accepted, and although another offer came through later, her mother encouraged her to choose Rhodes for its international reputation. Inspired by television shows like *Suits* and *NCIS*, Nozi initially saw Law as a clear path to success. However, once in the programme, she found the subject more academically demanding than expected and felt it did not align with her interests or learning style. This led her to shift her focus to Politics, where she felt more engaged and better able to manage the academic challenges.

Katlego – Politics

Black African Woman

Katlego’s ambition to study Politics was sparked during high school when she participated in the Model UN and the South African Institute of International Affairs. These formative experiences shaped her vision for the future and solidified her desire to pursue political studies.

However, her father did not view Politics as a legitimate academic path and urged her to consider more traditional, career-oriented degrees like Law or Accounting. Despite this pressure, Katlego remained firm in her decision, choosing to follow her passion and enrol in a Politics degree.

Chapter 5: More Than a Qualification

Meaning-Making and the Journey into Higher Education

This chapter traces the complex and often conflicted deliberations students undertook when deciding what to study at university. Far from being guided solely by personal interest or individual ambition, these decisions were deeply conditioned by students' social contexts, shaped by economic hardship, family expectations, school environments, and community values. The chapter focuses on how students reflexively navigated these influences, considering what degrees might offer not only in terms of career outcomes, but also in relation to their ultimate concerns and personal identity.

To understand this process, the chapter is organised around three core questions: Why did students believe higher education mattered? How did they access and choose between available options? What led them to pursue degrees in the humanities? Through these questions, the chapter moves beyond simplistic accounts of aspiration to examine how students made sense of their circumstances, weighed competing concerns, and acted strategically considering their constraints.

Degree choice emerges here not as a singular moment, but as a deeply situated process of negotiation, between self and structure, personal hopes and social obligations. Students' internal conversations reveal that choosing a degree was rarely just about academic preference. It was a way of positioning themselves in relation to their pasts, their communities, and their imagined futures. This chapter, then, positions students' pre-university decision-making as an early and significant site of agency, where the meaning of higher education and the identities it might help shape were already being reflexively worked out.

5.1 The Reflexive Journey into Higher Education: From Motivation to Access

Students' journeys into higher education were shaped by more than individual ambition or academic potential. Across the narratives in this study, participants described a process of deliberation shaped by the interplay of structural realities, cultural expectations, and personal identity. While socio-economic conditions did not determine their decisions, they profoundly

influenced the context within which students reflected on whether, where, and how to pursue a degree.

For many, financial issues, under-resourced schools, and intergenerational responsibilities, often expressed in relation to Black Tax, served as the backdrop for thinking about higher education. In these contexts, the idea of going to university was rarely framed as a purely individual aspiration. Instead, it emerged as a culturally meaningful and morally weighted response to material hardship, familial expectation, and the desire to contribute to collective well-being. Structural constraints shaped what options were seen as viable, while cultural commitments, such as the imperative to support one's family or uplift one's community, gave these decisions emotional and symbolic significance.

This deliberative process was also shaped by students' developing sense of identity. As Archer (2000, 2003) argues, personal identity forms the foundation from which individuals' ultimate concerns arise. Identity is not static but formed through ongoing engagement with one's context. For the participants in this study, who they were at the point of decision-making, how they understood their place in the world, and their obligations to others, were inseparable from how they made sense of what higher education might mean for their futures. University was not simply a pathway to credentials but a project of self-formation and social contribution, negotiated within specific structural and cultural constraints.

This section explores the reflexive journey into higher education, beginning with students' motivations and why they saw university as something they needed to do. Then, it turns to the practicalities of access and how students navigated the material, institutional, and emotional conditions that shaped what was possible. In doing so, it moves beyond narrow definitions of education as a private investment for economic mobility, illuminating how personal concerns were shaped in relation to family, community, and broader histories of inequality. Participants' accounts offer insight into the reflexive mechanisms through which they aligned their personal projects with the realities they faced, showing how identity, aspiration, and constraint coalesced in the decision to pursue a university degree.

5.1.1 Situated Aspirations: The Meaning of Higher Education

In Chapter 2, the literature showed how gaining access to university for many students whose families were historically excluded from higher education was seen as a powerful act of redress that would lead to breaking the cycle of poverty. From a social realist perspective, students'

pursuit of higher education as a form of redress is thus not merely reactive, but reflexive. This framing of higher education emerged throughout some of the students' narratives. Going to university was not presented as a choice; it became an understood expectation, interconnected with the belief of how it would change social and economic circumstances. This is well illustrated through Sibü's experience.

Sibü grew up in a township where poverty and limited access to resources were daily realities. For Sibü, the decision to attend university was shaped by her socioeconomic circumstances and how education was prioritised in her household. Her parents believed that education was the only viable path to a better life, out of the township they lived in, and would often make personal sacrifices to ensure she could attend school and then university.

Yes, and even on top of that, other people used to travel with taxies, [my mother] always used to take ... the public train which was like you'd pay R400-and-something per monthly and she denied herself so many things just for us to have a good education. Even when she was struggling with paying our school fees, she would go and go ask for subsidies (Sibü).

Sibü explained that she and her siblings would either go without lunch or take the bare minimum to school but always attended school no matter the circumstances. In Sibü's household, education was prioritised over anything else, including the basics. Thus, this value, conditioned by her family as a response to their financial situation, played a key role in her deliberation process. This prioritisation of education over basic needs like food demonstrates how Sibü's family, constrained by their socio-economic situation, had adopted education as their primary means of overcoming financial hardship. Structural conditioning — in this case the family's financial constraints — played a significant role in shaping Sibü's internal conversation. Education was perceived not just as important but essential for escaping poverty, reflecting the cultural conditioning within her household. In this way, Sibü's family had normalised that sacrificing immediate needs (such as food) for long-term educational success was necessary to ensure a better future life.

Sibü's decision to pursue a university degree was shaped by a deeply internalised commitment to education, cultivated through her lived experience of financial hardship and her mother's persistent sacrifices. Growing up in a household where the prioritisation of education was embedded in daily life, even at the expense of food and comfort, Sibü came to see formal education as the only viable pathway to a better future. This value was not passively absorbed

but actively deliberated upon. Sibü evaluated her circumstances against her personal concerns, weighing the reality of her socio-economic constraints against a culturally-instilled belief in education as a means of escaping poverty.

For [my mother], she saw me being a doctor, but I knew that I was not going to stop at high school level, like my peers around the township. I knew that I was destined for much better — not, I didn't know it, but I know that my mom wanted that for me (Sibü).

Sibü's decision to pursue university was grounded in a set of long-standing personal concerns shaped through both emotional commentaries and reflexive engagement with her socio-cultural context. Her mother's sacrifices — taking the cheapest transport, seeking out subsidies, and consistently placing education above immediate needs — served not only as practical strategies for survival but as an emotional commentary that imprinted on Sibü a powerful sense of what mattered. These sacrifices became the foundation of her own commitments, embedding the pursuit of education with moral and emotional significance.

While she acknowledged that her mother envisioned her as a doctor, Sibü was equally clear that, unlike many of her peers in the township, she would not stop at high school. She recognised that this imagined future had been willed for her and eventually internalised it as her own. Her life project, then, emerged from this relational inheritance, but was sustained through personal reflexivity: a deliberate orientation toward education as the only viable path to financial stability and social mobility. Sibü's agency is evident both in the shared structural challenge she faced, one familiar to many from similar backgrounds, and the way in which she deliberated upon it. Her developing personal identity was expressed through this project, not as a passive reproduction of her mother's hopes, but as an active appropriation of those values into a coherent vision of her future.

While Sibü's pathway to university was shaped through intimate, emotionally charged experiences within her household, where her mother's sacrifices became the moral scaffolding for her aspirations, other participants internalised similar values through more collectively reinforced cultural expectations. In these cases, it was not a singular figure but a broader social narrative that shaped their personal concerns, one in which education was framed as both a duty and a promise. For some, the push toward university was less about individual sacrifice and more about communal affirmation of what success ought to look like. Ontha's account offers a clear example of this kind of culturally mediated formation of identity and agency.

There was an expectation of ‘you need to work hard and study hard so you can go to university’, and it was spoken about, especially during your matric year because they tend to push you to study hard for like your prelim exams and you know, because this constant reminder of ‘if you don’t do well you’re not going to go to university’. So, it was always an idea and a thought that was pushed down to us that we need to go to university ... in black household families there is this conception that the only way in which you can make it in life is through education and through going to tertiary [education] (Ontha).

For Ontha, the decision to pursue university was embedded within a broader cultural expectation that framed education as the singular route to success and upward mobility. This message, reiterated throughout her schooling and particularly during her final matric year, functioned as a persistent reminder that academic achievement was not just desirable but necessary. The expectation was not abstract; it was actively voiced, often through phrases that linked performance in exams directly to one's future possibilities. Within her household and wider community, the belief that tertiary education was the only legitimate pathway to “making it in life” was deeply normalised, particularly within black families for whom education carried the weight of historical exclusion and economic constraint. This belief system became part of Ontha’s internal conversation — a set of cultural imperatives that shaped her ultimate concern and informed the direction of her personal projects.

You know, at some point I did see myself as after high school I want to go to university. I saw that myself. Not being pressured or anything. I wanted to because, number one, you know I just, I wanted to do something, and I didn’t want to work, and I didn’t want to take a gap year (Ontha).

Her commitment to succeed academically was not simply about fulfilling an external demand. It was about negotiating that demand within her own reflexive framework, aligning it with a developing sense of agency and personal identity. In choosing to go to university, Ontha was not merely responding to pressure, but actively taking up a culturally-instilled concern and translating it into a project that expressed who she was and who she intended to become.

Sibu and Ontha reflect a shared experience among many of my participants, in which the belief that education is the only viable route to a successful and financially stable future, though initially encountered as an external expectation, was ultimately taken up through reflexive engagement. While shaped by structural constraints and cultural expectations, both internalised this belief and aligned their decisions accordingly, making the pursuit of a degree a central part of their personal projects. Their experience also surfaces in Dimpho’s account, where the

decision to attend university was similarly embedded in early experiences of hardship, familial responsibility, and the desire to offer something better, not only for herself but for those around her.

However, not all participants responded to this culturally-embedded expectation in the same way. While Siby and Ontha internalised the belief in education as the only legitimate path to success, aligning their personal concerns and life projects with this value, others experienced the same normative pressure but did not reflexively adopt it. For some, the expectation to attend university remained external, something to be complied with rather than committed to. Rumi's narrative captures this tension, revealing how educational decisions can be shaped more by deference to familial authority than by personally endorsed aspirations. Rumi, a Zimbabwean Sociology Honours student, based her decision on what her parents wanted for her rather than what she would have chosen for herself.

I didn't really want to go to university ... [I] just wanted to go to a college and rewrite my math because I failed math dismally. Rewrite my math and maybe do a practical short course in nursing or cooking ... I talked to my dad and then he is like 'no, you should go to university like the rest of us — the rest of the family'. I also talked to my mom and then she was like 'ja, I think it's better you go to university' ... I didn't even want to go to A-Level, like I was like, after O-Level you know, tried to repeat that maths and do something practical. So that's just my parents' decision for me and what my parents say is what happens (Rumi).

Rumi's trajectory highlights a contrasting engagement with the cultural expectation that university is the preferred route to success. Unlike participants who internalised this belief as a personal concern, Rumi's decision to attend university was shaped primarily by the authority of her parents, rather than by a reflexively endorsed life project. Her own aspirations leaned toward a more practical and immediate path, retaking mathematics and pursuing a skills-based course in nursing or cooking. However, these inclinations were overridden in favour of her parents' insistence that she follow the established family norm of attending university. She shared that her parents understood their own success because of obtaining degrees and thus developed a belief that career and financial success is achieved by first completing a university degree.

Her internal conversation did not lead her to question or redefine these expectations, but rather to accept them as fixed obligations, reflecting a constrained exercise of personal agency within the boundaries set by her social and cultural context. In this context, her actions reflect a

compliance with structural and cultural conditioning rather than a deliberate alignment of personal concerns with educational aspirations. Rumi's narrative illustrates how, even where students experience the same cultural expectations, the degree to which they are internalised and integrated into personal identity varies significantly across individuals. Her narrative underscores the variability in how agency is exercised, not always through resistance or self-assertion, but sometimes through the reflexive choice to comply with external expectations. In choosing to follow her parents' wishes, she did not passively absorb their decision but actively engaged in internal deliberation and ultimately endorsed their view. This reflects a form of agency in which the outcome may align with others' expectations, but the process is still personally mediated.

Although Rumi's initial decision to attend university reflected more compliance with her parents' wishes than personal conviction, her narrative also reveals the presence of deeper concerns that began to shape her educational aspirations. Drawing from personal experience, she became increasingly aware of what she viewed as harmful beliefs and practices within her community, particularly around mental health and the silencing of children. "There are just some community beliefs that are messed up," she explained, referencing her mother's struggle with bipolar disorder and the absence of adequate support systems. These experiences carried emotional significance and became morally charged concerns, informing a growing desire to contribute to social change: "I also wanted to contribute to the community somehow. Probably build a pre-school, a primary school for the kids ... skilling them." Although her university choice was shaped by parental influence rather than personal aspiration, her reflections point to the emergence of a personal project grounded in care, responsibility, and a desire to contribute meaningfully to her community.

Rumi's expression of community-focused concerns and long-term aspirations aligns with the kinds of personal projects articulated by other black participants, such as Dimpho, Nozi, Liya, and Indie, for whom education was not simply a means of personal advancement. Instead, it was tied to broader cultural values and moral commitments, shaped through internal conversations that linked structural conditions, emotional experiences, and perceived relational responsibilities. For these students, the pursuit of a degree emerged as a way of becoming the kind of person they felt was needed, both within their families and in the communities from which they came.

Dimpho's narrative, alongside those of Nozi, Liya, and Indie, illustrates how the decision to attend university was shaped both by structural constraints and the meaningful integration of cultural values and personal concerns into the formation of personal identity. These students did not experience higher education as an abstract institutional pathway. Rather, they came to view it as a deeply embedded life goal, intimately tied to their sense of responsibility, moral purpose, and the future lives of those around them. In Archer's terms, their agency was exercised mostly through autonomous reflexivity but also at times through communicative reflexivity, valuing and internalising their families' beliefs and opinions.

For Dimpho, the ultimate concern was not simply personal mobility but a relational commitment to providing a better life for her younger sibling. She reflected:

I wanted to be someone that I wish I grew up seeing at home ... I want [my brother] to live a very comfortable life (Dimpho).

Similarly, Nozi spoke of becoming a role model for her sister, recognising her own educational journey as part of a broader narrative of possibility: "My mother always says I need to be a role model because I'm the first to go to university." In both cases, these internal conversations reveal a moral dimension to educational aspiration, i.e., education was not only a route out of poverty, but also a commitment to those who would follow. These projects were not externally imposed but emerged through sustained reflexive engagement where familial and community conditions became meaningful reference points in who they were becoming.

This reflexive process demonstrates how personal identity, in Archer's framework, is not fixed or imposed, but gradually constructed through the pursuit of projects that resonate with what the person has come to value most. In these students' lives, cultural values, especially those rooted in care, responsibility, and upliftment, were not simply a backdrop of their lived experiences. They were internalised and consciously acted upon. As Liya put it: "The little kids need to see a different kind of life." Her aspiration to serve as a visible alternative in her community became a personal project formed around a developing identity grounded in service, responsibility, and moral leadership. Likewise, Indie framed her attendance at university as an act of distinction and contribution: "I guess I wanted to be someone who did something."

These narratives show that personal identity was formed not in opposition to cultural expectations, but through their selective appropriation. Each student engaged in autonomous

reflexivity, along with communicative reflexivity, to assess what kind of person they wanted to become, and the degree was pursued not just as a credential but as an expression of that emerging identity. The university became the medium through which their ultimate concerns — improving their families' lives, becoming role models, and making a difference — could be realised. Their agency was not about resisting their conditions, but actively interpreting and responding to them in a way that integrated structural realities with deeply internalised values.

What emerges, then, is a decision-making process in which university attendance is not merely strategic or instrumental but existential. It reflects how personal identity takes shape through the interplay of lived relationships, cultural understanding, and reflective self-examination. In Archer's terms, these are not passive socialised actors but active agents; people whose personal identities are forged through reflexive engagement with the world and oriented toward future-oriented projects that hold both practical and moral significance.

For many of the participants discussed above, the decision to pursue university was not merely a response to material hardship or personal ambition. It was deeply embedded in a broader cultural value system that positioned education as both a moral responsibility and a collective strategy for social upliftment. These decisions were informed by intergenerational narratives of sacrifice, historical exclusion from opportunity, and the desire to become role models within their families and communities. In this context, university was not just a personal goal but a symbolic act of redress, representing the hope of altering inherited trajectories and opening doors for those who would follow. The reflexive deliberations that led to university were thus saturated with cultural meaning, moral weight, and relational concern. However, this was not a universal experience across all participants. While many understood university attendance as a culturally and historically imperative, others, like Shae, navigated similar financial constraints without these embedded cultural expectations. Her narrative reveals a different constellation of values, grounded more in personal responsibility and independence than in formal education. Shae's account, therefore, reflects a deliberation process about the future, one shaped not by a collective sense of historical redress but by a personal, individualised expectation to become self-reliant.

Shae, a white Philosophy Honours student, also experienced significant financial constraints. However, the expectations that shaped her educational choices were markedly different from those of many black participants. In her household, the imperative was not linked to higher education as a vehicle of historical justice or collective upliftment, but to the development of

self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. The message from her family was clear: she would need to take care of herself after school, but how she did so was left open. This orientation created space for a range of possible pathways including, but not limited to, university. Her reflection captures this well.

I was socialised within a middle class setting but that wasn't actually our family's economic status ... And so, what I was living as a reality — what was being reflected back to me — was that what I had wasn't normal. It wasn't acceptable. And now, I can look back and be like, I was living a significantly more privileged reality than the majority. But it's not what I was socialised into (Shae).

Here, Shae highlights a disjuncture between her lived reality and her socialised expectations. Although her family's financial circumstances were constrained, she was raised within a middle-class cultural framework that emphasised independence and self-sufficiency. Educational achievement was seen as valuable, but not the sole determinant of future success. Rather, she had been raised with the assumption, shared within her family, that she would eventually need to sustain herself, regardless of formal qualifications. This belief shaped how she interpreted her position and made decisions about her academic path. Her decision-making was conditioned by the belief that, ultimately, she would be responsible for sustaining herself. This expectation is clearly reflected in her account of her mother's stance:

My mom, out of need, just said, "I will try to keep you at school, and I will try to feed you nutritious food and, thereafter, thereafter your needs are your own. You need to figure that out" (Shae).

Education, in her family, was not viewed as a legacy or a moral imperative, but as one of many tools that might enable self-sufficiency — if used strategically. As Shae explained, extended family members had commonly pursued trades and later financed their own studies.

They all pursued trades of sorts first and then they all financed themselves through university ... I needed to be financially independent (Shae).

Accordingly, her initial path reflected this pragmatism. She pursued practical, skills-based routes such as paramedicine and considered other vocational options. However, her internal conversation, shaped by firsthand engagement with these fields, revealed that they did not align with her emerging concerns or sense of self.

The more I job shadowed and the more ... I did a lot of first aid, working as a first aider at different events and the more I just sort of saw how ... ja, how collaborating

with big pharma matters, if you want to do well and I found it really gross and I didn't want to be part of that (Shae).

I also didn't like seeing the career paramedics. There is so little structure to support them and give the necessary debrief, and so there's just a lot of them who brutalise people and [are] very harsh people or numb or are functioning alcoholics or whatever (Shae).

These reflections, grounded in lived experience rather than abstract reasoning, played a key role in reshaping her personal project. Her emotional commentary, particularly around disillusionment with institutional cultures and professional norms, revealed a growing misalignment between her values and the career paths she had initially considered viable. University, then, did not emerge as an aspirational or inherited goal, but as a reconsidered route, one that might offer more stability, structure, and alignment with her personal and ethical concerns.

This pragmatic, outcome-oriented view of education is also reflected in how her mother framed the financial risks involved.

My mom is a pragmatist, pretty much before anything else ... She said, "You can [go to university] but you are going to have to take on some element of risk if you want to take this decision" (Shae).

In response, Shae committed herself to improving her academic performance with the aim of securing a scholarship.

I started working a lot harder and suddenly saw purpose for my school, which was that I needed to do well enough that I can either get a scholarship to study (Shae).

Her pursuit of university was not driven by symbolic or moral narratives about education, but by a calculated assessment of her options. This decision, although shaped by constraint, was also deeply reflexive. Shae weighed the risks and rewards, considered what she could realistically achieve within her financial limits, and aligned her educational path with her long-term concern for autonomy.

Shae's narrative exemplifies how structure and culture condition agency without determining it. Her personal identity and life project emerged not from a predetermined script, but through autonomous reflexivity, where she deliberated on her options in light of her structural position and her family's cultural emphasis on independence. In contrast to many black participants, for

whom university symbolised collective hope and socio-historical redress, Shae's turn to higher education was a rational and personally meaningful choice. It was a strategic response to real constraints, framed within a cultural context that prioritised personal accountability over inherited obligation. University, for Shae, was not a destination passed down; it was a route she deliberately chose because it made the most sense in the context of who she was, and what she wanted her future to look like.

Shae and Steve's narratives illustrate a contrasting experience to that of many of the black participants in this study, particularly in how they approached higher education. Neither were bound by the intergenerational cultural narratives that positioned university as a necessary vehicle for social mobility or historical redress. Instead, both first explored practical, work-oriented routes such as trades, short courses, or physically demanding professions, before ultimately recognising that these paths no longer aligned with their personal identity and personal projects. Their decisions to pursue university were not shaped by a culturally-inherited obligation, but rather through reflexive engagement with their lived experiences, personal values, and practical constraints. In both cases, university became a means to an end, chosen not out of duty or expectation, but because it came to represent the most viable route toward a more meaningful and sustainable future.

Steve's narrative exemplifies how reflexive agency can develop over time, shaped by shifting personal projects and a re-evaluation of capacities and goals. Initially, Steve did not imagine himself pursuing an academic path. Reflecting on his performance in school, he explained, "so I didn't really do very well in high school. Partly laziness, partly lack of stability" (Steve). His school academic results were not met with pressure or disappointment, but rather with pragmatic support from his mother. As Steve recounted,

Once I matriculated, my mother straight up said to me, "I didn't think you were going to be an academic ... I think you are more built for practical stuff" (Steve).

This statement, rather than constraining, functioned as a form of cultural enablement, freeing Steve from an obligatory pursuit of university and affirming alternative forms of value and capability. Still, within this supportive framework, the responsibility for making decisions remained with him as he explains, "she said 'improve your marks so that it's your choice ... you get to make the choice'" (Steve). Through his mother emphasising his agency and encouraging his autonomy, Steve was enabled to deliberate on his own terms, exploring practical work and training opportunities after high school.

During his two-year break, Steve pursued a variety of physically active and service-oriented roles including lifeguarding, first aid training, anti-poaching work, and casual employment with his father's company. These experiences reflected a reflexive commitment to independence and self-sufficiency, underpinned by cultural values that prioritised doing over studying. His active engagement with these roles suggests an initial effort to build on personal projects grounded in physical skill, autonomy, and real-world application. However, over time, Steve's internal conversation began to shift. The appeal of these practical routes diminished as he assessed their long-term sustainability and alignment with his evolving aspirations. He began to question its value, "It was either that or go to Thailand. I was like what are we going to do in Thailand that we don't do here guys?" (Steve). The turn toward university was not driven by external pressure but emerged from a growing recognition that further study might offer more meaningful prospects.

This transition reflects a gradual realignment of Steve's personal identity and a recalibration of his personal project. His decision to apply to several universities while working as a lifeguard and after improving his matric results signalled a shift in how he perceived his capabilities and future options. Importantly, this was not a rejection of the practical work he had done, but a reflexive decision to pursue a different path once he realised that those earlier roles no longer suited who he was becoming. Steve's narrative illustrates how agency is exercised not only through action but through reflective withdrawal and redirection, where one's path is not abandoned but revised in light of changing concerns.

Like Shae, Steve's decision to pursue university was not shaped by a culturally-inscribed belief in its moral or collective significance. Instead, through autonomous reflexivity, he re-evaluated his earlier practical experiences and recognised they no longer aligned with his personal identity and evolving personal project. University emerged as a strategic next step, not through external pressure but as the most viable option for achieving stability and long-term fulfilment. It represented a recalibrated life project, shaped by shifting personal concerns and a growing clarity about the kind of future he wanted to build.

Taken together, these narratives reveal the deeply situated and varied ways in which participants answered the question, *Why is this something I need to do?* While all were navigating structural constraints, particularly financial pressures, their decisions about university were not solely pragmatic or economically-driven. Rather, they were mediated through different modes of reflexive engagement and shaped by culturally-embedded beliefs

about education, responsibility, and the future. Among black participants such as Sibub, Ontha, Dimpho, Rumi, Nozi, Liya, and Indie, the belief that a university degree was the only credible and legitimate path to stability and success functioned as a powerful cultural proposition. This belief, formed through generations of systemic exclusion from higher education, material deprivation, and intergenerational sacrifice, did not arise spontaneously. Instead, it reflects what Archer (2003) terms the emergent properties of the cultural system — ideas that have been retained, reinterpreted, and transmitted over time as families navigated persistent inequality and exclusion.

The value of a degree, for many participants, extended far beyond its practical utility. It carried emotional weight, moral significance, and symbolic power. For many black participants, university was seen as a form of socio-economic redress and a mechanism for fulfilling the aspirations of previous generations who had been denied access to formal education under apartheid. This belief aligns with what Walker (2022), drawing on Southall (2016), identifies as the prioritisation of formal education within black families as a means of gaining or maintaining social and economic advantage in post-apartheid South Africa. Participants' internal conversations were often shaped by this belief, combining familial obligation with a desire to uplift their communities and change inherited trajectories.

A key cultural mechanism shaping these decisions was Black Tax, which featured prominently in the meaning students ascribed to their degrees. It shaped how they understood their educational trajectories in relation to their families and communities. In this way, Black Tax operates both as a structural constraint, limiting personal financial choices, and an enabling cultural condition, providing individuals with a sense of purpose, legacy, and communal contribution.

Participants' narratives illustrate both the structural constraints and enabling cultural conditions. For some, like Sibub and Dimpho, university was seen as a collective investment that would ultimately benefit their families. Their personal concerns and educational aspirations were interwoven with the socio-economic upliftment of others, shaping personal projects grounded in care, responsibility, and long-term impact. Similarly, Nozi and Liya described their decisions to study as motivated by the desire to become role models and visible proof that these kinds of opportunities were possible within their communities. In these instances, Black Tax did not constrain agency in a negative sense but provided a moral and emotional framework within which education was understood to be meaningful. These students

exercised their agency, mostly through autonomous reflexivity, by aligning their personal projects with the structural constraints of economic hardship and the cultural expectations rooted in family responsibility, historical exclusion, and collective upliftment (Archer, 2007).

However, not all participants responded to these embedded expectations in the same way. Rumi's experience reflected a different form of engagement, one that more closely resembled communicative reflexivity. Although her family shared the same belief in the importance of higher education, Rumi did not initially see university as aligned with her own concerns. Her decision was shaped less by internal conviction and more by a deference to parental authority, highlighting how agency is still present even when it takes the form of compliance. Her later reflections on building schools and addressing mental health in her community suggest that a deeper, community-oriented personal project was emerging—one rooted in relational concern and cultural critique

In contrast, white participants Shae and Steve were not shaped by the same cultural narratives that positioned higher education as a morally significant or historically redemptive pursuit. Their families did not frame university as the only valued pathway or as a symbol of restitution. Instead, their decision-making processes were initially oriented around practical alternatives like trades, paramedicine, lifeguarding, and only later shifted toward university when these paths no longer aligned with their long-term goals. Their narratives demonstrate autonomous reflexivity that unfolded within a different cultural context, one that prioritised individual self-sufficiency over intergenerational obligation and personal fulfilment over collective upliftment.

What these narratives collectively show is that the decision to attend university was not merely a reaction to economic need or external pressure. Rather, it was a reflexive process through which participants evaluated their constraints, values, and goals. For many black students, the university represented far more than a site of learning. It symbolised the fulfilment of intergenerational dreams, a route to family stability, and a culturally meaningful form of restitution. The presence of Black Tax, both in its financial and moral dimensions, added another layer to their internal conversations, shaping how they envisioned themselves, their responsibilities, and the futures they sought to create. For others, university emerged as a pragmatic solution after critical self-evaluation, in the absence of inherited cultural imperatives. In both cases, students exercised their agency by engaging with the question of whether the university aligned with who they were and who they hoped to become.

5.1.2 From Intention to Access: Structural Mediation of Educational Pathways

Having reflexively decided that university was something they wanted, or needed, to pursue, participants were then confronted with a second question: *How can I make this happen?* Their narratives reveal that this question was shaped not only by personal preference or ambition but by a complex interplay of structural constraints (such as funding limitations, academic requirements, and institutional access), cultural knowledge (uneven access to resources and information), and social support and guidance (or its absence).

According to Archer (2003), individuals are not passive recipients of structure and culture. Instead, they engage with these conditions through internal conversations that shape their personal projects. Importantly, their personal projects and ultimate concerns and the ways they navigate structural and cultural conditions offer insight into their personal identities. However, the possibilities available to students are not equally distributed. The same structural and cultural conditions constrain and enable differently, depending on each student's socioeconomic context. These narratives reveal how students understand themselves, what they value, and how they make decisions about their futures in relation to how they navigate the enablements or constraints of the conditions.

Phumi's narrative illustrates this. While she knew she wanted and needed to go to university, she would have preferred to first take a gap year because she was unsure of what she wanted to study. However, given her family's deeply held belief in the importance of university, along with the financial constraints they faced, she felt that taking a gap year was not a viable option. While she felt a gap year would have been beneficial, it was not a realistic possibility. For her, financial hardship not only ruled out the possibility of a gap year but made immediate university entry non-negotiable.

Honestly, at home, I didn't have the choice of taking a gap year ... looking at our financial status at home, I don't really have the privilege of just taking a gap year and figuring out what I want (Phumi).

Phumi's circumstances show how structural pressures can limit the range of realistic options available. Financial hardship and family expectations made immediate university entry feel like the only option available to her, reducing her ability to pause, explore alternatives, or delay the decision. Her eventual admission to Rhodes University was not based on preference, but on what was accessible. Her marks had not met the entry requirements for her first-choice universities, leaving Rhodes University as, what she considered, the only viable path forward.

Rhodes [University] was not my first choice ... UCT ... Pretoria ... so demanding ... my marks weren't good enough to be accepted ... thankfully, Rhodes [University] accepted me (Phumi).

For others, such as Layla, a coloured Philosophy student, the deliberation process unfolded differently, shaped by structural and cultural conditions that expanded her sense of possibility and allowed for greater freedom in decision-making. With access to full scholarships and familial support, her decisions were shaped more by preference than by constraint.

I got scholarships to WITS, UP and Rhodes [University] ... there was no financial pressure with those choices. So, it was pretty much just up to me (Layla).

I decided to choose Rhodes [University] was because I felt like it was a different sort of environment compared to [my STEM-driven school]. I liked the idea of having an open degree because I didn't really have a sense of what I wanted going into my Bachelor's. So, I liked the idea of being able to decide at my own pace and not have to like lock myself into a decision when I was 17 (Layla).

Layla's deliberation process illustrates a reflexive engagement largely unconstrained by immediate structural limitations, like finance. Unlike Phumi, whose decisions were largely conditioned by financial hardship and restricted academic access, Layla experienced a wider field of possibility. With multiple scholarship offers and no financial pressure, she was able to deliberate with greater freedom, focusing on alignment between her educational environment and her personal concerns. Her choice of Rhodes University was shaped by a desire for flexibility, self-discovery, and a more holistic academic culture, reflecting autonomous reflexivity. Her decision-making centred on personal development and long-term alignment with an emerging identity, rather than urgent financial necessity or cultural obligation.

Culturally, Layla's decision-making was also shaped by a family environment in which higher education was not only accessible but strongly valued. With both parents holding multiple degrees and actively pursuing further study while she was still in school, Layla was embedded in a context where academic progression was normalised and encouraged. This background fostered a set of cultural expectations that aligned university not with immediate economic necessity or social mobility, but with intellectual development, personal growth, and fulfilment. As she explained,

My parents both have degrees. So, my dad is a medical doctor and while I was in high school, he got his MBA. And my mom's occupation is social work and she has a Bachelor's and a Master's. She's currently doing her PhD. So, I come from

an environment that was pretty focused on studies and it was, ja, I think it's just kind of a value in my family like higher education. They've just always encouraged my brother and me to go as like being an important part of growing as a person (Layla).

This reflects a cultural system where education is framed as an intrinsic good and as contributing to personal transformation, rather than as a strategic means to overcome disadvantage. These structural and cultural conditions facilitated Layla's capacity for autonomous reflexivity by offering both the material enablements and the cultural reinforcement to reflect freely and choose a path consistent with who she is and what she is interested in. In contrast to participants whose decisions were shaped by pressure to break cycles of poverty or meet intergenerational expectations, Layla's experience highlights how the privilege of not having to navigate structural constraints, such as finances or an under-resourced school, can enable space for exploratory deliberation that only needs to consider what she wants as an individual. Her decisions, like Shae's and Steve's, did not carry the way of considering collective upliftment. Instead, her circumstances enabled her to prioritise personal fulfilment.

These contrasting experiences highlight the uneven distribution of enablements across participants, foregrounding how structural and cultural conditions shape the space for reflexive deliberation differently. While Layla was able to centre her personal concerns, focusing on intellectual fit, future flexibility, and a preference for an open degree structure, this freedom was enabled by her access to financial resources, academic achievement, and a familial culture that valued higher education as a space of intellectual development and personal transformation. Her decision-making process unfolded within a context that enabled exploration and self-directed choice. In contrast, participants like Nathi encountered constraints even at the most basic logistical level. Without reliable digital access, his options were immediately narrowed, not by aspiration, but by what was materially feasible.

We don't have laptops ... I was also confused here with all the websites and things but the Rhodes [University] website is simple and straightforward and worked on a cellphone, which is what I had to use to apply ... so I did it for Rhodes [University] because I could (Nathi).

In this case, access to higher education was shaped not only by broad systemic forces but also by everyday infrastructural realities that had significant constraints in how Nathi could exercise his agency. A seemingly minor feature such as the usability of a university website, became decisive. As Nathi explained, limited access to technology and reliance on a mobile phone

meant that Rhodes University's simple, mobile-friendly application portal was a key reason he applied there. In this way, digital access functioned as a structural condition that directly influenced the range of viable options available to him. This highlights how agency is conditioned not only by large-scale systems like funding or academic performance but also by the immediate and practical resources students can draw upon when making decisions.

In contrast, students like Sibü, who accessed a private boarding school through a scholarship programme, navigated her deliberation process with significantly more institutional support. She recalled,

It was extremely, extremely supportive ... at that point it was what I needed to actually feel like I'm seen. They also covered all the application fees (Sibü).

My mentor helped me make the decision. When hearing that I wanted to get out of Johannesburg, she was like, "I would recommend Rhodes because it's a very small university..." (Sibü).

These forms of structural enablement, ongoing mentorship, application fee coverage, and tailored academic advice not only expanded her practical options but also helped align those options with her personal concerns and emerging identity. These support structures strengthened her capacity for reflexive deliberation by providing the conditions under which her agency could be most effectively exercised.

Both Layla and Sibü exemplify how structurally supportive environments, whether through familial educational capital or school resources, can enable a broader scope for reflexive deliberation. Layla's decision was shaped within a context of financial stability and a holistic cultural endorsement of the value of higher education, allowing her to choose a university that aligned with her personal preferences and uncertainty about her academic direction. Similarly, Sibü's scholarship-supported schooling provided both material resources and emotional validation, enabling her to make an informed, future-oriented decision that aligned with her sense of self. In both cases, the presence of enabling conditions allowed them to approach the decision of where and how to study from a position of agency rather than constraint.

In contrast, participants like Nozi and Liya navigated university access through informal or chance encounters, rather than structured institutional guidance. Their pathways were shaped not by embedded educational capital or formalised support systems, but by contingent sources of cultural knowledge. As Nozi explained, "My mom is a nail tech ... her clients ... told me to

apply [to Rhodes University]”. Similarly, Liya recalled that, “I spoke to a teacher ... he Googled and showed me what Rhodes is ... so I went like, ah, then I’m going to go there”.

These accounts highlight the uneven distribution of cultural resources, what Archer (1996) identifies as part of the cultural system, where access to knowledge about university options is not uniformly available but often dependent on interpersonal networks or moments of serendipity.

Despite these limitations, reflexivity remained central. Even when structural and cultural constraints narrowed the field of available choices, participants engaged in internal conversations about what these decisions meant for their lives and identities. For Shae and Nozi, for example, the decision to attend Rhodes University was not solely pragmatic, but also emotionally and personally significant.

I didn’t want to go to Stellenbosch [University]. I don’t like the culture of learning there. I don’t like the culture of women there — and I gravitate towards women ... moving away [from home] was very important to me, to get away from being told who and how I was” (Shae).

I was just trying to run away from being in Johannesburg and being at home to be on my own (Nozi).

These reflections illustrate what Archer (2007) identifies as the significance of relational goods: non-material benefits that arise from meaningful social relationships and personal commitments. Unlike economic or instrumental goods, relational goods refer to experiences such as emotional affirmation, a sense of belonging, or the pursuit of autonomy and self-definition (Archer, 2003, 2007). For Archer, these goods emerge through internal conversations, where individuals deliberate over what truly matters to them in their social contexts. In Shae’s and Nozi’s cases, the decision to attend Rhodes University was not just about access to education, but also about escaping environments that constrained their personal growth. Their choices were shaped by a desire for spaces that aligned with their values and allowed for greater personal freedom, forms of relational good that held deep significance. They actively navigated their circumstances, seeking educational paths that resonated with their evolving identities and deeper concerns.

While each participant had already resolved the question of *why* university mattered, the *how* of accessing it unfolded across vastly different conditions of support, constraint, and cultural

familiarity. As existing research suggests, for many students from under-resourced contexts, university choice is shaped less by long-range aspiration than by what is immediately attainable within their social and material environments (Walker & Mathebula, 2020; Thomas & Maree, 2022; Kanyopa et al., 2024). This reflects Archer's (2003, 2007) central claim, i.e., that while agency is always exercised through reflexive engagement, the contexts in which it unfolds are unequally structured. These contexts offer differential enablements and constraints which shape not only what is possible but also how carefully and meaningfully individuals can align their educational pathways with their developing concerns and identities.

What these narratives collectively reveal is that accessing higher education is not simply a functional transition — it is a deeply stratified and socially mediated process. Students with greater institutional and relational support, like Layla or Sibu, were able to make choices that reflected not only access but alignment, i.e., they could afford to consider what kind of environment, curriculum, or university culture would support their growth. With fewer structural barriers, their reflexive deliberation extended beyond the urgency of *getting in* to the more nuanced question of *where they would best belong*. In contrast, those with limited access to resources like Phumi, Nathi, or Nozi, often had to compress their decision-making around what was most immediately viable, sometimes accepting constraints that did not allow for more thoughtful deliberation.

This disparity speaks to the unequal terrain of possibility on which students must formulate their personal projects. Where strong support structures like scholarships, mentorship, and cultural familiarity existed, students could prioritise not only entering higher education but doing so in a way that resonated with their personal identity. Where such supports were absent, the university decision was often reduced to what was materially feasible rather than what was reflexively ideal. In this way, the process of accessing university reveals not just the operation of agency but the uneven conditions under which that agency is exercised, and how those conditions shape the possibilities for meaningful alignment between who students are, who they are becoming, and where they are going.

5.2 From Access to Alignment: Navigating Degree Choices within Cultural and Structural Constraints

Having navigated the complex structural and cultural conditions that shaped the meaning of, and their access to, higher education, students were then faced with another critical set of questions: *What should I study? What knowledge is worth pursuing? How can this choice*

support the future I am trying to build? If access marked the gateway, then degree choice represented an attempt to align their university journey with their personal concerns, social responsibilities, and imagined futures. This next phase of decision-making was no less reflexive than the choice to attend university in the first place. Rather, it involved a more focused negotiation of identity, possibility, and constraint.

This section explores how students' degree choices were shaped by a layered interplay of financial realities, familial influence, educational exposure, and the symbolic and practical value attached to different forms of knowledge. Drawing on Archer's (2003, 2007) concepts of structural and cultural conditioning and reflexivity, the analysis shows that students did not simply follow static interests or career goals. Instead, they worked to reconcile personal aspirations with social obligations, limited resources, and uneven access to institutional knowledge. For many, especially those navigating the expectations of Black Tax, and the relational commitments rooted in Ubuntu, degree choice was less about individual fulfilment and more about ensuring that their education served a broader purpose: supporting family, uplifting communities, and challenging structural exclusion.

Importantly, these decisions were not only shaped by what students hoped to achieve but by what they felt they were allowed, encouraged, or prepared to pursue. As with university access, the process of choosing a degree was a reflexive deliberation that exposed inequities in how cultural knowledge and institutional support were distributed and how these differences shaped their ideas of possibility. By examining the conditions under which these decisions were made, this section foregrounds how degree choice becomes a site where identity, structure, culture, and personal projects are deeply entangled.

5.2.1 Cultural and Financial Rationalities in Degree Choice

The narratives showed that for the majority of participants, particularly black students, degree choice was shaped by a complex interplay of cultural expectation, financial rationality, and structurally conditioned opportunity. Of the 15 participants in this study, 10 initially pursued a Law degree by taking the route to LLB through completing a Bachelor of Arts undergraduate degree. This trend speaks not only to the perceived prestige or financial return associated with Law but to how particular degrees become symbolically and morally charged within specific socio-cultural contexts.

For many, selecting a degree was less about personal preference and more about what would be viable, valuable, and necessary for the upliftment of their families and communities. Participants such as Sibuyi and Dimpho, drawing from their narratives in section 1, are examples of this as their degree choices were framed as strategic tools for fulfilling familial obligations, achieving economic stability, and contributing meaningfully to the social development of their communities. These goals were deeply entwined with the logic of Black Tax. Understood through the philosophy of Ubuntu, this responsibility was not viewed as a burden but as a meaningful way of sustaining interdependence and reciprocity.

Degrees like Law, Education, and Psychology held particular resonance for many participants because they were perceived to offer both social credibility and economic security. These fields were not only associated with prestige and stable income but also carried moral and relational weight. Choosing such degrees aligned with participants' sense of duty to contribute meaningfully to their families and communities and is perceived to ensure a stable income in the future. In contexts shaped by this kind of responsibility, limited career exposure, and the desire for upward mobility, these degrees emerged as practical and purposeful choices that 'made sense' within the structural constraints and cultural conditions of their lives. As captured by Nathi, degree choice was often constrained by a limited awareness of career possibilities:

In my village, you are aware of the policeman and teacher ... you hear of social workers because they come from time to time ... There are lots of careers I didn't know until I got to the university space (Nathi).

In this way, initial degree choices were frequently made based on what was visible, familiar, and culturally understood as a 'good career.'

For others, such as Liya, Lerato, and Nozi, the initial desire to pursue Law emerged not from direct familial expectations or clear career goals but from symbolic and aesthetic representations of success encountered in everyday life. Their narratives reveal how mediated images, television shows, school events, or fleeting public encounters offered compelling outlines for imagining futures beyond the limitations of their immediate contexts. In environments where exposure to professional careers was minimal, these cultural artefacts provided accessible cues for envisioning who they could become and what success might look like. Liya's memory of seeing a woman in a legal gown evoked an image of power and distinction to which she could aspire.

I just liked how it looked. It's weird, I thought I wanted to be that, because my idea in my mind it was like the people with like the big gowns and like being in court are powerful and have money (Liya).

Lerato linked her aspirations to portrayals of lawyers in crime dramas, where legal success was intertwined with wealth, lifestyle, and autonomy.

I don't know, I think I was just drawn towards it for some reason, because I remember my school's career day and I was dressed as a lawyer and that's just always been, it's just always been my dream for some reason. It's just something that I always wanted to do. I don't know, maybe it's because I watched a lot of crime shows like Suits and it just made me want that kind of success ... Success as in like having money and being able to have that nice life (Lerato).

In response to being asked why she wanted to study Law, Nozi described her fascination with crime shows as offering a glimpse into a world that represented one completely different from the limited career options visible in her community.

The movies. Those, NCIS, all those shows — it just, I still watch TV it is so interesting. So, I like learning about those crimes and fixing it and all that. So, they got my interest because I had never seen people do things like that. Where I'm from you like a nurse or teacher, but this thing, I was so interested. I could become someone different to the people around me (Nozi).

Law, in these instances, functioned less as a discipline and more as a socially recognised identity, one that promised transformation, recognition, and upward mobility. These accounts show how participants' aspirations were often shaped by emotionally powerful and culturally valued images of success, even if they had limited understanding of what those careers actually involved in practice.

Ontha's reflection introduces a more critical perspective, suggesting that what may appear as self-directed choice can, in fact, be shaped by internalised cultural expectations about success.

I look back and I'm like, what if the decision (to do an LLB) that I wanted to make, yes I'm okay with it but what if the decision I wanted to make is, what I was doing there was not a decision that I wanted to make but a decision that someone else wanted me to make because they believed a law degree meant success (Ontha).

Ontha, in retrospect, questioned whether her desire to study Law truly reflected her own concerns, or whether it was an internalised projection of what others around her believed

success should look like. Her reflection suggests that, even when choices appear autonomous, they can be deeply entangled with the implicit cultural scripts and external validations that shape one's sense of possibility.

These narratives reveal how participants' degree choices were shaped by the cultural and material conditions of their lives. As Archer (2003, 2007) argues, agency does not emerge in isolation but is always situated within a broader interplay of cultural meanings and structural constraints. Students did not select degrees based solely on abstract interests or academic preferences; rather, their choices reflected what mattered most to them in light of their lived realities. Many aligned their personal projects with concerns that centred on achieving financial stability, supporting their families, and contributing meaningfully to their communities, reflecting deeply-held commitments shaped by economic necessity, moral responsibility, and a desire for social recognition. These concerns mirror the meanings attached to higher education discussed in 5.1.1, where university was not simply a space for academic development or credentials, but a vehicle for social mobility, familial upliftment, and the fulfilment of intergenerational hopes. In this way, degree choice became a practical and symbolic act — a way to translate the broader moral significance of higher education into specific, actionable goals, framed around their ideas of success.

For several participants, the decision to study Law reflected a genuine interest, but one that was closely aligned with their ultimate concerns about achieving financial stability, social recognition, and the ability to support their families. Living in under-resourced communities where economic hardship was a defining feature of daily life, Law appeared to be a credible and aspirational pathway to a different reality. It was seen as a career that could offer a stable income and professional respectability, qualities that resonated with participants' desires to change their circumstances and contribute meaningfully to those around them. In this way, their academic interest in Law was inseparable from their personal concerns, making the degree not only a subject of study but a vehicle through which they could enact the hopes and responsibilities that initially motivated their pursuit of higher education.

Importantly, these decisions were rarely framed in terms of 'sacrifice.' Instead, participants' decisions were embedded in a broader ethical orientation, one that positioned higher education as a means of enacting care, responsibility, and future-oriented commitment. Choosing a degree with perceived financial and social value was not experienced as a departure from personal interest, but as an expression of who they were becoming in relation to the people and

communities they felt accountable to. This reflects how participants made sense of their options through a moral lens, where success was not only defined in individual terms, but also through contribution, upliftment, and the fulfilment of collective hopes.

This section shows how the degree choice was deeply shaped by the realities of structural constraint and cultural meaning but navigated with purpose through reflexivity. For many, it represented the most viable way to translate the significance of higher education into concrete action, in pursuit of both personal advancement and shared well-being. In this way, participants' choices marked a moment of alignment between identity, circumstance, and imagined futures, even as some would later re-evaluate those paths in light of new experiences and evolving concerns. I address these re-evaluations in the chapters that follow.

5.2.2 Family as Cultural Conditioners: Influence, Constraint, and Compromise

Across participants' narratives, families emerged not only as sources of support or motivation but as powerful cultural conditioners, shaping what kinds of futures felt credible, acceptable, or desirable. These influences operated unevenly. For some, family expectations narrowed the scope of what could be imagined or pursued, and, for others, family relationships provided conditional support that made space for exploration and compromise. Drawing on Archer's cultural system, family values, expectations, and socialisation patterns shaped participants' internal conversations about what degrees were 'worthy' and what forms of success were valid. These patterns were mediated by differences in access to educational resources, exposure to university, and the strength of cultural norms surrounding professional identity.

5.2.2.1 *Family as Constraints: Aligning with Family Visions of Success*

For participants like Nyasha and Ontha, who both initially intended on pursuing a Law degree, and Steve, family expectations served as strong conditioning forces, limiting the range of degrees considered legitimate. These students grew up in environments where university was non-negotiable and specific professional degrees, often in science, finance, or law, were culturally valorised as markers of respectability and upward mobility. Degrees outside of this narrow spectrum were often dismissed as indulgent or impractical, failing to meet the economic imperatives attached to how they have internalised the meaning of higher education. As Ontha explained:

There was an expectation that you go to university to become a professional through studying something that will make sure you would secure a well-paying

career. So, meaning that it is not open spaces for other fields or other platforms of which you could make it, for example maybe media (Ontha).

For Nyasha, whose parents were both professionals in STEM fields, pursuing anything outside that domain, such as art, was not a credible option.

There was never an option to think of sports or anything outside the academic bracket as good enough to aspire to do ... Zimbabwean parents are almost like, you can either be a doctor, an engineer or a lawyer (Nyasha).

These narratives reveal the strength of cultural conditioning, where emergent cultural norms, rooted in family histories, economic insecurity, and social respectability, filter into the internal conversation and shape what feels possible, valuable, or worth consideration. In considering their degree options, only certain kinds of knowledge were seen as worthwhile. These dominant cultural perspectives constrained the space for deliberation by narrowing the field of legitimate options. The students' reflexive processes were not silenced, but they were disciplined, guided by the weight of expectation and the internalised sense that certain degrees offered the only pathway to a successful future.

For Steve, the pressure to pursue a 'practical' or professionally recognised degree was not imposed directly by his family, but shaped through more subtle, generational forms of cultural conditioning that signalled the humanities as less legitimate or valuable. His family, made up largely of medical professionals and tradesmen, implicitly conveyed a sense that practical, career-oriented fields were the most credible paths to success. Although no one directly told him that the humanities were off-limits, he internalised these expectations through everyday conversations and the careers his family celebrated. The humanities, by contrast, seemed intangible and misaligned with the kinds of work his family valued. As he explained, the idea of studying something like Anthropology felt "frowned upon," as though it would not lead to a stable career in the future.

Rather than suppressing his interests, Steve, using autonomous reflexivity, exercised his agency by seeking a path that could bridge the gap between his intellectual curiosity and his family's values. When he discovered Medical Anthropology, it became a way to reconcile these tensions. It connected with his prior experience as a lifeguard, a role that had fostered his concern with health, care, and community well-being, while also maintaining proximity to the scientific and medical domains culturally valued in his family. His choice reflects a deliberate internal conversation shaped by both cultural expectations and personal concerns, illustrating

how students often navigate structural and cultural conditions as constraints to their personal concerns, but through negotiated compromise.

In these cases, students aligned their personal projects with their families' shared visions of what constituted a 'worthy' or successful future, not simply to gain support or recognition, but because these pathways had come to represent credible, desirable outcomes within both family and personal understandings of higher education's value. This alignment was shaped by cultural conditioning and internalised expectations, reflecting a strategic and often sincere commitment to futures seen as secure, respectable, and socially meaningful.

5.2.2.2 Family as Conditional Enabler

In contrast, students like Lerato and Layla experienced their families as enabling in different ways. Their families did not impose specific career paths but offered cultural or emotional resources that shaped their deliberations.

Lerato's parents had not attended university, but her older cousins had, and they played a formative role in shaping her understanding of what university could offer, both personally and academically. Their stories conveyed a culturally resonant image of independence, self-discovery, and intellectual freedom.

My cousins would tell me all their stories about university. It was like, oh we have so much freedom ... I've always looked forward to just being my own person, being in university (Lerato).

While her parents could not offer direct advice on navigating higher education, her cousins bridged that gap, inspiring Lerato with the idea of becoming "her own person," and sharing concrete knowledge about subjects like Politics and Sociology. These glimpses into the humanities, what could be studied, what questions could be asked, and how university knowledge could reshape one's view of the world, expanded Lerato's frame of reference and gave depth to her internal deliberations.

In Archer's terms, her cousins acted as conditional enablers. While they did not prescribe a specific academic path, they created the cultural and informational conditions that made certain kinds of academic and personal aspirations possible. By sharing their own experiences of studying subjects like Politics and Sociology, they enabled Lerato to imagine university not

just as a route to a job, but as a space for intellectual exploration and personal autonomy, thereby opening degree options that aligned with who she wanted to become.

Layla's experience further illustrates how cultural support from family can function as an enabling influence without being directive. As discussed in the previous section, her understanding of higher education was shaped by a familial culture that deeply valued learning, intellectual engagement and how university can be a space for personal development. The significance here is how that foundational orientation toward education shaped the way Layla approached her degree selection. Her parents' emphasis on the intrinsic value of education, combined with the absence of financial pressure or narrowly defined expectations, gave Layla the space to make choices aligned with her emerging intellectual identity and personal concerns. This enabled her to approach university as a site of discovery rather than obligation, and to pursue subjects like Philosophy and English, not in defiance of her family's values, but in continuity with them. Layla's internal conversation was supported rather than steered. She had the cultural and structural resources and familial trust to reflexively carve out her own path, grounded in a shared belief in the transformative potential of education.

This combination of financial security and cultural emphasis on education allowed Layla to pursue a degree that aligned with both her interests and her identity. Her reflexive deliberation was marked by a sense of freedom, shaped within a supportive environment that offered resources without coercion.

Lerato and Layla's experiences have shown how families can function not only as sources of constraint but also as conditional enablers through offering emotional, cultural, and informational resources that shape students' degree choices in non-prescriptive ways. For Lerato and Layla, the absence of rigid expectations created space for reflexive engagement with education as a site of personal growth and intellectual exploration. Their internal conversations were shaped within enabling environments that supported rather than directed their decision-making, giving them space to consider their personal projects and aligning their decisions with who they are. Furthermore, it illustrates how agency is supported when students have access to narratives and resources that align with their sense of identity, are given the structural, and cultural, space to choose freely, and are trusted to make decisions that align with their personal concerns. Degree choice, in these instances, became less about compliance and more about self-realisation within shared educational values.

5.2.2.3 Reflexive Navigation across a Spectrum of Influence

These cases illustrate that family influence does not fall neatly into ‘supportive’ or ‘restrictive’ categories. Rather, families act as cultural systems that students navigate reflexively, sometimes resisting, sometimes adapting, and sometimes aligning. Students like Nyasha and Steve adjusted their aspirations to fit familial expectations, while others like Lerato and Layla found ways to develop personal identities within enabling family framework. In all cases, family influence was mediated through internal conversations in which participants evaluated their values, responsibilities, and options.

Ultimately, students’ degree choices cannot be understood outside the familial and cultural contexts in which they were made. Whether as constraint or conditional support, family played a central role in conditioning how students perceived their options, framed their aspirations, and interpreted success. Archer’s framework offers insight into how these cultural influences shaped, not determined, participants’ agency. Through reflexive deliberation, students either aligned with or adapted their families’ values, translating them into personal projects that felt viable, valuable, and socially legitimate.

5.2.3 School as a Structuring Condition

School played a central role in shaping what participants saw as possible for their futures, either broadening or limiting their sense of available academic and career paths. As institutional settings, schools functioned both structurally and culturally to condition how students thought about their futures: what kinds of careers seemed feasible, desirable, or even accessible. Differences in how students were able to choose their subjects, extracurricular activities, and the presence or absence of career guidance contributed significantly to shaping the internal conversations through which participants reflexively navigated their degree choices.

For students like Katlego, school served as an enabling structure that expanded her understanding of the world and what was possible. Attending a well-resourced girls’ high school with extracurricular programmes, Katlego was introduced to fields such as international relations and politics through Model UN Debating and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) Youth Programme:

It influenced my idea to study a politics degree ... Model UN Debating has a lot of research ... I got in their youth programme, so it just exposed me to a lot of things at a girls’ high school (Katlego).

Her school environment acted as both a structural and cultural enabler. Exposure to political discourse, global issues, and public speaking not only sparked Katlego's interest but also gave her the tools to imagine herself within that world. These opportunities made politics feel not just intellectually stimulating but socially relevant. She could see how pursuing a Politics degree could potentially connect to real-world issues and how she might contribute meaningfully through it. The school's investment in co-curricular development thus broadened her idea of imaginable futures. Through participating, these possibilities became grounded in real-world exposure and practical insight into how political knowledge could be applied beyond the classroom.

In contrast, Liya's experience illustrates how an absence of structured exposure or career guidance can constrain, or narrow, what possibilities for the future exists. Attending a school with minimal guidance regarding the future, Liya found that her knowledge of potential careers was shaped more by media representations than institutional direction.

In high school ... you don't get career guidance, so the only careers you know about is you're a nurse, you're a lawyer ... I didn't know much about anything else (Liya).

Without formal pathways into career exploration, Liya's internal conversation was conditioned by what she saw in her community or on television. The limited institutional support became a form of structural constraint, directing her toward familiar professions simply because alternatives were not made visible. This reflects how unequal access to resources in schools shapes not just what students can do in terms of their academics but what futures they can envision as possible.

Nyasha's experience illustrates how structural conditioning can shape degree choices through the interplay of curricular design and cultural, familial, and broader societal expectations. In her Zimbabwean high school, students entering their final years (commonly referred to as A-Levels) were streamed into specialised subject areas such as Sciences, Commerce, or Humanities, based on their prior academic performance. These streams, intended to narrow academic focus in preparation for university, often came with little to no career guidance. Once placed, students found themselves on predefined academic tracks that implicitly signalled which degrees were seen as appropriate. Assigned to the Humanities stream, Nyasha drew on both school-based cultural values and her family's views to internalise a narrow pathway that Humanities naturally led to Law.

There wasn't ... career advice from the institutions I have been in ... if you do Humanities, obviously the ... degree is Law, and at the time it made sense to me (Nyasha).

This alignment between subject stream and career trajectory became the context within which Nyasha's internal conversation unfolded. Rather than weighing multiple academic futures against her developing interests or long-term aspirations, her reflexive deliberation was conditioned by the cultural and structural cues that had already narrowed the field of possibility. Law did not necessarily emerge from aligning her personal concerns with legal reasoning or justice but because it was the only destination that felt recognisable, validated both by school norms and family discourse. In this way, her agency was exercised within constrained structural and cultural conditions, where the plausible and the desirable had already been partially framed as she deliberated on her way forward.

For Phumi, academic performance rather than institutional streaming became the key structuring factor. Although she initially considered pursuing Science, her strong results in History shaped her self-perception and ultimately guided her toward the Humanities.

Maybe [History] is my passion ... I did really well in it so ... I'm going to go into the Humanities and I'm pretty happy here (Phumi).

In the absence of structured career counselling or institutional guidance, Phumi relied on her experience within what Archer (2003) refers to as the practical order, i.e., the domain of everyday interactions, performances, and achievements. Within this domain, emotional commentaries such as pride in her results, satisfaction from mastering the subject, and encouragement from teachers or peers acted as cues in her internal conversation. These affective responses were not superficial reactions but central to how she interpreted her potential and imagined her academic future. Her success in History became a concrete signal that this subject suited her strengths and could form the basis of a meaningful academic path, leading her to infer that this was the right path for her. In this way, Phumi's agency was reflexively exercised through an emotional commentary based on her academic performance. She navigated her choices by considering her academic achievements as a significant part of her deliberation process.

Across these accounts, schools emerge as powerful structuring agents, not only in terms of formal curricula, but through the opportunities they do or do not provide for students to imagine different futures. The availability of extracurricular activities, career guidance, and guided

subject choice shaped whether students' aspirations were expanded, redirected, or constrained. Within Archer's (2000) framework, the internal conversation through which agency is exercised is always situated within conditions that enable some futures to be considered while rendering others invisible or impossible. In this context, the unequal structure and culture of schooling played a key role in shaping how participants reflexively navigated degree choices, not only based on what they wanted to do, but based on what they had come to see as possible, legitimate, or attainable.

5.3 The Value of Knowledge: Personal, Social and Political Motivations

While many participants approached their degree choices as a means of ensuring economic stability or meeting family expectations, others articulated deeper motivations tied to knowledge itself. For these students, higher education was not only perceived as economically necessary; it was also intellectual, moral, and political. Their narratives reveal how personal histories, community contexts, and encounters with challenging or thought-provoking ideas and experiences converged to shape how they reflexively engaged with what knowledge could offer and what knowledge would align with their personal projects. These choices were not simply about career outcomes but were part of an ongoing process of identity formation, through which students imagined the kinds of people they could become and the roles they might play in shaping the world around them.

5.3.1 Knowledge as Identity Work and Social Contribution

For some participants, lived experience sparked a desire to pursue knowledge in order to understand, repair, or make visible social gaps they had personally encountered. Their degree choices were motivated by more than individual curiosity. They were anchored in moral concerns and the pursuit of relational goods. Rumi, for example, spoke of how her mother's late diagnosis of bipolar disorder influenced her desire to understand mental health.

It was my mother's condition, ja. She wanted to do psychiatric nursing ... and she was just diagnosed with it ... So, I'm like okay, perhaps this is what I could do (Rumi).

For Rumi, knowledge acquisition was tied to a personal imperative, an ethical response to a gap she observed both at home and in the cultural narratives of her community that stigmatise mental illness.

Where I live, this thing of mental health is not something people talk about, or think is real. They just think you sad and will pray for you or tell you to go to church (Rumi).

Her community's misconceptions about mental health served as a form of cultural constraint for Rumi, but also sparked a search for understanding. Rumi's reflexive deliberation moved toward alignment between her personal identity and a role she hoped to play for others — the imagined future version of herself, someone who could understand, explain, and possibly intervene in this area that lacked the necessary support.

Liya described a similar motivation: watching her mother navigate legal vulnerability at work made the absence of accessible legal knowledge painfully visible. Her decision to study Law was shaped not by abstract interest in legal systems, but by a drive to protect and advocate for people like her mother.

There was no one to help her. And I thought — there should be people who understand how these things work, but also who understand our lives (Liya).

Here, Law was not just a degree — it was a form of intervention. For both Rumi and Liya, their internal conversations were shaped by an awareness of absence: the absence of professionals who understood their realities, the absence of language to make sense of personal experiences, and the absence of institutional protection. Their degree choices were a response to these absences, reflecting ultimate concerns rooted in responsibility, justice, and care.

Dimpho's path into the humanities exemplifies what Archer (2000) terms meta-reflexivity, a mode of agency marked by sustained self-questioning and critique of social norms and structures. Growing up without her biological father, Dimpho began to interrogate the assumptions underpinning conventional definitions of family and relatedness.

It was just sort of intriguing to say it is just because we share blood does that mean we're family? So, for me growing up my grand dad was the father figure in my life and also my uncle ... And I questioned the fact that, so is it because my biological father just because we shared the same DNA (Dimpho).

Her internal conversation was not only about personal identity but also about the social meanings attached to roles and relationships. What began as an identity-relevant concern rooted in Dimpho's lived experience, i.e., *what is a father?* expanded into a broader sociological inquiry, i.e., *how do we construct family, and whose definitions count?* Her exposure to concepts like 'sperm donor' in school life sciences classes, she explained in her narrative,

provided the language and conceptual tools that enabled her to explore these questions more rigorously. In this interplay between personal experience and structural access to knowledge, the conditions were created for a deeper reflexive engagement.

Dimpho's decision to pursue the humanities was thus not driven by immediate career outcomes but by a desire to understand and question the frameworks that had shaped her life. For her, knowledge was a means of social and personal interpretation, a way to investigate identity, belonging, and the wider cultural order. Through a meta-reflexive orientation, she aligned her academic trajectory with a deeper project of critical inquiry, one that foregrounded meaning over marketability.

5.3.2 Knowledge as Political Awakening

For some participants, academic interests were shaped not by comfort but by friction; by the sense of alienation, discomfort, or constraint within their schooling environments. These experiences catalysed a desire to question dominant norms and pursue knowledge as a form of critical engagement. Layla's narrative exemplifies this. As a coloured girl in a predominantly white, upper-class, STEM-oriented private school, she found herself simultaneously structurally enabled while encountering a sense of cultural dissonance. Her access to quality education came bundled with an environment that foregrounded narrow definitions of excellence and success, often in ways that rendered her own experience invisible.

I was like a coloured girl in a very white, strict, upper-class private school ... So, I think that being in that environment forces you to question things (Layla).

Layla's internal conversation was shaped by a persistent sense of emotional unease. She experienced what could be described as affective dissonance — an intense, felt discomfort with her school environment — even before she had the language to explain why. Her reaction was visceral and unresolved, signalling that something about the values and norms around her did not sit right.

I was in such a constrained environment. I was very, very angry. Ja, and so I had a lot of just like unresolved upsetness (Layla).

These emotional responses functioned as early indicators in her reflexive process, prompting her to seek intellectual tools through the humanities that could help her make sense of her experience and articulate the structural inequalities that had a deep, emotional, impact on her.

While the school privileged science and mathematics, Layla gravitated toward the humanities, specifically English and History, because they offered tools for critique, context, and meaning.

I liked the idea of studying more critical thinking, coming from like a STEM-focused school, I was always felt like unbalanced and my favourite subjects in high school were English and History. And one of my English Teachers recommended studying Philosophy to me because he had gone to Rhodes [University] (Layla).

Layla's decision to pursue the humanities was shaped not only by her academic interests, but also by a meta-reflexive stance — a deliberate effort to challenge the dominant value system that had left her feeling like her personal identity was constrained and misaligned. Rather than adapting to the narrow definitions of success upheld by her school environment, she actively sought out intellectual frameworks that would allow her to interrogate them. For Layla, the humanities represented more than just subject matter. They appeared to offer a language and framework through which she might begin to make sense of her discomfort, question the social hierarchies she had experienced, and imagine alternative ways of thinking and being.

In this way, knowledge became a space of critical escape and self-formation, a way for her to transform unresolved anger into purposeful inquiry. Choosing this academic path was not just about aligning with personal interests, but about crafting a self and a worldview that could centre social critique, complexity, and justice.

While Layla's engagement with the humanities emerged through a sense of cultural dissonance and resistance, Dimpho's journey was shaped by early intellectual fascination, a pull toward theory that offered its own form of clarity and direction.

In high school I knew that I loved the writings of Karl Marx ... I loved theory ... and they look very similar. Those are the only people who ever thought to write in theory in the entire world (Dimpho).

Even within the constraints of an under-resourced school, which she described as “the ghetto,” Dimpho encountered Marx and Darwin, and their ideas became points of intellectual anchoring that helped her make sense of her lived experience and the world. Her curiosity about social structures, power, and human behaviour formed the foundation for her degree choice. Her internal conversation was not about employability but about becoming the kind of person who understands the world in new ways.

For Nathi, this alignment between personal interest and academic choice was far more conflicted. While he shared a similar desire for intellectual engagement and social understanding, his internal conversation was marked by competing concerns, i.e., the search for critical knowledge on one hand and the urgent need for financial security on the other.

Similarly to Layla and Dimpho, the pursuit of knowledge was deeply personal for Nathi, rooted in a desire to understand the world and his place within it as a young black man in post-apartheid South Africa. He was drawn to thinkers like Steve Biko, whose work resonated with his lived experience and inspired critical reflection.

It's like ... once you ... and especially if you are into that kind of thing ... Like even to discover that okay, a moving object will be stopped by friction ... it's an interesting discovery but it's not as important as ... understanding my reality as a black person in South Africa. That's something that I'm going to relate to more (Nathi).

This desire to make sense of the social conditions that shaped his life reflects a reflexive orientation toward knowledge as a means of self-understanding and political engagement. In Archer's (2000) terms, it signals the emergence of concerns from the social order, questions about identity, recognition, and agency in a world marked by inequality. Nathi wanted more than technical knowledge; he wanted education that could align with his reality and challenge him to question the structures around him. He sought intellectual spaces where he could not only locate himself in the knowledge but also where his contributions would be valued, where he could, as he notes, "have [his] opinion acknowledged."

However, this pursuit of meaning and critical engagement was in tension with another, more pressing concern: financial stability. Coming from a resource-scarce community, Nathi framed his decision-making within the constraints of the natural order. As he put it:

I mean we won't talk about what makes you happy ... that's not the reality which we face [when] you come from a place where most people lack and do not have ... (Nathi).

His internal conversation was marked by a difficult negotiation between what he described as "what makes you happy" and 'what is needed'. While his interest in the humanities was genuine and grounded in lived experience, he ultimately could not see that interest translating into a viable, financially secure future. The meaning he attached to higher education as a pathway out of poverty, shaped the limits of his deliberation. The practical order, in this case, became a site

of tension — Law represented a credible, respected profession and a clear route to stability. Whereas disciplines grounded in social theory, while intellectually fulfilling, he felt lacked the same economic prospects he needed to align with his ultimate concern of financial stability.

His final decision to pursue a Law degree with Philosophy as a minor reflects a compromise forged through layered conditioning. The ultimate concern that emerged was not the pursuit of understanding for its own sake but ensuring well-being and future security. Still, the inclusion of Philosophy reveals an effort to retain space for intellectual engagement, even if it could not be the dominant pathway, in alignment with his personal identity.

Nathi's story highlights the complex interplay between the natural, social, and practical orders, and how concerns arising from each can enter into tension. His desire to engage critically with the world, to make sense of race, power, and identity, was a deeply social concern, shaped by his lived experience as a black South African. Like Layla, he was drawn to knowledge as a tool for understanding the structural and cultural conditions of inequality. However, unlike Layla, whose financial security created the conditions to prioritise intellectual curiosity, Nathi's internal conversation was constrained by the demands of the natural order, his need for economic stability, and the weight of expectation to secure a different life financially.

The comparison between Layla and Nathi reveals how structural positioning conditions the terms of deliberation. While both students recognised the personal transformative potential of knowledge, their ability to act on that recognition was uneven. For Nathi, the question was not whether critical inquiry mattered — it clearly did — but whether it was feasible to prioritise in a context where financial precarity narrowed the scope of imaginable futures.

His internal struggle thus exemplifies a reflexive negotiation between competing ultimate concerns: one anchored in the aspiration for critical engagement, the other in the practical imperative to achieve economic security. His final decision to pursue Law with Philosophy as a minor was not a rejection of critical knowledge but a strategic reordering of priorities under constraint. It was a choice shaped as much by who he wanted to become as by what he believed was possible.

Across these narratives, the pursuit of knowledge emerged not simply as a route to professional qualification, but as a space for self-definition and social orientation. Whether motivated by personal experience, political awareness, or a search for meaning, students used their degree choices to navigate fundamental questions about who they were and what kind of contribution

they hoped to make. Reflexive deliberation was not limited to weighing career outcomes, but involved grappling with the tensions between personal interests, structural constraints, and culturally embedded visions of success. For some, like Layla and Dimpho, education offered a space for critical exploration and self-formation. For others, like Nathi, these aspirations had to be weighed against urgent material concerns. What unites these accounts is the recognition that knowledge held moral and existential significance, students were not only planning careers; they were interested in furthering their understanding of their identity.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how students' degree choices were the result of complex, reflexively navigated deliberations shaped by their structural positioning and cultural conditioning. For many, the decision of what to study was inseparable from the social worlds they inhabited — worlds marked by financial precarity, strong familial obligations, uneven access to information, and differentiated schooling experiences.

The narratives showed how economic insecurity and familial responsibility shaped the degree as a symbol of security, often pushing students toward fields like Law, Education, or Psychology. These decisions were not void of interest or ambition; they reflected a desire to secure both individual and collective futures. Students' aspirations were formed through ultimate concerns grounded in care, responsibility, and recognition — values cultivated within their communities and families. At the same time, these concerns were constrained or enabled by cultural expectations, school structures, and access to information, which collectively conditioned what appeared possible, desirable, or valid.

Family emerged as a powerful cultural force, sometimes constraining the range of acceptable choices, and other times enabling reflexive space for negotiation and exploration. Schools functioned as structuring agents, shaping the degree to which students could imagine diverse futures. For some, schools expanded their horizons through offering exposure and opportunity. For others, subject choices and limited guidance narrowed the field possibility. Still, across these contexts, participants demonstrated reflexive agency, meaning-making, compromising, and, where possible, asserting their own personal projects.

Many students pursued degrees not only as a pathway to economic mobility, but as a means to contribute to their communities, explore personal questions, or challenge social norms. Their narratives revealed that knowledge itself held meaning — it was a way to intervene in the

world, to become someone different, and to do so with purpose. Degree choice thus became an act of self-positioning, where who they were and who they hoped to become were intimately bound.

Underlying these varied deliberations was a shared understanding of higher education as a site of transformation: social, economic, and personal. Students' interpretations of what a degree could do were closely tied to their ultimate concerns, which emerged from the interplay between their lived realities and imagined futures. In this way, the meaning they ascribed to higher education was not abstract but anchored in deeply felt needs — to care for family, gain recognition, shift inherited trajectories, or make sense of the world. These meanings shaped the very terms of their internal conversations, what was seen as worth pursuing, what counted as success, and what kind of self might be made possible through study. As a result, their degree choices cannot be understood as isolated decisions, but as reflexive responses to layered concerns about survival, significance, and self-realisation.

This chapter provides the foundation for the next chapter, which turns from the question of *why* students chose their degrees to *what happened* in their degrees. In the following chapter, I explore how participation in the humanities conditioned shifts in students' personal identities.

Chapter 6: From Knowing to Becoming

Personal Transformation through the Humanities

In this chapter, I examine how participants experienced shifts in identity as they progressed through their undergraduate degrees, focusing on the reflexive processes through which these shifts were negotiated. While in the previous chapter I explored students' decisions to enter higher education, tracing the structural and cultural mechanisms that shaped their choices, in this chapter I turn to their experiences within the university. I explore how and why students began to re-evaluate who they were, what mattered to them, and who they aspired to become.

Students entered the university with personal identities shaped by a mix of conditions including economic insecurity, aspirations for social mobility, and desires for intellectual growth. Drawing on Archer's (2003) concept of ultimate concerns, I show how these guiding priorities were not fixed. As students engaged with the content, practices, and discourses of the humanities, they questioned these concerns through reflexivity. In this chapter, I trace the interplay between the structural and cultural conditions of the degree and the personal powers of reflexivity and agency. Reflexivity serves as the mechanism through which students made sense of their experiences, questioned inherited assumptions, and reshaped aspects of their identities.

Through their internal conversations, participants questioned their understandings of education, success, and self-worth. For many, the humanities curriculum offered new ways of thinking about the self in relation to others and the world. The degree experience thus acted as a catalyst for identity work. However, change was not automatic. Students interpreted and responded to these encounters in ways shaped by their pre-existing concerns, cultural backgrounds, and emerging commitments.

This chapter is organised into three sections. The first examines how disciplinary discourse in the humanities exposed students to new ways of thinking, which shaped how they understood themselves and the world around them. The second explores how peer discussions and dialogic engagement created space for students to test, reflect on, and sometimes revise their perspectives and sense of self. The third examines the process of unlearning, tracing the emotional and intellectual effort involved as students questioned inherited beliefs and redefined what they valued and who they were becoming.

Across these sections, I demonstrate that identity shifts did not simply result from participation in university. Rather, they emerged through ongoing, reflexive engagement with key elements of the degree experience, including disciplinary content, peer interaction, and institutional culture. These shifts reflect the dynamic nature of identity formation in a transforming university context where students encountered both constraint and possibilities and reveal how they deliberate on these conditions when considering who they are and what they want to do in the future.

6.1 The Humanities as Conditioning Context for Identity Formation

In the previous chapter, I showed that most of my research participants entered higher education with practical concerns, including aspirations for financial stability, social mobility, and personal independence. While these motives were often shaped by economic realities and familial obligations, they also reflected deeper identity concerns — the desire to become someone different, imagine alternative futures, or contribute meaningfully to others' lives. However, at the beginning of their degrees, participants encountered a disjuncture between these expectations, their ultimate concerns, and what the humanities disciplines at Rhodes University initially appeared to offer. Many students had chosen to pursue a humanities degree based on their personal circumstances and under the influence of broader cultural narratives that positioned university education as inherently valuable. For many of them, there was an underlying assumption that all degrees would offer practical outcomes. However, they felt the humanities degree lacked a clearly articulated connection to practical or professional pathways, which made it difficult for students to locate its purpose within their internal conversations or to align it with their ultimate concerns.

This initial mismatch between students' expectations and the degree's cultural content created a tension that many struggled to resolve in the early stages of their studies. While the degree did not offer immediate practical utility in the ways they had anticipated, it introduced students to a set of discursive and normative commitments — the cultural content of the humanities — that began to challenge inherited assumptions and reshape their internal conversations. These early encounters were not neutral. They marked a shift in students' positioning within a new discursive environment, prompting internal questions about meaning, purpose, and identity. It was within this space of uncertainty and interpretive struggle that students' internal conversations began to shift. The following section explores how disciplinary discourse functioned not only as a site of dissonance but also as a causal mechanism that shaped the focus

and content of reflexive deliberation. At times, this discourse aligned with students' personal projects. In other instances, it set in motion a process of identity elaboration, prompting students to reconsider their concerns and revise their personal trajectories

6.1.1 Disruption of Expectations and Early Reflexive Tensions

Many participants entered university with practical concerns shaped by economic instability, responsibilities toward their families, and aspirations for upward social mobility. For many of the black student participants, in particular, personal identity and ultimate concerns were deeply intertwined with their commitment to their families and communities. The expectation to support parents and siblings through Black Tax formed a central part of their understanding of self, responsibility, and success. These commitments were further underpinned by cultural values such as Ubuntu, which emphasise relationality, collective wellbeing, and the imperative to *be* through and for others. As discussed in the previous chapter, such concerns were embedded in participants' personal identities and expressed as ultimate concerns (Archer, 2003) — the deeply held priorities that orient action and shape internal deliberation. The decision to pursue higher education was made within this practical and cultural context, often under the assumption that any university degree would yield tangible, professional outcomes that could be translated into familial upliftment.

However, the initial experience of the humanities disrupted these expectations. Students felt that the degree lacked a clear articulation of its practical utility and, in the initial stages of their degree, students struggled to situate its content within their internal conversations. The conditioning context shaped by the discursive culture, the norms, and intellectual practices of the humanities failed to align with participants' immediate concerns, producing a sense of reflexive dissonance as they struggled to reconcile their expectations with what the degree appeared to offer. Students found themselves in a space where the degree's structure and discourse offered no obvious support for their personal projects.

Sibu captured this misalignment:

This is too open-ended and very all over the place for me. I need something for sure because I need to make money, I need to take care of my siblings (Sibu).

Her words reflect not just confusion, but a sense of urgency — her internal conversation was dominated by a responsibility to provide care and achieve economic stability, commitments that the degree did not appear to help fulfil. Similarly, Steve indicated the following.

It is going to positively impact you in the sense that you are going to be very aware of the world, but it's not going to be able to help in your actual making money kind of thing (Steve).

These two narratives illustrate an early reflexive tension that was shared by many participants, i.e., students were beginning to appraise the degree not only in terms of its content but in relation to their concerns and imagined futures. These tensions mark the early stages of identity work, a moment in the agential morphogenetic process when the cultural and structural conditioning of the degree interacts with existing personal projects, and students need to begin deliberating on whether, and how, their concerns remain viable.

Although the initial misalignment between students' expectations and the structure of the degree was unsettling, it prompted more sustained and critical internal reflection. As students encountered unfamiliar ideas and interpretive frameworks, many began to question the assumptions that had previously guided their decisions. This reflexive engagement moved beyond resolving immediate discomfort, prompting some to re-examine their personal projects, reconsider the sources of their commitments, and reflect on the kind of lives they wished to lead. The following section explores how the discursive content of the humanities acted as a cultural conditioning mechanism, shaping these evolving internal conversations and contributing to the reconfiguration of students' personal identities.

6.1.2 Disciplinary Discourse and the Reconfiguration of Personal Identity

As students progressed through their degrees, the knowledge, interpretive frameworks, and discursive practices of the humanities began to play a more prominent role in shaping their internal conversations. These disciplinary discourses introduced new ways of thinking about the self, society, and the world, often in tension with earlier beliefs and assumptions. For many, this marked a turning point in the development of personal identity. No longer were they simply responding to external expectations. Instead, they began to engage reflexively with new ideas that challenged, affirmed, or extended their ultimate concerns.

Discourse refers to the systems of language, meaning, and practice through which individuals make sense of the world and their place in it (Gee, 1996). It encompasses not only the words that people use but also the values, assumptions, and norms embedded in those ways of speaking, thinking, and knowing. Scholars have shown that discourse plays a fundamental role in shaping identity, as it provides the conceptual and cultural frameworks through which people interpret their experiences and relate to others (Gee, 1996; Hymes, 1996; Norton, 2000; Miller,

2003; McKenna, 2004). As Gee (1996) argues, discourse functions as a normative system that guides how individuals understand the world and themselves. It is through discourse that knowledge is constructed, social relationships are mediated, and roles are defined.

Importantly, discourses are not neutral or singular. Individuals are exposed to multiple and often competing discursive systems of discourses throughout their lives, shaped by family, schooling, peer groups, and socio-economic environments. These systems of meaning carry causal powers; they shape what individuals come to value, how they interpret their experiences, and what they imagine to be possible. From a realist perspective, however, such conditioning is not deterministic. As Archer (2003, 2007) argues, cultural conditioning is operational when it is engaged reflexively by an individual. Thus, discourse influences identity only when it is reflexively engaged, i.e., when individuals draw it into their internal conversations and evaluate it in relation to their personal histories, aspirations, and ultimate concerns. In this study, the disciplinary discourses of the humanities operated not as imposed frameworks but as cultural mechanisms that entered into dynamic interaction with students' reflexivity. In doing so, they created the conditions for personal re-evaluation and identity elaboration. This is reflected in Nathi's explanation below.

But I can engage with it and then, you know, sort of apply it to my own life to make me a better person (Nathi).

For Nathi, disciplinary knowledge was not encountered passively but taken up as a resource for self-development. His experience is an example of one that emerged throughout the narratives, showing how students reflexively interpreted and integrated new ideas into their identity. Rather than simply responding to the degree's content, Nathi reworked it in relation to his own concerns, a process that reflects reflexive deliberation shaping the elaboration of personal identity.

Layla offered a similarly layered reflection.

Philosophy has a reputation of impracticality, which I totally get, but I've seen it as hugely practical — on a personal level, ja. But also, you tend to see it everywhere, like in the views that people hold when they're writing in newspapers or the arguments that people make for things. So, I think the value it has for me is partially impacting other things and being able to impact myself (Layla).

Layla's account highlights how disciplinary discourse operated on multiple levels, broadening her understanding of the social world while also provoking internal self-examination. Her

reflection illustrates the dual conditioning potential of humanities knowledge as both outwardly expansive and inwardly transformative.

Together, these reflections illustrate how students engaged in reflexive processes of identity elaboration, not necessarily by discarding their ultimate concerns, but by reworking how those concerns were understood and pursued within the university context. For some, like Layla, the humanities aligned with long-standing commitments. As discussed in the previous chapter, her ultimate concern centred on developing a critical understanding of the social world. For her, Philosophy's reputation for impracticality was less important than its capacity to expand her perspective and offer meaningful tools for social analysis, a view she actively reaffirmed through her engagement with disciplinary discourse.

For some participants, the degree did not necessarily resolve the tension between personal interests and external expectations, but it offered moments of affirmation that shaped how they related to themselves. Nathi, for example, expressed a desire to engage with ideas that could help him make sense of his experience as a black man in South Africa. Although his decision-making remained influenced by the pressure to pursue something more economically stable due to his economic circumstances, he still found value in the personal insights the humanities afforded him. The excerpt above from Nathi's narrative does not signal a reorientation of his ultimate concerns, but it does show how students could draw meaning from the curriculum even when it did not align directly with their immediate goals. In these cases, disciplinary knowledge became a resource for self-affirmation and enabled opportunities for personal transformation, supporting identity development in subtle but significant ways through reflexive engagement.

This complex negotiation between personal interest, cultural expectation, and structural constraint was also evident in the experiences of Nyasha and Rumi, both Zimbabwean students whose families placed strong emphasis on professional degrees. Rumi, for instance, had considered nursing, a path aligned with her desire to address the needs she had witnessed in her community. However, it was through Sociology that she encountered a discursive framework, and through the discourse that enabled her to make sense of her mother's mental health struggles in broader social terms.

Sociology helped me see how we're all shaped by the world around us, not just by what's happening in our heads (Rumi).

Rather than abandoning her original concerns, Rumi's internal conversation shifted in scope. Through reflexive engagement with the discourse of Sociology, she reinterpreted what it meant to care for others, reframing social development not as something to be delivered individually (as in nursing) but as something to be understood structurally and collectively.

Nyasha had initially enrolled in Law, a discipline highly valued by her family and reinforced by the cultural narratives of her school environment. Her encounter with Political Studies, though, initiated a different kind of internal reappraisal. The degree did not immediately resolve her practical concerns, but it enabled a critical interrogation of inherited assumptions about what counts as valuable or impactful work.

In high school, I never thought critically about the systems around me. But then, studying politics at university, I started questioning so much about how power works and how decisions impact communities. It felt more practical to me because it addressed real-world problems in ways law couldn't (Nyasha).

For both Rumi and Nyasha, disciplinary discourse did not function as a static or prescriptive force. Instead, it acted as a cultural mechanism that mediated their reflexive deliberations, enabling them to reinterpret both the content and direction of their personal projects. These were moments of identity elaboration (Archer, 2003), in which students reworked the meaning of their ultimate concerns and recalibrated their sense of self in relation to the world. The humanities made this possible by introducing alternative interpretive frameworks, new ways of understanding the self, society, and one's role within it. These frameworks offered students new ways of thinking and valuing, providing them with the conceptual tools to make sense of their experiences and the language to reflect on what mattered. They enabled students to reassess their priorities and reflect on their identities in ways that aligned with their evolving concerns.

The experiences of Layla, Nathi, Rumi, and Nyasha illustrate the diverse ways in which students reflexively engaged with the discursive content of the humanities. While for some this meant reaffirming existing concerns through the language and critical tools provided by their disciplines, for others it involved a more substantive re-evaluation of personal priorities and aspirations. These narratives reflect a shared process of reflexive negotiation, in which disciplinary knowledge operated as a cultural mechanism, shaping and being shaped by students' internal conversation. Their reflections highlight how identity elaboration did not arise from exposure to discourse alone, but from the dynamic interplay between the cultural conditioning of the degree and the reflexive agency of individuals actively rethinking who they

were and what they valued. In this way, the humanities disciplines contributed to shifts in personal identity, not by offering fixed answers, but by expanding the interpretive possibilities through which students could reconstruct their concerns and reimagine their futures.

6.1.3 Claiming Social Identity through Multidisciplinary Learning

While the previous sections focused on students' reflexive engagement with disciplinary knowledge in shaping personal identity, this section turns to how participants began to articulate and claim their social identities, that is, the ways they located themselves within broader social groups, causes, and communities. For several students, the process of identity formation did not remain confined to private self-understanding. Instead, it extended outward, as they began to identify with collective narratives and shared struggles that were introduced, interrogated, and validated through multidisciplinary study.

Archer (2000, 2003) draws a distinction between personal identity, shaped by one's ultimate concerns and biographical history, and social identity, formed through identification with roles, positions, or group affiliations within the social order. Importantly, Archer (2000) argues that social identities are only fully integrated into a person's sense of self when they are reflexively accepted as meaningful and aligned with their personal projects. In this sense, social identity is not simply assigned or absorbed; it is actively negotiated and selectively taken up when it aligns with the individual's personal identity.

For many participants, this negotiation was made possible through the multidisciplinary structure of the humanities. The opportunity to draw connections across subjects, such as Politics, Philosophy, Sociology, and literature, enabled students to encounter multiple, intersecting discourses that spoke to issues of race, gender, inequality, and justice. In doing so, students were not only exposed to frameworks that described the social world, but also invited to see themselves as participants within it. This multidisciplinary exposure created space for students to reflexively position themselves in relation to broader political and ethical communities, and in some cases to claim new social identities that had previously felt inaccessible or undefined.

Students' identification with feminism, anti-racism, or social justice work was not a matter of adopting ready-made labels. Rather, it involved an unfolding process of reflexive alignment, where certain discourses gained personal significance and became integrated into their broader identity projects. In this way, multidisciplinary learning functioned as both an intellectual and

affective resource for constructing meaningful social identities, grounded in personal experience but directed toward shared forms of understanding and collective belonging.

The students' reflections reveal how multidisciplinary learning in the humanities did more than introduce diverse content; it created the conditions for a richer, more expansive reflexive engagement with the social world. For Ontha, the metaphor of the humanities as a multifaceted gemstone captures this sense of intellectual and personal unfolding.

I often look at the humanities division like a gemstone. You know how a gemstone is multifaceted with different angles. You look at here is the humanities department where you are just standing there, you just see one building, one door, so tiny. But when you go in there you realise it is like a gemstone with all these different angles (Ontha).

This imagery highlights how the multidisciplinary nature of the degree invited a move from narrow, pre-university understandings of knowledge to a more complex, layered appreciation of self and society. Through reflexive engagement, what appeared singular from the outside became a network of interconnected perspectives that allowed for deeper personal exploration and social positioning.

Ontha further explains how this exposure to intersecting disciplinary discourses, particularly around feminism, enabled her to articulate a social identity that had previously been less defined:

But when you come to Rhodes [University] ... humanities degrees have this thing of intersectionality or this interconnectedness ... I saw that through my view on subjects — as much as you're learning activism or feminism from a political side, you understand feminism from a sociological perspective, and I think me being exposed to such subjects also helped me be very well versed in myself to articulate and say "I am a feminist" (Ontha).

Her account illustrates how multidisciplinary learning provided not just knowledge, but the conceptual and discursive resources through which students could reflexively develop more coherent identities. For Ontha, this was not merely a process of absorbing content but of identity elaboration, a shift in her internal conversation through which previously unarticulated beliefs and values were brought into focus and given clearer expression. Her claim to a feminist identity emerged as a product of reflexive engagement; shaped by her evolving concerns, legitimated through exposure to critical frameworks, and integrated into her personal project.

This kind of identity work was not only intellectual, but also emotionally challenging and morally evaluative, requiring students to confront discomfort, reassess deeply held beliefs, and consider their responsibilities toward others. It required students to revisit what they had previously taken for granted, challenge inherited norms, and come to terms with alternative ways of understanding self and society. As Archer (2000, 2003) emphasises, social identities are only truly incorporated when they are reflexively endorsed, when they resonate with an individual's concerns and become embedded within their ongoing self-narrative. Ontha's articulation of feminism reflects this process, not the passive adoption of a label, but the reflexive alignment of her social identity with a broader moral and conceptual worldview.

Katlego's narrative similarly illustrates how multidisciplinary engagement reshaped her understanding of society and social issues.

I think because we are taught to think of the world in a sociological, humanistic way ... then through like Politics, I could understand what is happening in this African society, and why ... So, it really made me understand issues in different ways, different perspectives ... when you have a microscope you can really zoom into what you're looking at. It gives you more detail as to what's really happening, you know. So, I, that's the part I appreciate about my degree — I wouldn't have been the same in thinking before I got here (Katlego).

Katlego's use of the microscope metaphor suggests both an enhanced capacity for analytical depth and the ability to approach complex issues from different disciplinary angles. The multidisciplinary structure of her degree allowed her to shift between sociological and political lenses, each offering a distinct but complementary way of interpreting the same social realities. Rather than being confined to a single explanatory framework, she developed the reflexive habit of examining issues from multiple vantage points, each sharpening her understanding in a different way. This fluid movement between perspectives fostered a more layered, critical engagement with society and her position within it. This is an example of a deepening of reflexive agency, where knowledge was not only absorbed but engaged with and deliberated on to revise her concerns and expand the scope of her personal project. Her narrative reveals identity work that is intellectually adaptive, contextually situated, and grounded in an emerging sense of understanding the complexity of the world.

In these examples, multidisciplinary acted as a catalyst for students to recognise, articulate, and claim social identities that aligned with their evolving self-conceptions. Rather than passively accepting fixed social labels like those they claimed before the degree, participants engaged in identity work, drawing together personal experience, ethical commitment, and

intellectual exploration to reflexively shape what those identities meant to them. The humanities made this possible not by prescribing group identities, but by equipping students with overlapping frameworks of meaning that allowed them to locate themselves more intentionally within collective narratives.

These accounts demonstrate that the humanities, through their multidisciplinary and intersectional orientation, did more than broaden intellectual scope; they opened new possibilities for social self-location. By engaging with overlapping discourses that resonated with their lived realities and ethical commitments, students were able to reflexively consider social identities that felt both personally meaningful and socially grounded. Interdisciplinary learning functioned as a cultural mechanism that extended identity formation beyond the personal, enabling students to claim positions within broader social narratives.

6.1.4 Ambiguity, Structure, and the Challenge of Corporate Identity

Having discussed how the disciplinary discourse enabled students through reflexive engagement to elaborate their personal and social identities, this section shifts focus to a more constrained terrain: the difficulties participants faced in envisioning professional futures. For many participants, the humanities degree fostered deep intellectual and personal development but left them uncertain about how to translate this growth into career possibilities. The degree's structure, often without explicit career pathways or practical orientation, left students struggling to form what Archer (2000) calls a corporate identity — a projected sense of self directed toward roles in the public or professional world.

Archer (2000, 2003) distinguishes between personal identity, the reflexively constructed sense of who one is and what matters to them, and corporate identity, which refers to the roles and positions individuals occupy within social institutions. Personal identity develops through ongoing internal conversations in which individuals interpret and respond to their social contexts, experiences, and ultimate concerns. Although it is conditioned by external factors like family, class, and culture, it is not determined by them. Rather, identity is formed through reflexive engagement with those influences, as illustrated in the previous chapter through how students deliberated on the purpose and value of higher education.

In contrast, corporate identity originates from the external social roles and expectations made available by institutions (e.g., being a student, professional, or employee). However, these roles only become meaningful for individuals when they are reflexively endorsed by the individual

and when they are able to see the alignment with their personal identity and ultimate concerns. Without this alignment, individuals may resist or feel alienated from these roles, struggling to consider how it will allow them to become the future version of themselves they aspire to be.

A coherent corporate identity requires the ability to envision one's future within existing social roles. Archer (2000) explains that the internal conversation involves a discussion between the past, present and ideal future versions of the agent where they reflect on these different parts to consider the decisions they should make. In the context of this study, the previous chapter showed how becoming financially independent and being able to support their families was the ultimate concern for many students when deciding to do a degree and when choosing a degree. Thus, for many students, the degree's structural form limited this possibility, constraining their ultimate concern. Without exposure to applied work, industry linkages, or professional modelling, students found it difficult to connect their learning with 'real-world' roles and their lives beyond the university space. This often conditioned a state of agential morphostasis, where students' identities were not elaborated in this domain because the structural context constrained the conditions to support their ability to conceptualise and develop that aspect of their identity.

Layla's reflection captures the uncertainty and disconnect many felt:

I think that doing a Bachelor of Arts at Rhodes [University] ... I have no idea of what like a corporate world would look like ... I have some idea of what academia would look like ... But I have no idea what any other job would look like ... You love what you're studying but you want to think — when you have this job, when you wake up in the morning, what do you do? (Layla).

Her concern does not stem from a lack of intellectual fulfilment or motivation. As shown in her reflections in the previous chapter, Layla entered university with an ultimate concern centred on developing critical insight and understanding social complexity, a goal she felt the humanities helped her achieve. Her narrative here reveals a new disjuncture. While her intellectual concerns were addressed, she now encounters a different gap — the absence of structural support to help her translate that insight into a viable professional future. This signals a shift in her reflexive deliberation; her internal conversation is now grappling with how to extend her personal project, and ultimate concern, beyond the university, in a context where institutional structures offer little orientation toward non-academic careers. This highlights students' concerns of limited structural scaffolding available for them in attempting to align their elaborated identities with realistic occupational trajectories.

Other participants voiced a similar sense of disconnect. Liya described the profound personal growth she experienced, including emotional resilience and the confidence to navigate difficult relationships, but struggled to see how these personally transformative capacities aligned with the demands of her understanding of the job market.

It's prepared me for so much, like my life ... I'm now able to even confront my mom ... But when I look at job listings ... I just don't know what it is. There's Human Resources so maybe that (Liya).

This disconnect points to a broader issue. While the humanities often provide valuable personal capacities (confidence, critical thinking, empathy), students are left to make sense of how or whether these capacities are recognised or valued in the job market. The inability for students to translate their educational outcomes to professional expectations contributes to feelings of uncertainty surrounding future trajectories, particularly for those whose personal development does not neatly align with predefined occupational roles and who face the responsibilities of Black Tax.

Steve was even more direct in naming the gap between personal development and professional viability.

Yeah, it's a great thing, but I would say don't waste your money getting an undergraduate in anthropology and then think it is going to make a difference in your office life ... It's not going to help in your actual making-money kind of thing (Steve).

His comment reflects a form of instrumental disillusionment and a recognition that the degree cultivated awareness, but not economic mobility. This feeling was echoed by Lerato, who praised the humanities for helping her understand people but expressed uncertainty about its economic value.

Value, it's definitely not on the economic side ... Humanities it's very versatile ... understanding people better is the core of everything ... But if we were to focus more on technical things we would just be robots (Lerato).

Her statement captures a central tension — students valued the humanising qualities of their degree, but these qualities were not clearly translatable into the labour market. The lack of practical anchoring made it difficult to construct a coherent corporate identity, even as students recognised the broader worth of what they had learned.

Nozi voiced concerns about structural barriers beyond the degree itself.

In South Africa, I don't think it's easy for humanities students to get jobs ... people put people they know into the workspace ... I don't think my degree is enough on its own (Nozi).

Her reflection highlights the layered nature of constraint, not only does the degree lack clear professional pathway. For Nozi, the challenge was not just translating knowledge into work but navigating systems that were difficult to access and often shaped by informal networks and hidden expectations. From a Social Realist perspective, this points to a conditioning context in which structural inequality intersects with limited institutional scaffolding, constraining students' capacity to translate their educational gains into future-oriented action and in turn develop their corporate identities.

Importantly, Nozi's narrative also reveals how students recognise the need for personal strategies and relational skills, such as navigating professional networks or making connections, that are not explicitly addressed or developed within the degree. These are part of the broader agential challenge students face, i.e., learning not just *what* to know but *how* to position themselves within constrained opportunity structures. The reflexive process of identity becomes entangled with structural obstacles that cannot be overcome by knowledge or disciplinary discourse alone. Instead, students are left to deliberate on how to pursue their concerns amid limited cultural and institutional resources for action.

These reflections underscore a key tension in the identity formation process. While the humanities offered students the tools for personal insight and social engagement, they often fell short in enabling students to envision futures within professional contexts. The agential morphogenetic potential of the degree was limited in terms of the corporate identity domain. Without structural mechanisms to support the development of corporate identity, students remained caught between personal transformation and professional ambiguity, a condition in which their internal deliberations about the future struggled to translate into concrete plans or possibilities within a social context that offered limited opportunities, guidance, or recognition for the kinds of aspirations and identities they were developing. These constraints did not diminish the value of the degree itself, but highlighted its limitations in meeting students' ultimate concerns, particularly when not supported by institutional mechanisms that connect academic learning to future employment.

6.1.5 Critical Understanding and the Emergence of Empowered Agency

Building on earlier discussions of how participants re-evaluated their concerns social identities and considered their corporate identities, this section focuses on the empowering effects of critical insight. It examines how engagement with humanities disciplinary discourses allowed students to reinterpret their life experiences and adopt a more agentic orientation toward their circumstances. For several participants, the degree not only deepened their self-awareness but fostered a stronger sense of personal agency, anchored in a clearer understanding of the structural and cultural conditions that shaped their lives. This marks a shift from identity confirmation or tension to identity elaboration, where new knowledge enables the reworking of personal projects in ways that are both more informed and more intentional (Archer, 2003, 2007).

This process of agential morphogenesis was often set in motion by a moment of recognition, i.e., disruption of the belief that social hardship was solely the result of personal failure or poor choices. For Sibü, engaging with the humanities discourse allowed her to reframe her experience of poverty as part of a broader socio-political reality rather than a personal or familial failure.

It's like yes, I'm this poor girl from this family but now I see that it's not my fault or my parents', there's all these things that made it harder for us that I'd never thought about before. It made me want to show people what I learnt so they could also understand why things are the way they are ... like it's not just because of them (Sibü.).

This moment represents a significant shift in Sibü's reflexive deliberation. Her internal conversation, previously focused on personal reasons to explain her circumstances, begins to incorporate a level of structural analysis through the discourse. This is an example of identity elaboration, where the individual reinterprets their circumstances in light of newly encountered cultural content. Rather than passively internalising these ideas, Sibü actively reworks them in relation to her personal projects, allowing for a more agentic positioning within her social context. This shift illustrates that personal transformation does not occur through social exposure alone, but through the reflexive evaluation of experience, which mediates between cultural conditioning and emergent personal projects.

For others, this kind of empowerment involved a more introspective form of critical reflexivity. Shae, for example, describes how philosophy enabled her to interrogate the assumptions and biases that shaped her thinking:

Philosophy appeals to the sceptic in me ... I found some of the subjects really helpful for sorting out what my thoughts were, how do I think about something, where do my biases lie, why those biases are important and why they are harmful to me? (Shae.).

This represents a shift from reflexivity as a tool for practical navigation to a deeper, meta-level awareness of the thinking self. For Shae, the curriculum became a generative mechanism for self-interrogation, enabling her to reshape her interpretive lens and, with it, her relationship to the world.

Steve's narrative echoes this broadened awareness.

I started looking at my life really relatively. I realised, okay my view is not the only view ... you are able to engage with the world in a much more self-aware way. And that rewards you so much (Steve).

Steve's reflection illustrates how critical insight enabled a shift from a self-enclosed worldview to a more relational and reflective stance. By recognising the limits of his own perspective, he developed a deeper awareness of difference, complexity, and interconnectedness. This marks a shift in the internal conversation, one that expands its evaluative reach and enhances the individual's capacity for empathy, discernment, and informed judgment. Rather than constraining his agency, this decentring of the self became the basis for a stronger, more responsive form of agency, rooted in greater reflexive depth and attuned to the broader social world.

Similarly, Lerato reflects on how the degree altered her orientation toward difference.

I was, you know how sometimes you don't know something and you're very judgmental towards it — I was that person. But now I'm ... very open-minded ... I consider that okay, people have their different experiences ... they see the world differently compared to how I see the world (Lerato.).

Lerato's comment reflects not just intellectual tolerance but a revised identity orientation; a shift from judgment to openness and from assumed universality to situated understanding. This shift, too, is a product of reflexive engagement with ideas and encounters that challenged her earlier worldview. This reflexive reorientation contributed to the elaboration of a self that was more open, empathetic, and capable of recognising and respecting different ways of being in the world. Lerato's reflection reveals more than an increased intellectual tolerance; it illustrates a shift in personal identity orientation. Through sustained reflexive engagement, she moved from a worldview shaped by unexamined assumptions and judgment to one grounded in

openness and perspectival awareness. This shows a change in the focus and evaluative content of her internal conversation where prior certainties are disrupted and replaced by an ongoing sensitivity to plural ways of knowing and being. This reflexive reorientation contributes to the elaboration of a more inclusive, relational sense of self.

The accounts above illustrate how the humanities functioned not only as a space for critical inquiry, but as a context in which students' reflexive capacities were deepened, enabling them to re-evaluate their concerns and reposition themselves more agentially within their social contexts. Through engagement with the discourse and sustained self-reflection, students reconfigured their internal conversations, moving beyond inherited judgments or self-blame and toward more expansive personal projects grounded in insight and ethical purpose. These were not abstract shifts. They reflected concrete moments of agential morphogenesis, where participants' identities were transformed through the integration of new knowledge into their reflexive frameworks. In this way, the humanities offered more than critique. They enabled the conditions for students to reclaim authorship over their biographies and imagine themselves as capable, knowing agents within a complex and unequal world.

6.1.6. Summary

This section has explored how the humanities degree at Rhodes University operated as a conditioning context that shaped students' internal conversations and contributed to processes of identity formation. While not determining outcomes, the structural and cultural features of the degree, including its multidisciplinary scope, critical discourses and ambiguous relationship to the labour market, functioned as causal mechanisms that influenced how students engaged reflexively with their lives, priorities, and emerging personal projects.

This section offered insight into how early tensions between students' expectations and the degree's epistemic culture prompted new deliberations about purpose and value (6.1.1); how disciplinary discourse provided frameworks for revising personal narratives and reconfiguring concerns (6.1.2); and how multidisciplinary engagement enabled students to articulate and claim social identities that aligned with their evolving commitments (6.1.3). The same cultural richness, however, was accompanied by structural limitations, particularly in preparing students for professional futures, resulting in experiences of misalignment with ultimate concerns and uncertainty about the future (6.1.4). Still, for many, critical engagement through the disciplinary lenses facilitated a re-reading of personal histories and social conditions,

enabling identity elaboration and a repositioning of the self in relation to the broader social world (6.1.5).

Following Archer (2003, 2007), the section has shown that the degree did not impose identities, but rather entered into reflexive interplay with students' existing concerns. The shifts in identity were not automatic outcomes of participation, but emerged through internal conversations in which students interpreted, re-evaluated, and selectively appropriated aspects of the degree. In this way, the humanities acted as both a cultural and structural context for agential morphogenesis, enabling, though not guaranteeing, shifts in the direction and content of students' personal and social identities.

6.2 Dialogic Learning and Identity Formation

This section explores how dialogic engagement, particularly through tutorials, lectures, and informal conversations with peers, functioned as structural and cultural mechanisms within the degree that conditioned students' internal conversations and contributed to shifts in identity. While disciplinary content provided new frameworks of meaning, it was often through collaborative learning spaces that students were able to interrogate, personalise, and integrate these ideas into their developing sense of self. These discussion-based environments acted as enabling contexts for reflexive engagement, allowing students to deliberate on inherited assumptions, engage with new perspectives, and elaborate personal projects in response to what they were learning. These spaces were not neutral; they enabled or constrained identity development depending on how they intersected with students' concerns, confidence, and social positioning.

6.2.1 Enablements and Constraints of the Tutorial Space

The process of learning in the humanities often unfolded through dialogic peer interactions, with tutorials providing key spaces for personal and transformative engagement. Tutorials offered students a more intimate, student-centred context for engagement, often compensating for the limitations of large lecture-based formats. Peer discussions, especially within structured tutoring programmes, enabled a form of collaborative meaning-making that was both socially and intellectually generative (Clarence, 2018; Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Layton, 2013). In contrast to traditional models of didactic instruction, peer tutoring positioned senior students not as knowledge authorities, but as facilitators of critical engagement, creating space for mutual reflection, questioning, and shared interpretation (Clarence, 2018). This was

particularly significant in the context of expanding student diversity, where varied backgrounds and social positions required dialogic, inclusive learning environments (Clarence, 2018).

Students' narratives indicated that peer learning spaces, particularly tutorials, operated as forms of academic support and important sites of reflexive engagement. As students tested ideas, posed questions, and responded to differing perspectives, they began to interrogate ingrained assumptions and engage with disciplinary discourse in ways that shaped their internal conversations (Archer, 2003). This aligns with a body of South African research which highlights tutorials as dialogic learning spaces where students engage not only with course content but also with deeper processes of meaning-making and personal relevance (Clarence, 2016; Clarence, 2018; Faroa, 2017; Lekota, 2024; Maphalala & Mpofu, 2020; Hassan, 2022; Underhill & McDonald, 2010).

When structured with clear pedagogical intent, tutorials enable students to personalise abstract ideas by connecting them to their own social and cultural contexts. This process deepens understanding and renders disciplinary knowledge more relevant and accessible, encouraging students to reinterpret prior assumptions through engagement with new frameworks (Hassan, 2022; Maphalala & Mpofu, 2020). Rather than focusing on the passive transmission of knowledge, well-facilitated tutorials centre participatory and inclusive learning. Clarence (2018) demonstrates that dialogic facilitation in which students are encouraged to co-construct meaning supports collaboration, invites difference, and promotes critical reflection. This is especially significant in the humanities, where knowledge is contested and interpretation central to learning (Nussbaum, 2010).

Tutorials as dialogic spaces enable conditions where students critically engage with propositional knowledge, i.e., knowledge that takes the form of claims, concepts, or theoretical frameworks which can be questioned, analysed, and discussed (Archer, 2007). By thinking with, against, and beyond the material, students are encouraged to interrogate the claims being made as well as their own assumptions and prior understandings. When this process is sustained, it has the potential to enable reflexive thinking that contributes to identity development, as students begin to locate themselves in relation to broader frameworks of meaning.

Building on this, Hassan (2022) positions tutorials as potential spaces for decolonial work in higher education, particularly through practices that encourage dialogic and relational

engagement. His study demonstrates that tutorials can become humanising spaces, especially when tutors share linguistic or cultural backgrounds with students and when multilingual dialogue, collaborative learning, and culturally responsive approaches are adopted (Hassan, 2022). These relational environments provide the conditions in which reflexivity is exercised. When students feel recognised and culturally affirmed, they are more likely to sustain coherent internal conversations, enabling them to make sense of their academic experiences in relation to their identity. This is particularly significant for black students navigating unfamiliar English-speaking institutions, where feelings of exclusion often accompany academic participation. Inclusive tutorial practices, then, not only support engagement with academic knowledge but also strengthen the reflexive capacities that underpin belonging, identity formation, and academic success (Hassan, 2022; Ngwabe et al., 2025; Archer, 2003, 2007).

Faroo (2017) and Lekota (2024) illustrate that pedagogical strategies such as adapting to diverse student needs, validating multiple viewpoints, and affirming student contributions do more than improve academic outcomes; they actively support reflexivity. These approaches enable students to bring their lived experiences into conversation with disciplinary content, deepening their engagement and opening space for transformation. In these instances, tutorials act as enabling contexts (Archer, 2003), i.e., social environments that condition and support students' capacity to reflect critically on their assumptions, values, and identities.

Although this study did not include direct interviews with tutors, existing literature offers valuable insights into the pedagogical intentions informing tutorial spaces across South African higher education institutions (Clarence, 2016; Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Hassan, 2022; Maphalala & Mpofu, 2020). These studies show that tutorials are not simply logistical extensions of lectures but are purposefully designed to foster the student voice, facilitate engagement, and create space for academic and personal development. While practices may vary across contexts, the shared pedagogical goal remains clear — to cultivate student-centred, inclusive learning environments that support both cognitive development and reflexive engagement.

The research outlined above describes tutorials as deliberately structured, dialogic spaces that support reflexive engagement, a central condition for identity elaboration in Archer's (2003, 2007) terms. Rather than aiming for consensus or correctness, these environments encourage students to encounter unfamiliar perspectives, question ingrained assumptions, and connect disciplinary knowledge with their lived experiences. By fostering multiple voices and enabling

students to relate abstract ideas to personal meaning, tutorials create the conditions for what Archer (2003) refers to as discursive contradiction, i.e., moments in which internalised beliefs are disrupted by alternative frameworks, prompting deeper deliberation and potential shifts in identity. As part of the broader conditioning context of the humanities, these inclusive pedagogical spaces offer more than academic support. They serve as intentionally designed opportunities for students to engage critically, reflect deeply, and rework aspects of the self in response to new knowledge and perspectives.

Discussions in tutorials exposed students to diverse interpretations and applications of knowledge. By articulating their reflections and engaging with others' viewpoints, students encounter discourses that often differ from those they have previously internalised. This process encouraged them to evaluate their current beliefs and values critically. When students are presented with discourses that challenge societal norms or personal experiences, they are compelled to consider contradictions in their own thinking. This might involve grappling with ideas like systemic inequality, cultural biases, or philosophical debates. These contradictions often spark reflexivity, where students ask: *How do my current beliefs align with this new understanding?* Engaging with peers who interpret discourse knowledge differently broadens students' perspectives, helping them appreciate the complexity of concepts they may have previously viewed as static or one-dimensional. In this way, tutorial discussions act as enabling structures (Archer, 2000, 2003), providing an environment that supports students in revisiting and potentially reshaping their internal dialogues about identity, values, and aspirations.

As students participate in peer discussions, they gradually develop their voice and confidence in expressing their thoughts and opinions. Archer's (2000, 2003, 2007) concept of agency emphasises individuals' capacity to act intentionally and purposefully to shape their identities. Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge, students actively engaged in meaning-making through the articulation of their perspectives and reflection on others'. In this way, tutorial spaces operated not only as instructional settings but as relational and epistemic environments where confidence, clarity, and commitment were cultivated.

Phumi's narrative exemplifies how sustained participation in discussion-based settings contributed to a growing sense of agency and self-assurance.

[In tutorials] I felt like my opinions really mattered and as much as they weren't always the best answers, I felt like they were — I contributed my voice in my tutorials, and they were difficult because undergrad is difficult but it was really nice

to just see my growth from first year up until third year. And ja, I really ... I really enjoyed doing Politics in my undergrad (Phumi).

I didn't like talking around big groups because I was quite self-conscious. But seeing that now I go to my Honours classes, you know, to these seminars and I sit down and my lecturers ask for my opinions and they actually agree with those opinions and they actually tell me, add those opinions to your papers. So, I feel like that has helped me grow more confident (Phumi).

Phumi's account reveals the formative role of dialogic engagement in shifting her internal conversation, from self-doubt to increasing self-endorsement. In Archer's (2000, 2003) terms, this represents a move from a constrained mode of reflexivity, shaped by hesitancy and deference, toward one marked by confidence and elaboration where her thoughts are being externally validated. Her development of voice was not incidental but emerged through repeated engagement in spaces that recognised her perspectives as legitimate. Confidence here served as an emotional commentary but tied to the practical order of reality and built through iterative experiences of speaking, being heard, and receiving affirmation from peers, tutors and lecturers, strengthening her commitment to her studies.

This link between discursive participation and personal investment was echoed in other narratives. Students often described how academic and peer interactions clarified not only their thinking but also their direction of study. As Katlego explained:

Model UN [when I was at school] gave me a good introduction to like global systems and ideas. But Politics [at university] felt personal to some extent. Like I could see things in my country and my home space and what that meant in relation to the rest of the world and it's like this whole big world, I felt how it impacted my life as an individual and people around me's life and I wanted to know more. That's why I did honours and want to do masters. I feel like if I know more maybe I can do more (Katlego).

Katlego connects her academic interest to her lived experience, recognising how political structures shape daily life and how education might serve as a tool for meaningful engagement and change. Her investment in further study reflects not only intellectual curiosity, but the alignment of academic content with her personal projects.

Other students similarly identified tutorial or informal conversations as moments of re-orientation. Nathi reflected:

There's this thing where you're talking to your classmates and you realise that your life like money and family, and where you're from and that, is not just your experience and it's tied to being black and being from a village or something (Nathi).

This recognition reframed personal hardship as part of a shared social reality, expanding Nathi's understanding of his circumstances and affirming the relevance of academic ideas to lived experience. Through exposure to collective reflection, students like Nathi moved from individualised interpretations of their struggles to more relational and structural understandings — a shift that deepened their intellectual engagement and sense of belonging.

Steve's reflection reinforced this point.

If it wasn't for my tutor and one of my lecturers I think I wouldn't have continued with Anthropology. They made me understand and see the relevance of what I was learning and despite what I initially thought, you can find ways to make it practical. But it depends on how you decide to use it (Steve).

Steve's experience highlights how the tutor-lecturer relationship provided both academic guidance and legitimisation of the value of the degree. Steve's decision to continue was not the result of abstract persuasion, but the outcome of relational support that enabled him to see alignment between disciplinary knowledge and his personal projects.

Each of the students above gained clarity about their perspectives through peer or academic discussions, which enhanced their confidence in their chosen paths. The narratives illustrate how academic discussions and exposure to broader perspectives strengthened their sense of purpose and investment in their studies. Katlego connected her personal experiences to global systems through reflective discussions, motivating her to pursue further studies to make a meaningful impact. Nathi's engagement with peers helped him recognise the shared nature of his challenges, fostering a sense of collective identity and confidence in understanding systemic issues. Steve, through supportive guidance from his tutor and lecturer, gained insight into the practical relevance of anthropology, which aligned with his personal values and sustained his interest in the field. These experiences highlight how the interplay of reflective dialogue and academic support enhances self-confidence, aligns academic pursuits with personal motivations, and drives deeper investment in learning. This is consistent with Archer's (2000) proposition that individuals are motivated by projects that resonate with their ultimate concerns.

However, the students also indicated that tutorials were not always supportive environments. Across the narratives, students emphasised that the quality of tutorial engagement was highly dependent on the tutor's approach, with tutors often described as 'setting the tone' for whether the session would become an enabling or constraining space for learning. In this way, the tutorial was not a neutral context, but a site shaped by relational and pedagogical dynamics.

Nyasha recalled how a hostile tutorial environment undermined her confidence and led her to disengage entirely.

I remember my [humanities subject] tutor was mean. She would shout at us about everything and was always saying we were going to fail. People were too scared to talk or ask questions. She always said things like 'we should already know this' when we didn't. I actually dropped the subject because of her (Nyasha).

Dimpho similarly described a lack of tutor preparation that created discomfort and uncertainty.

My one tutor never ever came prepared so that [tutorial] was so awkward. We would just sit there, and he would wait for us to speak but we didn't know what to talk about. The lectures helped with that module, but I wish he would have checked more with us in the tuts because I wasn't always sure (Dimpho).

These accounts highlight how tutorial spaces, while designed to be dialogic and developmental, could also become sites of alienation when tutors were disengaged, unprepared, or authoritarian. Participants' reflections underscore the critical importance of tutor competence, preparation, and relational sensitivity, particularly in light of the emotional and cognitive labour involved in participating in academic discussions. As shown earlier, dialogic engagement has the potential to prompt reflexive development and identity elaboration, but only when supported by pedagogical practices that affirm students' epistemic legitimacy and create the conditions for open, inclusive dialogue.

While tutorial spaces can serve as powerful enabling mechanisms for learning and identity development (Archer, 2000), their effectiveness is contingent on a combination of structural and agential factors. The pedagogical approach of the tutor, the relational dynamics within the group, and the student's willingness to engage all shape whether the space becomes one of support or constraint. As participants' reflections reveal, a well-facilitated tutorial can provide opportunities for students to articulate ideas, receive feedback, and refine their thinking in relation to others. However, even in a supportive environment, the depth of learning is mediated by students' reflexive engagement, their choice to participate, test their views, and remain open

to critique. In this way, the tutorial becomes a site where agency is both exercised and developed. Students cultivate voice and confidence through dialogic interaction, contributing to shifts in values, deeper intellectual investment, and growing self-definition as active participants in the learning process.

6.2.2 Conversations in and out the Lecture Space

Participants described how their learning extended beyond the formal structure of lectures and tutorials. Informal conversations held while walking between classes, sitting on campus lawns, or lingering after lectures, became critical spaces for negotiating meaning, exchanging perspectives, and processing complex ideas. These moments outside the learning experience. Rather, they functioned as generative encounters that contributed meaningfully to students' reflexive engagement with knowledge and identity.

Ontha reflected on the value of these informal peer dialogues.

When you're walking out and you sit somewhere. Those tend to be the biggest factors that contribute, because like I said the beauty of diversity of thought as well and having this conversation sees you see things differently and if I am able to have a conversation with this person because we are also around the same age group. When I have a conversation with my lecturer, sometimes it is difficult because they are more knowledgeable, and I am not. But when we on the same level, when we have that conversation, you understand me and I understand you (Ontha).

For Ontha, casual conversations with peers created a space of mutual exchange, one in which ideas could be explored on more equal footing without the pressure of formal authority. Unlike the hierarchical dynamic with lecturers where perceived levels of knowledge had the potential to constrain open dialogue, conversations with fellow students provided a relational space in which ideas could be expressed without fear of judgment. This dynamic reflects Archer's (2000, 2003, 2007) emphasis on the social context as a conditioning environment, i.e., while social structures such as institutional hierarchies shape the conditions of interaction, individuals retain the capacity to navigate and respond to these constraints through reflexive engagement.

Ontha's emphasis on age and shared experience points to a perceived epistemic parity — a space where she could explore and articulate her views more confidently. Within Archer's framework, this can be understood as part of the social order, where the confidence to participate is shaped not only by one's position in a hierarchy, but also by the perceived legitimacy of one's voice in relation to others. In this case, peer discussions expanded the

discursive resources available to her and enabled a more confident internal conversation about knowledge, self-worth, and belonging.

These informal interactions further illustrate Archer's (2000) point that identity is not formed in isolation, but through ongoing negotiation within cultural and relational contexts. Students were actively making sense of it in relation to others. As they engaged in conversations and contributed to shared interpretations of what they were learning, they co-constructed knowledge within peer-based, discursive spaces. Ontha's reflections, like those of many others, point to the significance of these moments — the collaborative exploration of complex ideas and the mutual shaping of understanding.

Nathi's experience during the COVID-19 lockdown captures the absence of this interaction and its impact on his learning.

Like you didn't get to see your friends, you don't ... you just have to be on your own and work on your own ... think that's important to like know what other people think about the content (Nathi).

Nathi's reflection reinforces the view that knowledge and discourse are not separate from the social dynamics in which they are embedded, but co-constructed through interaction. For many students, this process was profoundly relational. Dialogue with peers was not peripheral to learning. It was integral to how concepts were engaged with, interpreted, and made meaningful. In this sense, peer exchange functioned as a critical space for intellectual development and the formation of academic and personal identity.

Nyasha's narrative offers an account of how the lecture space has the potential to serve as dialogic sites of identity transformation. Reflecting on her undergraduate Politics classes, she described how witnessing a peer regularly challenge dominant perspectives reshaped her thinking.

Then just being in a space where we were allowed to vocalise, even in a lecture theatre that's filled to the brim and people could still raise their hands and shout across the room what they really think and, even in saying this, I really picture this gay gent who was always, always speaking his mind, and I think from the get-go, his presence allowed me to, it challenged me, because at the time I didn't want to believe that you know, people could be you know, I wasn't opposed to it, but it was new to me. So, throughout my undergraduate Politics experience he was also in the fore of arguments and raising up his, raising his opinions and challenging the lecturer even. So that has shifted how I think, how I see people, how I want even to be present in the world (Nyasha).

Nyasha reflects on how witnessing another student's confidence in voicing views that conflicted with her beliefs, conditioned by the cultural beliefs of her home space, contributed to her questioning her perspectives. What initially felt unfamiliar or uncomfortable gradually became a source of personal transformation. This was not a private reflection alone but a socially mediated moment of reflexive engagement and a recognition of difference that unsettled previous assumptions and opened new moral and conceptual ground.

The lecture space, in this case, became more than a space for content delivery. It served as a space for live ideological contestation, where the presence and assertiveness of peers exposed students to alternative ways of being and thinking. Nyasha's reflection echoes Archer's (2003) argument that identity is shaped not only through intellectual engagement, but also through emotional responses and value judgements involved in questioning and reworking previously internalised beliefs and assumptions. These transformations often arise through contradiction, when internalised beliefs are disrupted by new cultural resources encountered in social interaction.

This experience was valuable for many of the students in this study, all of whom had moved to Makhanda from other countries or towns. Separated from the familial and community-based contexts that had previously conditioned their worldview, participants found themselves in a context that offered both spatial and discursive distance from home. This dislocation, while at times disorienting, created space for re-evaluating values, beliefs, and priorities in ways that had not been possible before.

As Nyasha explained further,

The academic space really has opened my mind, but I think experiences are a lot more, I don't know, like experience is the best teacher. So even if I'm in an academic space where I'm learning new things, I learn about myself more quickly when I'm around people who have opposing views of cultures that are different from me and that challenges me and helps me to grow (Nyasha).

Her reflection reinforces that while formal curricula expose students to new discourses, it is often through dialogic encounters with peers in lectures, tutorials, and informal spaces that these ideas gain meaning and impact. The move away from familiar social environments, paired with sustained engagement in diverse academic spaces, enabled students to interrogate inherited beliefs and assumptions and reconsider aspects of their personal and social identities.

Ontha similarly describes the lecture space as a site where conversations that were previously socially prohibited became possible.

The purpose of having these lectures is that you were able to open up a dialogue ... Some conversations which have been deemed to be taboo, to speak about. In society we don't talk about this. But those lecturers open that conversation — like 'let's speak about this' (Ontha).

Her narrative reinforces the idea that lectures can function as enabling contexts for questioning previously held beliefs. Through engaging with topics previously considered inappropriate or 'off-limits', students were invited into conversations that prompted them to reconsider the social norms they had internalised. In Archer's (2003) terms, this is part of the broader cultural system conditioning identity; as students are exposed to new cultural ideas and frameworks of reasoning, these shape the internal conversations through which they interpret, resist, or appropriate new meanings.

Vygotsky (1978) and other scholars (Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995; Downing, 2012) emphasise that cognitive development is shaped through social interaction and that young adults internalise ways of thinking through dialogue with others. Similarly, Archer (2000, 2003) offers that cultural systems — the ideas, norms, and knowledges embedded in one's context — condition how individuals interpret their world and themselves. Being in a new environment and exposed to unfamiliar discourses and diverse perspectives expanded participants' internal conversations and gave them access to new interpretive tools with which to rethink identity and agency. As students engaged critically with both course material and peers' perspectives, their internal conversations began to encompass topics they had previously not had space or permission to explore. This led to deeper self-interrogation: *Why do I think the way I do? Where do these beliefs come from? Do they still reflect who I am?*

In Archer's terms, identity formation depends on reflexive deliberation, i.e., a person must "know themselves to be themselves" (2000, p. 19). This self-awareness is essential to prioritising concerns and constructing personal projects. For the participants in this study, being physically and discursively removed from prior conditioning environments enabled them to engage in this kind of reflexive work. Lecture discussions functioned not simply as learning spaces but as opportunities for identity negotiation, where students could question their beliefs and re-evaluate their place in the world without the pressure of their home conditions that holds particular cultural expectations of them.

Having the opportunity to talk through their thoughts and reflect with others brought into question the formation of their personal identities and subsequently conditioned social identities. The ideas of others, including peers, tutors, and lecturers, challenged their viewpoints, values and beliefs. Through their deliberation on these discussions, there were shifts in their personal identities, that formation changing through the interplay between them and the structural and cultural conditions of their courses. Essentially, talking through the discourse conditioned a process of unlearning.

6.2.3 Conclusion

This section has shown how conversations, both inside and outside the classroom, played a central role in how students made sense of what they were learning and who they were becoming. Dialogue was not just a way to share ideas, but a key part of the learning process that allowed students to question their beliefs, hear different perspectives, and reflect more deeply on their own experiences. Through discussions with tutors, peers and lecturers, students encountered views that often challenged what they had grown up believing. These moments created opportunities for students to think critically about their values, re-evaluate their assumptions, and develop a stronger sense of identity. These conversations acted as important conditions that shaped how students reflected on their lives and made choices about their future. This section, then, highlights the importance of dialogue as a key part of how university students grow, not just intellectually, but personally and socially.

6.3 Unlearning and the Reconfiguration of Identity

This section examines how the process of unlearning³ played a role in shaping students' identities, not as a loss or rejection of knowledge, but as a valuable part of their personal and intellectual growth. For many participants, studying the humanities led them to confront beliefs, values, and assumptions they had carried throughout their lives, often culturally conditioned by family, community, or earlier schooling. These beliefs were brought into question in response to their changing priorities and perspectives through their engagement with the discourse. This section traces how these moments, where their previously held beliefs were challenged, led to deeper internal reflection where students began to question, untangle, and ultimately reshape parts of their identity. Unlearning was not about forgetting but about

³ Unlearning refers to the process of questioning and letting go of previously held assumptions or knowledge in light of new experiences or perspectives (Foley, 1999; Andreotti, 2011).

rethinking what they believed and why — an often emotional and difficult process that required time, support, and sustained engagement with the ideas and teaching approaches offered in their degree. The section is organised into three parts: first, it looks at how students started to question what they had once taken for granted; second, it considers the emotional and cognitive effort involved in dealing with uncomfortable realisations; and third, it shows how these reflections sometimes led to meaningful and lasting shifts in how students understood themselves and their place in the world.

6.3.1 Questioning the Taken-for-Granted

For many students, the process of unlearning began not with a conscious decision to discard old beliefs, but through a growing dissonance between the beliefs they held and carried into university and the frameworks they encountered within the humanities. These inherited understandings, about the self, success, race, gender, morality, or knowledge itself, often operated as normalised, shared truths, internalised through family, schooling, and cultural environments. These discursive inheritances formed part of the conditioning context: the cultural resources that shape, but do not determine, the content of the internal conversation. What triggered change was not exposure alone but the reflexive work students undertook in response to disjuncture.

Nathi's narrative illustrates how exposure to new ways of thinking within the humanities disrupted deeply rooted moral and cultural expectations.

Before I came to university, I thought I had to act a certain way as a black man — you know, not showing emotion, not asking for help. But then I started questioning where those ideas came from and who they actually serve, it just made me understand it in a different way (Nathi).

This shift reflects a turning point in Nathi's internal conversation. Rather than passively holding on to expectations he had internalised about masculinity, he begins to interrogate their origins and purpose. The humanities, in this instance, did not impose a new identity but introduced a mode of critical questioning that Nathi internalised and applied to his own identity. His reflection reveals a process of reflexive re-alignment where previously unquestioned identity commitments are held up against emerging concerns and values. In doing so, Nathi opens space for a different way of being, one that is more emotionally open and agentially chosen, rather than socially imposed.

Layla similarly described this moment of disruption as deeply unsettling but ultimately generative.

At first, it's like everything you thought you knew — it's wrong or incomplete. You feel kind of lost. But then it's like ... maybe that's the point (Layla).

Her reflection highlights the disorientation that can arise when long-held beliefs are disrupted. Rather than offering simple answers, the humanities introduced complexities that challenged her previous understanding of the world. This moment of discomfort reflects what Archer (2000) calls a reflexive contradiction, when the frameworks individuals have relied on to make sense of their lives no longer hold, creating a tension that demands internal re-evaluation. Layla recognises the discomfort as part of a necessary process, one that invites deeper questioning and opens new ways of thinking about herself and her place in the world.

In both accounts, the move toward unlearning was neither automatic nor imposed. It required students to engage critically and personally with what they were encountering and to bring new ideas into dialogue with their lived experiences, social contexts, and personal projects. These were not simply academic exercises but deeply existential processes, marking the first steps in identity shifts and in questioning what previously felt like fundamental aspects of their identity.

6.3.2 Discomfort and the Challenge of Reconfiguring Assumptions

The process of unlearning was neither smooth nor emotionally neutral. For many participants, recognising the limits of their previously held beliefs surfaced levels of discomfort, feelings of confusion, frustration, guilt, and at times, vulnerability. These emotional responses were not signs of failure or unwillingness to learn, but rather evidence of how seriously students were engaging with the challenging process of rethinking their beliefs. As Archer (2003) notes, when internal conversations bring deeply held values and assumptions into question, this often triggers strong emotional reactions. The discomfort signals a tension between old ways of understanding and new possibilities, prompting students to reflect more seriously on what they believe and why. In this way, emotional discomfort was enacted as emotional commentary in the reflexive process, prompting participants to reconsider their priorities and, in some cases, reshape their understanding of who they are.

Katlego articulated the emotional toll of this process.

You come in thinking you know what's right and wrong, what's good and bad. And then suddenly, you're being asked to see the world in a completely different way. It's not easy. It makes you question yourself — and that's scary (Katlego).

Her reflection highlights the unsettling nature of encountering ideas that challenge deeply held moral beliefs that likely formed part of her personal identity. Katlego's discomfort signals a difficult phase of reflexive engagement, one in which previously held values lose their authority and must be re-evaluated in light of new perspectives. This is not a rejection of morality altogether, but a reconsideration of the specific moral assumptions she previously held, such as fixed ideas about right and wrong or what counts as a good life. These beliefs, often inherited through upbringing or community norms, had provided a stable foundation for understanding herself and others. The discomfort she expresses signals a turning point: her internal conversation begins to critically assess whether these assumptions still align with her developing worldview. This moment reflects a key stage in personal identity formation where she is not abandoning values but actively working to reshape them in ways that feel more coherent with her evolving concerns and understanding of the world.

For some participants, the process of unlearning led to a deeper kind of ethical awareness, not just about abstract ideas, but about how their beliefs affected themselves and others. Shae, for example, described how engaging with Philosophy encouraged her to interrogate the origins and consequences of her biases.

I started thinking about where my biases come from, why they matter, and how they might be harming me or the people around me (Shae).

This marks a shift in the internal conversation from simply questioning familiar ideas to critically evaluating them in light of their ethical implications. Shae's reflection illustrates a shift toward more deliberate ethical awareness — a recognition that her values not only shape her self-understanding but also carry consequences for how she relates to and affects those around her.

The emotional discomfort that accompanied these realisations were a meaningful part of the reflexive process — a signal that certain beliefs were no longer of value to them, and that a deeper rethinking was necessary. Through ongoing engagement with critical content, conversations with peers, and support from tutors and lecturers, students were able to navigate this complexity and move toward more intentional, coherent identity positions.

In this way, unlearning functioned not as a rejection of the past, but as an important phase of personal transformation and shifts in their identities. It involved questioning previously held beliefs in challenging ways, grappling with discomfort, and ultimately reorienting identity in ways that were more critically informed and ethically grounded. Identity reconfiguration in the humanities has the potential to be an emotionally and intellectually engaged process of reflexivity.

6.3.3 Unlearning as Identity Reconfiguration

The process of unlearning became a fundamental reorganisation of how participants understood themselves and their place in the world. This was the point at which reflexive deliberation, prompted by dissonance, sustained through discomfort, and enabled by cultural mechanisms, conditioned shifts in identity. These were moments of agential morphogenesis, where students' sense of personal identity began to shift, shaped by new concerns, evolving commitments, and emerging possibilities for who they could become.

For Nyasha, this process involved moving from compliance with external expectations to an empowered sense of intellectual agency.

At school, I did what I was told. I didn't question why things were the way they were. But now, I see things differently. I want to challenge, to contribute. I don't want to just follow anymore (Nyasha).

Nyasha's reflection marks a turning point in her reflexive journey: a move away from uncritical acceptance of authority toward a more self-directed, intellectually engaged stance. Her studies in politics gave her the analytical tools to question systems of power and inequality, but it was through internal deliberation that these tools became personally meaningful. Rather than simply acquiring knowledge, Nyasha began to inhabit it, using what she learned to shape how she thinks, acts, and positions herself in the world. This shift signals a growing sense of agency, where she no longer defines herself through external expectations but through her capacity to question, contribute, and decide for herself what matters.

Similarly, Steve described how critical thinking reshaped his sense of possibility.

I used to think there was only one way to succeed — get a job, make money, don't look back. But now I think about purpose, impact, the kind of person I want to be. That's success too (Steve).

Steve's reflection captures a significant shift in how he considers his personal projects. He is not rejecting the importance of financial stability but placing it within a more expansive frame that includes questions of personal purpose and social contribution. Through sustained internal reflection, shaped by his academic exposure, he moves beyond inherited scripts for success and begins to articulate his own terms for a fulfilling life. His priorities shift not because he is told to value something else, but because he develops a deeper understanding of what matters to him.

In both Steve's and Nyasha's narratives, unlearning is not about discarding the past but reassessing it. Previous beliefs are neither completely rejected nor held without question. Rather, they are held up to scrutiny, repositioned, and sometimes reinterpreted in light of newly encountered ideas and values. There is a reconfiguration of underlying frameworks through which students make sense of themselves and the world.

These shifts were enabled by the structure and culture of their learning experience, through spaces for dialogic, multidisciplinary content, and an environment that encouraged students to think critically and reflexively. Participants did not simply replace one worldview with another — they experienced an emotional process of internal deliberation, weighing competing perspectives against their evolving personal projects and deliberations on who they were becoming.

What emerges from these accounts is an understanding of identity not as a fixed or adaptive response to external mechanisms, but as shaped through agency. Students developed the capacity to sit with discomfort, confront contradiction, and make conscious choices about what to carry forward and what to leave behind, even when they were deeply held beliefs, part of who they were, carried with them for most of their lives. In this way, unlearning becomes a valuable example of reflexivity, a process through which personal identity is reshaped in response to both intellectual insight and emotional resonance.

This section has shown that unlearning is an important part of personal transformation. It enabled students to question what they had previously accepted as truth and to make more intentional commitments to who they wanted to become. Through Archer's (2000) agential morphogenetic lens, unlearning emerges as a key mechanism of identity formation: a moment when structural and cultural conditions come interact with reflexive agency, producing not just knowledge, but meaning, direction, and growth.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the humanities degree acted as a generative context for shifts in students' personal identities. Using Archer's (2000) agential morphogenetic framework, it traced the interplay between the structural and cultural conditions of the degree and students' reflexive engagement, demonstrating that identity transformation was not automatic but emerged through sustained internal deliberation in relation to the degree.

Disciplinary content, multidisciplinary exposure, and spaces for discussions functioned as key conditioning mechanisms. These aspects of the degree structure enabled students to question long-held assumptions, re-evaluate personal projects, and reconsider the social roles and values that previously shaped their self-understanding.

Identity shifts did not follow a uniform path. For many participants, these shifts involved reconfiguring moral frameworks and reorienting personal goals as they engaged with new perspectives and questioned previously held assumptions. While the depth and direction of change varied, identity emerged as a continuously reflexive process, shaped not only by students' engagement with the conditions of their degree but also by how they made sense of the cultural and structural conditions that had shaped their lives prior to entering higher education. Thus, the humanities served as a space for potential agential morphogenesis, enabling students to rework aspects of the self through critical reflection and meaning-making.

The chapter shows the potential of the humanities as a medium through which students develop the capacity to reflect on who they are, what matters to them, and how they wish to engage with the world. Identity transformation was not driven by the curriculum alone, but by the interplay between institutional conditions and the reflexive deliberations of students navigating the complex process of becoming.

Chapter 7: Becoming with Purpose

Imagining Futures in a Contested Present

The journey through higher education is rarely linear, as illustrated in the previous chapters, especially for students navigating layered social, cultural, and economic expectations. Chapter 5 revealed that aspirations toward university were rarely reducible to individual ambition. Instead, students' decisions to pursue higher education were shaped by complex deliberations, entangled with familial responsibilities, financial pressures, and, particularly, for many black participants, a strong sense of collective purpose. Higher education was never just a qualification. It was often a symbolic and material investment for others, grounded in the cultural expectations of Black Tax and the hope of social mobility. Within this context, meaning-making in relation to higher education was already an act of negotiation between opportunity and obligation, hope and precarity.

Chapter 6 traced students' experiences when they enter the disciplinary space of the humanities. Students began their degrees with identities already shaped by community, history, and socio-economic inequality. As they progressed, these identities were challenged by new discourses, epistemologies, and ways of being, often disrupting pre-existing beliefs and values. Through critical engagement with disciplinary content, many students began to reflect on their own positions in the world more reflexively. Some experienced this process as deeply affirming, others as unsettling. For most, however, it initiated a shift in how they understood themselves and who they could become. Identity formation, in this sense, was not simply about finding their voice but about confronting the deeper question of how that voice might be used.

This chapter builds on those foundations by turning toward how they imagine their futures. It explores how students approaching graduation begin to envision futures shaped by their evolving sense of self, shifting personal identities, and the formation of new personal projects. It considers how growing reflexive capacities cultivated through both personal enablements and constraints, and disciplinary practice inform emerging personal projects, ethical commitments, and imagined life paths. For students at this stage, the question is no longer just *Who am I?* but *Who might I become and for whom?* In exploring these questions, the chapter examines how personal reflexivity becomes oriented toward purpose, how new modes of relational responsibility take shape, and how students negotiate the space between the university and the world beyond it.

7.1 From Voice to Purpose: Expressive Confidence and the Search for Meaning

For many of the students in this study, entering university was not the result of wide-ranging deliberation or extensive career guidance. As explored in Chapter 5, decisions about degree choice were often shaped by a narrow range of available options, constrained by resource limitations, school contexts, and the need to pursue economic security. Participants described making choices based on what was available or selecting courses that were still open late in the application process. These early decisions, shaped more by circumstance than aspiration, meant that students arrived in higher education without a clear sense of alignment between their academic paths and personal goals. This disjuncture was intensified by the institutional culture of the university itself. As outlined in Chapter 3, while higher education in South Africa has undergone formal transformation, many students continue to experience the university as a space of epistemic and cultural alienation (Naidoo et al., 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2022). The symbolic removal of colonial markers has not been matched by a substantive rethinking of the curriculum or pedagogical frameworks. For black students, particularly, the university is frequently experienced as misaligned with their lived realities — a place where dominant disciplinary traditions marginalise the knowledges, languages, and cultural histories they bring with them (Matthews, 2020; Mignolo, 2007; Fataar, 2022). The humanities, while often imagined as a space of critical engagement, are not immune to these exclusions.

In this context, developing a voice within the university is neither straightforward nor inevitable. It is shaped by encounters with unfamiliar epistemic landscapes, by negotiation with dominant norms, and often by an initial sense of displacement. Students did not arrive at university already equipped to assert themselves intellectually. Rather, they entered into a process of becoming, one shaped by critical engagement with new ideas but also by the tensions and dislocations they experienced along the way.

Amid these conditions, students began to cultivate forms of reflexive engagement that gradually reshaped their relationship to knowledge, to themselves, and to the futures they could imagine. What started as a process of adaptation and learning to navigate unfamiliar discourses and disciplinary expectations became, for many, a deeper form of personal transformation. For some students, the process of becoming unfolded through small but meaningful changes like moments of speaking in a seminar for the first time, forming an opinion grounded in personal experience, or challenging an idea that was previously held as an embedded belief.

These shifts did not occur in isolation. As explored in the previous chapter, they were made possible through a combination of enabling conditions: relational interactions with peers and lecturers, exposure to discourses that foregrounded critique and positionality, and the chance to engage with material that resonated with, and sometimes disrupted, their lived experiences. These moments of recognition and intellectual connection created space for students to develop both confidence and voice.

I was quiet and shy when I first came here in first year, you know? And now I'm like confident and like more critical of things that I see. I just don't take things at first hand; I question stuff now (Rumi).

Rumi's account exemplifies this process. Her growing confidence is not presented as an innate trait, but as something that emerged through engagement, dialogue, reflection, and the interpretive space that the humanities enabled. Within this context, confidence was not simply individualised self-assurance. It was a relational and situated outcome of feeling seen, heard, and intellectually respected. As students began to participate more actively in academic discourse, they also started to recognise themselves as legitimate contributors to it and not as passive recipients of knowledge but as thinkers in their own right.

This was the terrain where reflexivity became visible: in how students narrated their shifts, re-evaluated their positions, and began to speak within — and back to — the institution, questioning its assumptions, language, and exclusions. Others, like Nyasha and Phumi, described how their studies helped cultivate a growing sense of intellectual agency and self-trust. For Nyasha, this took shape as confidence in both expressing her thoughts and trusting her ability to think critically, even when she felt uncertain..

"My degrees have allowed me to be more assertive, be confident in my way of thinking even if I don't understand something — be confident in questioning it."
(Nyasha)

Her reflection highlights an important shift in how knowledge is approached. Rather than positioning herself as accepting an idea without engaging with it, Nyasha reframes understanding as needing to be developed through active questioning. This reflects a move from communicative reflexivity, where internal deliberation depends on social confirmation, toward autonomous or meta-reflexivity, where one's internal conversation becomes a more independent and evaluative process (Archer, 2003). This shift is not just intellectual but

ontological; it signals a growing capacity to position oneself as an agent in relation to knowledge, no longer seeking only to absorb it but to interrogate and reshape it.

For Phumi, this process of reflexive engagement also translated into a broader sense of personal security, a stabilising of identity grounded in the ability to form, hold, and express her own views.

I feel like I'm much more secure in who I am ... My studies encouraged a lot of forming your own opinion and being confident in that opinion. I feel like that also helped me to be confident to be who I am (Phumi).

In her reflection, Phumi connects epistemic confidence with emotional and social self-assurance. Her experience suggests that reflexivity is not solely an academic skill but a form of identity work, one that supports students in moving from externally oriented forms of validation to a more internally grounded sense of self. Archer (2000) explains that reflexive deliberation is always emotionally invested because it deals with matters of the ultimate concern and personal projects: aspects that matter most to individuals, guiding the decisions that they make. For Phumi, becoming confident in her opinion was not just about participating in academic debates. It was about consolidating a sense of self that no longer hinged on the approval of others. In this way, identity was not only expressed through reflexivity; it was also stabilised by it.

The narratives above are examples of how students' internal conversations became more than silent reflections — they became formative spaces in which academic tools, personal histories, and emerging commitments converged. It is within these deliberations that many began to move from voice toward something more future-oriented: a sense of purpose.

Initially, for many students, reflexive deliberation pre-enrolment was shaped by structural and cultural conditions: to obtain a qualification to ensure success, secure financial stability, and meet the expectations of family and community. As discussed in Chapter 5, these concerns were deeply rooted in broader structural inequalities, often framed by cultural expectations such as Black Tax or the desire to serve as a source of community and familial upliftment. Within this context, the internal conversation was oriented toward survival, making the most of limited opportunities and managing the weight of responsibility. However, through sustained disciplinary engagement, this orientation began to shift. The degree provided more than conceptual knowledge. It enabled space for students to question and engage with the

frameworks that had previously shaped their thinking. This process opened new ways of deliberating on what was important, enabling a movement from navigating generational expectations and responsibilities to articulating personally meaningful directions.

Rather than only focusing on understanding who they had become through the degree, students began to consider how this evolving sense of self might inform the kinds of lives they wished to lead beyond the university: which futures felt possible, desirable, and consistent with their emerging values and concerns. In Archer's (2003) terms, reflexivity is inherently teleological — it involves not only interpreting one's social reality but deliberating on what is worth pursuing and how to act on it. For many participants, this reflexive shift involved thinking about how their studies and the sense of self that developed through that experience could inform purposeful action in the world. It is in this movement from expression to intention that personal projects begin to take form.

Layla described how her engagement with Philosophy reshaped how she approaches complexity in both academic and personal domains.

Part of that is because I have these dialogical tools from Philosophy to figure out where the tension is at and like what it's coming from ... Also informing things like the decisions I make — having Philosophy has been pretty influential. Ja, it feels almost like a world-building sort of perspective (Layla).

Her reflection signals an important shift in how disciplinary tools become integrated into reflexive practice. Rather than simply acquiring concepts, Layla shares how Philosophy offered a new way of thinking, one that enabled her to recognise and work through tensions in her life. Her use of the phrase “world-building” signals a shift in how disciplinary knowledge is being engaged, not only as content to be mastered, but as a framework for interpreting experience and imagining new ways of living. It suggests not only that she is interpreting her circumstances differently but that she is beginning to orient herself toward an imagined future, a way of living shaped by new ways of seeing. At this point, reflexivity becomes directed toward the formulation of personal projects: internally deliberated courses of action that express what matters most to the individual and how they intend to act upon it (Archer, 2003).

For some students, reflexive engagement not only leads to greater self-confidence but also to a deepened sense of social awareness. Lerato, for example, described how finding her voice through the degree also heightened her attentiveness to the perspectives of others.

I'm just a whole new different person ... Now I have a voice, and I want to use it ... I take into consideration other people's ideas and views as well. Because if I can have opinions, so can the other person (Lerato).

Her reflection reveals that becoming more vocal was not experienced as a purely individual act, but as one embedded in a wider ethical orientation. The internal conversation was not only used to clarify personal goals, but also to consider how those goals are situated within, and responsive to, a broader social world. In Lerato's case, gaining a voice came with the recognition that others are equally entitled to speak and be heard. Her growing confidence in asserting her views was accompanied by a reflexive awareness of the responsibilities that come with doing so.

According to Archer (2000, 2003), personal identity is shaped through the interplay between ultimate concerns and the structural and cultural conditions through which those concerns will be pursued. Reflexivity enables individuals to assess the social structures they confront, such as familial obligations, economic constraints, and institutional hierarchies, alongside the cultural norms that shape what is considered valuable, legitimate, or possible. Through this process of deliberation, individuals determine which aspects of these inherited conditions to endorse, contest, or resist, and how to act in ways consistent with their priorities. Identity, then, is not simply formed through self-recognition, but through positioning oneself in relation to the social world, discerning where one stands, what one stands for, and how one intends to live.

This deliberation process is not abstract. It emerges in the lived reality of navigating roles, expectations, and constraints. Reflexivity is always situated, shaped by social context, but oriented toward agency. In deliberating on who they are becoming, individuals do not operate in isolation, but in relation to the frameworks and demands that surround them. It is through this process that they begin to define the kind of agent they want to be and what kind of personal projects they regard as worth pursuing.

Lerato's account offers an example of this dynamic. Her emerging sense of purpose was not framed as a private aspiration, but as fundamentally relational, developed through a growing awareness of how her actions affect, and are accountable to, others. In this way, her narrative reflects a form of agency shaped by her voice and relational reflexivity: a thoughtful engagement with difference and an ethical commitment to co-existence. Through this internal deliberation, she was not simply asserting identity — she was working out how to inhabit it meaningfully within a shared social world.

While for some students the reflexive process sharpened a sense of relational responsibility, for others it enabled a reframing of their own lived experience through the conceptual resources offered by their disciplines. Sibu articulated how the study of Sociology helped her make sense of her life, not as an individual failing, but as shaped by broader structural conditions.

I think it has also helped me make sense of my own life. Like the things that have happened in my life I'm able to understand them in a more sociological lens, that I'm not — I'm not economically disadvantaged because my parents did not work hard enough but because society structured that designed in certain way, like I never understood that I'm almost like, "Why is it that my friends are rich and I'm poor?" and stuff like that, but I actually understand my life a lot better (Sibu).

This shift enabled her to reinterpret her personal history not as the result of individual failure, but as shaped by broader social and economic conditions. Differences she had previously experienced between herself and her peers, in opportunities, access, or recognition, could now be understood within a structural frame, offering her not only insight but a different way of locating herself within the world.

For Liya, this shift became visible in the way she began to speak, think, and engage with others.

So definitely [my studies have] changed me — how I see things, how I think about things, how I talk. I know now that some things are not worth my time ... You get to see a lot of ignorance, because it's something you must study in Sociology (Liya).

Her reflection illustrates how disciplinary engagement shaped her reflexive stance toward how she chooses to respond to the world in her everyday life. Rather than responding reactively to every encounter, Liya began to discern what aligned with her emerging values and what did not. Her voice was no longer just about speaking. It was about choosing when to speak, when to disengage, and how to sustain a sense of self in a digital world where people are able to share their thoughts freely, openly and accessibly. This was not detachment but deliberate positioning: an agentic capacity to filter, prioritise, and act with intention.

Nozi echoed a similar transformation, describing how her studies equipped her with the capacity to stand up for herself.

I know how to fight for myself now because of the knowledge I have acquired ... My studies have literally taught me to stand up for myself (Nozi).

In her words, knowledge is not simply theoretical. It becomes a means of self-protection, self-definition, and resistance. The act of ‘fighting for oneself’ emerges here as a personal project: a way of claiming space, asserting worth, and refusing to remain silent. For students like Nozi, the development of agency was closely tied to what their studies enabled. In her case, academic knowledge became a resource for self-assertion — a means to articulate her needs, defend her position, and act with greater confidence. In this way, Nozi’s account reflects a shift from passive engagement to knowing when and how to assert her presence. This shows the emergence of agency beyond existing as potential, but as a lived and embodied practice: a way of navigating the world informed by knowledge, critical reflection, and an evolving sense of self.

The accounts explored in this section illustrate how reflexivity, conditioned through degree experience, enabled space for students to deliberate on what matters to them in relation to the ways they had changed. These were not always clear plans for the future, but rather meaningful shifts in how they understood themselves and the kinds of agents they were becoming. Their shifts in identity and the personal transformations they experienced are particularly significant against the backdrop of the South African higher education context students must navigate, which, as the literature showed in Chapter 2, often remains exclusionary of the lived realities of black students (Matthews, 2022; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the emergence of voice, purpose, and direction is neither automatic nor trivial. It signals the formation of personal projects grounded in reflexive deliberation, through which students are not only interpreting their place in the world, but actively working out how they wish to inhabit it and, for some, change it. This process offers valuable insights into the potential of the humanities to be a space for transformation that is both personal and political.

7.2 Relational Reflexivity and Social Responsibility: Caring, Kinship, and Concern for Others

For many students in this study, the decision to enter university was never a purely individual act. It was shaped by long-standing familial responsibilities, communal expectations, and inherited histories of structural exclusion. As discussed in Chapter 5, students’ educational choices were often made under conditions of constraint — with limited career guidance, economic precarity, and few viable alternatives — and at the same time, these choices were also deeply relational. They reflected an ethos of care grounded in interdependence, a sense of obligation to those whose sacrifices made the journey possible. This collective orientation was

not incidental; it stemmed from enduring cultural values such as Ubuntu, where the self is understood through relationships with others (Walker et al., 2022). In this context, higher education is imagined as a route to personal mobility and as a means of securing dignity, redress, and upliftment for the wider family or community (Masutha, 2022; Fongwa, 2021). These dynamics reveal that, from the outset, the internal conversation for many students was already relationally attuned, shaped by the weight of inherited expectations and by an ethical sensibility rooted in reciprocity and care.

For some students, the formation of purpose was inseparable from a deepening awareness of social injustice and a desire to intervene meaningfully in it. Sibü's reflection captures this orientation clearly.

I want to be an agent of social change. Like they've made me realise the magnitude of the injustices and the inequality that I actually want to do it. They've prepared me for that, I don't know, yes, they're preparing me for that. At this stage I feel like I'm capable to be an actual agent and I feel like whatever my actions will be will bring about change (Sibü).

Sibü's account reflects a shift in how she understood both herself and her responsibilities in the world. Her desire to be 'an agent of social change' was not framed around personal ambition, but around the kind of impact she wished to make in response to the inequalities she had come to recognise. This orientation suggests that the internal conversation was doing more than clarifying career goals — it was enabling a transformation in her social identity. In Archer's (2000) terms, social identity is forged as individuals deliberate on who they are in relation to the broader social order and decide how to position themselves within it. For Sibü, this positioning was informed by the interpretive tools she gained through her studies, which enabled her to re-read structural inequalities not as impersonal forces but as sites of intervention. The emotional charge of her statement — "they've made me realise the magnitude of the injustices" — reflects the transformation of first-order emotions like frustration or confusion into second-order emotions oriented toward commitment and action. Her growing sense of capacity and her belief that her actions "will bring about change," signals that her personal project was becoming grounded in a moral purpose: a response to what she had come to care about most.

For some, imagining the future involved reconsidering what it means to participate meaningfully in society. Rumi's reflection offers an example of this shift.

I feel it has prepared me for something, you know. Just to go out in the society and the community and you know, do something, as a civil, as a civilian you know. Not to just be a citizen who just go in the corporate road forward and do things, but to make a difference, but just to give a, give an eye and perspective to things and contribute somehow. Like it has like challenged me to [...] Be an agent of change (Rumi).

While she, like Siby, describes a desire to “be an agent of change,” Rumi locates her emerging purpose within a broader civic future imaginary. Her emphasis is less on structural intervention and more on the capacity to see differently — to engage the world with awareness, critical perspective, and a commitment to contributing ‘somehow.’ This imagined future does not reject professional ambition outright but reflects a growing discomfort with individualistic trajectories that centre personal gain over social contribution. Rumi’s account reflects a process of reflexive deliberation in which she assesses her ultimate concerns in relation to the roles and expectations available to her. Rather than uncritically following dominant pathways such as the “corporate road,” she is actively working out what kind of life feels meaningful, and what kind of social presence aligns with her values. Her invocation of “perspective” suggests that her degree experience has not only equipped her with conceptual tools but has shifted the way she understands her place in relation to others. Purpose, in this account, emerges as an orientation rather than a fixed endpoint, one informed by a reflexive commitment to living attentively, relationally, and with integrity.

Like Rumi, Dimpho also imagined her future in terms of ethical contribution. However, her focus was more explicitly tied to the politics of voice and representation, particularly in relation to race and gender.

So, I want to be able to use that to give voice to the voiceless or the marginalised groups which is mostly in South African society black women (Dimpho).

Dimpho’s statement reflects an emerging sense of purpose rooted in the desire to speak with and for those whose experiences have historically been silenced or misrepresented. Her articulation of “giving voice to the voiceless” gestures toward a broader concern with epistemic and social justice, a recognition that certain groups, particularly black women, remain structurally marginalised within both institutional and societal spaces. In Archer’s (2000) terms, this reflects a process of working out one’s identity in relation to the social order, specifically, deliberating on how to respond to cultural and structural exclusions with a course of action that feels ethically anchored. Dimpho’s internal conversation is shaped by both

personal concerns and an emerging awareness of how her own trajectory might intersect with the struggles of others. This points to a reflexive capacity that moves beyond self-definition toward social alignment, an active positioning of the self in relation to wider collective concerns. Her imagined future is not simply about professional fulfilment. It is about becoming the kind of agent who can contest inherited silences and contribute to broader recognition.

For Katlego, imagining her future was a deeply personal reckoning with how she had come to understand structural inequality and what role she might play in addressing it.

So, it was hard, but you know, those things, they teach you to understand the inequalities. And also they taught me to value my degree because essentially I want to become a policy maker and for me it's personal — it's a personal choice, like it's a personal thing that I want to do — because realising the structural inequalities that exist here in South Africa and how policy makers are the ones who make big impacts in terms of influencing our presidents, the policies, your ministers, whatever. Or just even companies or corporates on what decisions to make (Katlego).

Her words reflect an identity that has been shaped not only through personal experience but through reflexive engagement with sociological and political frameworks. The humanities shifted how she interpreted her place in the world. What was once experienced as difficulty, “it was hard”, emerged as formative, conditioning both critical understanding and a sense of direction. This is not identity as self-description, but as an unfolding trajectory: Katlego recognises her capacity and responsibility to move beyond understanding inequality and become responsive to it. Her aspiration to become a policy maker is not framed in terms of power or prestige, but of meaningful participation in shaping a more just society. Her narrative illustrates how reflexive deliberation enables individuals to align their concerns with a course of action that feels personally necessary and socially responsive. Katlego's imagined future is inseparable from who she has become through the degree, a person who values critical thinking and intends to use it to contribute to structural change.

For Ontha, the personal transformation that emerged from her experience in the humanities was tied to the intention of going back and contributing to the place she came from. Her studies did not distance her from where she came from. They equipped her to go back differently, as someone newly positioned to contribute, teach, and lead.

To also understand where we come from, the history. We need to be critical thinkers of certain consequences that might happen when we take certain decisions,

and humanities subjects often give you a sort of picture or a painting of how you can go about this. But one thing that you also do is when they open your mind you become a leader from where you come from because you go back and you give those teachings of what you have learnt (Ontha).

Ontha's account reveals how her sense of identity was reshaped through critical engagement with disciplinary knowledge and a growing commitment to social responsibility. Her reference to "where we come from" is reflexive, signalling a renewed understanding of her historical and social context and a desire to engage with it critically. For her, the humanities did more than foster abstract critique. They offered enabling conditions for a forward-looking return home, a way to reinvest what she has learned into the communities that shaped her. Leadership, in this account, is not positional but relational. It emerges through responsibility to others and a commitment to shared knowledge. Her narrative illustrates an identity in which ultimate concerns are not only individually held but socially embedded. Ontha's internal conversation is not confined to self-advancement. It is oriented toward continuity and how her personal growth might become a resource for collective transformation. She no longer positions herself only as a product of her background, but as someone who can actively contribute to it, returning with insight, perspective, and purpose.

The narratives explored above illustrate how students' reflexive deliberations were shaped both through personal transformation and a deepened sense of relational responsibility. As students engaged more critically with their disciplines and began to reinterpret their own histories and positions, they also re-evaluated what it meant to act in relation to others. While many entered university carrying the weight of collective expectation, their degrees enabled a shift from obligation to intention, and from fulfilling roles imposed by circumstance to imagining forms of contribution aligned with their emerging values. These changes did not sever their ties to the community. Rather, they reconfigured them. The ethics of Ubuntu remained present, but were rearticulated through new discourses of justice, leadership, and care. Through this, students began to imagine futures in which they could succeed and in which their success was inseparable from the well-being of others. These deliberations reveal how the humanities have the potential to condition a reflexive orientation that is both socially embedded and future-facing, where the personal and political are not in tension, but mutually sustaining.

7.3 Imagined Futures and the Structural Constraints of Becoming

As students approached the end of their degree, they expressed how the reality of life post-university started to weigh on them as they began to question how to carry their commitments into an uncertain future. For many, reflexive engagement had clarified what they valued and who they were becoming in response to the impact of their degree experience, but navigating how to align these insights beyond the university was challenging. It required navigating the structural realities of economic precarity, employment scarcity, and the enduring weight of familial responsibilities. From the beginning of their journeys, students had made degree choices that balanced aspiration with necessity, initially selecting disciplines like Law, Education, or Social Work because they perceived them as a clear pathway to stability, credibility, and the potential to contribute meaningfully to their families and communities, as discussed in Chapter 5. This orientation, shaped by the moral economy of Black Tax and underpinned by the ethics of Ubuntu, had not been forgotten or lost through the course of their studies. Instead, it evolved. As students reimagined who they wanted to become, they did so within the constraints of inherited responsibility and financial instabilities.

Within Archer's (2000) framework of reflexivity, the internal conversation mediates between the temporally distinct identities of the 'I', 'Me', and 'You'. The 'I' reflects the past self. For my research participants, it is the pre-enrolment identity, shaped by cultural conditions like family and community, and structural conditions such as financial constraints and schooling systems that initially informed students' degree choices. The 'Me' represents the present self-information, responding to the experience of higher education and the identity shifts it has enabled, including a clarified sense of values, purpose, and personal projects. As students near the end of their studies, their internal conversations begin to address the 'You': the imagined future self that needs to act within the constraints of a perceived precarious labour market and persistent social responsibilities. This moment of deliberation is marked by tension between who they were, who they are becoming, and what they are expected to be. In considering their futures, students are not only envisioning personal ambitions but negotiating the structural and cultural conditions that continue to hold causal power in the decisions that they make. It is in this complex triadic negotiation between the 'I', 'Me', and 'You' that identity becomes reflexively reworked and situated within the practical realities that shape the limits and possibilities of becoming.

For many participants, concerns about financial security remained central throughout their academic journeys. Despite the personal and intellectual transformation enabled by their degrees, students remained acutely aware of the structural conditions that initially shaped their entry into higher education, particularly the need to secure employment and provide for their families. As they neared graduation, this imperative became more urgent. Students often referred to ‘the real world’ as a way to explain how they considered entering the workforce — a phrase that marked the anticipated transition from university life to the demands of economic survival. As McArthur (2023) cautions, this conflation of selfhood with employability has significant implications for graduate identity formation. In this study, it surfaced most clearly in students’ apprehension about translating their disciplinary knowledge into marketable skills. While participants spoke of gaining valuable personal insight and critical awareness through the humanities, they struggled to reconcile these achievements with the practical demands of job-seeking. As Dimpho explained,

I know I’ve learnt things and understand why things are the way they are but writing about it in an essay is one thing, but that isn’t exactly going to help me find a job. Do I type Sociology into LinkedIn? Like I’m not sure what exactly to search for (Dimpho).

Dimpho’s uncertainty reflects broader patterns identified by Ashton et al. (2023), who observe that many humanities students find it difficult to articulate their skills in ways that align with employer expectations. These concerns were often shaped long before university, as participants internalised community narratives that equated education with a financially stable career pathway, a theme explored in Chapter 5. At university, these early ideas of employability were further shaped by comparisons with peers in professionally oriented programmes who often questioned the value and direction of humanities degrees. In this context, employability was not just a practical concern but a symbolic one, highlighting the perceived legitimacy and social worth of one’s degree.

This tension is intensified by the increasing commodification of higher education. As McArthur (2023) argues, when degrees are reduced to their exchange value in the labour market, graduate identities risk being commodified, equated with the economic utility they can produce. In this logic, students begin to measure their self-worth against the marketability of their qualifications, conflating the roles they are able to perform in the labour market with personal identity (McArthur, 2023). The university, traditionally a space for cultivating critical thought and ethical reflection (Ashwin, 2020; McArthur, 2011), becomes repositioned as a site of

credential production, packaging knowledge as a set of transferable skills to meet global economic demands. These trends are not abstract in the South African context. As Czerniewicz et al. (2020) show, the growing reliance on private funding has aligned institutional priorities with market imperatives, further marginalising disciplines not deemed economically essential, as illustrated in Chapter 2.

Research in South Africa underscores these structural inequalities. While scholars like Schmidt (2018) point out that humanities graduates in the United States do not necessarily experience elevated unemployment, MacGinty (2024) demonstrates that the South African labour market reveals a different reality. Drawing on data from Moleke (2006), MacGinty (2024) shows that graduates from humanities disciplines face disproportionate challenges with limited employment pathways compared to those in Health or Education. Similarly, Oluwajodu et al. (2015) establish a direct link between graduate unemployment and field of study, noting that the labour market prioritises qualifications aligned with science, technology, and economic growth, often those positioned within higher salary brackets. Against this backdrop, participants' anxieties about the future were not expressions of self-doubt alone. They were grounded in the structural constraints of a system that continues to value certain forms of knowledge over others.

The uncertainty students expressed was not only about employment prospects in theory, but about how to envision themselves meaningfully occupying future roles. As they approached the threshold of graduation, some participants began to confront a disjuncture between the intellectual space conditioned during their degrees and the structural and cultural realities of the labour market. While students expressed their ambition and clarity in their interests, they found it challenging to visualise how their disciplinary knowledge might translate into professional environments. As Layla reflected,

I just can't picture what my day-to-day would look like as a Philosophy graduate.
What would my workday look like? What kind of workplace could I be part of?
(Layla).

Layla's reflection reveals a pause in the reflexive process. In Archer's (2003) terms, internal deliberation relies on the ability to project personal identity into the future, deliberating on the idea of the 'You', through establishing an ultimate concern and the formation of coherent personal projects. However, as illustrated through Layla's narrative, that projection is constrained by a lack of recognisable pathways. Without a clear sense of how the values and

capacities enabled through her experience throughout her degree could be enacted in a professional context, Layla's ability to align her concerns with future action was constrained. Her question extends beyond the practicalities of job seeking. It is ontological in nature: *Where and how can someone like me exist after this degree?* A search for where and how her transformed self can find recognition and purpose beyond the university.

Katlego's account deepens this concern, describing not only an absence of information about the world of work, but a feeling of being ill-prepared for the transition.

I feel nervous about life after graduation. I feel like I have Rhodes figured out, I know what my lecturers expect of me, I've figured out how to study and maintain good marks, but I mean, work isn't about assignments. Actually, I don't know what it's about. I wish this was something our lecturers spoke about. I feel like I'm going into the real world blind (Katlego).

Katlego's sense of preparedness within the academic context contrasts sharply with her feelings of disorientation about what lies beyond it. While she developed the reflexive and procedural knowledge necessary to succeed at university, these capacities had not yet been scaffolded into an understanding of post-university life. The disjuncture she expresses was shared among the research participants, a feeling of transition without translation. While the degree experience conditioned a sense of personal transformation, strengthening students' agency, voice, and clarity of purpose, it offered limited preparation for navigating the unfamiliar and often exclusionary logics of the labour market.

Both accounts show a tension between the internal conversation and its conditions of possibility. As Archer (2003) argues, the capacity to project a self into the future is contingent on the availability of imagined roles and viable routes for action. Where structural conditions do not align with the kinds of identities students have worked to develop, or when institutional cultures fail to provide adequate support, the reflexive process can become strained and marked by uncertainty, conflict, or constrained decision-making. Students were concerned about navigating a terrain in which their ultimate concerns and personal projects could not be readily realised. This reflects the challenges of sustaining agency in spaces where the institutional and structural support necessary for enacting imagined futures does not align.

For some participants, the uncertainties surrounding employability prompted renewed reflexive engagement. In Archer's (2003) terms, these students re-evaluated their personal projects and adjusted their decisions in response to the misalignment between their concerns and the socio-

economic conditions they anticipated. Feeling underprepared for the labour market and sensing that an undergraduate degree alone lacked the recognition or credibility needed to secure meaningful employment, some students began to recalibrate their educational trajectories. This was not only a strategic response to market demands, but a reflexive effort to align the knowledge and capacities developed through their degree with what they perceived as necessary to be recognised and competitive in the professional world. This was a reflexive process through which students weighed the commitments and perspectives shaped by their degree against the economic pressures and uncertainties they were preparing to face, within the context of their cultural responsibilities.

Rumi captured this tension clearly.

Yes, I, I do think it has value but then, now I, okay, I can't end at Honours. I have to do Master's and PhD now so it can have more value, like have to like add more value on it so that I can find a way (Rumi).

For Rumi, the value of her degree was unquestioned in intellectual and ethical terms. It had equipped her with the capacity to understand the structural 'gaps' in her community and to imagine how they might be addressed. However, this recognition of knowledge as socially meaningful stood in tension with the perceived limitations of her qualification in the employment landscape. The decision to pursue further study reflects an effort to resolve this incongruity and to gain symbolic and institutional capital that might allow her to make the kind of contribution she envisions. In Archer's (2003) terms, this reflects contextual incongruity, a situation in which the internal conversation confronts structural and cultural conditions that do not readily support the realisation of one's personal projects. Rumi responds to this contextual incongruity by adjusting her course of action: choosing to pursue further study not as a postponement, but as a way to sustain her evolving identity and commit more fully to her ultimate concern and personal projects.

Phumi articulated a similar rationale.

In the world we live in, everyone has an [undergraduate degree]. Finding work in this country is already hard. The only way to stand out and have a bit of a chance is get a Masters. It makes me seem more valuable and maybe I will know more about what the real world will need of me (Phumi).

For Phumi, the Master's degree is positioned as both a competitive necessity and an opportunity to gain clarity. Phumi perceives her undergraduate degree as having limited value in a saturated and uncertain labour market. Her decision to continue is also motivated by a desire to better understand what life beyond the university entails, a gap she feels has not yet been filled. Her internal deliberation reveals an attempt to reconcile the development of personal identity with a world that does not offer clear or coherent roles for that identity to inhabit. The choice to pursue postgraduate study is thus both a defence against precarity and an extension of the reflexive project of becoming.

Others, like Steve and Liya, expressed a tentative orientation toward academia or research, not always out of aspiration, but out of perceived alignment with the limited possibilities available to humanities graduates.

But I would love to eventually lecture. That's something I always want. Also, it feels like a natural progression when you do Anthropology, like in terms of practically earning money (Steve).

And recently before I even thought about the PhD thing, when I was looking at jobs, I was looking at something to do with research, a researcher. So maybe that's where I want to go. I'm not like — at this point I don't know. I don't know what I want to do (Liya).

These accounts reflect a more uncertain or hesitant form of reflexivity. Steve's comment that academia feels like a "natural progression" suggests that, in the absence of diverse or visible career pathways, students may internalise narrow professional imaginaries, even when those do not fully align with their original motivations or concerns. Similarly, Liya's uncertainty is indicative of the limited narrative resources available to make sense of a future as a humanities graduate. The reflexive process, in these instances, is constrained.

For Shae, the orientation toward the future was stripped of idealism altogether.

"I want to change the world." I don't have that intuition. I just want to earn money and live somewhere where I'm safe. No femicide. And my academics are what are going to get me there (Shae).

Shae's reflection captures a pragmatic and personal redefinition of what it means to lead a meaningful life. Her priorities, safety, stability, and financial independence, emerge from navigating the pervasive realities of gender-based violence and economic insecurity. In contrast to the more relationally-embedded aspirations articulated by many black students in this study,

Shae's internal deliberation is centred on her individual well-being and personal security. This is not to suggest that her concerns are less valid, but to highlight how her imagined future does not exist in relation to the kinds of cultural and familial obligations that shaped the aspirations of many of her peers. As discussed in Chapter 5, the absence of intergenerational pressures such as Black Tax and the accompanying ethic of Ubuntu, meant that students like Shae (and Steve) did not hold the cultural expectation to imagine their futures in relation to others' expectations or collective upliftment. Their internal conversations were shaped primarily by personal preferences and private concerns, rather than by a moral economy of reciprocity or responsibility. In this way, Shae's narrative highlights how cultural expectations shape the reflexive process, influencing not only what students envision for their futures but also who those futures should include.

Together, these accounts illustrate that deliberating on an imagined future is not a linear or uncomplicated process. It involves working out who one wants to become in relation to a world that may not easily align with that becoming. The internal conversation continues, but often under conditions of uncertainty, contradiction, and constraint.

The narratives above show that students' reflections on who they hoped to become remained deeply shaped by the same structural and cultural conditions that influenced their decision to pursue a degree. While many spoke about meaningful shifts in how they understood themselves and the world, they also described the ongoing pressure of financial precarity, familial obligation, and the desire for upward mobility — factors that had initially framed higher education as a pathway to a better future. These concerns did not fall away but remained present as they imagined their futures, highlighting how past and present conditions intersect in shaping identity. In this sense, students were not choosing between old and new understandings but navigating their transformed sense of self within the ongoing realities of structural constraint. As shown in Chapter 6, many participants struggled to form a coherent corporate identity, a future-oriented sense of self in relation to work, because the material conditions needed to realise their aspirations were uncertain or lacking. Their internal conversations became spaces of negotiation, as they weighed what now felt meaningful against what was practically possible. This underscores the central claim of the chapter: becoming is not a linear or fully agentic process, but one continually shaped by the institutional, social, and economic contexts within which students must make their way.

7.4 Conclusion

Across the three sections of this chapter, I have traced how final-year humanities students navigated the complex process of becoming, developing voice, formulating purpose, and imagining possible futures. These were not linear or uniform trajectories. Rather, they emerged through ongoing reflexive deliberation shaped by students' lived experiences, structural constraints, and disciplinary engagements. While Archer's (2000, 2003) agential morphogenetic approach provides the conceptual language to analyse these shifts, highlighting how personal identity is formed through the interplay of structural conditions, cultural norms, and reflexive agency, the students' narratives offer rich insight into what this process looks and feels like from within. Reflexivity was not exercised in a vacuum. It was exercised within unequal systems, constrained opportunities, and deeply relational moral economies shaped by histories of exclusion and expectations of care.

The narratives show how the development of voice and purpose was inseparable from students' experiences of being recognised, not only in classrooms and curricula, but also in their ability to see themselves as legitimate participants in knowledge production. For many, this recognition enabled a reorientation toward the future, not simply as a space of employment, but as a space of contribution. Personal projects were formed through ethical reflection, community-rooted commitments, and the desire to act meaningfully in response to inherited inequalities. However, this sense of becoming was not unbounded. While students demonstrated a growing capacity to deliberate on what mattered and who they wanted to be, the conditions under which these projects could be realised were uneven and, for many, uncertain.

The anticipation regarding the transition to life beyond university brought these tensions into sharper focus. As students looked ahead, they were required to reconcile the values and commitments developed through their studies with the realities of an unpredictable labour market, the enduring weight of Black Tax, and limited institutional support in bridging the university-workplace divide. Some, like Sibu and Katlego, remained committed to their sense of social purpose, while others like Shae and Layla reconsidered their aspirations around safety, stability, or survival. Across these diverse responses, what remained constant was the ongoing reflexive engagement with identity, who they were becoming, what they could do with their degrees, and how to position themselves within the social world. These accounts reveal that the development of corporate identity, as explored in Chapter 6, was frequently marked by

ambiguity, with students struggling to align their emerging sense of self with possible professional pathways. Many students remained caught between who they had become through the humanities and who they were expected to be in a market-oriented society.

Within this uncertainty, a meaningful shift had still occurred. The experience of a humanities degree shaped the students' capacities to think critically, live ethically, and navigate uncertainty. The personal projects articulated by participants may not all be realised, but their formation reflects a kind of personal transformation that is both agentic and socially situated. It rests on the ability to question, to connect, and to envision different possibilities, even within the constraints that persist.

Interlude II: On the Other Side

Looking Ahead and Imagining Futures Vignettes

This second set of vignettes draws from the part of the interviews where students were asked to consider their futures. Building on earlier reflections about their journeys into and through university, these narratives reveal how students were making sense of what their studies had meant, what they had gained, and what uncertainties remained as they looked ahead. Rather than offering neat conclusions, their accounts reflect the ongoing work of aligning personal transformation with social responsibility, and internal clarity with external possibility. In revisiting these reflections, this section underscores that becoming is not a fixed outcome of the degree experience, but a continuing process shaped by hope, constraint, and the search for meaningful futures.

Sibu – Sociology

Black African Woman

Sibu's time at university deepened her commitment to both personal growth and social justice. While she entered Rhodes focused on securing financial stability, she emerged with a broader sense of purpose, determined to contribute to transformation through meaningful work. The institution echoed the support she had once found at school, offering space for academic and personal development. But, the weight of familial responsibility remains. With plans to pursue a Master's in Sociology, Sibu hopes to build a future that balances financial security with socially engaged work, a future shaped by resilience, reflection, and a deep sense of duty to those she carries with her.

Nathi – Sociology

Black African Man

Nathi's turn to Philosophy offered a kind of intellectual homecoming a space where he could grapple with questions of identity, selfhood, and social meaning. Leaving Law behind was not easy, especially as it disrupted the expectations he had grown up with. But, Philosophy allowed him to think freely, locate himself in the discourse, and be recognised for his ideas. While he is committed to postgraduate study, he remains conflicted. The academic path feels true to who he is, but the uncertainty of financial stability weighs heavily. His story captures a tension that remains unresolved: the struggle to reconcile intellectual passion with economic necessity.

Steve – Anthropology

White Man

Through his studies in the humanities, Steve discovered new ways of thinking about care, crisis, and the human condition, insights he hopes to carry into the medical field. He now envisions a

future where his academic training intersects with his earlier experiences, pursuing a career as a paramedic or in emergency care. While his trajectory remains multidisciplinary, what anchors him is the search for meaningful, applied work. For Steve, studying the humanities helped him reframe his sense of purpose, not away from practicality, but toward a form of impact grounded in empathy and understanding.

Liya – Sociology

Black African Woman

Throughout her time at university, Liya's decisions were grounded in a desire for financial stability and a commitment to supporting her family. While her degree was not always aligned with her personal interests, it offered a way forward, towards security, independence, and contribution. Now planning to pursue a Master's and a career in research, Liya continues to make pragmatic choices shaped by her context. Her academic journey has been less about self-discovery in a personal sense, and more about finding a viable route through which she can uplift herself and those she cares for.

Shae – Philosophy

White Woman

University became more than just an academic pursuit for Shae — it offered a space for intellectual growth and a possible path to the secure, peaceful future she longed for. Her studies allowed her to engage deeply with ideas, challenge her assumptions, and reflect on her place in the world. But beyond this personal expansion, her degree represented an opportunity: a stepping stone to postgraduate scholarships and the possibility of building a life in a safer, more stable environment. For Shae, the humanities became both a sanctuary for thought and a strategy for survival, linking intellectual freedom to tangible hopes for a different future.

Layla – Philosophy

Coloured Woman

Studying Philosophy gave Layla the conceptual language and critical tools to reflect on her life and identity in ways she had never been able to before. It helped her make sense of earlier experiences and offered a space for personal healing and intellectual expansion. Without the immediate pressure to earn or provide, she has been able to fully immerse herself in learning, guided by a love for ideas and their transformative potential. Looking ahead, Layla hopes to pursue postgraduate studies abroad, continuing to grow as a thinker while remaining open to where her philosophical path might lead.

Lerato – Politics

Black African Woman

Lerato's time in the Humanities, especially through her study of Politics, helped her develop a stronger, more assured voice. While she had always been independent, her degree affirmed and deepened her confidence, sharpening her thinking and broadening her perspective on the world. She values the way her studies exposed her to different views, teaching her to appreciate complexity and nuance. For Lerato, learning has become a space of empowerment. She now

sees herself in academia long-term, with aspirations to complete a doctorate, driven not only by achievement but by the transformative journey of education itself.

Dimpho – Sociology

Black African Woman

Dimpho's academic journey deepened her commitment to understanding the lived realities of those marginalised by social structures. Through her Social Science studies, she developed a strong sense of purpose: to provide visibility and voice to the misunderstood and overlooked. As a self-identified feminist and aspiring black female academic in Sociology, Dimpho sees her work as a way to challenge dominant narratives and support her community. Her studies have not only shaped how she sees the world but affirmed her role within it — as someone who seeks to ask difficult questions and contribute to a more just and inclusive society.

Rumi – Sociology

Black African Woman

Although she describes herself as shy and reserved, Rumi's university journey gave her space to grow in confidence and find her voice. Sociology offered a new lens for understanding the structural challenges her community faces and opened new possibilities for how she might contribute. While she remains committed to community work, she now sees herself making an impact not only through service but also through research and academic engagement. With aspirations to complete a Master's and eventually a PhD, Rumi's path has evolved, but her commitment to social transformation remains firmly in place.

Nyasha – Politics

Black African Woman

Through her studies, Nyasha experienced a quiet but profound shift. She began to find confidence in her own thinking and increasingly grew drawn to the intellectual possibilities of academia. Her engagement with the humanities not only challenged her inherited beliefs but also opened new ways of understanding people and the world around her. What began as a constrained path has since become one of genuine curiosity and transformation. She now hopes to pursue postgraduate study, excited by the prospect of contributing to academic work that continues to challenge and expand her worldview.

Ontha – Politics

Black African Woman

Through her studies, Ontha found not only her academic interests but also her voice. Identifying as a feminist, she became confident in naming her values and articulating her vision for change. While she remains unsure how her degree will translate into the world of work, she is clear about her broader purpose: to take what she has learned and use it to improve the conditions in her home community. Committed to social transformation, she hopes to continue into a Master's and eventually a PhD.

Phumi – Politics*Black African Woman*

Despite her initial uncertainty, Phumi's studies became a space of personal growth. She developed confidence and a stronger sense of self, describing how her thoughts and opinions came to feel meaningful and valid. Although she remains unsure about possible career paths, she now carries a sense of self-assurance that she didn't have before, one shaped through learning, reflection, and recognition.

Nozi – Politics*Black African Woman*

Studying at Rhodes University transformed how Nozi sees herself and her capabilities. She describes gaining confidence and learning how to advocate for herself, something she once found difficult. While she hopes to pursue a Master's degree and dreams of starting her own NGO, she worries that her limited social networks will make it difficult to enter the job market. Still, her undergraduate experience affirmed her passion for wellness and community care, which she began cultivating through a support initiative she developed on campus, work she hopes to continue in the future.

Katlego – Politics*Black African Woman*

University affirmed Katlego's sense of purpose. The academic space empowered her and nurtured her growing interest in African foreign policy, which became the subject of a research paper she hopes to publish. Encouraged by meaningful mentorship and opportunities to connect with established scholars through her department, Katlego is eager to continue learning. She now plans to pursue a Master's degree and eventually a PhD, with a clear sense that research and academic work are paths where she can contribute and thrive.

Chapter 8: Discussion

Navigating Meaning, Structure, and the Purpose of Higher Education

Becoming a graduate in contemporary South Africa is a complex and deeply situated process. In this study, I aimed to understand how humanities honours students make sense of themselves and their futures in the context of structural inequality, cultural obligation, and the challenges universities face in balancing economic utility with social and personal transformation. Drawing on Archer's (1997, 2000) Social Realism framework, I explored how students engage in internal conversations to interpret their experiences, articulate what matters most to them, and consider who they want to be in the world. The process through which students come to understand who they are, what they value, and how they hope to act in the world is neither linear nor guaranteed to result in lives that reflect those aspirations. The structural and cultural conditions students must navigate within and beyond the university significantly impact the potential for these imagined futures to be realised.

In this chapter, I draw together the findings from the narratives, using a social realist framework, to develop three key arguments about how identity, purpose, and agency are enabled and constrained within the context of South African higher education.

First, I argue how students' reflexivity and deliberations are a situated practice, shaped by economic precarity, social obligation, and cultural histories that have been developed pre-enrolment. While Archer (2000, 2003) conceptualises reflexivity as an internal mechanism for mediating structure and agency, shaped by individuals' concerns, emotional commentaries, and cultural conditioning, my findings in this study extend this understanding. They show how, in the South African context, reflexivity is often embedded in a deeply relational and ethical orientation, especially for black students. In this way, the internal deliberation is not only about individual self-clarification, but also about navigating inherited responsibilities to family and community and imagining futures in ways that remain accountable to those relationships.

Second, I show that the humanities offer more than disciplinary content — they can become a space in which students form personal projects, articulate emerging identities, and imagine new modes of being. Through their studies, students developed an enriched sense of self, deepened ethical commitments, and a language through which to make sense of their lives and their

histories. However, these forms of becoming unfolded within institutional and cultural environments that did not always recognise or support who they were becoming.

Third, I argue that while many students gained clarity about their concerns and commitments, the transition toward acting on those concerns, what Archer (2000) terms corporate identity, was often constrained. Students faced structural constraints, limited institutional guidance, and an uncertain labour market, which left many navigating the future hesitantly. In my study I foreground the gap between personal transformation and the external conditions that shape its realisation, including socioeconomic inequality, the degree's limited support for career navigation, cultural obligations, and labour market constraints. I show that the process of becoming, of forming a sense of self, purpose, and future direction, is generative and continuous, shaped by agency but continually negotiated within the constraints and possibilities of the social world students inhabit.

8.1 Reflexivity as Situated: Agency Amid Constraint

The findings I presented in Chapters 5 and 6 show that students' personal identities were already being shaped before university, through ongoing reflection on their responsibilities, social environments, and future aspirations, long before academic learning began to influence these processes. Rather than beginning at the point of enrolment, students' internal conversations had already been shaped by the structural and cultural conditions of their social worlds, particularly through ongoing deliberation about how to navigate familial responsibilities, financial constraints and inherited cultural expectations stemming from the legacies of apartheid. For many, the decision to enter university was not primarily a personal or autonomous one, but a deeply relational act rooted in responsibility to others. These were culturally-bound decisions made within constrained opportunity structures, where higher education was understood not only as a means of personal advancement but as a vehicle for collective upliftment. As the literature on Black Tax, stemming from Ubuntu, in South Africa shows, these decisions were made amid a context in which educational attainment carries intergenerational weight and value (Fongwa, 2021; Dube, 2022; Mangoma & Wilson-Prangle, 2019). For these students, the internal conversation was already oriented toward ultimate concerns, shaped not only by what they wanted for themselves but by what they felt they had a responsibility to do for others.

Archer's (2003) model of reflexivity, which conceptualises the internal conversation as a mechanism for mediating between structure and agency, provides a valuable framework for understanding these deliberations. Reflexivity, as conceptualised by Archer (2000, 2003), is central to identity formation. It is through internal deliberation that individuals clarify their ultimate concerns, define personal projects, and decide how to act within the structural and cultural contexts they inhabit. However, the student narratives in this study surfaced the extent to which this process is situated, not only in relation to structural barriers like poverty, educational exclusion, and labour market precarity, but also through cultural expectations that complicate the notion of autonomous agency.

Many students in this study did not inhabit a single, stable mode of reflexivity. Instead, they shifted between communicative and autonomous orientations depending on their social and economic circumstances. This movement was especially visible as they negotiated obligations to family, financial insecurity, and emerging personal aspirations. These patterns both affirm and extend Archer's (2000) account of reflexivity. While Archer (2008) acknowledges that reflexivity is socially embedded, her typology tends to treat reflexive modes as relatively fixed within individuals. By contrast, my findings illustrate that under conditions of constraint, reflexive orientations can be situational and dynamic. This aligns with critiques from Atkinson (2010) and Adams (2006), who argue that Archer's (2000, 2003) framework does not account for how social pressures and moral obligations can destabilise or blur reflexive modes. For participants in my study, reflexivity was not a consistent internal orientation but a shifting and often difficult process of making sense of competing concerns about who they were, what they valued, and who they were becoming in relation to others.

This is particularly evident in students' accounts of how they chose their degrees. As shown in Chapter 5, fields such as Law, Education, and Psychology were selected both for their perceived employability and the promise they held to contribute to community upliftment and to honour familial sacrifices and expectations. In these cases, reflexivity was oriented not only toward individual advancement but toward collective accountability, a logic consistent with the ethics of Ubuntu, in which selfhood is understood as relational and responsibility as shared. The personal projects students pursued were inseparable from the social and cultural landscapes they were embedded in.

Thus, through my findings I suggest that in contexts marked by economic instability and enduring inequality, reflexivity is not merely a mechanism for self-realisation, but a mode of

ethical negotiation. It is shaped by necessity as much as aspiration, and it is directed as much toward others as toward the self. In the beginning, many of them relied on communicative reflexivity because they lacked the material or informational resources to navigate choices independently and, more significantly, because of cultural norms that emphasised the power of parental authority, responsiveness to family expectations, and the value of relational decision making. Their internal conversations were shaped by a deep-seated sense that decision-making was not an individual pursuit but a shared, negotiated process embedded in familial and cultural ties.

The findings show that for the students in this study, particularly black students, personal identity was not a separate or purely individualised construct, but one deeply interwoven with familial ties, communal expectations, and the legacies of social inequality. Their reflexive deliberations were shaped by an acute awareness of their embeddedness in networks of obligation and care, and their decisions were often as much about maintaining relational coherence as they were about pursuing individual goals. In contexts marked by persistent structural constraints, identity formation emerged not through an isolated sense of self but through the ongoing negotiation of what it means to act responsibly toward others while seeking to realise one's own aspirations. Thus, reflexivity functioned as an ethical and relational process, one in which students worked to align their actions with both personal values and collective responsibilities. Students' situated reflexivity reveals that their identities were forged through navigating the tensions between agency and constraint, self and community, in ways that reflect the social and moral weight their decisions carry.

8.2 Identity Formation and Moral Orientation in the Humanities

The findings explored in Chapters 6 and 7 illuminate how the humanities disciplines became sites of identity work, ethical reflection, and meaning-making for many students. This process was not linear or uniformly personally transformative, but shaped through uneven encounters with disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical environments, and shifting senses of self. For many, studying the humanities was not just about discovering career pathways or intellectual interests. It became a way of negotiating personal and shared meaning within a landscape shaped by uneven opportunity, inherited responsibility, and the shifting role of the university, which has increasingly been defined by market imperatives and its own financial constraints that complicate its ability to support students' holistic development.

Students' narratives show that reflexive deliberation is often centred on ethical and existential questions: *Who am I becoming? What matters to me? What am I responsible for?* These questions emerged not in abstraction, but in relation to students' lived realities and cultural values, particularly the ethics of Ubuntu and the intergenerational responsibilities embedded in Black Tax. This supports Nussbaum's (1998, 2002) view that the humanities engage deeply with questions of meaning, identity, and value. However, this view is also extended: in the South African context, these questions are tethered to histories of exclusion, moral duty, and collective survival. Reflexivity thus was not just inward-facing. It was relational, shaped by inherited commitments to community and by the social contradictions students had to navigate.

These findings echo McLean et al.'s (2018) argument that the power of disciplinary knowledge to be personally transformative is shaped by students' ability to connect that knowledge with their lived experience. Similarly to McLean et al.'s (2018) study, my study reveals that it is not access to higher education alone that matters, but how students engage with knowledge, and whether that engagement is recognised and supported. For many participants in this study, especially those from working-class backgrounds, the value of the humanities lay in moments of discomfort, questioning, and reorientation, what McLean et al. (2018) describe as 'boundary crossing' and 'becoming.' These moments of discomfort, questioning, and reorientation often unfolded through reflexive deliberation, as students worked to make sense of the disciplinary knowledge they encountered in light of their own social realities, values, and lived experiences, making the knowledge both personally relevant and morally significant.

The experiences of students navigating identity, meaning, and aspiration through their humanities studies reflect the broader tensions that define the role of the humanities in post-apartheid higher education — disciplines that are intended to enable critical engagement and personal transformation, but remain shaped by histories of exclusion, epistemic hierarchy, and uncertain value within a market-oriented system (Matthews, 2020; Luckett, 2022; Vale, 2020). While scholars (Matthews, 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2022; Luckett, 2022) often highlight the alienation students feel when their experiences are not reflected in the curriculum, the participants in this study offered a different perspective. Many described how their degree and disciplinary discourses enabled them to understand their histories, their communities, and their place in the world more critically. Rather than being epistemically disconnected, students experienced the humanities as intellectually and personally resonant spaces where the

knowledge encountered helped them make sense of inequality, develop purpose, and reflect on their lived experiences and circumstances in new ways.

McLean et al. (2018) argue that whether students experience higher education as personally transformative depends, in part, on how they conceptualise the purpose of university. In their study, students who viewed university as a space for engaging with disciplinary knowledge were more likely to expand their personal projects to include self-development and a commitment to social change (McLean et al., 2018). By contrast, those who understood university primarily as a route to a credential were less inclined to see knowledge as a tool for reinterpreting themselves or the world around them (McLean et al., 2018). While this distinction is useful, the findings of my study point to a different dynamic. Most participants did not enter university with a view of it as a space for personal transformation. Their choices were shaped by the need for survival, the historical legacy of exclusion, and a deep sense of responsibility to family and community. Studying was not understood as individual advancement, but as a means to fulfil shared hopes for upward mobility and collective progress. In this context, selecting a degree was less about self-realisation and more about securing a career path seen as socially and economically valuable. However, through their engagement with the humanities, many students began to reflect more critically on their histories, values, and futures. It was through this encounter with disciplinary knowledge, rather than any prior expectation, reflexivity, shifts in identity, and new ways of imagining the self and society began to take shape.

At the same time, students were not naïve to the economic and symbolic devaluation of their disciplines more broadly. As discussed in Chapter 2, the humanities remain under pressure to justify their relevance in a market-driven university system increasingly shaped by neoliberal imperatives (McArthur, 2011; Mintz, 2021; Agmata 2019). Students felt this tension acutely. They often had to justify their degree choices to families and communities expecting economic return and they carried the uncertainty of how these degrees would be valued beyond the university. For many, this created an ongoing negotiation between studying what felt personally meaningful and pursuing what felt secure, a negotiation shaped by the structural weight of inequality, the moral economy of responsibility, and the precarious logics of employability.

Still, within this tension lies one of the most enduring contributions of the humanities: the space they enable for personal transformation that is not reducible to market value. While students

felt the disciplines did not provide clear career paths, they offered them a way to reflect critically on their histories, responsibilities, and values, and to imagine lives shaped by meaning rather than only survival. This process involved more than acquiring disciplinary knowledge. It reflected what Biesta (2009) terms subjectification, the formation of the self through critical reflection, independent judgment, and rethinking one's relationship to the social world. It enabled students to develop ethical awareness, cultivate voice, and think relationally about who they were becoming in the context of others. As Ashwin (2020) and Marginson (2024) argue, the university's role should not be limited to preparing students for the labour market, but must also support them to examine their assumptions, reason about their lives, and engage with the social world in ways that deepen their capacities for judgement, purpose, and responsibility.

The findings in the current study demonstrate that for many students, particularly those entering university from contexts of material constraint and social obligation, this kind of personal transformation was especially significant. Their engagement with the humanities allowed them to make sense of their circumstances, articulate what mattered to them, and reimagine their place in society. While they remained concerned with economic outcomes, this did not preclude a deep investment in the formation of self. These developments often took shape through grappling with difficult content, being challenged to think in new and complex ways, and reflecting on social injustice and their place within it. These moments marked more than academic achievement. They were turning points in how students understood their place in the world and the ways in which they could contribute to it.

In this light, identity shifts through the humanities were not a linear process of acquiring skills, but a dialogical negotiation between past experience, disciplinary encounter, and future aspiration. It was shaped by pedagogical relationships, disciplinary content, and the broader institutional culture, all of which mediated how students made meaning of their studies. Despite the devaluing of the humanities within market-driven discourses of value (McArthur, 2011; Croft & Bradshaw, 2025), this study shows their enduring potential to foster intellectual and ethical agency. The development of identity, purpose, and belonging cannot be separated from the capacity to engage meaningfully with knowledge, nor from the conditions that make such engagement possible.

Students' experiences within the humanities reflect both the promise and the tension of what higher education can offer. While they did not emerge from their studies with all the answers or clear vocational pathways, many articulated a stronger sense of self, a deepened ethical

awareness, and a commitment to social responsibility that was formed through sustained engagement with disciplinary knowledge, facilitated through enabling structural and cultural learning conditions. This process, what Biesta (2009) terms subjectification, is not peripheral to the aims of higher education but central to its transformative potential. At the same time, as this chapter has shown, this kind of personal transformation unfolded within a system still shaped by competing demands and pressures to demonstrate economic utility. That students found meaning, direction, and a sense of purpose within the humanities offers insight into their significance as disciplines capable of nurturing reflective, socially engaged individuals. It is this formation of identity and purpose, situated in relation to others and to the broader world that underscores the humanities' role in fostering not just graduates but potentially thoughtful contributors to a more just society.

8.3 The Value of Dialogue in an Increasingly Digital University

Amidst the shift toward digitisation and online delivery in higher education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and reinforced by the rise of AI and market-oriented efficiencies, there is growing concern about what is lost when learning is separated from in-person dialogue (Talib et al., 2021; Woldegiorgis, 2022). For many students in this study, learning was not experienced as an isolated encounter with content, but as a dialogic process of relational engagement. It was in conversation with peers, lecturers, and ideas that they developed voice, clarified meaning, and formed purpose. These experiences underscore the importance of learning through participation, dialogue, and shared meaning-making, especially in the humanities, where developing critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social understanding depends on sustained, interactive engagement with others (Nussbaum, 2002; Davidson & Goldberg, 2004).

The value of dialogue also emerged in the context of identity formation. Many participants described how classroom discussions, seminar debates, and informal peer exchanges were critical in shaping their understanding of self and society. These spaces allowed them to test ideas, articulate concerns, and encounter differences in ways that challenged and extended their own perspectives. As highlighted in previous chapters, this was not only an intellectual process but a deeply relational and ethical one, anchored in students' desires to live with meaning, contribute to their communities, and navigate inherited obligations. In this way, dialogue acted as a medium through which students could align their personal projects with broader social realities.

However, the increasing digitisation of learning risks narrowing the possibilities for dialogic, relational engagement. While this shift has exacerbated longstanding inequalities across the South African higher education landscape, particularly for rural and working-class students without stable access to technology or supportive study environments (Woldegiorgis, 2022), its potential impact could play out differently in residential contexts like Rhodes University. Here, the concern is less about access and more about the disruption of the relational and dialogic aspects of campus life that are central to the humanities learning experience. Many institutional digital strategies are shaped by what Timmis and Muhuro (2019) call a “technocratic consciousness,” an approach that frames education primarily in terms of efficiency, access, and content delivery. Within this logic, students are positioned as decontextualised consumers of information, rather than as relational beings whose learning is shaped by their histories, cultural contexts, and social ties, as I illustrated in this study. This overlooks the importance of dialogue, exchange, and shared meaning-making.

The potential diminishing of dialogic spaces in higher education, in response to an increasingly digital approach to teaching and learning, raises concerns that extend beyond pedagogy. It poses a democratic challenge by narrowing the conditions under which students can meaningfully engage, reflect, and develop as socially responsible individuals. When educational practices prioritise one-way content delivery over dialogic exchange, they have the potential to limit students’ ability to make sense of knowledge in relation to their lives, communities, and values. This shift undermines the relational and interpretive dimensions of learning that are essential for fostering critical thinking, ethical reflection, and personal transformation. As Ashwin (2020) argues, personal development in higher education is not solely about the accumulation of knowledge, but about making meaning, reflecting alongside others, and learning how to act ethically in a shared world.

Thus, this study reaffirms the need to protect and reimagine dialogic pedagogies in an era of increasing digital abstraction. It is often through dialogue that education becomes not only intelligible but potentially transformative, offering an encounter with others that can support the formation of self, foster deeper understanding, and enable more meaningful engagement with knowledge.

The experiences of participants in this study suggest that dialogic engagement played a meaningful role in how they developed confidence, formed perspectives, and began to articulate a sense of self in relation to others. Within the context of their humanities studies,

dialogue was not simply a mode of instruction but a process through which critical reflection and relational understanding could take shape. As the higher education sector continues to shift toward digital delivery, these accounts point to the need for careful attention to the kinds of learning environments that support such interaction. While this study cannot speak to all contexts, it highlights how, for these students, dialogic spaces were integral to how they experienced personal transformation through education.

8.4 Navigating the Limits of Becoming: Transformation, Livelihood, and Institutional Responsibility

As discussed in the sections above, students' degree experiences often enabled meaningful self-reflection, a stronger sense of voice, and identity work. However, this process of becoming, of articulating values, clarifying purpose, and imagining futures, did not happen in isolation. It was deeply entangled with structural and cultural realities: the need to earn an income, support families, and establish professional footing in a deeply unequal society. In this context, personal transformation gained significance only when linked to viable pathways for social and economic participation. Students' aspirations were shaped by tangible concerns about survival, mobility, and justice. For many, developing a meaningful sense of self was inseparable from the desire, and the need, to take purposeful action in the world.

As in Case et al. (2018), in this study I show that while the university played a significant and often positive role in shaping how students saw themselves, the benefits of that experience, particularly in relation to thinking about their futures, were not equally accessible to all. Social class remained a key factor shaping students' access to university, their ability to succeed within it, and their prospects after graduation. While some students spoke with growing confidence about who they were becoming, others described an ongoing tension between personal growth and structural constraints, an experience that closely echoes the findings of Case et al. (2018), where students' transformative journeys were similarly shaped and, at times, limited by structural pressures. This highlights a key insight: personal transformation in higher education is not evenly distributed but is shaped by the dynamic interplay between structural conditions and agency. In both this study and Case et al. (2018), students' capacity to reflect, deliberate on their futures and exercise their agency was mediated by material constraints, access to support, and the degree to which they could navigate and make sense of their studies.

While students spoke of developing clarity around who they wanted to be and how they hoped to contribute to their communities, their ability to enact these intentions was often constrained.

Some felt underprepared for the world of work. Others struggled to see how their academic insights could be recognised or translated into professional contexts. This disjuncture reflects what Archer (2003) describes as a breakdown in the development of corporate identity, the stage at which individuals seek to translate their internal concerns into collective action or social contribution. When institutional and structural conditions do not align with or support these concerns, the capacity to act on one's commitments is constrained. The persistence of structural and cultural conditions that had not yet adapted to the needs and concerns of students, in relation to the complexity of their lived experiences, constrained their ability to translate internal deliberation into concrete action. The social context remained largely unchanged, limiting the realisation of personal identity as corporate identity.

As outlined in the Chapters 1 and 2, these limitations can be understood in relation to the contested and evolving role of the university. In post-apartheid South Africa, higher education is tasked with dual, often conflicting mandates, i.e., to redress historical injustices and foster inclusive citizenship, while also responding to economic demands for skills production, employability, and accountability (Badat, 2007; Lange, 2012; Soudien, 2008). Within this framing, students are expected to emerge both as informed, critically engaged citizens and as professionals who can contribute to the economy. However, these aims are not always aligned in practice.

The findings show that students often experienced a disconnect between the university's discourse of transformation, which emphasises redress, empowerment, and social justice, and the limited institutional mechanisms available to support their professional futures. While higher education was framed as a space of personal development and societal contribution, students frequently found that this transformative promise was not matched by practical guidance or structural support, particularly when it came to translating their academic experience into meaningful economic or social participation.

This tension is heightened by structural barriers that continue to define access to opportunity. As discussed in Chapter 2, NSFAS funding challenges, especially around delayed disbursements and the psychological toll of debt, impact students' ability to plan for life after graduation. For many, the possibility of postgraduate study, viewed to strengthen employability or pursue long-term goals, was foreclosed by financial strain. Some students who extended their studies did so as a strategic response to perceived gaps between their current qualifications and the realities of the job market.

The difficulty of navigating life after university reveals that personal growth within higher education is not solely a matter of internal development. It also depends on whether students are adequately supported to translate their insights, skills, and evolving sense of purpose into meaningful opportunities for social and economic participation beyond the university. It is equally about how institutions engage with the realities students face, responding to their evolving identities by providing the recognition, resources, and structural support needed to translate intention into action. Without this responsiveness, the development of purpose and agency remains constrained by external conditions beyond students' control. As McArthur (2011) and Ashwin (2020) argue, higher education should not reduce its purpose to producing economically useful graduates. However, in this study I show that it should also not neglect the material realities that shape how students can use their education. In this study, participants' narratives surface the need for a more integrated vision, one that holds together economic mobility and personal transformation, recognising that for many students these are not competing aims but mutually reinforcing imperatives.

These findings raise important considerations for the transformation agenda in South African higher education. While access and demographic inclusion have been central goals, students' narratives suggest that transformation also requires attentiveness to how students make meaning of their studies and to how institutions extend support for these meanings into students' post-university trajectories. For the students in this study, the university was not just a place to acquire knowledge, but to imagine new ways of living. Whether these visions can be realised depends partly on how institutions define and support student success, not only in terms of measurable outcomes, but also in relation to students' contexts, who they are becoming, and the forms of contribution they hope to make.

These findings underscore that the process of navigating life beyond university is shaped both by individual agency and the extent to which institutions recognise and respond to students' lived realities. In this view, transformation is not an endpoint, but an ongoing relational process, one that requires higher education to attend both to the identities students cultivate within the university and to the conditions that enable them to act meaningfully beyond it.

8.5 Student Identity Work Through a Social Realist Lens

This study contributes to Archer's (2000, 2003) social realist theory of reflexivity by demonstrating how internal conversations are shaped not only by individual reasoning but by

relational and moral obligations that are embedded within cultural, historical, and structural contexts. In Archer's (2000, 2003) framework, reflexivity is the mechanism through which individuals navigate structure and agency. While this typology of reflexive modes offers a powerful tool for understanding how people think through their lives, the findings of this study suggest that these modes are often more fluid and dynamic than the model implies. Students did not fit neatly into autonomous or communicative categories. Instead, their internal conversations were shaped by shifting responsibilities, constrained opportunities, and a deep sense of moral accountability to others.

In particular, the study foregrounds how reflexivity operates within a relational moral economy. For participants, decisions were rarely individualised. They were interlinked with the expectations of families, the weight of intergenerational sacrifice, and the imperative to 'give back.' This illustrates the influence of Ubuntu as a cultural logic that frames selfhood in relation to others and reveals a form of reflexivity that is both evaluative and ethical. Students' deliberations extended beyond what to do — they deliberated on who to be and for whom. In this way, the internal conversation becomes a site of ethical negotiation, where the self is shaped in relation to responsibility and social purpose.

The study also complicates Archer's (2000) model by showing how reflexivity is deeply shaped by socio-economic conditions. While Archer (2000) recognises that material circumstances condition reflexive engagement, the findings in this study reveal just how emotionally charged and materially consequential that engagement can be. In a context of widespread precarity, institutional ambiguity, and uncertain futures, students' internal conversations were often marked by tension, frustration, and ambivalence. The development of personal projects and ultimate concerns, core to Archer's (2000) notion of identity formation, was often disrupted or deferred not because of an absence of agency, but because of structural and institutional limitations. While Archer (2000) emphasises that the realisation of reflexivity depends on enabling conditions, the findings in this study show that this process is not only structurally mediated but also ethically and emotionally negotiated. For these students, acting on internal deliberations involved weighing responsibility to others, managing economic uncertainty, and contending with institutional ambiguity, all of which shaped what became possible to pursue.

This study also adds to ongoing debates on transformation in South African higher education by foregrounding students' lived experiences as central to this research. While access and decoloniality remain important, the findings offer another dimension of transformation, i.e.,

how students come to understand themselves through their studies, how they navigate the expectations placed upon them, and how institutions respond to their aspirations. In this case, Archer's (2000) framework is useful for recognising students as reflexive agents capable of shaping their futures and for surfacing the importance of the conditions that shape whether their agency can be exercised in ways that are meaningful to them.

This centring of student experience offers an important lens through which to consider debates about the purpose of higher education. Rather than viewing economic productivity, social justice, and personal transformation as separate or competing aims, the findings show that students often hold these goals together. They sought both financial security and the ability to live in alignment with the values shaped through their studies. This dual aspiration is not a contradiction. It reflects the entangled realities students inhabit. Archer's (1997, 2000) social realist framework is thus valuable because it illuminates how identity, purpose, and action are forged at the intersection of structure, culture, and agency. It enables an analysis that focuses on students' reflexive deliberations, while also attending to the institutional and social conditions that shape what becomes possible. In this way, the framework helps to explain not only what students hope for but also why translating those hopes into action remains uneven and why transformation, if it is to be meaningful for students, should engage all three dimensions.

This study shows the value of Archer's (1997, 2000) social realist framework in understanding how students navigate the tensions between their structural conditions, cultural responsibilities, and educational aspirations. Rather than viewing economic, ethical, and intellectual goals as separate, participants experienced them as interwoven dimensions of their efforts to build meaningful futures. By foregrounding the internal conversations through which students reflect, deliberate, and act, Archer's (1997, 2000) approach enables a deeper understanding of how identity formation and agency are shaped, and often constrained by the realities of South African higher education.

8.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the layered, often contradictory processes through which students reflect on who they are, who they are becoming, and what they hope to contribute, both within and beyond the university. It has been shown that their identity and process of reflexivity are not detached but a socially-embedded and ethically-charged process shaped by

familial obligation, economic precarity, institutional cultures, and disciplinary encounters. The humanities provided students with language, frameworks, and moments of recognition that enabled critical engagement with their histories and hopes. While students exercised agency and developed meaningful orientations toward the future, their ability to enact these visions remained uneven—constrained by structures that did not always support the aspirations they had worked to articulate. These insights suggest that while personal transformation holds significant value, it may not, on its own, be enough. This involves creating conditions that support both the development of self-understanding and the capacity to pursue futures that are socially meaningful and materially sustainable.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Unfinished Journeys: Understanding Higher Education through Student Experience

In this thesis I set out to explore the ways in which a humanities degree conditions shifts in students' identities, their perceptions of the value of their education, and how these experiences intersect with broader socio-economic and institutional dynamics in South Africa. Rather than viewing students as passive recipients of policy, curriculum, or labour market pressures, this study sought to understand their experiences from their own perspectives, to explore what these dynamics mean for how they engage with learning and how they come to understand who they are becoming.

Drawing on Archer's (2003) social realist framework, I examined how students engage in internal conversations to shape their identities and imagine possible futures. I found that, while higher education and the humanities in particular offered space for meaningful self-exploration and intellectual development, students' capacity to act on these transformations beyond the university was shaped and often constrained by external realities. These included the pressure to secure financial stability, the need to support families and communities, and the uncertainty of translating academic development into professional opportunity.

I argued that reflexivity is not a detached or purely individual process. For the students in this study, it emerged through ongoing engagement with cultural values and structural conditions. Their internal conversations were not detached acts of self-analysis, but reflections shaped by obligations to family and community, experiences of financial constraint, and the meaning they found (or struggled to find) in their academic journeys. Understanding how students navigate these intersecting pressures offers more than insight into their personal trajectories. It illuminates how the transformation agenda in South African higher education is experienced from the ground up. While policy frameworks often define transformation in terms of access, throughput, or curriculum reform, this study shows that meaningful change also depends on how students are supported to reflect, develop, and act in ways that are responsive to both who they are becoming and the complex social, economic, and familial realities they must navigate. In this way, reflexivity serves not only as a conceptual tool for understanding agency but as a useful lens for examining how universities enable or constrain the broader aims of equity,

recognition, and social justice in post-apartheid South Africa. It foregrounds the need for institutions to remain attuned to the evolving experiences, aspirations, and conditions of their students, ensuring that the transformation agenda attends to both structural reform and enabling meaningful, contextually responsive engagement with who students are and who they are striving to become.

9.1 Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to growing scholarship on higher education, identity, and transformation in South Africa by centring students' lived experiences and how they make sense of university life and future possibilities through reflective engagement with their values, responsibilities, and aspirations. It foregrounds the meaning-making process through which students interpret their studies, articulate purpose, and respond to the social worlds they inhabit. In doing so, it shifts the lens of transformation away from structural metrics toward the subjective and relational dimensions of personal and identity development, not as a guaranteed outcome but as a situated process shaped by uneven conditions.

Theoretically, the study affirms the value of Archer's (2000) social realist framework for understanding student agency. Additionally, it highlights how reflexivity, while central to identity formation and personal projects, is not always linear or internally coherent. In a context shaped by collective obligation, historical inequality, and constrained opportunity, students' reflexive deliberations are often relational, emotionally charged, and shaped by moral commitments to others. This complicates static interpretations of reflexive modes and underscores the importance of attending to the structural and cultural conditions under which agency is expressed and constrained.

Empirically, the study offers a grounded account of how humanities students in post-apartheid South Africa navigate the dual imperatives of personal meaning and economic survival. It shows that students' engagement with the humanities was shaped by a mix of structural constraints, personal aspirations, and evolving meaning. While many entered the degree through limited choice or circumstantial pathways, their narratives reflect a process of finding value, purpose, and intellectual connection through their studies. Over time, many students came to engage deeply with the humanities' potential to foster ethical awareness, social responsibility, and critical reflection. This engagement unfolded alongside a persistent awareness of their degrees' contested value in a precarious labour market. Their experiences

challenge dominant narratives that position market value and social transformation aspirations as mutually exclusive, revealing instead how students sought both meaning and mobility within and through their studies.

Additionally, my study contributes to a more contextualised understanding of how students encounter higher education. It highlights that students do not arrive at university as blank slates, but are already positioned by intersecting histories, expectations, and constraints that shape how they perceive the purpose and value of their studies. Decisions about degree choice, field of study, and what counts as success are not made in neutral conditions. They are informed by familial responsibilities, financial pressures, and collective symbols of hope for communities historically excluded from higher education. Yet, institutional forms of support and recognition often begin after students have entered the system, overlooking the formative influence of these pre-university experiences. By drawing attention to this misalignment, the study foregrounds the need for more responsive forms of guidance and support that are attuned to the layered complexity of who students are when they arrive, and not only who they are expected to become.

Contextually, the thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the purpose and value of the humanities in a system under pressure to deliver measurable outcomes, navigate funding challenges, and be responsive to social justice and redressing the legacies of apartheid. It illustrates how the humanities remain spaces of possibility where students reimagine themselves and their social worlds despite being constrained by institutional, financial, and policy limitations. By centring the student perspective, the study adds weight to calls for transformation that move beyond access and inclusion toward more expansive, responsive, and justice-oriented understandings of what it means to support students meaningfully through and beyond the university.

In line with McLean et al. (2018), in this study I affirm that a socially just higher education system cannot be assessed through access and throughput statistics alone. It must ask whether students are enabled to participate in, and be recognised as, legitimate contributors to meaning-making, supported as credible knowers who can engage with disciplinary knowledge in ways that allow them to reflect on their lives, respond to their ultimate concerns, and contribute to the public good. McLean et al. (2018) argue that educational quality lies in this kind of engagement and that socially just curricula are not fixed but continuously negotiated in relation to students' lives and contexts. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) concept of hermeneutic justice,

the extent to which individuals have access to the conceptual tools and frameworks needed to understand and express their experiences, they highlight the importance of creating conditions where all students can participate meaningfully in knowledge-building and sense-making (McLean et al., 2018). In this study I extend that concern by showing that, while many students did begin to rework their identities through engagement with the humanities, structural constraints often limited the extent to which those shifts could take hold. Students' meaning-making was shaped not only by their studies, but also by whether they could carry those insights into a world, particularly the labour market, that often did not value or reward the identity work they had done. As Case et al. (2018) similarly show, structural inequalities continue to shape how students access, experience, and move through higher education. Personal transformation, then, is not only a matter of becoming reflexive, but of whether institutional and social conditions enable that reflexivity to translate into meaningful futures.

9.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study explored how humanities honours students at a South African university make sense of their studies, identities, and imagined futures within a context shaped by inequality, obligation, and institutional transformation. By centring student narratives, it sought to understand the meaning and value of higher education from the perspective of those experiencing it. While the findings offer valuable insight into the relational and situated nature of reflexivity and identity development, the study is influenced by a number of limitations that also offer opportunities for future research.

The first limitation concerns scope. The study was based at a single institution, within one faculty, and focused on a specific cohort of students. While this focus allowed for depth and contextual sensitivity, it necessarily limits the generalisability of the findings. Students at other universities, in different faculties, or studying in different socioeconomic and institutional contexts may have markedly different experiences. Future studies could explore how these dynamics play out across a wider range of institutions including historically black universities or universities of technology to build a more comparative understanding of how institutional context shapes student meaning-making.

Second, while the humanities offered a valuable site for exploring identity, critical reflection, and social aspiration, the study did not include students in more professionally-oriented or STEM disciplines. The challenges and tensions identified in this study may be experienced

differently by students in programs with clearer professional trajectories or different epistemic cultures. Comparative research across disciplines could shed light on how different curricular and pedagogical environments support (or constrain) personal and professional development.

Third, this study captured students at a particular moment, after they had completed their undergraduate studies. While their reflections offered rich insight into how they understood their experiences and hopes for the future, the study does not follow them beyond the university. Longitudinal research would be valuable in tracing how these aspirations and identities evolve over time, how students navigate the post-university landscape, and whether the kinds of transformation they experienced were sustained, deferred, or reconfigured.

Finally, while the study focused on students' internal conversations and meaning-making, it did not systematically analyse the broader institutional structures, such as advising systems, curricula, or employment services, that might have shaped or limited their trajectories. Future research might examine how institutional support structures either enable or constrain students' efforts to connect their personal transformation with viable futures, especially for those whose educational journeys begin in contexts of inequality or limited support.

These limitations do not detract from the insights offered here but rather underscore the complexity of higher education as a lived experience. As this thesis has shown, student meaning-making is shaped long before university and will likely continue long after it. Attending more closely to these temporal, institutional, and relational dimensions opens new possibilities for how the transformation agenda is conceptualised and pursued, not only as a policy goal, but as an ongoing, everyday negotiation in students' lives.

9.3 Situating the Researcher: Post-Research Reflections

In Chapter 1, I outlined my positionality, drawing on my own experience of completing a humanities degree at Rhodes University. That experience was deeply personal, not only because of what I learned, but because it shaped who I am in ways I continue to reflect on. It instilled in me a lasting belief in the value of higher education, particularly in its potential to support meaningful personal engagement and self-understanding. For this reason, it feels necessary to conclude the thesis with reflections on how this research has deepened and challenged my own understanding of higher education and its purpose, particularly in relation to the work I do in student development.

While many of the findings resonated with my own experience, particularly the sense of personal transformation amid uncertainty about the world of work, I was also confronted with meaningful differences. I did not carry the same degree of familial or communal responsibility that shaped so many of the participants' journeys. While I relate to the idea of Black Tax in a broad sense, I had not previously grasped the depth of ethical commitment that some students felt towards their families and communities. This part of the research had a profound effect on me. It challenged me to consider how social and moral responsibilities shape not only students' educational choices, but also their sense of self and their hopes for the future.

I also found myself questioning an assumption I had not realised I held, i.e., that students today have come to see university as primarily instrumental, shaped by consumer culture and caring only about the value it has for a career. Listening to students' narratives throughout this study revealed something more complex. While some may articulate their goals in pragmatic or instrumental terms, these choices often emerge from layered personal, social, and economic pressures. The degree becomes not just a credential but a symbol of survival, a way of imagining and enacting a better future in the face of difficult realities. This changed how I understood our students, the weight they carry, and the significance they attach to the university experience.

In my professional work in student academic development, the research highlighted just how extensive the transition from school to university really is and how inadequately we currently support it. The challenges extend beyond academic preparedness. Many students lack access to the kind of guidance, resources, and structured orientation needed to make informed decisions and to navigate the culture of higher education. A single orientation week is not enough. We need to recognise that students are not just crossing an epistemological threshold. They are negotiating an ontological shift, learning not only how to study, but how to be within a space that may not always recognise or affirm them. My study revealed how much more support is needed to help students adjust, settle, and develop a meaningful sense of belonging in the university.

Most of all, this research affirmed the depth of insight students themselves have to offer. Their voices, experiences, and perspectives are an under-utilised resource in shaping the transformation agenda. They are not just participants in higher education; they are critical contributors to its ongoing reform. Listening to their stories reminded me that in the face of rapidly changing social, economic, and technological conditions, we must stay attuned to who

our students are and how they are experiencing the university. If we fail to do so, we risk overlooking the structural shifts still required to support them, not only as learners, but as whole people navigating a complex world.

9.4 Conclusion

In tracing how students engage with their studies, imagine their futures, and navigate the constraints of their social worlds, this thesis has offered a situated account of what higher education means and what it makes possible in post-apartheid South Africa. It has shown that while students arrive at university carrying layered responsibilities and uneven forms of preparation, they also bring with them the capacity to reflect, to care, and to envision lives of purpose and contribution. The humanities emerged as important, if not always secure, spaces for this kind of exploration — spaces where identity, ethics, and aspiration could be brought into dialogue. The possibilities opened through their studies, however, were not always matched by the institutional and structural support needed to carry them forward. In this sense, my study highlights the importance of attending not only to access and outcomes, but to how students are supported to become in ways that are intellectually, socially, and materially viable. What emerges, then, is a reminder that the future of higher education lies not just in what it delivers, but in how it listens to the realities, needs, and hopes of those it serves.

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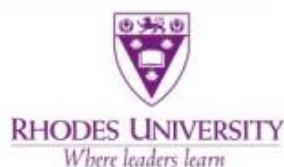
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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval Letter



Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Rhodes University
Education Building, Grey Street, Grahamstown/Makhanda, 6139, South Africa
PO Box 94, Grahamstown/Makhanda, 6140, South Africa
t: +27 (0) 46 603 8315
e: dean.education@ru.ac.za

7 April 2025

Ms Kelly Vorster

K.Vorster@ru.ac.za

Dear Ms Kelly Vorster

Re: Students' understandings of the purposes of a humanities degree

APPLICATION NUMBER: 2025-5488-9589

This letter confirms that your research ethics renewal application has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (EF-REC).

Approval is granted for 1 year. An annual progress report is required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the progress report is due.

Should any substantive change(s) be made during the research process, that may have ethical implications, you should notify the Education Faculty REC Chair via email. This includes changes in investigators. The REC Chair will advise as to whether a new application is necessary.

Do keep this clearance letter secure and accessible throughout your study and after its completion. It will be needed when a thesis is examined and when publications are submitted to journals.

Please also submit a brief report to the REC Chair on the completion of the research. This can be done via email. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully and whether any ethics-related matters arose that the committee should be aware of, in order to guide future studies.

Sincerely,

Dr Mandy Hlengwa

Chair: Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Invitation to Participants

Dear Student

Re: Invitation to participate in a research study

My name is Kelly Solomon and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Rhodes University under CHERTL. I wish to invite you to participate in a Narrative conversation for the study entitled: **Students' understandings of the purposes of a humanities degree**. The study has been granted ethical clearance from Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (EF-REC). The aim of this research is to explore how students understand the purposes of a humanities degree. The study is focused on students' experiences and aims to uncover conditions that may have contributed to the ways in which they understand the purposes of a humanities degree. This study really focuses on the student experience in hope that your experience will contribute to how we think about teaching and learning in the humanities. Therefore, your participation is important to the research so I can capture your experiences of being a humanities student at Rhodes through your story.

The research will be undertaken through narrative interviewing where I will place you at the heart of the research study. The interviews will be setup in a conversation manner where you will be asked to share your story and journey in the University space. Your participation in the research is anonymous and your identity will not be revealed. The collection of this data will require between 60 to 90 minutes of your time. The time will depend also on the follow up interviews that many be required.

My supervisors is Professor Mags Blackie (mags.blackie@ru.ac.za). You are welcome to contact her at any time should you wish to discuss anything regarding my research process.

If you agree to participate, I will explain in more detail what would be expected of you and provide you with the information you need to understand the research, via email or through an online call. These guidelines would include your rights as a participant.

Participation in this research is voluntary and a positive response to this letter of invitation does not oblige you to take part in this research. To participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that you understand and agree to the conditions, before we start the interview.

Thank you for your time and I hope that you will respond favourably to my request.

Yours sincerely,

Kelly Solomon
Student number: 11s4021
Email: k.solomon@ru.ac.za

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Research Title: Students' understandings of the purposes of a humanities degree

Researcher: Kelly Solomon
K.solomon@ru.ac.za

Supervisor: Prof Mags Blackie
mags.blackie@ru.ac.za

RESEARCHER STATEMENT

I am writing to request you to participate in an in-depth semi-structured interview for my PhD research project “*Students’ understandings of the purposes of a humanities degree*”. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide if you would be willing to participate in my study. I ask that you read the form carefully. You are welcome to ask me any questions about the purpose of the research, the type of questions I would like to ask you, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. Once you have read and understood the form, and all your questions have been responded to, you will then be able to make an informed decision about participating in this study. This process is called “informed consent.” I will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to explore how students understand the purposes of a humanities degree. The study is focused on students' experiences and aims to uncover conditions that may have contributed to the ways in which they understand the purposes of a humanities degree.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH INFORMATION

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can decide to withdraw at any stage. This means that you are not obligated to complete the interview process and may leave the study at any stage. The names of all participants will be anonymized to protect their identity. When I transcribe and write my analysis of your interview, I will assign a pseudonym and code to all type of identifiers that could link the interview data to you. I will keep the link between

your name and the pseudonym code in separate documents, which will be stored with a password, on a secured computer. Once the study is complete, I will destroy all documentation linking your information to the pseudonym. If the results of this study are published or presented at academic conferences, I will ensure, to the best of my ability not use your name, or any other identifier that could link your experience with your profile.

It is expected that each interview will last around one hour, but may, upon mutual agreement last longer. Interviews will be scheduled at a location and time most convenient for you. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. The recording will be stored on a password-protected device.

CONSENT

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, I can ask the researchers listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can email the researcher, Kelly Solomon, at k.solomon@ru.ac.za or the supervisor, Professor Mags Blackie (mags.blackie@ru.ac.za). I will receive a copy of this consent form.

I (participant's name) agree to participate in the research project of Kelly Solomon entitled, *Students' understandings of the purposes of a humanities degree*.

I understand that:

The research study has been approved by the relevant faculty ethics committee. The Rhodes University Ethics Committee has given ethical clearance to this research project (will insert date) and I have may request to see the clearance certificate.

The researcher is interested in exploring how humanities honours students understand the purposes of a university education (Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science and International Studies, and Philosophy).

My participation will involve being interviewed at my convenience for duration of about one hour per interview or longer if necessary.

The use of semi-structured interview will be utilised to collect data.

I may be asked to answer questions of a personal nature, but I can choose not to answer any questions about aspects of my life which I am not willing to disclose.

I am invited to voice any concerns I have about my participation in the study, or consequences I may experience as a result of my participation and to have these addressed to my satisfaction.

I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, should I have concerns about my participation which I did not originally anticipate.

The thesis and publications resulting from this study may contain information about my experiences, attitudes and behaviours but these will be reported in such a way that it will not be possible for me to be identified by the general reader.

Signed on (Date):

Participant:

Researcher:

Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me your story? How did you end up at Rhodes and studying this subject?
(I will start with this question to allow participants to share their stories in their own way. The questions below will be used as prompts if needed.)
2. Tell me a bit about yourself, where did you grow up?
3. Tell me about your family? Probe: What do your parents do? Did others in your family attend university?
4. Why did you decide to go to university?
5. What made you decide to come to Rhodes?
6. When you made the decision to come to Rhodes, did you have an idea of what you wanted to study? Why/why not?
7. How and why did you decide to study the courses you are enrolled for?
8. What made you take this specific subject as your major?
9. How would you describe your experience of being a humanities student?
10. Is there anything significant that you can think of that has contributed to your experiences of being a humanities student?
11. Tell me about how you think about your studies now in comparison to how you thought about them when you were in first year. Do you think a lot has changed? Why/Why not? In what ways?
12. In what ways do you think you have changed over the course of your studies?
13. What has contributed to the ways in which you feel you have changed?
14. How do you feel about the kind of person you have become over the course of your studies?
15. Can you identify what may have contributed to these changes? / Why do you think not much has changed, is there something you wish would have been different during your time as an undergrad?
16. What has been your favourite part of your studies thus far? Can you tell me a bit more about it?
17. What has been the most challenging part of your journey? If you feel comfortable, can you share a bit more about it?
18. In what ways do you think this degree has been of value to you? Has it been?
19. In what ways do you think this degree *will* be of value to you when you've completed your studies?
20. When you were still in school, did you think this is where you would be now?
21. What are your hopes and dreams for the future?
22. Have your studies contributed in any way to how you envision your future? In what ways?
23. What do you think your studies are preparing you for/ have prepared you for?