

RHODES UNIVERSITY  
Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning

**Student Development Programmes at Historically Black  
Universities in South Africa**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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## Abstract

Amongst many other effects, apartheid legislation limited Black people's access to higher education and their participation in the South African economy. Towards the end of apartheid, those institutions designated for white students began to take in more Black students and a new sub-section of the institution, student development, was formed to assist struggling Black students. The programmes put into place to assist these students were premised on the notion that the problems these students experienced in the academy emerged from their poor schooling under the Bantu Education system. The programmes were thus focused on offering remedial support for the student, with little to no critical reflection on how the university itself was implicated in the challenges confronting these students. After apartheid, student development programmes spread across the sector, including in those institutions that were designated for Black students under apartheid. Such programmes are now largely funded by South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training in the form of the University Capacity Development Grant. Various stakeholders who conceptualise and implement these student development programmes using the University Capacity Development Grant from historically Black universities nationally were interviewed, alongside the analysis of documents on funding of Student Development Programmes.

This study draws on a Realist approach to identify what conditions the conceptualisation and implementation of University Capacity Development Grant-funded student development programmes in historically Black universities. The focus on historically Black universities was because of the significant role these institutions play in the sector, particularly for the students of working-class families. Furthermore, the prior research on which this study builds showed that historically Black universities have particular challenges in spending their University Capacity Development Grant funding and that student retention and throughput issues are felt in particularly acute ways in these institutions.

The findings show that the historic conditions of South Africa conditioned how Black students are perceived. The participants in this study, those responsible for

implementing student development programmes, positioned these students as having individual deficits which needed to be addressed. Those responsible for planning and implementing the programmes did not take into consideration how the systemic challenges of the past and the social structures of the present shape how the university as a whole functions. The decontextualization of the student from their social identities and the absencing of the university as a major mechanism allowed student development to take the form of add-on interventions that left the status quo of the mainstream curriculum untouched.

The study also identified how the nature of the historical relationship between the state and the university under apartheid conditioned participants to take a compliance position that focused on adhering to the Department of Higher Education and Training's technical requirements for the use of the funds. There was thus little critical theorisation about the student experience or what shape the post-apartheid university might take. The study concludes that for student development to bring about the desired changes, it needs to be understood more broadly as integrated with staff development, curriculum development, and institutional transformation. To achieve meaningful change, there has to be a collective effort that tackles issues at a systemic level.

**Keywords:** Student Development Programmes, Historically Black Universities, Access to higher education

## Isishwankathelo

Phakathi kwezinye iziphumo ezininzi, umthetho wocalucalulo wawuthintele ukufikelela kwabantu abaNtsundu kwimfundo ephakamileyo kunye nokuthatha kwabo inxaxheba kuqoqosho loMzantsi Afrika. Ngasekupheleni kocalucalulo, loo maziko ebekhethelwe abafundi abamhlophe aqalisa ukuthatha abafundi abaNtsundu abaninzi kwaye icandelwana elitsha leZiko loPhuhliso lwabaFundi, lasekwa ukunceda abafundi abaNtsundu ababetsala nzima. Iinkqubo ezamiselwayo zokunceda abafundi zazisekelwe kwingcinga yokuba iingxaki abafundi abazifumanayo kweli Ziko leMfundo zivele kwimfundo yabo ephantsi, phantsi kwenkqubo yeBantu Education. Iinkqubo ke ngoko zazigxile ekuboneleleni ngenkxaso yolungiso kwabafundi, kungekho mbono ibalulekileyo malunga nokuba idyunivesiti ngokwayo iye yabandakanyeka njani kwimingeni abajongene nayo abafundi. Emva kocalucalulo, iinkqubo zoPhuhliso lwabaFundi zisasazeka kulo lonke icandelo lwe mfundo ephakamileyo, kuquka nalo maziko ayekhethelwe abafundi abaNtsundu phantsi kocalucalulo. Iinkqubo ezinjalo ngoku ubukhulu becala zixhaswa ngemali liSebe leMfundo ePhakamileyo noQeqesho loMzantsi Afrika ngendlela yeSibonelelo soPhuhliso lweZakhono zeDyunivesithi.

Kuchongwe abantu abohlukeneyo abachaphazelekayo ekucingeni nasekuphumezeni ezi nkqubo zophuhliso lwabafundi kusetyenziswa iSibonelelo soPhuhliso lweZakhono zeYunivesithi ezisuka kwiidyunivesithi zabaNtsundu ngokwembali kuzwelonke, kwaye kwenziwa udliwano-ndlebe, kunye nohlalutyo lwamaxwebhu enkxaso-mali yeeNkqubo zoPhuhliso lwaBafundi.

Olu phononongo lutsalela kwithiyori eyiRealist. Lethiyori ichonga ukuba zeziphi iimeko zokuqikelelwa kunye nokuphunyezwa kweSibonelelo soPhuhliso lwezakhono zedyunivesithi ezifumana inkxaso-mali kwiinkqubo zophuhliso lwabafundi kwiidyunivesithi ezazi zabaNtsundu ngaphambili. Olugqaliselo kwiidyunivesithi zabaNtsundu ngokwembali kungenxa yendima ebalulekileyo edlalwe ngala maziko kweli candelo, ingakumbi kubafundi beentsapho zabaNtsundu. Ngaphaya koko, uphando lwangaphambili olwakhe phezu kwalo olu phononongo lubonise ukuba ngaphambili iidyunivesithi zabaNtsundu zinemingeni ethile ekuchitheni imali yazo

yeSibonelelo soPhuhliso lweZakhono zeDyunivesithi nokuba ukugcinwa kwabafundi nemiba yokuphumelela kubonwa ngeendlela eziqatha ngakumbi kula maziko.

Iziphumo zoluphononongo zibonisa ukuba iimeko zembali zaseMzantsi Afrika zayimisela indlela abajongwa ngayo abafundi abaNtsundu. Abathathi-nxaxheba kolu phando, abo banoxanduva lokuphumeza iinkqubo zophuhliso lwabafundi, babeke ababafundi njengabaneentsilelo ekufuneka ziqwalaselwe. Abo banoxanduva lokucwangcisa nokuphumeza iinkqubo abazange bathathele ngqalelo indlela imingeni yenkqubo yexesha elidlulileyo kunye nemibutho yezentlalo yangoku ibumba indlela esebenza ngayo idyunivesithi xa iyonke. Ukuguqulwa kwemixholo yomfundi kwiimpawu zabo zentlalo kunye nokungabikho kwedyunivesithi njengeyona ndlela iphambili yavumela uphuhliso lwabafundi ukuba luthathe uhlobo longenelelo olongezelelekileyo oluye lwashiya imeko ekhoyo yekharithulam yesiqhelo ingachatshazelwa.

Oluphononongo lukwachonge indlela ubume bobudlelwane bembali phakathi kukarhulumente kunye nedyunivesithi phantsi kwemeko yocalu-calulo ukuba abathathi-nxaxheba bathathe indawo yokuthobela egxile ekubambeleni kwiimfuno zobugcisa zeSebe leMfundo ePhakamileyo noQeqesho ukuze kusetyenziswe le mali.

Ke ngoko kusetyenziswe ithiyori ebalulekileyo encinci kakhulu malunga namava omfundi okanye ukuba idyunivesithi yasemva kocalu-calulo inokwakheka njani. Uphononongo luqokumbela ngelithi ukuze uphuhliso lwabafundi luzise utshintsho olunqwenelekayo, kufuneka luqondwe ngokubanzi njengoko luhlanganiswe nophuhliso lwabahlohli, uphuhliso lwekharithulam, kunye nenguqu yedyunivesithi. Ukuphumeza utshintsho olunentsingiselo, kufuneka kubekho iinzame ezihlangeneyo ezijongana nemiba kwinqanaba lenkqubo.

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## List of Acronyms

ASGISA	Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa
CEPs	Cultural Emergent Properties
CHE	Council on Higher Education
COSAS	Congress of South African Students
CTP	Council of Tertiary Principals
CUP	Council of University Principals
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ECP	Extended Curriculum Programme
FYE	First Year Experience
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution
HBU	Historically Black University
HDI	Historically Disadvantaged Institution
HELTASA	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association South Africa
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HWU	Historically White University
LMS	Learning Management System
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
NDP	National Development Plan
NEA	Not Economically Active
NEPI	National Education Policy Investigation
NGP	New Growth Path
NPHE	National Plan for Higher Education
NRF	National Research Foundation
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
PEPs	Personal Emergent Properties
QLFS	African Quarterly Labour Force Survey
RDG	Research Development Grant
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SAAAD	South African Association of Academic Development
SAADA	South African Academic Development Association
SEPs	Structural Emergent Properties
SoTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TDG	Teaching Development Grant
UCDG	University Capacity Development Grant
UCDP	University Capacity Development Programme
USaf	Universities South Africa

# Chapter 1:

## Introduction to the Study

### 1.1. Introduction and Background to Study

In 1995, when South Africa was moving into a democratic state, many opportunities were provided for those people whom the apartheid<sup>1</sup> government had marginalised. I was fortunate to become one of ten Black children from an informal settlement<sup>2</sup> in the Eastern Cape to receive an opportunity to be admitted to an Afrikaans-medium<sup>3</sup> primary school. In this study, I show the many opportunities that the South African government has initiated, from which I and many others have benefited. I have first-hand experience of how the South African government has helped and continues to help poor people improve their lives socially and economically. My mother benefited from the Reconstruction and Development Programme, which I discuss briefly in Chapter Four to show the many efforts that have been in place to improve the lives of Black people in South Africa. I also briefly write about programmes such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, which benefited me in furthering my studies in higher education. In addition, I discuss other institutional funding that helps universities fund their staff to obtain postgraduate qualifications. This PhD degree is funded by one of the programmes offered by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

Therefore, this thesis is in part a representation of my developmental journey and how I have navigated social life as a Black person in South Africa, using the opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> A system of racial segregation and discrimination enforced by the white minority government from 1948 to 1994, building on centuries of racist colonisation.

<sup>2</sup> In South Africa, informal settlements are makeshift communities where people build homes from materials like wood, metal sheets, and plastic, usually without official permission or infrastructure like water and electricity. They emerged near cities during apartheid when systematic racial segregation and forced removals pushed Black South Africans into overcrowded, underdeveloped areas with little government support. They grew rapidly after apartheid ended when people moved closer to cities looking for work. Today, informal settlements reflect both the country's historic inequalities and its ongoing challenges in providing affordable housing for everyone.

<sup>3</sup> Schools in South Africa were designated for particular ethnic groups during apartheid. Only white children were allowed to go to schools designated for white people, which were better resourced than schools designated for Black children.

that the South African government has provided in its attempts to redress. I also show how education has the potential to improve Black people's socio-economic status. In this thesis, I reflect on the South African landscape and the efforts undertaken to achieve reform through the education sector. It is thus undeniable that there are many attempts undertaken by the government to develop and implement initiatives directed towards improving the lives of the poor in the country post-apartheid.

However, I am also critical of the missed opportunities and the misrepresentation, injustice and perpetuation of colonial and apartheid ways by the same government. While my entire educational progress has been subsidised by the South African government and I am now a success story, I am among the few who have been awarded such opportunities. I have to be aware that though my successes have entailed hard work and resilience, they are based on the privileges of these opportunities; privileges that many still cannot access.

Throughout this thesis, I reflect on the problematic notion of higher education as a meritocracy (Guinier, 2015). Sobuwa and McKenna (2019) explain that the concept of 'meritocracy' allows an understanding that student success emerges mostly from individual attributes and effort, and that those who do not succeed must be lazy and unmotivated. I have been confronted by many instances where I am praised for my success, and those I grew up with are seen as failures who were lazy. These examples are reinforced in our lives at a national level, where each academic year, for example, matriculation results<sup>4</sup> of young learners who are top achievers from poorer communities around the country are published, and they are celebrated as hard workers who have overcome despite all odds. Their poverty-stricken contexts are celebrated, and their intellect, hard work and resilience are given as explanations for their success. Such an understanding is carried not only across their communities and schools but is also adopted within higher education, where all institutions of higher

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<sup>4</sup> Matriculation (Grade 12) results are released nationally by the Department of Basic Education after final exams are marked and standardised. The results are published publicly through newspapers, online platforms and schools, showing student exam numbers (historically their full names) to protect their privacy. This process is similar to A-Level results in the UK or SAT/AP results in the US.

learning want students who are bright or hardworking and 'motivated' to learn, and where student success in the system is seen to emerge from the individual's attributes and practices.

Yet, this narrative is deeply flawed. It obscures the Structural<sup>5</sup> inequalities that continue to shape educational outcomes and reinforces the idea that failure is a personal fault rather than a systemic issue. It is here that Steve Biko's philosophy of Black Consciousness becomes vital (Biko, 2017; Nqambaza, 2018). Biko reminds us that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. When Black students internalise the belief that their success or failure is solely a reflection of their effort, they are less likely to question the very system that marginalises them. Walker (2020: 1) studies Biko's Black Consciousness as she seeks to "understand how and why failures of epistemic justice matter for democratic and inclusive lives", and how examples from Biko can point us in this direction in higher education. Black Consciousness calls us to reject these deficit narratives and to see ourselves not as problems to be fixed, but as people whose knowledge, histories, and ways of being are valid and valuable. It urges us to awaken to the reality that true liberation in education must begin with the decolonisation of the mind (Biko, 2017; Nqambaza, 2018; Walker, 2020).

It is within this concern of Black Consciousness that I embarked on this study. Who gets to succeed in higher education and who doesn't? How is student success understood in the system? These and other such questions kept nagging at me. In this thesis, I look at how Student Development Programmes were conceptualised and implemented over four decades in South Africa. In doing so, I found that they have largely always been conceptualised and implemented with the understanding of responding to the not-so-bright, the lazy, or the unmotivated student who brings with them enormous deficits from their poor background. My first encounter with such deficit thinking was when, in my first degree, I had to register for an English and

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<sup>5</sup> My theoretical framing in this thesis is based on Critical Realism and Social Realism, which use concepts such as Structure, Culture and Agency. When I'm using these terms as theoretical concepts, I have capitalised them throughout, to distinguish them from their ordinary use, such as in a social or physical 'structure' or a reference to 'culture' in the sense of a tradition.

Computer Literacy module to assist with my grammar, spelling and literacy to help me read and write in English and to have the skills that would prepare me to type my assignments. The design of these modules did not draw from the subjects I was studying in order to teach me any of the practices I needed to be a successful writer in the discipline I was studying; instead, the modules were focused on *my* skill set, comprehension and presentation skills in the English language. The course was taught by literacy professionals who were not disciplinary experts. The course was experienced by my peers and me as simultaneously irrelevant and as a gatekeeper that demanded that we prove our worth.

In my second year, I was introduced to Supplemental Instruction, where I was responsible for facilitating the first-year students' learning in modules which are regarded as at-risk modules. These modules, though understood as being difficult, gave additional opportunities for students outside of the class context to learn some of the key concepts regarded as difficult to grasp during lectures. But what was surprising was how the module experts positioned the responsibility for taking on these concepts with the students who were battling – and that there was an assumption that, as a second-year student, I could enhance their taking on of these concepts with no input from the lecturers.

I was then further exposed to these ways of understanding students and their learning after my university studies, when I joined another university in an academic position as a junior lecturer. I became exposed to the dominant ways academics understood students from poorer environments – the very same environments that I came from. It is within such a context that I found myself grappling with the various ideas and beliefs people had about poor students who came to university. This is how I came to my research question.

## 1.2 Rationale of the study

I came to understand that the deficit positioning of students was not only at the university I worked at, but that the idea was also much larger (regionally, nationally,

and internationally). Literature shows that there is indeed a strong correlation at a global level that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have a lower chance of succeeding in university (van Zyl, 2016; Mzileni & Noveve, 2025). But while this is a verifiable statistic, there are problematic explanations for such data. Poverty is the primary – and sometimes only – explanation offered for their struggles, and there has, as a result, been a common view that universities can address this with initiatives that focus only on the student (Boughey, 2002; Smit, 2012; Case, 2013c). This narrow focus allows institutions to overlook their roles in preparing students for success, particularly in how they structure learning environments, foster belonging, and support institutional transformation.

This thesis challenges the deficiency-based assumptions that often define poor and working-class students solely by their socio-economic circumstances, as if poverty inherently limits their capacity to learn, succeed, and thrive within higher education. Such assumptions reduce students to their material conditions, ignoring their potential, the knowledges<sup>6</sup> and the values they bring with them, as well as the broader social and institutional factors that shape their academic journeys.

Guided by Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism and Margaret Archer's Social Realism, this study adopts a perspective that recognises the complexity of social problems. These frameworks emphasise that meaningful solutions cannot be found by isolating a single cause or by surface-level explanations. Instead, they call for a deeper understanding of the Structures and Cultures, and determine what Agency was at play. In the context of higher education, this means looking beyond students' lived experiences as an isolated explanation for their success or failure in university.

Furthermore, this thesis argues that Student Development Programmes should not be designed with the sole intention of 'fixing' students, as if the problem lies within them as individuals. Rather, such programmes should be seen as critical resources for

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<sup>6</sup> While the plural form of knowledge may be archaic or nonstandard in the English language, in this context 'knowledges' refers to different systems or types of knowledge to emphasise diversity or contrast of worldviews. Therefore, 'knowledges' highlights that knowledge is not monolithic but exists in multiple forms across cultures.

universities themselves, providing the insight and tools necessary to transform institutional Structures and Cultures in ways that promote inclusion and meaningful participation for all students. An inclusive university environment does not emerge by placing the burden of adaptation on students, but through intentional efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and create spaces where all students can belong and succeed.

Some might argue that embarking on a study from such a normative position is problematic, but, as I discuss later, the notion of objectivity as desirable in the social sciences is deeply embedded in a post-enlightenment empiricism, and denies the extent that the researcher is always embedded in their study (Smith, 1999 and Frassinelli, 2018). Furthermore, this study was undertaken as part of a team project looking at social justice and quality in higher education<sup>7</sup>, in which we collectively engaged with an equity perspective from the start.

### 1.3 Context of Study

This study takes place in South Africa in the higher education sector, a highly differentiated context as a consequence of apartheid. Historically, education in South Africa was differentiated according to race – as will be further detailed in Chapter Four – and those universities that were meant for Black<sup>8</sup> students did not enjoy the same funding. For example, Black institutions did not enjoy the same infrastructure budgets, and some institutions made do without key resources for teaching and learning, like laboratories and computers. In instances where they were provided with funding for some of these, there was strict monitoring and control on the expenditure of their finances. For example, if these funds were unspent for any particular reason, the government could recall the funds (Bunting, 2004a; Cloete et al., 2004). As a consequence, some of these institutions had very small campus sizes and

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<sup>7</sup> The SJ&QinHE project is funded by DHET UCDG and led by Sioux McKenna. More details can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/sjqinhe>

<sup>8</sup> 'Black' is an all-inclusive term that includes Africans, 'Coloured' and 'Indians'. This inclusive definition is not only as per SA legislation past and present but was a key aspect of the Black Consciousness Movement.

accommodated very few numbers of students (as was expected since higher education was not a priority for Black people), and did not enjoy the same student and staff resources, making the student and staff experience materially different to that of students in white institutions of higher learning (Bunting, 2004b; Cloete et al., 2004).

Mergers were instituted as a means of restructuring the racially segregated higher education system after apartheid. That meant some universities intended only for white people were amalgamated with those meant only for Black people. Today, there are twenty-six universities, a reduction from over thirty-nine universities and technikons and more than twenty colleges. In Chapter Four, more details about the context of higher education are offered.

Despite these mergers, there are eight historically Black universities (HBUs) in South Africa today. These universities are alternatively known as HDIs – historically disadvantaged institutions. These universities are a result of either not merging or of a merger between Black institutions, which I explain in detail in Chapter Four. These universities have a historically disadvantaged institution status as per the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Department of National Education, 2002) and receive some additional funding for their infrastructure development, called the Sibusiso Bhengu Fund<sup>9</sup>.

It is in this context of HBUs that my study is situated, where most poor Black students enrol and where the highest drop-out rates and lowest throughput rates are reported by the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) annually (Council on Higher Education, 2012).

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<sup>9</sup> This grant was only implemented from 2015 (and renamed Sibusiso Bhengu Fund in 2022), despite repeated calls for it for many years prior.

No.	Name of Institution	Differentiated Type <sup>10</sup>	Affected by the merger	Province
1.	University of Venda	Comprehensive	No	Limpopo
2.	University of Zululand	Comprehensive	No	KwaZulu Natal
3.	Walter Sisulu University	Comprehensive	Yes	Eastern Cape
4.	Sefako Makgatho University	Traditional	Yes (merged with Limpopo), but then delinked	Gauteng
5.	University of Fort Hare	Traditional	No	Eastern Cape
6.	University of Limpopo	Traditional	Yes	Limpopo
7.	University of the Western Cape	Traditional	No	Western Cape
8.	Mangosuthu University of Technology	University of Technology	No	KwaZulu Natal

Table 1: South African Institutions Classified as HBUs

Within these HBUs, this study researches the use of the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG). The UCDG is a grant within the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), which was established to provide earmarked grants under the South African higher education funding framework. The UCDP has a number of funded projects in the form of earmarked funds, which, unlike the block grant the university receives from the state each year, cannot be used at the discretion of the university's council but need to be used for approved earmarked purposes (UCDP, 2018–2020).

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<sup>10</sup> Traditional universities are expected to mainly offer formative and professional qualifications and have a strong postgraduate and research focus, Universities of Technology are expected to mainly offer vocationally focused qualifications and only offer postgraduate studies and undertake research in niche areas, and comprehensive universities are expected to be a combination of the previous two (Department of National Education, 2002). The extent to which such differentiation exists is however greatly debated.

The UCDP was introduced to respond to the calls of the need for providing capacity and enhancement of teaching, learning, assessment, and research at public universities. The UCDG has a long history prior to its first being offered in 2018. From 2004, it comprised two separate grants in the form of the Teaching Development Grant (TDG) and the Research Development Grant (RDG). Despite its name, the bulk of TDG funds were spent on student development (Moyo, 2018) because many universities identified poor retention and throughput issues as needing student development initiatives, and there was less appetite for staff, curriculum, or institutional development. In 2018, the TDG and RDG were merged to form the UCDG. The reason for this merger was stated as

... to further advance the gains that have been enabled through the TDG and the RDG, to ensure that the overlap areas that existed between the two grants would be efficiently addressed to avoid duplication and wastage of resources and to enable other areas of development in universities that were neglected (DHET 2018–2020: 3).

Since the establishment of the TDG as an earmarked grant fund in 2004, there has been an ongoing challenge of the ability of HBUs to spend the allocated funds on an annual basis (Moyo, 2018; Moyo & McKenna, 2021). This research study is a follow-up to the study by Moyo (2018), who analysed the use of the TDG across the entire public higher education sector of South Africa. Moyo's analysis revealed how a number of universities, and in particular HBUs, struggled to spend these teaching development funds each year. He also revealed how initially institutions focused on other challenges regarding infrastructure, operational and general development rather than on teaching development specifically. Once the spending requirements were tightened up and such misallocation of the funds was prevented, the monies were often left unspent, resulting in the withholding of future funds in these universities. Moyo and McKenna (2021), for example, indicate that in 2015, all seven HBUs<sup>11</sup> failed to spend their funds to the amount of ± ZAR 40 million. In 2014, a total amount of ZAR

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<sup>11</sup> At the time, there were only 7 HBUs. This is because Sefako Makgatho University (previously Medunsa) was initially merged into the University of Limpopo, though this merger was later undone.

65 million was withheld from 6 of the 7 HBUs. Moyo's study looked at "what enabled some universities and constrained others in the use of the Teaching Development Grant".

This study picks up where his left off; while he looked at the whole university sector and looked at the TDG broadly, this study hones in on HBUs and the student development portion of the funding only. It sought to understand how student development initiatives under the UCDG funding are conceptualised and then implemented. The study also sought to identify some of the mechanisms that conditioned the conceptualisation and implementation of UCDG-funded student development. However, while Moyo's study raised concerns about the understanding of students and their learning underpinned by the UCDG-funded student development initiatives, his data did not allow him to interrogate this in great detail. My study seeks to interrogate the understanding of students and their learning underpinned by the UCDG-funded student development initiatives more extensively.

#### 1.4 Research Question

This study seeks to understand the nature of Student Development Programmes funded by the University Capacity Development Grant at historically Black universities in South Africa. It asks:

- How were the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) funded Student Development Programmes conceptualised?
- How were they implemented?

In answering these questions, the study asked, 'What is the interplay of Structural, Cultural and Agential mechanisms conditioning these conceptualisations and implementations?'

## 1.5 Outline of Thesis Structure

In this chapter, I have introduced the experiences that led me to undertake this study and provided the research questions. Chapter Two is my introduction to the philosophical position I have taken to assist me in moving beyond description to understand how things came to be as they are seen to be in the data. I thus take a Realist philosophical approach, which draws from Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism, to understand the nature of 'truth'. Critical Realism argues that what we observe, feel, and experience as humans in the world as we live it is generally understood to comprise the world as *it is*; in other words, we generally draw only on our empirical inputs to decide what constitutes 'truth'. But, as researchers, we should attempt to go beyond these daily observations, feelings and experiences, and seek to understand the causal mechanisms from which the daily observations, feelings and experiences emerged; this is referred to as Depth Ontology (Bhaskar, 2008). Therefore, using Critical Realism as an underlabouring philosophical approach in this study, I had to go beyond the data, which in its qualitative nature represents multiple and shifting experiences of the world, and to seek to identify the underlying causal mechanisms that were involved for people to have these observations, feelings and experiences today.

Critical Realism as a philosophical approach was insufficient in my view to provide an account of causal mechanisms of the social phenomenon under study (Ncube, 2020; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). That is why I needed an approach to account for the generative and causal mechanisms as the substantive philosophical framework for this study.

Margaret Archer's Social Realism accepts Critical Realism's explanations of Depth Ontology but further shows what those generative causal mechanisms mean for the social world. Archer (1995; 2000) argues that the social world is made up of three intertwined domains: Structure, Culture, and Agency, and our role is to interrogate the

ways in which Structures, Cultures, and Agency were at play for people to observe, feel, and experience the phenomenon under study in the way that they did.

Therefore, Chapter Two sets out the way I used these theories in my attempt to understand how UCDG Student Development Programmes were conceptualised and implemented within the different HBUs in South Africa. The philosophical assumption I made about the data gathered was from an approach that required me to first understand how the history of higher education in South Africa, Academic Development as a field, and student development shaped the participants in the ways that they did.

Chapter Three continues to draw on the Realist approach as I discuss the methodological approaches taken. I reflect on research design decisions and how I attempted to ensure quality and validity. For instance, in this chapter, I reflect on the extent to which conducting research using Western methodologies intersected with my identities as an African young man and an emerging scientist.

Chapter Four maps out the start of the cycle in the research phenomenon. It is in this chapter that I provide a broad scope of the review of the literature. Chapter Four, in Social Realist terms, is T1 – the time before the collection of data in which various discursive constructions shape the conditioning of Structures, Cultures, and the conditioning of groups to either complement or contradict social phenomena. It is in this chapter that I map out the global, African, and South African higher education context.

Chapter Five is the first findings chapter of this study and is referred to as T2–T3 in the Social Realist morphogenetic cycle (a cycle which is discussed in the next chapter). T2–T3 is where the data is positioned in time and in which the social-cultural interactions take place, including the people who conceptualised and implemented the student development, from whom I collected the data. Chapter Five draws mostly on the Cultural mechanisms which conditioned the people to understand these students as the problem that needed fixing. In this chapter, I show the various social-

cultural group interactions that emerged to condition the people to conceptualise students as the problem that needed fixing in order to achieve low dropout rates and high throughput rates.

Chapter Six, the second findings chapter of this study, continues as T2–T3, as the social-cultural interactions the people had in conceptualising Student Development Programmes that were deemed suitable for these students. In this finding, the people drew from T1 to develop their conceptions of the kind of initiatives that needed to be conceptualised as student development in their universities. These programmes were generalised and ad hoc in nature. They assumed that all Black students suffered from the same conditions, and thus generalised their individual experiences to poverty, lack of skills and motivation.

Chapter Seven, the last of the T2–T3 chapters and thus the last findings chapter of this study, shows the interplay of Structure, Culture and Agency, and how it enabled some people in implementing their student development initiatives in these universities. In this chapter, I reflect on the influence of Structure and Culture in conditioning the study participants in ways that were either enabling or constraining as they implemented their student development projects. This chapter looks at the many large-scale mechanisms, such as globalisation, neoliberalism, apartheid, and massification, that conditioned the implementation of student development.

Chapter Eight serves as the conclusion of this study and gives a critical discussion of the findings which emerged from the study. It serves to reflect on the contribution of the study.

## Chapter Two: Philosophical Framework

### 2.1 Introduction

Social Science research requires researchers to have a basic understanding of the philosophical principles underpinning their research. This is because these principles lead to philosophical assumptions about the phenomenon in question. Archer (2019: 140) indicates that “all theorists have a social ontology, whether implicit or explicit, which effectively defines the constituents of the social world”. Moon and Blackman (2014: 4 - 7) list three fundamental elements which make up these ‘worldviews’: ontology, epistemology and philosophical perspective:

Ontology – is what exists in the human world that researchers can acquire knowledge about; epistemology – is how knowledge is created; and philosophical perspective – is the philosophical orientation of the researcher that guides their action.

In following a Realist position, I take the following positions in regards to these three:

- Ontological realism
- Epistemic relativism
- Judgemental rationality.

In this chapter, I will grapple with all three of these to make explicit my philosophical principles and theoretical assumptions throughout this research study. Creswell (2014) stresses that in the past, worldviews remained largely hidden in research, despite the worldviews of the researcher having a major influence on the practices of the research. In recent years, there has been a call to more explicitly identify worldviews in research practices from the outset. Providing information on philosophical approaches or worldviews allows the reader to understand why the researcher selected particular methods and approaches for their research and how

those philosophical approaches, worldviews, and methodologies led them to their findings (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to expose my ontological, epistemological and philosophical (and thus axiological) perspectives in this study on the nature of higher education, Academic Development and student development in South Africa at historically Black universities.

## 2.2 Research Approaches

Philosophical principles, philosophical paradigms, research paradigms, epistemologies, ontologies, or worldviews (however you refer to them) all form part of a broader perspective that the researcher brings with them to the research experience. In the Social Sciences, explicitly articulating the research approach is important as it creates meaningful positions of interpretation for the reader, and it is also an ethical way of conducting and disseminating research. When the reader has been given sufficient understanding of the philosophical approach to the research, they can develop a better understanding of how the researcher arrived at their findings. Each discipline has its philosophical underpinnings, which it uses to make assumptions about social phenomena (Moon & Blackman, 2014). For example, this is a Social Science study and seeks to understand student development at historically Black universities in South Africa, and therefore it requires an approach which seeks to understand the various experiences and events which emerged as constraints or as enablers using qualitative analysis and examining the viewpoints of those involved. Another researcher undertaking a similar study might use an approach focused on statistical analysis, for example, examining expenditure items and spreadsheets depicting the number of attendees at student development workshops and so on. In this social study, experiences and ideas that people hold about student development at HBUs were foregrounded, though these were brought together with statistical data about student development events in the form of lists of expenditure items and spreadsheets as additional data.

In taking a Realist position, as I outline in this chapter, I argue that in many cases worldviews, paradigms and philosophical approaches to conducting research fall foul

of being either Empiricist or Relativist, with problematic consequences in social life. Empiricism entails research which can only account for observable data and cannot account for the mechanisms and conditions from which that data emerged. Relativism, on the other hand, entails an understanding of the world as entirely socially constructed and thus fluid.

Empiricism results from observable or experimented events which are measured carefully to arrive at particular results. These approaches towards research often follow quantitative approaches to data collection. In other instances or as an opposite of empiricism, a relativist position is often followed, where the researcher's account is gathered using qualitative approaches in the form of questionnaires or interviews, etc., which produce the multiple nature of experiences of those participants, resulting in multiple truths or multiple realities (Boughey & McKenna, 2021: 14).

People bring with them varying perspectives, opinions or beliefs which represent their truth, and Relativist research remains at the level of personal truths. Boughey and McKenna (2021: 14–15) argue that this is “not useful because if all that researchers do is to present one view of the world, which is one among many, on a reality that is ever-changing, what would be the point of doing research?” These authors thus argue that “what we need to consider as we plan our research is the nature of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ itself” (Boughey & McKenna, 2021: 14).

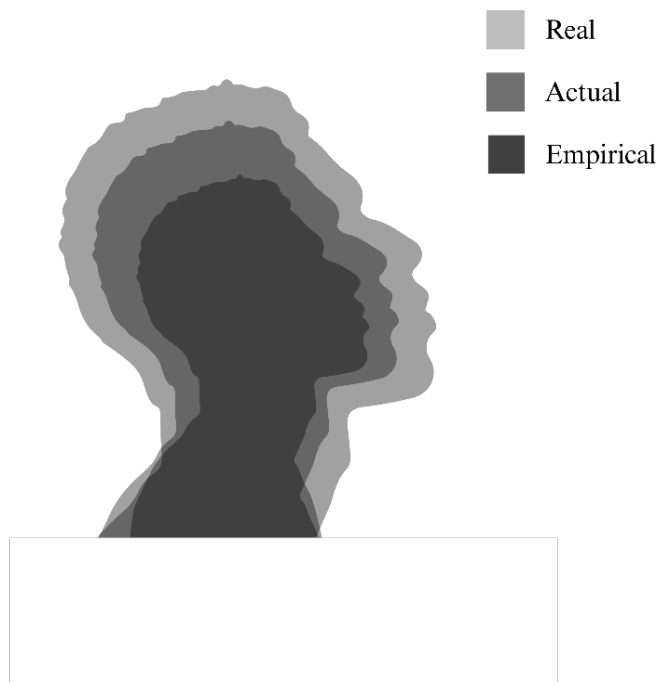
However, this is not to say that Empiricist and Relativist research has not been helpful in the grounding and development of knowledge in society. But Boughey and McKenna (2021) argue that we now need to find approaches that interrogate the multiple and complex understandings that show us the multiple truths that may exist in the world, while also acknowledging the existence of mechanisms that have conditioning effects on the world, even where humans may be entirely or partially unaware of them.

## 2.3 Introduction to Critical Realism

To answer this question about the nature of truth and its multiple complexities, I turn to Critical Realism, which assists me in understanding the nature of truth or reality. Critical Realism is thus used as an underlabourer, or the underpinning philosophy of reality, for my research. It is Critical Realism which assists me in unpacking the ontological and epistemological positioning of this study. This means that Critical Realism is used to articulate the nature of 'truth' within a Realist perspective and thereby create a foundation on which this study is undertaken.

### 2.3.1 Critical Realist Ontology

Roy Bhaskar (1998) argues that what manifests today in our lives is brought about by the interplay of both observable and unobservable mechanisms. He refers to this as Depth Ontology, which allows us to understand that the many views and experiences of events are the 'truth' or 'real' for those involved, but to understand how these came to be, we need to go beyond collecting experiences and describing events. We need to attempt to understand what mechanisms were active and how these worked to enable these experiences and events to emerge as they do. Boughey and McKenna (2021) state this as the argument that there is a hidden world, composed of generative Structures or mechanisms, which exist independently of human interpretations, knowledge, enactment, or discourse. Thus, the goal of the researcher is to establish, What the world must be like for conditions to be the way they are today (Bhaskar, 2008).



*Figure 1: Depth Ontology*

In unpacking Depth Ontology, Bhaskar (1998; 2008) suggests that there are two strata of reality. The first stratum is intransitive, which means that the properties and powers of this stratum exist regardless of our knowledge of them, and it is relatively unchanging. Bhaskar (2008: 11) explains the intransitive object as “knowledge of things which are not produced by men at all, such as the specific gravity of mercury, the process of electrolysis, the mechanism of light propagation”. He further explains that “none of these ‘objects’ depend upon human activity. If men ceased to exist, sound would continue to travel and heavy bodies fall to the earth in the same way” (Bhaskar, 2008: 11).

Bhaskar continues to explain that:

The intransitive objects of knowledge are, in general, invariant to our knowledge of them; they are the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities of the world and are independent of us (ibid).

While no one could hypothesise or know about it, it does not mean it wouldn't happen. Therefore, this stratum, which is intransitive and called the Real, consists of the causal mechanisms that underlie phenomena, irrespective of whether we are aware of them or not.

The second stratum is transitive and relatively changing. Bhaskar (2008: 11–12) refers to this stratum as

The raw materials of science – the artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day. They include the antecedently established facts and theories, paradigms and models, methods and techniques of inquiry available to a particular scientific school.

These strata thus consist of two levels – the level of the Actual, that is, events in the world, seen or unseen; and the level of the Empirical, that is, our understanding of the world, experiences, and perceptions. Both the events, which we may or may not experience, and experiences are relatively changeable.

	<b>Empirical</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Real</b>
<b>Experience</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Events</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Mechanisms</b>	No	No	Yes

*Table 2: Three domains of reality (Bhaskar, 2008: 13)*

Case (2013a) and Boughey and McKenna (2021) note that, in contrast to laws and forces in the natural world, the intransitive level in the social world is almost always open to change or contestation and therefore only relatively unchanging.

Bhaskar (2008: 13) offers us the transcendental question, “What must the world be like for things to be the way they are?” He calls this the Depth Ontological viewpoint of research. Depth Ontology assists the researcher to go beyond their data and to attempt to understand what conditioned the data to emerge in the ways that it does.

Depth Ontology thus provides an understanding that there are underlying causal mechanisms in the intransitive strata, that is, the level of the Real that goes beyond its subsets of the Actual and Empirical (Moyo, 2018: 43; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). This then means that, in the context of my study, my role as a researcher was to identify the causal mechanisms that emerged at HBUs, which conditioned the conceptualisation and implementation of UCDG student development initiatives.

Therefore, at the level of the Actual are the student development events that take place, and at the level of the Empirical are the subjective perceptions and experiences of such student development events. All the data that I collected was at the level of the Empirical and the Actual, and I then needed to undertake an analysis which would allow me to identify some of the causal mechanisms which were at play, and which allowed student development to be conceptualised and implemented in the manner it was. By doing so, I attempted to answer the transcendental question, which, adapted for my study, is: What must the world be like for the UCDG-funded student development initiatives at HBUs in South Africa to be like for things to be the way they are today?

While Depth Ontology is useful in identifying causal mechanisms in the Real, it does not explain “Why so, rather than otherwise”; thus, the social ontology does not give us explanations. “Its task is to define and justify the terms and the form in which explanations can properly be cast” (Archer, 2013b: xi). This is the disadvantage of Depth Ontology, as the point of research is to discover why things happen in the way they do. We then need to turn to epistemology as a way of making meaning from the Realist position of the Depth Ontology.

This approach is referred to as Depth Ontology (Bhaskar, 2008).

Transcendental Question	Thinking	Examples	Critical Realist Depth Ontology
Why are participants understanding student development this way?	➔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- They have subjective experiences and perceptions of student development as they see it playing out at their HBUs.</li> <li>- Their experiences &amp; perceptions are a result of the emergence of events they may have experienced or not.</li> <li>- Their experiences &amp; perceptions are influenced by events they may know or not know about (apartheid, race, social class, gender, etc).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transitive</li> <li>- Can change</li> <li>- May be experienced and observed differently by different participants.</li> </ul>
Why are the current student development initiatives as they are?	➔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Their use of the UCDG currently – that is, what student development initiatives occur – as a result of mechanisms at play, whether they are seen and understood or not.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transitive and Intransitive</li> <li>- May be experienced differently by different participants.</li> </ul>
What are the underlying mechanisms which lead UCDG-funded student development initiatives to take the form they do?	➔	<p>Multiple, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The history of Academic Development, particularly student development.</li> <li>- The history of HBUs as conditioning institutional ethos and relationship to the state.</li> <li>- Mechanisms in the form of apartheid history, education, race, and social class, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intransitive</li> <li>- Exists whether we know about it or not.</li> <li>- Relatively unchanging (In the social world, mechanisms are far more changing than in the natural world, though change can occur like mechanisms in the natural world too).</li> </ul>

Table 3: A Depth Ontology reflection on the study

### 2.3.2 Critical Realist Epistemology

Critical Realism assumes a Realist ontology as discussed above, in that it is understood that what happens in the world and how we experience what happens is not simply the multiple and contradictory perceptions of individuals. Underlying such multiple and contradictory perceptions are real mechanisms that have effects, whether we are aware of them or not.

However, Critical Realism distinguishes between the Realist nature of ontology and the varied and at times contradictory nature of epistemology. It therefore concedes to epistemological relativism. Knowledge is made by humans and is therefore always partial and potentially flawed. But it is the only means by which we can come to know the world. Epistemology allows us to move to what Bhaskar refers to as transcendental reasoning. In Critical Realism, transcendental reasoning is understood as central to epistemology because the researcher comes to an understanding of how things come to be (the causal mechanisms) in a complex and stratified reality, albeit a flawed and partial understanding. This is where ontology, the nature of truth, is different from epistemology – our many views and knowledge about the ‘truth’ and how we come to understand it.

Epistemology in Critical Realism is described as “our limited knowledge of the nature of the structure of the world”, that is, how things come to be and why (Moyo, 2018: 35) Vorster (2010: 4) explains that “causal mechanisms are not observable but are ‘causally efficacious’”, hence Moyo (2018) warns us to be careful of answering our research question using only what we have observed from our data as if that is the full account of the reality of the world. Therefore, Critical Realism using transcendental reasoning “makes claims as to the necessary conditions that make a possible object (the social world) of knowledge” (Vorster, 2010: 4). Thus, the transcendental question I ask about “how must things have been for the UCDG funded Student Development Programmes at historically Black universities in South Africa to play out as they did?”, helped me to arrive at a reasonable conclusion about

the conceptualisation and implementation of UCDG Student Development Programmes at HBUs in South Africa.

As explained earlier, in Critical Realism, epistemology is secondary to ontology, meaning that phenomena in the world take place whether we know about them or not. Such phenomena may emerge from multiple mechanisms, which can in the social world include social structures (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Social structures consist of Structures such as education, gender, race or social class, to mention a few. These mechanisms exist in society, whether we know about them or not, and they have causal powers that may or may not affect us. The history of apartheid, for instance, in South Africa has causal effects which are real for all of us today. I may not have been physically present during those years of the apartheid struggles, but I have been affected by the decisions that were taken during those times. For example, Black students were not allowed to study with white students, thus resulting in the separation of schools and universities. Today, there is a big divide between those universities that were HBUs and those that were historically white universities (HWUs) as a consequence of such historic decisions. This is an example which presents many underlying causal mechanisms at the level of the Real, which conditioned the emergence of events and experiences at the level of the Actual and Empirical as we have them today. This example of the decisions taken during apartheid in higher education in South Africa can also be seen to have conditioned how student development at HBUs was conceptualised and then implemented to date.

At the level of the Actual, events may or may not emerge from the interplay of such mechanisms; for example, at some HBUs the history of higher education in South Africa, as is argued in Chapter Four, had a significant impact on how the institutions did not have access to resources (including human resources), and their location and infrastructure were affected due to the marginalisation and segregated apartheid history. As a result, participants may have experienced difficulties due to a lack of adequate infrastructure and teaching and learning resources – like laboratories and access to electricity and water. Therefore, the emergence of events may become

'true' and 'real' for them individually, thus becoming transitive, as it may change based on how individuals experience and interpret them in a moment in time.

At the level of the Empirical are our varied experiences and observations about social life (knowledge). These experiences and observations are ever-changing and may be experienced and observed differently by people. In the example given above, participants may or may not have knowledge about the history of South African higher education, for instance, and may or may not experience the events of higher education in South Africa in the same manner, and, thus, they may have varying experiences and observations about the context of higher education in South Africa, and differ in their personal explanations for the current context. This results in the participants conceptualising and implementing Student Development Programmes at HBUs having varying experiences and observations of what student development is. Boughey and McKenna (2021: 18) explain that "such experiences and observations emerge from an interplay of multiple underlying causal mechanisms which emerged at the level of the Real and the level of the Actual". For example, I was particularly bothered by how I was expected to implement various UCDG Student Development Programmes at my university as an Academic Advisor, as I was not familiar with how students and their development in higher education were perceived. Such an experience and event possibly emerged out of many underlying causal mechanisms, which may include events such as my basic schooling background, my university experiences, and my acquired knowledge about teaching and students' learning in higher education.

## 2.4 Complementary Modes of Inferences

The above process of moving from intransitive to transitive, and from beyond the Empirical and the Actual to identifying causal mechanisms within the larger, encompassing Real, requires transcendental reasoning as to how things must have been like for a particular phenomenon to emerge in the way it has. This requires what Critical Realism refers to as Complementary Modes of Inferences, which include

Abduction, Retroduction, Induction and Deduction reasoning or inference (Bhaskar, 2008; Moyo, 2018; Danermark et al., 2019; Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Bhaskar (2008: 53) explains that “we have no knowledge of anything but phenomena; and our knowledge of phenomena is relative, not absolute. We know not the essence, nor the real mode of production, of any fact, but only its relations to other facts in the way of succession or similitude”. Boughey and McKenna (2021: 18) further explain that “we cannot access the interplay of mechanisms at the level of the Real directly”. For example, in the research, I only had access to the perceptions, understandings, ideas and experiences of participants as they experienced student development within the use of the UCDG at HBUs and within the various Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) progress reports of student development events that took place at these universities. What happened in the history of higher education in South Africa and the many mechanisms which have conditioned the emergence of the data of participants’ perceptions and experiences, at the level of the Empirical, is impossible for me to fully access.

Thus, complementary modes of inference involved me using the Realist approach to allow me to ‘see’ the empirical data differently. Danermark et al. (2019) indicate that the four modes of reasoning or inference are complementary. They are central to the logic of scientific reasoning and are therefore useful scientific methods. Therefore, ‘inference’ involves various procedures and ways of reasoning and arguing in science to differentiate between a particular phenomenon and what is general. Throughout the research process, I did a step-by-step process of trying to understand the events that led participants to have the kind of experiences they have today (Archer, 1995; Jones et al., 2014; Greenhalgh et al., 2017).

Modes of inference are: deductive, abductive, retroductive and inductive reasoning (Danermark et al., 2019). These modes of inference are the necessary steps to take in the process of knowledge-making/finding. In this research process, I started with deductive reasoning. In this step, I formulated my research question based on my insights from working with students in higher education, my understanding of higher

education, teaching and learning, and my experiences with UCDG student development projects at HBUs as the beginning of the process, as well as my initial engagement with the literature.

I then moved from these insights to abductive reasoning, where I started testing and thinking about the Realist ontological approach as the best conceptual framework that would assist my thinking and understanding of student development at HBUs. Abductive reasoning could be known as the process of thinking carefully about the best method(s) to use in trying to understand the phenomenon at hand. I then moved to retroductive reasoning, which is where my data assisted me in identifying the interplay between underlying causal mechanisms, which led to the emergence of events and experiences of Student Development Programmes at HBUs. Lastly, the Inductive reasoning process then required me to look at the data I generated differently (Danermark et al., 2019).

A Realist approach assisted me in identifying the mechanisms which were at play in conceptualising and implementing UCDG Student Development Programmes at HBUs and then interrogating whether that was either in constraining or enabling ways. The process of identifying the causal mechanisms involved in answering Bhaskar's 'transcendental question' (1998; 2008), which I adapted to respond to my research phenomenon, "What must the world be like for participants to have these experiences, feelings and ideas in their conceptualisations and implementation of Student Development Programmes at HBUs?" Some authors such as Sayer (2010) and Lewis-Beck et al. (2004) explain that the transcendental question itself is a form of the modes of inference as it seeks to discover the underlying causal properties that exist in social life, and the researchers must understand those properties to avoid the epistemic fallacy (Greenhalgh et al., 2017, The RAMESES II Project).

Therefore, the four modes of inference, like in Realist research, are useful in helping researchers gain insights into the various mechanisms which condition the emergence of events. Using complementary modes of inference or reasoning is important in scientific research, as it allows us to apply well-reasoned and rigorous

methods of estimating the validity of generalisations (Jones et al., 2014). Failure to do so will result in me committing what Critical Realists term the 'epistemic fallacy', where I reduce reality to a few sets of reasons and beliefs provided in the data and potentially those I already possess, and then I equate this to the full and only knowledge of the world. This entails conflating what is in the data with the explanation for how the phenomenon under study emerged in the ways that it did (Moyo, 2018; Ngcobo, 2022; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). For example, if I only used the perceptions, understandings, ideas and experiences of the participants as they experience students, teaching and learning, higher education and/or student development, without identifying the causal mechanisms from which they emerge, I am treating the multiple and contradictory views as 'the truth' and therefore taking a relativist position which does not move our knowledge of the phenomenon forwards. Such an account would be a conflation between the events and experiences and how these events and experiences came to emerge in the ways they did. Those interpretations and observations will have been inaccurate as each participant will have had myriad prior experiences which would shape how they experience the events they confront (Moyo, 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Ngcobo, 2022).

Critical Realism thus calls for an acknowledgement of fallibility (Boughey & McKenna, 2021), in that it accepts epistemological relativism, but it refuses ontological relativism, whereby human experience is equated to 'truth' or 'reality'. If researchers are working towards identifying the causal mechanisms which have conditioned the events and experiences to emerge in the ways they have, they need to acknowledge that this will be a partial and potentially incorrect process. Boughey and McKenna (2021) suggest that we use explanatory theories to assist us in unpacking the possibilities which could have emerged moving across the three stratified domains of reality as explained by Critical Realism. By doing so, the explanatory theory we select should avoid the 'epistemic fallacy' and "assist us to make particular 'judgments' about the closest possible account of mechanisms which were at play in the emergence of events and experiences" (Boughey & McKenna, 2021: 19).

## 2.5 Judgemental Rationality in Social Science Research

The particular judgements we have carefully come to after our thorough reasoning require us to make informed judgements about our data sets. As I have explained, epistemology in Critical Realism is described as our limited knowledge of the nature of the structure of the world, that is, how things come to be and why (Bhaskar, 2008; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). To balance the nature of the truth (Depth Ontology, including intransitive mechanisms) with how we understand things as they come to be (our knowledge of the world, epistemology), Critical Realism introduces 'judgemental rationality'. Critical Realism requires us at this stage to evaluate and make judgements on the varied accounts of knowledge available to us in the form of data (Danermark, et al., 2019; Stutchbury, 2021). The acknowledgement of the researcher's fallibility in moving from the data (Empirical and Actual) to identifying the underlying causal mechanisms (Real) from which the events and experiences emerged is not the same as relativity. While the partial and fallible nature is acknowledged, this is not the same as saying that 'anything goes' and that any explanation is as good as any other. Judgemental rationality is central to ensuring that the strongest account is provided.

This is where we need to turn to a theoretical framework to account for the judgements and decisions in a way that can create, describe, explain, argue and show our account of the phenomenon as something real (Ncube, 2020; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Archer (1995; 2013a; 2013b) explains that Bhaskar understood that Critical Realism does not fully account for 'causal powers and generative mechanisms' which exist in the social world, and Critical Realism thus often plays the role of an 'underlabouring' theory useful to the social sciences. Indeed, much of Bhaskar's work in developing his account of Depth Ontology focuses on the existence of natural phenomena that are beyond human interaction, even if they have enormous implications for humans. It is for these reasons that I turn to Social Realism to provide the substantive theoretical framework for this study, in complementarity with the Critical Realist underlabouring.

## 2.6 Introduction to Social Realism

To assist me in further explaining the various 'causal powers and generative mechanisms' which exist in the social world, the explanatory theory I applied to make judgements in ways that would not commit 'epistemic fallacy' is Social Realism. Margaret Archer, a Critical Realist, was concerned with how sociology tended to look at social phenomena from the perspective of either 'Structure' or 'Agency' or to over-emphasise one at the cost of the other, thus committing what she terms conflation.

In Social Realism, Archer (1995; 2000; 2003) accepts Bhaskar's concept of the Depth Ontology with its epistemic relativism and ontological realism, and focuses on what this means for the social world. She argues that the social world is made from three intertwined domains of Structure, Culture and Agency (Archer, 1995; 2003; 2013a). In the following sections, I briefly introduce Archer's concepts of Structure, Culture and Agency.

### 2.6.1 Structure

Structure comprises the means of determining who has the material resources and positions of power within organisational structures (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Archer, 1995; 2000; 2003). In this research, Structure comprises resources available to participants' access and the positions they hold. For example, in my research, HBUs are Structures that have been conditioned by the events of past Agents; therefore, the current Agents are introduced into those pre-existing Structures. For example, if a new Teaching and Learning Dean at an HBU is introduced to a Structural context which has no policies or other means of integrating student development within the curriculum, this would be an example of Structures of student development in the university which may or may not constrain student development initiatives in the institution. Another example of Structures in this context could be a lack of formal and informal spaces for reflecting on teaching and learning, and student development in the university. When the Teaching and Learning Dean does not have a platform to discuss their ideas on teaching and learning in the institution with other leaders, they may find it difficult to communicate their new ideas on student

development within the university structure, finding it constraining to conceptualise and implement new student development ideas.

### 2.6.2 Culture

While Archer describes Structure and Culture collectively as 'the parts', she explains how Structure can be understood as separate from Culture. "Archer's contribution through Social Realism has been to show how Culture can be analysed analogously [to Structure], and that the interrelations of Culture with Agency cannot be ignored" (Case, 2013b: 43). Culture can be explained as the 'world of ideas'. Case (2013b) explains that Culture is pertinent in that the person who holds these 'worlds of ideas' is conditioned in their actions by them and the degree to which they can persuade others to take on these ideas. This is what (Boughey, 2013: 32) refers to as the discourses of a community; using Fairclough (2010), she defines discourses as "systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Discourses define, describe and delimit what is possible to say and not possible to say within a context". Continuing with the example of a new Teaching and Learning Dean, it will be their ability to work within the existing discourses (Culture) available within the university by either drawing on them to implement their projects (this will be complementary Culture) or by disputing or rejecting such discourses (this will be contradictory Culture) and introducing new ones. Thus, Culture comprises sets of beliefs adopted by a group of people (Archer, 1995; 2003; 2014; Muthama, 2018). If the dominant Culture of student development in the institution is contradictory to that of the new Teaching and Learning Dean, then this would be a constraint to her enacting her Agency.

### 2.6.3 Agency

Agency is what is exercised by people in a social setting; it is the extent to which people have the freedom to act (Archer, 2003; 2013a; Moyo, 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Agency may also be termed as 'the people', as the term cannot be attributed to only one person but is a collective. Margaret Archer uses the term 'the

people' to distinguish from the conditioning effects of Structure and Culture, which she terms 'the parts'. It is the collective group of 'the people' who then get an opportunity to exercise their Agency using their freedom to act. For example, 'the people' who conceptualise and implement student development at HBUs may work together as a collective to achieve this goal by navigating and interacting with the various university Structures and Cultures (the parts) in ways that enable them to achieve this collective goal. Each Agent may use their different forms of Agency towards achieving their goals. Therefore, Archer (1995; 2003; 2008; 2013a) explains that Agency is the ability of Agents to collectively work together to achieve their goals in a given Structure and Culture (Quinn, 2011; Dwayi, 2013; Moyo, 2018; Muthama, 2018). Archer (1995; 2000; 2003) makes a distinction between types of Agency ('the people') and divides them into two separate categories: Primary and Corporate Agency.

#### 2.6.3.1 Primary Agency

Primary Agency is found in people who hold little power in that particular context (e.g. students and Academic Developers might be positioned as primary Agents in a university), be that in the form of power by virtue of their position or other means of influence. Primary Agency entails very little power to act being accorded to the individual or group by virtue of their identity. Their Agency is thus strongly conditioned by the Structures and Cultures in which they find themselves. If the Structures and Cultures of the context enable their personal projects, they are likely to be able to achieve them with relative ease; if the Structures and Cultures within which they find themselves are contradictory, they will be challenged in achieving their personal projects because of their limited Agency or means of influence (Archer, 1995; 2000; 2003; Brock et al., 2017).

### 2.6.3.2 Corporate Agency

When those with Primary Agency work together to form groups possessing joint ideas, values and beliefs, they may then have sufficient power to develop what is termed Corporate Agency. The process of coming together as a collective enhances their Agency, whereby their influence increases and their means of influence can even become dominant. Corporate Agency is when people come together as a collective to change or defend their positions. In the context of the study, students, lecturers, or Academic Developers may have primary Agency, in that they hold relatively little institutional power, but if they work collectively towards a shared project, they could develop corporate Agency (Archer, 2000; Brock et al., 2017). Alongside Primary or Corporate Agency, which is vested in the collective Archer (2000), also identifies that power can be vested in someone in a particular social position, who she calls a 'Social Actor'.

### 2.6.3.3 Social Actors

Social Actors have power accorded to the positions they hold and may therefore draw on that power to enact their Agency. The Teaching and Learning Dean of my example might be a Social Actor in the university context, in that a certain amount of power may be ascribed to the position by the Structures and Culture of the institution. The individual who takes up the role may do so in a great many ways, which may enhance or limit the Agency ascribed to the position, but it is the position itself which nonetheless has power (Boughey, 2010). For example, the position of a Teaching and Learning Dean at a university allows them to sit in meetings and discussions where students, lecturers or Academic Developers might not be invited to attend, such as a senate meeting. Social Actors get to be involved in various discussions and decision-making platforms, which are at the highest level of the institution where people come together to make institutional decisions (Archer, 2000; 2003).

When gathering and analysing data, I wanted to observe and understand how people enacted their Agency as they interacted with existing Structures and Culture in the conceptualisation and implementation of Student Development Programmes funded

by the UCDG at the different HBUs in South Africa. I sought to establish how 'the people' were constrained or enabled by the existing dominant Structures and Culture in the university, and how such constraints and enablers were affected by their forms of Agency (Primary or Corporate Agency, or by their positions as social actors).

## 2.7 Analytical Dualism

Archer introduces what she calls Analytical Dualism, which is the need for analysis of social phenomena in order to reflect on Structure, Culture and Agency separately, even though the three are always at play (intertwined) in the social world, and thus always in evidence in any data. Just like Bhaskar's 'epistemic fallacy', Analytical Dualism helps avoid what Archer (2000) refers to as 'the fallacy of conflation', where researchers conflate Agency with Cultural or Structural systems. Social Realism understands that they are intertwined, and that events and experiences emerge from the interplay of properties of all three, but my job as a researcher is to separate them just for the purpose of analysis, so I can see which properties have which effects. Archer introduces us to three different ways in which conflation may occur: Upward, Downward and Central conflation (Archer, 2000; Quinn, 2012; Dwayi, 2013).

Archer (2000) argues that research guilty of Downward conflation regards people as having no power to act on their environments, thereby denying that people have properties separate from 'the parts' that allow them to act back on 'the parts'. All explanations for the social phenomenon being studied thus rest on Structural and Cultural conditions. For instance, if there are institutional or national policies or specific ways in which funding is allocated within an institution, the assumption guilty of Downward conflation is that the people on the ground will have no choice but to implement such policies or work within the confines of such funding allocations. This assumes that change will occur in the university through changes in 'the parts' with no explanation as to how it is people who interact with 'the parts'. This conflation fails to account for the ways in which humans have Agency to resist the causal tendencies of Structural and Cultural mechanisms.

Research guilty of Upward conflation disregards the Structural and Cultural barriers which exist, which may constrain people from exercising their power. All explanations for the social phenomenon being studied thus rest on the actions of the people in the study. Various studies, for instance, Behari-Leak (2017) and Motshoane (2023), have argued that staff development initiatives are often guilty of Upward Conflation in the assumption that development opportunities or 'training' for individual academics can resolve problems in the wider institutional context. That wider context and its causal effects are often nowhere interrogated in such initiatives.

Archer (2000) concludes her critique of social science research's grappling with the relationship between 'the people and the parts' with a discussion of Central conflation. Central conflation conflates 'people' (Agency) and the 'parts' (Structure, Culture), with neither having autonomy from the other. She goes on to critique Giddens' theory<sup>12</sup> of 1984 as resulting in Structure, Culture and Agency being "clamped together in a conceptual vice" (Archer 1996: 87). Central conflation makes it very difficult to identify which causal mechanisms are at play and whether they emerge from parts or the people in a social setting (Quinn, 2012; Moyo, 2018). Such a conflation, she explains, makes it impossible to plan or act for change.

In contrast to these conflations, Analytical Dualism has allowed me to account for the mechanisms at play in the conceptualisation and implementation of the Student Development Programmes that I found in my data. Through Analytical Dualism, I separated the power of Structural relations, the relations between ideas, and the properties and power of Agents, and was able to reflect on how the emergent properties of each conditioned the events and experiences that emerged.

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<sup>12</sup> Giddens' Theory of Structuration explains that social structures constantly shape and reinforce each other through their actions. However, those same structures also guide and limit each other's actions. He argues that Structure and Agency are interconnected and are thus highly dependent on each other.

## 2.8 Emergent Properties

Emergent properties are found in all social systems in the domains of Structure, Culture, and Agency. They cannot be reduced to the individual, as they arise from the interactions and collective behaviour of individuals within society. Therefore, emergence is central as a philosophical approach that emphasises the existence of the many underlying causal mechanisms that, through being enacted and through the interplay between them, emerge in events and experiences (Archer, 2013; Westaway, 2019). For example, in this research, Black students' high dropout rates and low throughput rates are an event, and this emerges from the various interactions of individuals in higher education with the Structures and Cultures available (e.g., curriculum, pedagogy, policies, historical and current context, institutional ethos, etc.). Therefore, emergent properties of Structure (Structural Emergent Properties), Culture (Cultural Emergent Properties), and Agency (Personal Emergent Properties) intersect to lead to the emergence of varied events and experiences.

### 2.8.1 Structural Emergent Properties

Structural Emergent Properties (SEPs) result from the different powers of Structural relations. When they become active, these properties have effects on the world. In a university, for example, there are various powers afforded to the different Structures of the university, like policies and committees, and more abstract structures, such as how the budget of the university is allocated, what constitutes the concept of a 'university', and so on. As explained earlier, Structure comprises the means of determining who has the material resources and positions of power within organisational structures (Archer, 2000; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). When a Student Development Programme is endorsed through a particular policy at the senate level, it will carry particular SEPs. Conversely, when such Student Development Programmes are not funded, these SEPs are unlikely to be activated.

Therefore, when SEPs are enacted, they possess particular powers which enable them to condition particular events and experiences. In this study, I have aimed to

determine the extent to which the various SEPs have conditioned how UCDG Student Development Programmes are conceptualised and implemented at the various HBUs and how this has enabled or constrained student development.

### 2.8.2 Cultural Emergent Properties

Just as SEPs result from the different powers of Structural relations, Cultural Emergent Properties (CEPs) are the result of emergent properties in the domain of Culture. As Archer (2000) and Case, (2013b) put it, Culture is pertinent in that the person(s) holding a particular 'world of ideas' and the degree to which they can persuade others to take on those ideas can act as a causal mechanism in the emergence of particular events and experiences, and can reduce the likelihood of others. Therefore, CEPs are the emergent properties within a particular 'world of ideas' that people can use to persuade others to take on those ideas. For example, if all senate members endorse a particular Student Development Programme at a university because it complements a dominant discursive construction of students, there will be a high likelihood that that particular programme will gain traction in the university.

### 2.8.3 Personal Emergent Properties

Identifying the Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs) entails considering the ability of Agents who are constrained or enabled by these SEPs and CEPs to enact their personal projects. For example, it could be the influence of the new Teaching and Learning Dean's role as a Social Actor that allows them to implement their plans. Alternatively, students who collectively protest against a specific student development initiative can, through corporate Agency, constrain its likelihood of being implemented. In my data, I was able to interrogate who has power in the institution and how that has conditioned the conceptualisation and implementation of UCDG Student Development Programmes at HBUs, and I was able to identify some of the Structural and Cultural enablements and constraints in this regard. Archer (2000) continues to explain that each person in a social setting possesses personal

emergent properties (PEPs). She makes a distinction between these persons as having different roles and responsibilities in a social setting, and therefore, each person's PEPs will be dependent on what role or position they hold at that particular time and place. Archer thus makes a distinction between people with different PEPs to Primary or Corporate Agents, as explained earlier.

## 2.9 Social Realist Analytical Framework

Taking all the above considerations into account, I found that Social Realism became a useful lens as both the theoretical framework as to how social phenomena emerge and as the analytical theory (see next chapter) to trace the emergence of the phenomenon under study – Student Development Programmes in HBUs. It allowed me to identify some of the underlying causal mechanisms involved in the emergence of conceptualisations and implementation of student development at HBUs by looking at the data in terms of the powers of Structure, Culture and Agency. Archer (2013a) argues that emergent powers (SEPs, CEPs and PEPs) can best be made evident through the 'Morphogenetic Cycle'.

## 2.10 Morphogenetic Cycle

Archer's aim in developing the Morphogenetic Cycle (Archer, 1995; Case, 2013b; Zeuner, 1999) was to develop a framework that gives an account of the particular construction of particular Structures at particular times (T) and in particular spaces. Therefore, the 'Morphogenetic Cycle' first set out to explain where forms of social interaction came from, that is, how 'emergence' emerged (Archer, 1995; Case, 2013a). Mechanisms may work together or sometimes contradict each other, and may exist in various forms over time. Therefore, it was not enough for me to accept what participants told me in the interviews and the primary and secondary documents I analysed as the 'truth'<sup>13</sup>. I needed to take this empirical data and see what powers

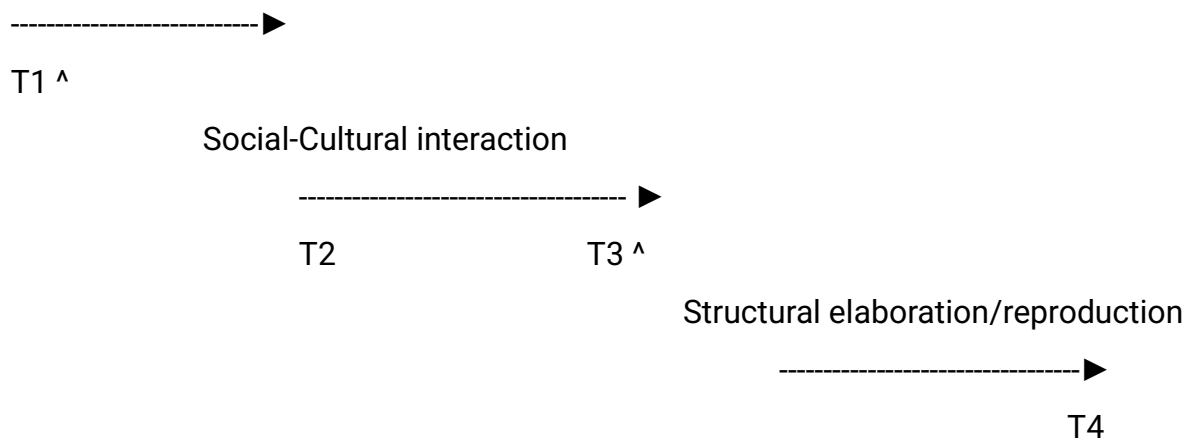
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<sup>13</sup> This should not be misunderstood as suggesting any of the data was a 'lie' but rather it was evidence of a partial truth, that is, the 'truth' as experienced by the interviewees and the document writers, drawing on their Agency and conditioned as they were by myriad Structural and Cultural mechanisms.

had been at play, what the roles of SEPs, CEPs and PEPs were in enabling or constraining Agents in conceptualising and then implementing Student Development Programmes the way they did, and how the different times (Ts) have given emergence to the participants' experiences today. In the following diagram, I offer a short description of the Morphogenetic Cycle (Archer, 1995; 2000), indicating the idea of looking at different periods to identify how specific events and experiences emerged.

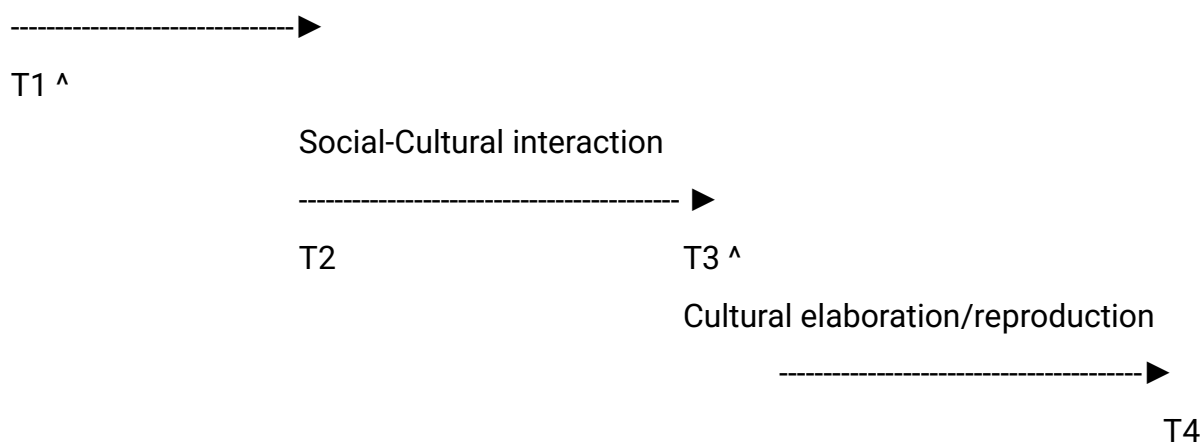
### The Morphogenesis/stasis of Structure

Structural conditioning (leading to ideational and discursive shaping)



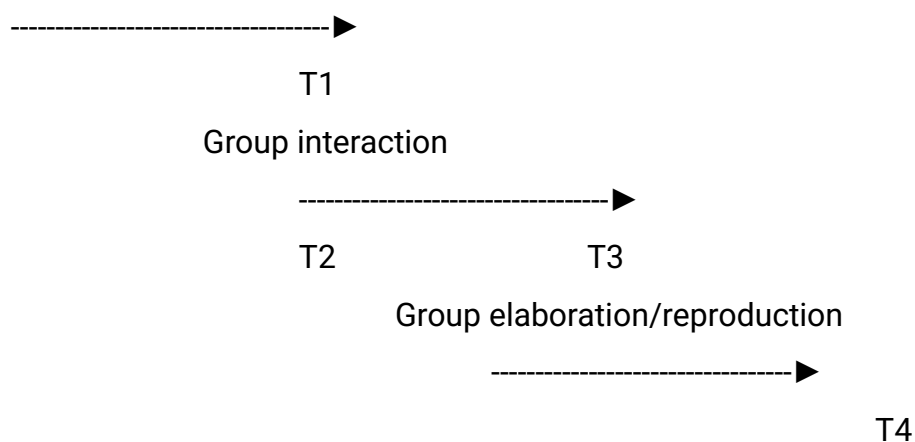
### The Morphogenesis/stasis of Culture

Cultural conditioning



### The Morphogenesis/stasis of Agency

Social-cultural conditioning of groups



Source: Archer (1995; 2000)

Figure 2: The Morphogenetic Cycle of Structure, Culture, Agency

In this cycle, Archer (1995; 2000) details the process whereby social structures elaborate or reproduce. Morphogenesis is often briefly stated as 'change' and morphostasis as 'no change'. While this might be a useful shorthand, in both cases, events and experiences emerge anew – either as the ongoing effect of causal mechanisms at play over time (morphostasis) or when new causal mechanisms come into play or the relationship between causal mechanisms shifts (morphogenesis).

At T1, the various ideas and discursive constructions (Culture) and allocation of resources (Structure) are already in play. T2–T3 emerges as Agents (the people) interact with the conditions of T1 and any new causal mechanisms that may come into play during T2–T3. This is a consequence of socio-cultural/group interactions where 'the people' engage in strategic actions as they challenge or conform to the conditions of T1. At T4 is the elaboration or reproduction of their actions as they interact with the various Structural conditions and socio-cultural interactions, and either achieve change or reproduce the same conditions (status quo remains). In the next chapter, I show the history of higher education, Academic Development, and student development, and how that history formed my (partial, fallible) rendition of T1 in my research. My findings, chapters at T2–T3 then serve as the identification of the mechanisms conditioning the UCDG-funded student development initiatives, and my conclusion reflects on whether the data suggests elaboration or reproduction as T4.

The morphogenetic framework assisted me in understanding and explaining data in its historical conditions to assess whether the change (elaboration) or lack thereof (reproduction) occurred (Archer, 1995; 2000). Elaboration (T4) only occurs if conditions in the given setting (T1 and T2–T3) provide a platform for Agents to pursue their goals. This is important because Structure and Culture cannot bring about change; only Agents can – the parts serve to enable or constrain Agents from pursuing their particular projects.

If the conditions constrain the Agents in such an endeavour, such consequences might be the reproduction of the same events and experiences for 'the people' involved, with their Agency having little effect. On the other hand, where Agents find complementarity to their personal projects in Structures and Cultures, they are more likely to be able to enact their projects, which could potentially entail change.

Using the morphogenetic framework has given me a good understanding of the different emerging properties of Student Development Programmes over time. It has also answered the transcendental question of "What must life have been like for people to conceptualise and then implement UCDG Student Development Programmes the way that they have at HBUs in South Africa?" I was able to do this by looking at the constraints and enablers Agents had to negotiate in their institutions (HBUs) to achieve (or not) their personal goals. It is important to note that, given the limitations in any research in identifying the mechanisms at play, there is no one-to-one correlation between the researcher's identification of mechanisms and the emergence of particular events and experiences. However, the morphogenetic approach fails to provide a justification or rationale for why particular outcomes, interpretations, or results are the way that they are on its own: it only describes, presents the situation, and shows complexities (Archer, 1995). That is why I had to turn to Situational Logics to understand why people acted in the ways that they did at a particular point in time.

## 2.11 Situational Logic

Morphogenesis and morphostasis are achieved by the interactions of 'the people' (Agents) with 'the parts' (Structure and Culture), and Archer (2000; 2013a) argues that such a process in the Morphogenetic Cycle can only be explained by the concept of Situational Logic. Archer (2013a) refers to 'Situational Logic' as the most logical events in a situation in which conditions necessitate certain actions. My understanding of Situational Logic is the negotiations of the personal goals of Agents in a given context in response to the Structural and Cultural conditioning, and their interactions with other Agents who may or may not share their personal project.

Luckett (2012) further explains that it is possible to trace the Situational Logic found in both SEPs and CEPs as these contain different power relations and together shape practical situations, daily experiences and events that individuals encounter. Luckett (2012) continues to explain how SEPs and CEPs are found at T1 of the Morphogenetic Cycle. She also warns us that these powers possessed by SEPs and CEPs are dependent on the PEPs we are afforded – for example, through our job title, description, disposition<sup>14</sup> and position. Therefore, an employee is appointed to a position and context which precedes them. There are various mechanisms which have been at play before they came into the position and that continue to be at play. For example, if the university does not have enough venues, and Student Development Programmes are not discussed in institutional meetings, and there are no committees that have been driving student development in the institution at T1, this will mean that new student development practitioners will be confronted with a Situational Logic working against foregrounding student development or crafting innovative development initiatives. While Archer offers a complicated table of Situational Logic (Archer, 1995), the more streamlined one by Luckett (2012) has been adopted by numerous researchers, such as Ngcobo (2022), Boughey and McKenna (2021), and Motshoane (2022). The table below gives an indication of the Situational Logic one may encounter.

Situational Logic	Contradictions		Complementarities	
	Necessary	Contingent	Necessary	Contingent
	Correction	Elimination	Protection	Opportunism

Source adapted: (Luckett, 2012: 341)

Table 4: Situational Logics

<sup>14</sup> Archer (2003) draws on the idea of Internal Conversations to demonstrate how different ‘dispositions’ or ‘ways of engaging with the world’ have an effect on Agency. This study does not engage with the theory of Internal Conversations as the data did not permit such analysis. Identifying the Internal Conversations of social actors involved in conceptualising and implementing student development initiatives would make for a follow-up study but will require a different set of data generation tools.

The terms 'complementarities' and 'contradictions' are relatively self-evident, with the former indicating Structural and Cultural contexts that align with the Agents' personal projects, and the latter indicating where they do not. But the terms 'necessary' and 'contingent' need some discussion. In a necessary relationship, the mechanisms being identified are reliant on each other for existence – you cannot have one without the other (even where they might contradict each other), whereas in a contingent relationship, the two co-exist but could potentially exist without each other (Case et al., 2017).

If there is a Situational Logic where two mechanisms are of necessity at play but are contradictory, correction will likely occur to ensure that such a contradiction is addressed. In the case where two mechanisms happen to both be at play (contingent) and are also contradictory, some form of elimination is likely to happen to ensure that the contradiction is addressed. In the case where the identified mechanisms are complementary and they have a relationship of necessity, then the status quo will be protected by these mechanisms; where the complementary mechanisms are simply contingent on each other, there is the possibility of opportunism – that is, an opportunity for Agents to enact change in the direction of their personal projects.

It is important to note that these Situational Logics “predispose actors towards particular courses of action” (Case et. al., 2017: 281); they do not determine such actions. The logic of these arrangements, (Archer, 1995) argues, “moulds” the actions of Agents because of the “ideational positions” these relations place them in – but these logics will not categorically determine the logic of correction, elimination, protection or opportunism because other mechanisms are always at play, some of which might not be identified by the researcher.

## 2.12 Conclusion

Archer's theory became an analytical tool which assisted me in looking at my data in its completeness. As I have argued, the reasons for using a Realist position in my

study, instead of an Empiricist or Relativist position, were to avoid observing data and then coming to conclusions or taking these multiple personal experiences as the ultimate truth (Boughey & McKenna, 2021: 14). In my findings chapters, I had the opportunity to explore how participants conceptualised and then implemented student development in their context and, through Analytical Dualism, to endeavour to identify the mechanisms at play in the domains of Structure, Culture and Agency. Situational Logics assisted me in establishing which SEPs and CEPs were at play and how Agents negotiated their PEPs in the way that they did. If I had not done this, I would have understood my participants' experiences as just the interplay of SEPs, or just that of CEPs, or just that of PEPs, thereby conflating one over the other and committing an epistemic fallacy (Archer, 2000; Boughey & McKenna, 2021: 14).

The next chapter deals with the methodology, and outlines the data collected and means of analysis, and the ways that the Social Realist concepts introduced here informed the research design. As explained in Chapter One, it is traditional for the literature review to precede the methodology chapter, but in this study, the chapters are switched because the literature review acts in part as a discussion of T1. That is, the literature review draws on a range of studies to discuss the Structural and Cultural conditions into which the UCDG-funded Student Development Programmes were introduced.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter unpacks the step-by-step processes of how this Social Realist research study was conducted. I provide a detailed and transparent account of the various methodologies and approaches undertaken to get to the 'truth' and why I chose these. As indicated in the previous chapter, the Realist position understands human understanding or knowledge of the truth as always partial or fallible but demands judgemental rationality in the researcher's account so that what is offered is the best explanation of the phenomenon available at the time.

O'Leary (2004: 85) explains the methodology in research as the framework or paradigm used, the methods applied (including the tools, that is, the devices used to collect the data), and the overall design of a research study (being the plan for conducting the study). This is because every project requires a clear design, although these are not settled or self-evident. Instead, they are based on a series of careful decisions. In the case of this study, the careful decision-making was underpinned by a Critical Realist philosophy that entailed the identification of mechanisms shaping how UCDG Student Development Programmes were conceptualised and implemented at HBUs in South Africa.

As explained in Chapter Two, Critical Realist ontology is based on the interplay of both observable and unobservable mechanisms at the level of the Actual and at the level of the Real. However, it argues that the researcher's responsibility is to go beyond just collecting experiences and describing events. The goal is to attempt to understand what mechanisms were active and how these worked to enable these experiences and events to emerge in the way that they did. This chapter shows the step-by-step process of how I undertook this research study, not only by observing the UCDG documentation and the interviews conducted on student development at

HBU, but also by offering a credible account of what life must have been like for people to conceptualise and implement UCDG Student Development Programmes in the way that they did.

### 3.2 Research Question

As described in Chapter One, during the apartheid years, HBUs were deprived of resources, which limited their ability to provide access to success to Black students in university (Bunting, 2006). Decades after apartheid, insufficient changes have occurred despite there being various initiatives by the DHET to provide restructuring for the provision of better access, with a consequent lack of success. As mentioned in Chapter One, the UCDG is one of the programmes that were put in place to enhance student success in higher education. This research study is a follow-up on Moyo's (2018) study, which revealed how many universities, and in particular HBUs, struggled to spend these teaching development funds each year, initially focusing on other challenges like infrastructure, operational and general development, rather than on teaching and learning development specifically. One of the main findings from Moyo's study was that the historically based differentiated nature of the South African higher education landscape constrained the implementation of teaching development. The stark resource differences in the sector have meant that the funds have not fully translated into system-wide gains. My more specific focus on HBUs seeks to interrogate this differentiated nature in more detail.

Like Moyo (2018), I too decided to conduct a large-scale study in response to the National Research Foundation's<sup>15</sup> (NRF) concerns about the dominance of small-scale studies in education research that often allow only descriptive accounts of social life (Deacon et al., 2010). As part of the Social Justice and Quality in Higher Education project, introduced in Chapter One, I embarked on the study with an ideological concern. The desire for equitable access to the 'goods' of the university

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<sup>15</sup> The NRF in South Africa funds and supports research across universities and research institutions to advance knowledge, innovation, and development.

for all people was an important aspect in developing the study in the ways in which I have done.

This study sought to understand how and why Student Development Programmes under the UCDG funding were conceptualised and then implemented as they were. Importantly, it also sought to identify the possible mechanisms that conditioned student development conceptualisation and implementations at HBUs. It did this by asking the following research question:

What mechanisms enable or constrain Student Development Programmes funded through the UCDG at Historically Black Universities?

To answer this research question, the study had to establish:

- a) How are Student Development Programmes conceptualised at HBUs?
- b) How are Student Development Programmes implemented at HBUs?
- c) How does the interplay of Structure, Culture, and Agency condition the conceptualisation and implementation of student development at these HBUs?

My research questions identify a specific population in the field of higher education, HBUs, student developers and lecturers. In Ary et al. (2010: 54), a population is described as “all members of any well-defined class of people, events, or objects”. In this research, HBUs represent the population from which data were gathered. Eight HBUs in South Africa were chosen; as explained in Chapter One, these universities are classified as HBUs as well as having HDI status. Moyo’s study raised concerns about some of the understandings of students and learning that underpinned student development initiatives, but his data did not allow him to interrogate this in great detail. I thus decided to follow-up where Moyo (2018) left off in order to unpack and more fully understand the social phenomenon of student development initiatives. Although my research looks at the same grant (or at least the grant in its current iteration), there have been new developments with the grant since his research, and

my research honed in only on one portion, which is the student development funding as opposed to all programmes. Finally, while Moyo's desktop study reviewed institutional proposals, budgets and financial records, I used interviews and conducted a Social Realist analysis of these and key documents to establish how participants conceptualised and implemented student development in their universities. This allowed me to take up some of the concerns raised by Moyo's study and, drawing on his findings, to dive deeper into the causal mechanisms that may have been at play.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

During the data collection stage, I needed to be aware of the strengths and limitations of my data-gathering tools as they needed to be the most appropriate for this research. For my study, I drew on two sets of data: documents and interviews. As I detail later, this entailed first obtaining ethical clearance (see Appendices 1 and 2).

#### 3.3.1 Document Analysis

I looked at UCDG-related documents from seven HBUs, which included some institutions' three-year UCDG proposals outlining how the universities planned to spend the grant, the consolidated reports of how funds were spent and the monitoring and evaluation reports that reviewed such spending. I encountered many challenges in obtaining these documents, as most participants I contacted were not willing to share their institutions' plans. Those participants who indicated an interest during the interview did not immediately provide me with these documents, and most of them delayed the process. The alternative process, which is the one I followed, was for me to request these documents through the DHET and to sign a non-disclosure form, which limits me from sharing any names of institutions' and participants' expenditures on projects. This process with the DHET was also not easy or efficient, as it needed a lot of line management approvals. This took an extended period of time, but it was worth it, as I had all the universities' UCDG plans and projects on student development.

I also collected key institutional-level documentation, which differed from institution to institution and included but was not limited to each institution's vision and mission statement, teaching and learning policies, and student development policies; i.e. any documents that indicated how the institution strived to support its students, for example through Extended Curriculum Programmes, Teaching and Learning Centres or Student Development Centres, Tutorship and Mentorship Programmes, and how these Units/Departments/Centres describe, define and understand student development in their context. I mostly made use of institutions' websites to collect these publicly available documents, in the hope that these would indicate how institutions positioned student development in their different contexts.

The purpose of using these documents was to begin mapping the different understandings, beliefs and ideas that the institutions had about student development (in the realm of Culture), the resources available to be able to implement those student development ideas (in the realm of Structure) and the ability of 'the people' to act (Agency).

I also undertook an analysis of DHET-authored documents, such as the founding document of the UCDG, the criteria document for proposals, strategies, policies and frameworks, and other communications which concerned funding of student development for institutions. In these documents, I saw how the DHET discursively positioned student development within these documents and the funding thereof, and whether there was a common understanding throughout the university- and national-level system, or whether there were contradictory discourses on what student development is. Some data was publicly available for access, while some needed to be accessed through institutions, which was challenging, as mentioned earlier.

The following table is a depiction of all national-level documents I analysed:

No.	Document Name	Description
1.	Ministerial Statement on University funding: 2015/16 & 2016/17	Deals with funding in the university sector
2.	Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the University Capacity Development Programme through Effective Management & Utilisation of the UCDG 2018–2020	Deals with the implementation of the UCDG
3.	Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities: 2013	Reviewed the implementation of the funding framework
4.	Institutional University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) Plan Report Second Cycle Composite Report 2021–2023	UCDP Second Cycle Report 2021–2023 (HBUs)
5.	University Capacity Development Plan 2021–2023	2021 Annual Progress Reports (HBUs)

Table 5: National Documents Analysed

These documents can be considered to be both primary and secondary sources. Ary et al. (2010) refer to *primary sources* as the actual work of participants, for example, the proposals and application forms they developed in conceptualising the UCDG Student Development Programmes at their universities; and *secondary sources* as the documents written by others, such as websites, policies, strategies and so on. These documents may not always be accurate accounts of the experiences of the participants, and that is why I needed to conduct interviews as an additional technique.

### 3.3.2 Pilot Interviews

To prepare for the main phase of data collection, I conducted three pilot interviews with participants from historically white universities (HWUs). These interviews served multiple purposes: they allowed me to test the clarity and flow of my interview questions, to assess the technical setup for online interviews, and to begin to engage with the kinds of discourses that might emerge in the actual study. While the HWU context is different from the HBU one, I sampled participants who were responsible for the conceptualisation and implementation of UCDG Student Development Programmes using the same DHET grant. The reasons for this were that I wanted to gain an understanding about the appropriateness of my questions in relation to the grant as a funding mechanism and in relation to student development as a concept. I also could not sample participants from HBUs as the chances of getting many participants from the HBU research site were unlikely and I wanted to ensure that all such interviews were included as study data. Given that the interviews were conducted virtually, it was essential to ensure that the recording software functioned correctly, that audio quality was clear, and that transcription tools accurately captured the dialogue. I also took detailed notes on the technical procedures to follow, ensuring consistency and reliability during the main interviews.

Malmqvist et al. (2019) explain that conducting a pilot study as a novice researcher is commendable, as it better informs and prepares them to face possible challenges which may arise in the actual study. Indeed, the pilot interviews were instrumental in refining my interview schedule. I evaluated how long the interviews took, how participants responded to specific questions, and whether any questions needed to be rephrased for clarity or reordered for better flow. Based on these insights, I made several adjustments to improve the coherence and depth of the interview process. This iteration helped ensure that the final set of questions would draw rich, relevant data aligned with the study's objectives, and I was much more confident in interviewing my participants.

Substantively, the pilot interviews began to reveal how participants from HWUs conceptualised student development. They generally viewed it as an institutional responsibility, with efforts aimed at capacitating both students and academic staff to engage with diverse ways of teaching and learning. However, their approaches still reflected what Boughey and McKenna, (2016) refer to a decontextualised learner understanding of student success, often rooted in deficit discourses that position students as lacking the necessary skills or motivation. These early insights were valuable in shaping my analytical lens and preparing me to analyse the data using data analysis software. The pilot phase thus not only enhanced the technical and procedural aspects of the research, but also provided an initial glimpse into the dominant narratives surrounding student development in South African higher education.

### 3.3.3 Interviews

The first decision that I needed to make in regards the interviews was who to include as my sample (see Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form). Ary et. al. (2010: 148) explain that a sample is the portion of the population and the selected sites that are used for data collection in any research study. This identification of a sample requires careful thought and consideration in order to solicit the best environment and participants to collect data related to the relevant events and experiences. An immediate complexity is that the planning, management, and implementation of the UCDG are housed in different departments or units in each institution, and often across multiple departments or units in a single institution. My sample was purposefully looking for people who were engaged with the UCDG and, specifically, its use for student development. For example, ideally, I wanted to include at least one person at the management level responsible for the conceptualisation of student development initiatives and/or UCDG proposal writing and reporting to DHET, and at least one person involved in implementation (while acknowledging that there may be overlap in these two groups). Purposive sampling (which is also referred to as judgement sampling) is often used as a technique for choosing a small number of participants from a larger population who can provide data related to key experiences (Agee, 2009; Creswell, 2014).

Initially, I purposefully selected two participants involved at the conceptualisation levels within each institution (e.g., Faculty Dean and Director of Teaching & Learning), and two participants engaged at the implementation level (e.g., Tutor coordinator or lecturer who implements a student development module). This meant my sample was planned to be in the region of four participants per HBU, which equals a total of thirty-two participants of the eight HBUs sampled. Unfortunately, my target number of thirty-two participants did not play out as intended, as I discuss below, and I only managed to sample twelve participants instead. The need to include multiple documents as additional sources was thus especially important.

<b>Pseudonyms of participants</b>	<b>University sampled</b>
Mandisa	A
Pumlani	A
Aya	A
Thabo	A
Babalwa	A
Likho	B
Sifiso	B
Jabu	B
Bongiwe	C
Thandeka	D
Makhadzi	E
Marianne	F
No participants (UCDG documents only)	G

*Table 6: List of participants and universities sampled*

This is a large-scale study in that it looks into this phenomenon across all eight HBUs in the country. Conducting national studies presents its challenges, such as, for example, not having the financial means to travel to each university to conduct interviews across the country, or not being able to reach the intended number of participants (Agee, 2009; Jones et al., 2014; Ary et al., 2010). Therefore, apart from

the purposive sampling, I had to rely on the snowballing sampling technique, where the participants I interviewed indicated other key participants necessary for this research. Ary et al. (2010) explain that the snowball sampling technique is useful in helping to identify other key subjects that may be of good use to your study. Unfortunately, this did not work out as intended, as an uneven spread of participants across the universities was ultimately reached through this sampling technique. Muthama (2018) discusses the conditions constraining and enabling research production in HBUs in South Africa, where she shows that these institutions have historically not focused on research. She shows how their research outputs have remained lower than those of HWUs over the years, thus suggesting the lack of familiarity with research processes in these universities. My experience of this was evident in how I struggled to get participants.

Sampling in qualitative research is not statistically determined; it is based on saturation rather than complete representation. What mattered most to me were the depth and richness of the conversations I had with people (Sarantakos, S., 2000).

Another contributor to my uneven spread of research participants across the universities was the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of planning this study, a hard lockdown was imposed, where there was no free movement of people in the country. HBUs were especially badly affected by the sudden move to emergency remote teaching, learning and assessing. The consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic thus created a limitation to communication, as participants only relied on emails to contact one another as colleagues, thus affecting the snowballing technique, where they could refer me to other prospective participants who were suitable for the study.

At the time of conceptualising this research, I did not know what the future held and thus designed my interviews to be conducted online. This method of interviewing was also beneficial due to time and financial constraints, as these universities are spread across the country; therefore, even though by the time of the interviews, the harsh restrictions had been relaxed, and people could move freely around the country, the interviews continued to be undertaken online. This undoubtedly entailed a few

constraints as it is much harder to establish rapport, observe non-verbal prompts (most of the time our cameras were switched off due to bandwidth challenges) and establish trustworthiness with participants. This meant I needed to spend more time before the interview began in earnest, explaining the rationale behind my study to ensure participants truly understood the essence of the study and that they gave fully informed consent.

The interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix 4 –Interview questions). I came into the interview with eight key questions to solicit my understanding of the conceptualisation and implementation of UCDG Student Development Programmes at HBUs. However, I did not always get the opportunity to ask all eight questions in a single file manner, as semi-structured interviews follow the conversation, and questions arise as the conversation moves along. My role in these interviews was to ensure that the conversation was purposeful, and to decide if I needed to ask direct questions or when it was time to rephrase particular questions which may not have been answered, and when follow-up questions were needed to ensure I had understood fully or to elicit more details (Agee, 2009; O’Leary, 2004).

In these interviews, I attempted to gather participants’ conceptualisations of student development and their reflections on the implementation of their initiatives. I used interviews as empirical data, which are the descriptive experiences participants shared with me on their experiences of conceptualising and implementing Student Development Programmes funded by the UCDG at HBUs. During these interviews, I encountered many challenges. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world; many people do not have equal access to resources. At the time of this research, the country was also experiencing political and social battles, which led to a lack of service delivery. The country’s electricity supply was also compromised, leading to a short supply of electricity, and thus loadshedding<sup>16</sup> was implemented almost daily, whereby the electrical grid was shut down for hours at a time, often with little warning. Therefore, electricity supply and internet connectivity were not

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<sup>16</sup> Loadshedding in South Africa is when electricity supply is intentionally turned off in different areas for set periods to prevent their entire power grid from collapsing due to demand.

guaranteed. This was especially the case for the participants I interviewed, as many of their institutions are in rural areas and poorly resourced towns in South Africa. This meant an interview that could be completed in forty-five minutes ended up taking longer or had to be repeatedly rescheduled due to loadshedding and connectivity interruptions. These are all challenges that affected the duration and process of conducting my interviews. I recorded each interview on an online recording system, MS Teams, which also provided me with a transcription of the interview. This was helpful after the interview, as I could replay the interview and pause to listen and read what the participant had said verbatim (Agee, 2009). The transcripts were not always perfectly accurate, and so careful editing was still needed.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis involves a rigorous method of identifying findings from various sources of data collected. Creswell (2014) describes the process of data analysis as akin to the process of peeling an onion, where the researcher needs to dig deeper and deeper into the different layers in pursuit of understanding the given data. That is precisely what Realist research demands; it requires me to move beyond just describing or summing up the data to identifying the causal mechanisms (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Initially, in my data analysis, I realised I was only looking at my data as if it comprised just Structure, just Culture, or just Agency, since the data was still in its raw format, instead of looking for the multiple mechanisms which are all at play in all data (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Lockett (2012) refers to this as just empirical-level data that does not show the underlying socio-economic and institutional power structures and cultures involved.

Therefore, in the data analysis stage, I relied on Archer's concepts, discussed in the previous chapter, to provide me with a methodological approach to explain the emergence of the data. I specifically used Analytical Dualism to identify the specific workings of Structure, Culture and Agency, despite all three always constituting all

data. The use of the Morphogenetic Cycle assisted me in understanding how mechanisms played out over time in the emergence of the conceptualisations and implementations of student development. My goal was to analyse and observe the extent to which 'the people' (Agents), in their interactions with one another, worked together (or in contradiction to each other), and drew upon the existing Culture and Structures to change or maintain the status quo in the institution – and possibly identify why that was the case (Case, 2013; Moyo, 2018).

Social Realism is an analytical theoretical tool that in itself demands the researcher to constantly look at the interplay of Structures, Cultures, and Agency in events which occur in the interplay of socio-cultural and socio-economic interactions (Archer, 1995, 2000; Lockett, 2012). As discussed in the previous chapter, the underpinning question is always, "What are the Structural and Cultural mechanisms enabling these understandings, beliefs and ideas and resource allocations to continue and constrain alternative ones?"

As indicated previously, Agents find themselves in situations which precede them and thus find it difficult to exercise their PEPs, thereby constraining their Agency. This then led me to continue digging deeper to understand the events which have led to how student development is now playing out at HBUs. Bhaskar's (2008) transcendental question, as previously explained, required me to ask my presented data, "What must life have been like for UCDG-funded Student Development Programmes to be conceptualised and implemented in the way that they are?" In the data analysis stages, I needed to ask myself why I was seeing what emerged in the data the way I did. Initially, I found myself identifying 'findings' based on the experiences of my participants and my interpreting of their interpretations of student development. This is what is known as a double hermeneutic (my interpretation of participants' interpretations), and thus creates what Bhaskar calls the epistemic fallacy (2008), which does not explore the multiple mechanisms involved (Maxwell, 2013; Daniel & Harland, 2018).

Boughey and McKenna (2021) warn about the dangers of a double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher interprets the participants' interpretations. These authors

argue that researchers come to data with personal views and understandings of the phenomenon in question, and thus have the potential to interpret those interpretations of others based on their limited understanding of the world. Social Realism then becomes useful, as it minimises this double hermeneutic by insisting that the researcher move beyond describing the events and experiences and towards identifying how they emerged through the interplay between Structure, Culture and Agency. This required the Analytical Dualism first introduced in the previous chapter.

### 3.5 Analytical Dualism in Data Analysis

As discussed in the previous chapter, Analytical Dualism can be implemented for research purposes to identify the specific conditioning effects of Structure, Culture and Agency in the emergence of the phenomenon under study. Analytical Dualism allowed me to understand the complex properties the participants possessed in conceptualising and implementing student development in the way they did in their capacity, which led to many discursive constructions about how student development was initiated at these HBUs.

The danger of Analytical Dualism is that researchers forget that the separation of 'the parts' from 'the people' is just for analytical purposes, and in the real world, these parts are not separate. During the data analysis stage, for example, I found myself making the mistake of looking at my data as illustrating Structure, Culture or Agency, or as just the individual SEPs, CEPs or PEPs at play, instead of understanding that each event and experience emerged from multiple mechanisms in all three areas, which are intertwined and interlinked. This meant I did exactly what Archer said I should avoid, where I was accounting my findings as only upward (by focusing only on Agency), or downward (by focusing only on Structure and/or Culture), or as central conflation (without implementing Analytical Dualism at all) (Archer, 2000). I thus had to identify an issue in the data, and use Analytical Dualism to account for the Structural, Cultural and Agential interplay that enabled that issue to emerge as it did.

During this stage of analysis, I needed to remember how Analytical Dualism requires me to be able to separate the powers accorded to SEPs, CEPs and PEPs to not commit epistemic fallacy, but I still needed to make sense of how these played out over time to understand how change did or did not occur. This led to the use of the Morphogenetic Cycle in both my analysis and my structuring of the thesis.

### 3.6 Morphogenetic Cycle in Data Analysis

As previously explained in Chapter Two, the Morphogenetic Cycle allows the identification of Structural and Cultural conditions at the time the phenomenon under study or Agents come into play. This is considered T1. Then it demands an interrogation of the actions of Agents within these conditions that account for the phenomenon over time, which is considered T2–T3. Finally, T4 indicates the situation at the end of a particular cycle of time, and this would be the T1 of the next cycle, once again providing the Structural and Cultural conditions.

In this study, I have interrogated T1 as the context of higher education globally and its consequences for South Africa and HBUs in particular. T1 takes the form of Chapter Four in this study. In this chapter, which also serves as the study's literature review, I have interrogated the literature on the Academic Development and global forces such as massification. During data analysis, I needed to take this T1 into account in understanding the conditioning of the data, the documents and study participants' interviews as they conceptualised and implemented Student Development Programmes. In this study, T2–T3 represents the different events and experiences participants interacted with in their institutions: the UCDG and the conceptualisation and implementation of Student Development Programmes in their institutions and attempts to identify the mechanisms at play in their emergence. T2–T3 is presented as my findings' chapters, that is, Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. T4 emerges as elaboration or reproduction. This is presented as Chapter Eight, the concluding chapter in this study, which also includes some recommendations.

Understanding the Morphogenetic Cycle then led me to understand the different power relations (Situational Logics) that were at play in my data, which then further led me to understand how the people (Agents) experienced it in their context. This ultimately then led me to look at the different interactions which occurred, and the powers involved, which led to morphostasis or emerged as morphogenesis.

### 3.7 Data Management

Creswell (2014) explains that qualitative research is custom-built, and data analysis, data findings and the data itself are often entangled. When I was collecting my data, I had to be mindful of my data analysis processes and how I would then translate those into my findings (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Daniel & Harland, 2018). Academics in many other disciplines and research methods, such as quantitative researchers, critique the qualitative method and refer to it as “choreographed or using the three ‘I’s – Intuition, Insights and Impressions” (Creswell, 2013: 04). As argued in the theory chapter, Social Realism allows me to avoid using the three ‘I’s. As I planned my research, my goal was to discover the nature of ‘truth’ or the ‘reality’ of my participants (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) and then go beyond this to find out why that ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ was the way it was. This goal involved me asking the transcendental question, which is “What must the world be like for conditions to be the way they are today?”

After collecting the necessary documents for analysis, I had to save them in a folder on my personal computer in a cloud backup space, which is password-protected. I did the same process for my interviews. As detailed above, I recorded all of them in an online system which provided me with transcriptions of the interviews, and I kept the audio recordings and the transcripts in the same folder. I then uploaded all of these to Nvivo – a data management system that assists researchers in analysing data (Creswell, 2014; Caldwell, 2018).

To ensure validity and reliability in the quality of my data gathered, specialised software designed to categorise my data into quality data allowed me to start

describing the various documents and interviews individually by identifying concepts, words, and phrases as codes. Codes in data management software can be descriptive words or phrases that relate to a topic or concept, or can be analytic and related to a particular theory (Creswell, 2013; Caldwell, 2018). Within these codes, I wrote memos and grouped or labelled them as having a relationship. For example, after I coded the conceptualisation of 'student development', which was common in the documents and the interviews, I could then group these into sub-sets that drew on different conceptualisations.

Data management software allowed me to begin to critically reflect on the relationship between the different data sets. For example, I had the opportunity to visualise the data in how it was presented in its different forms. For instance, the DHET documents barely define or describe students and focus on broad definitions rather than direct ones. It was also interesting to see how the various universities often described students in similar ways. The memo section allowed me to summarise my thoughts about how I was seeing the data physically. I was able to reflect on this in the memo section, which allowed me to reflect on various sentences and statements from the documents and interviews as part of managing the data. The advantage of data software management tools is that they allow you to explore your data in many ways. For example, they allowed me to test correlations between some concepts and descriptions, and they allowed me to develop images such as word clouds to see which words or phrases and concepts were dominant in the data, and to see what about that dominance was useful in my research study (Tau, 2024; Odena, 2013).

Creswell (2013) and Odena (2013) explain that qualitative researchers need to make careful decisions on what data is useful to them in responding to the research question, and which data is not relevant. For instance, as I will discuss in later chapters, I was able to 'see' the extent to which student development was understood from a deficit construction and the levels of deficit it was drawn from. I was able to identify how their understanding of developing students came from a noble and kind act, as opposed to being malicious. Indeed, this data has given me more information,

for example, about the broader higher education landscape and how it plays out at HBUs differently from at HWUs, thanks to the use of data management software that allowed me to explore the data sets in different forms. Therefore, it assisted me with interpreting the data with a conceptual and analytical understanding (Creswell, 2013). I then had to move from memoing, coding and interpreting to describing and classifying the data. Crucially, I had to maintain my Social Realist lenses throughout this coding process and apply Analytical Dualism to account for the identified codes.

### 3.8 Ethical Clearance

I applied for ethical clearance at Rhodes University through the Education Higher Degrees Committee, and then I also had to apply separately at the eight HBUs in South Africa (see Appendix 1 – Ethical Clearance Certificate and Appendix 2 – Request for Permission to Conduct Study letter). I needed permission and support from my institution to ensure that this study addressed all ethical considerations, and that it maintained the integrity of the university and that of the participants and institutions involved. I needed various forms of documentation about institutions' applications for funding, for example, their three-year proposals and annual reports. This meant that I was privy to the financial information of institutions. This made the data collection process quite challenging, as some participants were not willing to share their funding proposal documents. One participant, for example, opted to only share his section of the funding document as he was not comfortable sharing other projects, despite there being student development projects in the other sections, and despite their university's ethical clearance approval letter to conduct the study and access all documentation. This led me to turn to the DHET to access the rest of the documentation, as I considered it part of public information. This proved to be a lengthy process, taking over a year. DHET has a Data Sharing Agreement contract, which can be signed by the researcher to acknowledge their terms and conditions for working with such data. The condition was that I anonymised the data.

### 3.9 Member participation and anonymity

My interview questions were informed by my understanding of institutions' planned projects and their expenditure of money, and I engaged in such conversations with care and respect. I made it clear from the start that my aim was that of enhancement and the shared endeavour to support student success. I made clear that this was not a study seeking to judge the participants or their institutions, but rather to understand how student development took place and how it came to take place in the ways that it did.

It was challenging to fully maintain institutional anonymity, given that the descriptions of the institutional contexts revealed some of the specific universities, for instance, there are eight HBUs in South Africa, and this is publicly known, thus making it impossible to anonymise them in this study. However, I tried my best not to include any particular key identifiers of the institutions from the data. For example, where participants indicated that their HBU was situated in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, such a description identifies it as the University of the Western Cape, because that is the only HBU in the Western Cape Province. I therefore had to redact such data that identified the institution. But, where participants mentioned that their university is a rural university situated in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, this was not too obvious, as it could be the University of Fort Hare or Walter Sisulu University. This is the level and extent to which I needed to be careful about the presentation of my data, in order not to compromise the anonymity of my participants or their institutions.

All members were invited to participate in the study voluntarily and could choose to withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix 3 – Participant consent form). Individuals were fully anonymised, and any identifying characteristics which compromised their anonymity were redacted. For example, when participants mentioned their positions and named particular student development projects that were unique in their universities, I changed those project names into more general names for student development. For instance, where tutorship, orientation or a

student development programme was termed uniquely, I changed this to its general terms used internationally. It is hoped that HBUs will see this research as a developmental study which seeks to assist in identifying the mechanisms which enable and/or constrain their conceptions of Black students in university and how they then conceptualise and implement student development in higher education.

### 3.10 Positionality

I am an Academic Developer currently working at an HWU; however, at the beginning of this study, I worked at Walter Sisulu University, an HBU, as a Student Advisor in the field of Academic Development. I am thus an insider–outsider in this research study, as I have previously worked in one of the institutions I researched, and I know some of the colleagues I interviewed from some of the institutions through conference and workshop projects. At my current institution, I am employed as an Academic Developer, which means I am an insider to the field, as I still work directly with the UCDG-funded Student Development Programmes. However, I am not in the same context anymore, and I came to the interviews from an HWU context, making me an outsider to the HBU context.

Due to this position, I could potentially have been perceived by my participants in a negative light, given the hierarchical nature of universities in the unequal South African landscape. It was possible that my participants might assume that I would be undermining or not understand the context of HBUs anymore. On the other hand, I was also an insider given my prior experience in both the field of student development and the HBU context. My insider position was at times a constraint. For instance, I battled to probe some statements made by participants who made clear that I would know the nuances they couldn't articulate or the realities of HBUs that are perhaps generally not verbalised. For instance, some participants would say "...uyayazi wethu" (you know how it is) whenever they were responding to questions that potentially had political implications (i.e., conflict of interest, known misuse of funds, etc.). Such a response often came with other non-verbal prompts that in my culture signal a sense of discomfort to answer. While in the Western culture, it is

perhaps easier to probe respectfully despite such discomfort by, for example, responding by saying, “No, please tell me more”, in the African culture, such a response would be seen as “Impoxo”, which means I am not respecting boundaries or am forcing the person to respond<sup>17</sup>. Such extractive approaches to research have been critiqued in much of the literature and would be particularly inappropriate in this context. This required me to allow the participants to talk comfortably and not probe too much into aspects with which I could see they were uncomfortable. It is in such instances that I needed to rely on modes of inference and draw on other data sets to strengthen the findings.

Fortunately, participants had generally already answered the main question and only became uncomfortable when I continued to dig deeper and deeper into their contexts. In other instances, this also happened in the opposite way, where participants would dwell much deeper on a response where I felt I had already received sufficient input – but respect required that I needed to allow them to continue.

Another challenge that was influenced by my positionality was when participants who were my seniors couldn't respond to questions, either because they simply did not know the answer or felt uncomfortable with a particular question. In such cases, I made the conscious decision not to probe such questions any further and simply moved on. This is again a customary requirement for a young Xhosa man interviewing his elders, where probing questions could easily be read as disrespectful and undermining. For instance, some participants did not want to discuss what did not work well in their institutions, and when they mentioned political challenges and personal interests of people, they did not want to provide details. In other instances, there was much discomfort shown by senior participants who did not want to appear ignorant about some definitions and concepts of student development and success (e.g., definitions and what particular concepts meant to them). They would, for instance, say “I am sure you know this much better than me...”. This is another

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<sup>17</sup> isiXhosa–English dictionaries translate ‘impoxo’ as irony or sarcasm, but this is not its full, nuanced meaning.

example of where they said: “uyayazi wethu” (you know how it is), and my role was to draw on that finding only based on where they were comfortable to share.

To some extent, critiques of Social Science research will use this experience to further critique how gathering qualitative data is not ‘scientific’ enough. Mkhize (2006) and Tau (2024) reflect on the complexities of being Black researchers confronted with Eurocentric or Western ways of doing research that do not align with Indigenous values, such as ‘ubuntu’ and ‘[uku]hlonipha’ (respect). Throughout this research, I drew on Tau (2024) and Mxalisa (2025) to remember that I am a human being working in collaboration with other human beings in research, as opposed to being a researcher doing research. During the data collection stage, I was very open and clear to my participants about my intent, and about the goal of the study as a social justice approach, and where participants were not willing to share their knowledge and experiences, it was okay.

Despite my attempts at reflective consideration of the ethical implications of this study, including interviewee-informed consent and anonymity, and my positionality and the many choices in conducting this study in the manner I did, including the selection of theoretical lenses, there are inevitably limitations to this study. However, this does not mean I did not get the depth in the responses I needed from participants, nor did I miss clarifications from unclear and ambiguous responses and explanations that would limit the richness and the many nuances or perspectives that the data presented. It is, however, hoped that my ethical decisions and positionality assisted me in avoiding making the experiences negative for participants. I believe that my participants were comfortable and were not pressured, and this minimised my influence to lead participants towards certain responses. This process allowed me to learn from the data and get different perspectives on what people were thinking and experiencing, as opposed to what I possibly believed when I initiated the study.

### 3.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter drew on Archer's concepts to indicate how I identified the mechanisms which were at play in conditioning participants to conceptualise and implement Student Development Programmes in the way that they did. Research methodology is important in social science research because it provides a structured and transparent framework for how we gather data, analyse and interpret it. Tools such as Analytical Dualism assisted me in analysing the data meaningfully. Therefore, Analytical Dualism as a tool was particularly useful as it assisted me in separating the parts from the people, just for the purpose of data analysis. I also made use of the Morphogenetic Cycle as a framework for analysing the stages at which participants interacted (T2-T3), thereby either elaborating or reproducing the status quo. Using theory to explain our methods assists in gathering and interpreting data 'truthfully'. Social Realism has assisted me in strengthening the credibility and reliability of my study and has assisted me in considering the deeper Structures and mechanisms involved in what people say and do. Therefore, methodology allowed me to search for the truth carefully, critically, and ethically, rather than simply reinforcing what I expected or wanted to see.

## Chapter 4:

### T1 – The Structural and Cultural conditions at the start of the cycle

#### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters served to introduce the lenses through which I undertook this research study and the processes by which I collected and analysed the data. The purpose of this chapter is to spell out the conditions under which the data were collected (T1) for this study. In the following three chapters, they will then be analysed and discussed as findings (T2 –T3). As explained, the Morphogenetic Framework assisted me in understanding and explaining data within its historical conditions and in reflecting on the forms and extent of change (Archer, 1995; 1996; 2000).

Chapter Two has shown that many underlying causal mechanisms condition social phenomena and that our role as researchers is to identify what conditions were at play for things to emerge in the way that they did (Bhaskar, 2008). This chapter seeks to discuss some of the conditioning mechanisms at T1 of this study, which may bring us closer to understanding why ‘the people’ conceptualised and implemented UCDG Student Development Programmes in the manner in which they did.

This chapter begins with a look at some global forces at play that condition higher education systems, and includes a reflection on their effects on the system under study. It then moves from the global to the African continent, before drilling down into the conditions at play in the South African higher education system when the UCDG was introduced. These discussions are not in chronological order; for example, neoliberalism, an issue discussed under the section on global issues, continues to develop and extend its causal effects long after the mergers in the South African system took place, an issue discussed in a later section of this chapter. Nonetheless, this chapter serves to draw on the literature to outline some of the key mechanisms conditioning the phenomenon under study, that is, the conceptualisation and

implementation of student development discussed as T2–T3 in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

## 4.2 Global Forces Affecting Higher Education

A number of forces at the global level have shaped higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. While these forces are often large and abstract, they have effects on the everyday lives of those involved in higher education and on how student development is conceptualised and implemented. This section begins with an introduction to the concepts of globalisation and neoliberalism before discussing the emergence of a massified higher education system around the world, including in South Africa.

### 4.2.1 Globalisation

Globalisation is concerned with “the economic changes that have resulted from the development of transportation and communication links thanks to the development of technology” post the World Wars, when industries were rapidly developing (Boughey and McKenna, 2021: 1). Globalisation has therefore given rise to particular discourses that have then conditioned how people function in society (Archer, 2013). The role of higher education in the global state became central, as it is understood that knowledge plays a key role in driving the global economy (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Higher education was increasingly perceived as a place of knowledge production, specifically for economic growth and the support of industry. Maasen and Cloete (2004), Mohamedbhai (2014), and others show how the early years post-World War II shaped the understanding of what constituted a new social order. Societies were determined to establish a new environment for socio-economic and political change globally.

However, the new social order that brought about global connection also brought forms of disorder, as the people had different ideas, understandings and beliefs of

what constituted 'social order' (Archer, 2014). Archer argues that the results of education as we have it today are the formation[s] of many Agents who interact:

Most of the time ... the forms that education takes are the political products of power struggles. They bear the marks of concession to allies and compromise with opponents. Thus, to understand the nature of education at any time we need to know not only who won the struggle for control, but also how not merely who lost, but how badly they lost (2014: 2).

Therefore, the rise of a hyper-capitalist economy from the 1990s onwards (Boughey, Unpublished; Jameson, 1990) meant that the understanding of higher education as providing skilled labour for industry was increasingly hegemonic (Kraak, 2001; Maasen & Cloete, 2004; Mohamedbai, 2014). At this time, global bargaining intersected with the development of higher education across the African continent, which was beginning to gain its independence from colonial rule after hundreds of years (Mohamedbhai, 2014). Maasen and Cloete (2004: 7) explain that on the African continent, the rise of globalisation greatly affected financial markets and "implicit bargaining" took place, which needs to be understood as the introduction of neoliberal ideologies, often in exchange for funds from the World Bank. Globalisation was seen to be vital to develop an international connectedness to global trade. This meant that trading was no longer only localised; Maasen and Cloete (2004) and Boughey and McKenna (2021), for instance, give examples of the establishment of some big, globalised trade institutions which strengthened the globalisation discourse, like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the European Union (EU), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

#### 4.2.2 Neoliberalism in the academy

Despite the benefits enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s from a capitalism that included various social safety nets and saw the use of large works by the State as a means of employment, there was a shift in the 1970s and 1980s to the idea of a small state

being more efficient. This was combined with ideas of a free market and 'trickle-down economy', especially as implemented by Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the USA. The globalised market system, which was closely tied to such neoliberal ideas, promised improved lives through a thriving economy.

Higher education was promoted as a means to improve people's socio-economic lives as they would be trained to provide the requisite skills of the country, thereby contributing to economic development not only in their local communities but globally (Maasen and Cloete, 2004; Mohamedbhai, 2014; Boughey, 2024). The rise of neoliberalism entails a dominance of market logic, which seeks to economise all aspects of human life. Neoliberalism understands human endeavours as valuable for society only if they are economically productive (Jameson, 1990; McKenna, 2025). It includes a strong narrative of investment in human capital (Houghton, 2019). This thinking positions higher education as having its primary purpose as skills training for individual wealth and national economic growth, and reduces the potential for higher education to be understood as a public good that serves humanity and the environment, thus making neoliberalism another set of discourses that condition the world we live in (Lange, 2012).

Sayer (2015) and Arcidiacono (2016) indicate that neoliberalism understands people as consumers or commodities. This has implications for higher education because students are positioned as customers who have paid for the 'product' of a qualification, and it simultaneously positions students as commodities who as future 'human capital' serving the knowledge economy. Houghton (2019) suggests that neoliberalism relies on 'debt-fuelled consumption', and that this thinking encourages students to borrow money to obtain the product of a higher education qualification that they can exchange for social mobility and improved employment opportunities (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Masutha, 2023).

Hlatshwayo (2022) describes the consequences of neoliberalism in the direness that has come to be experienced by students who have been reduced to fee-paying clients prepared for the knowledge production of economic goods. However, in the context

of post-apartheid South African democracy, neoliberal promises were often interpreted as having potential for the emancipation of Black Africans.

#### 4.2.3 Massification

Massification, that is, the widening of access to higher education to include social groups traditionally excluded, emerged from globalisation and neoliberalism. While higher education traditionally served to cement the social positions of the elite, which in the case of Europe and its colonies generally meant wealthy, white males, this shifted over time. The end of World War II brought about a new social thinking – world order became the common discourse (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Socialist theorists such as Althusser, Bowles and Gintis, and Gramsci heavily influenced the broad political and social transformation of that era (2019). Such theories were dominant in the expansion of higher education and the rise of students' movements in the 1960s, which highlighted the relationship between education, class, and capitalist society (Jameson, 1990). Criticisms of traditional higher education loudly argued that social structures were designed to legitimate and reproduce class inequalities by forming a subservient class and workforce for Capitalists. In contrast, Communism offered a view of a classless, socially just society. Marxists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed theories which were critical of the role education (and other social structures) played in developing an élite system. Higher education was understood as a vehicle for reproducing class hierarchies designed to instil dominant ideologies and to maintain class distinctions (Jameson, 1990). Marxists called for the opening up of higher education to all (McAllister-Grande, 2021), a slogan that later became infamous in South Africa's June 16, 1985, where the Congress of South African Students (COSAS)<sup>18</sup> emphasised the Freedom Charter's<sup>19</sup> call for an open education system advocating for "the doors of learning and culture be opened for all".

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<sup>18</sup> COSAS was a student organisation founded in 1979 that aimed to fight for better education and broader political freedom for Black South Africans under apartheid.

<sup>19</sup> The Freedom Charter was adopted in 1955 in South Africa by various anti-apartheid groups that fought for the liberation of all Black South Africans.

In contrast, theorists taking a capitalist stance argued that the limitations of access to higher education restricted the opportunities for a bigger skilled workforce that could drive economic growth. Capitalists understood the new social order as consisting of a market economy which needed a more skilled workforce to respond to the economic pressures aligned with industrial and technological advancements of the time (Maasen & Cloete, 2004; Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Despite coming from very different ideological positions, there was thus a consensus that access to higher education needed to be widened. In Africa, this global shift in access to higher education for a more diverse population meant the inclusion of previously excluded (Black) people (and women) who had been denied access through unjust legislation, financial constraints, or lack of opportunity (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). For example, in South Africa, higher education was mainly reserved for white people and a minority of the Black middle class who could only access the qualifications offered in universities designated for their ethnic and racial categories. These were generally certificates, diplomas, and a few degree qualifications like public administration, nursing and teaching qualifications (Maasen & Cloete, 2004; Bunting, 2006). The global shift towards widening access meant that higher education was widely opened to most people through various forms of higher education institutions. It also meant that people could now interact more frequently with the global world. While widening access and global connectivity between higher education systems came late to South Africa because of apartheid divisions and international academic sanctions, the process of widening access did eventually arrive and had immense effects on the conditions in the very divided higher education system constructed during apartheid (Department of Education, 1997; Ministry of Education, 2001; Ntshoe, 2002)

Massification led to the emergence of a new understanding and need for higher education for the different cohorts of students who accessed it. Mohamedbhai (2014) indicated that massification coincided with a global democratisation of higher education, where there was a shift from an élite higher education system reserved for only the select few to a mass system that encouraged diverse access to higher education post-World War II. This mass system provided widespread chances of

upward mobility in the socio-economic lives of both working-class and middle-class students. The massification of higher education was received positively by governments around the world as it promised economic development for the country (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Boughey, 2024). In South Africa, specifically, post-1994, massification was phenomenally quick as masses of Black students could now also enjoy access registered across the range of higher education institutions, including those to which they had previously been denied access.

This is arguably how post-apartheid South Africa drew its central understanding of the purpose of higher education – being primarily focused on serving the socio-economic interests of its people (Black people in particular). This was because having a higher education qualification meant that people could gain knowledge and thus be attractive to employers (Case et al., 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Going to university for the masses and acquiring the skills needed for economic growth in South Africa (and in Africa), particularly meant that Black people who had been previously excluded from the economic development of the country now hoped to be fully included.

Therefore, a massified university system meant great access to economic wealth for both the state and its citizens, who would be remunerated for their qualifications when they were labourers in markets trading their knowledge. In turn, this was understood to result in a well-functioning economic state of the country, which produces quantities of products for the global market. In the conditions of globalisation and neoliberalism, masses of students accessed higher education in large numbers globally, and this was replicated in South Africa (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Trow's seminal analysis of this global phenomenon of widening access (1973) introduced the concept of massification. He suggested that a higher education system that serves less than 15% of a country's 18- to 24-year-olds can be considered 'élite'. He states that a system can be said to have massified when more than 15% of its 18- to 24-year-olds are in higher education. He describes a universal higher

education system as achieved when a country's higher education serves more than 50% of its 18- to 24-year-olds. Importantly, he argues that the shift from élite to massified entails more than increased numbers, with their related need for more resources. He argues that a massified system, by definition, is no longer just serving the élite. The inclusion of students and staff from other social classes has several consequences, according to Trow (1973: 7), as the following extract from his famous essay indicates:

When access is highly limited, [higher education] is generally seen as a privilege, either of birth or talent or both. Above about 15 percent of the age grade, people increasingly begin to see entry to higher education as a right for those who have certain formal qualifications ... And the emphasis shifts from the shaping of character to the transmission of skills for more specific technical elite roles ... In institutions of mass higher education, education becomes more modular, marked by semi-structured sequences of courses, increasingly earning unit credits (the unit of exchange in modular courses), allowing more flexible combinations of courses and easier access and movement between major fields and indeed among institutions ... Under the conditions of mass higher education, the emphasis is on the transmission of skill and knowledge [rather than shaping of character in the preparation of an élite], and increasingly formal instruction is carried on through large lectures supplemented by seminars often taught by teaching assistants.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) Vital Statistics 2022 (2024) indicates that South Africa has attained massification, with an overall participation rate of 24% in 2022 (latest data available). Comparing the CHE VitalStats 2022 (CHE, 2024) report with a UNESCO (2022) report<sup>20</sup>, one sees that South Africa's higher education participation rates are lower than those of most countries in the Global North, such as the United Kingdom, currently at 35.8%. More positively, South Africa is rapidly growing its numbers and is expected to reach numbers comparable to Global North

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<sup>20</sup> While Trow (1973) considered participation rates in the category of 18- to 24-year-olds, UNESCO and the CHE in South Africa use the category of 20- to 24-year-olds.

countries in a couple of years, as data shows a significant increase to more than double its size since the early 1990s in terms of student enrolments.

While massification has yielded positive gains in access to higher education in South Africa for the previously marginalised groups, when this data is disaggregated, the CHE VitalStats 2022 (2024) reports a differentiation in social groups in terms of access to higher education in South Africa. The CHE report (2024) shows that 48% of the white student population enters university in comparison to only 23% of their Black peers (see the figure below). However, it should be noted that this percentage remains the highest participation rate on the continent and continues to increase annually. Furthermore, going back further to 2005 (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2012) it can be seen that the participation rate of the African population was 12% and the participation rate of the white population was 57%.

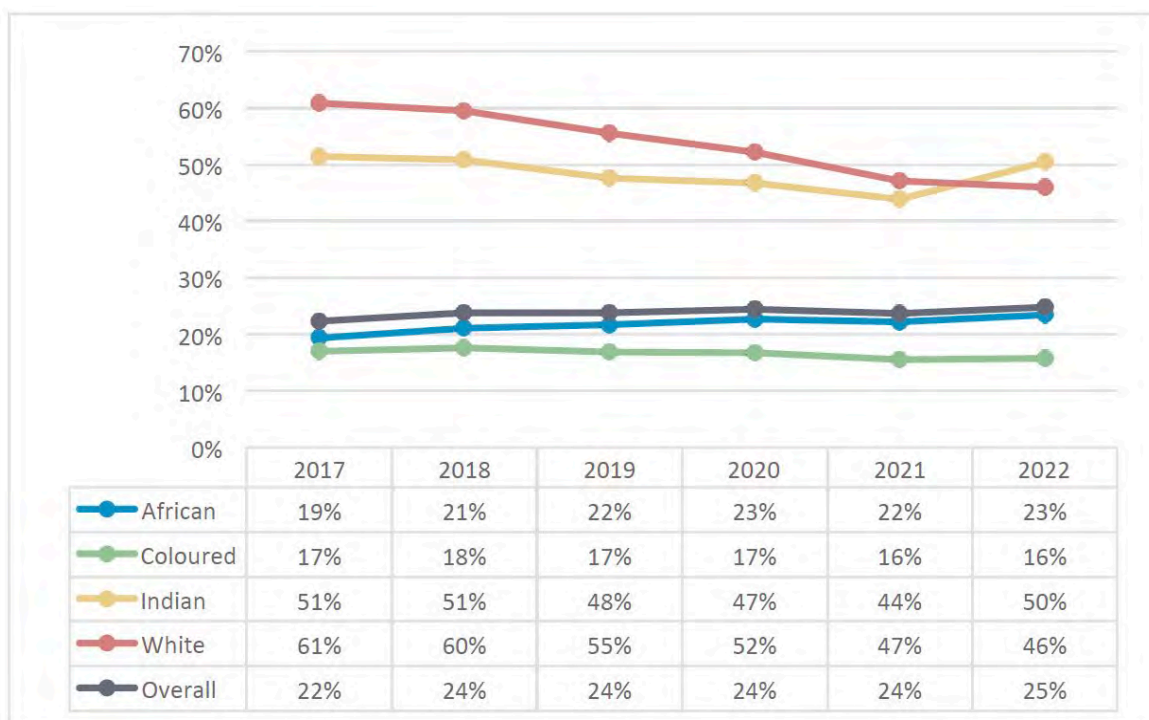


Figure 3: Higher Education Participation Rates by Race Group (CHE, 2024)

But it is important to note that physical access to the university does not equate to the epistemological access needed for success (Morrow, 2003; 2009). The number of the general population who can access *and complete* higher education and qualify

to contribute to society and the economy of a country should be taken as the basis of determining the success of massification – particularly in South Africa, where higher education is often primarily understood to serve the economic needs of people and the state, at the cost of other purposes. Successful completion of a programme of study remains somewhat racially differentiated across the South African higher education system, though the difference in this aspect, too, is rapidly closing. The two figures below indicate the throughput rates<sup>21</sup> for the 2017 cohort of diploma and degree students, as calculated with data up to 2022.

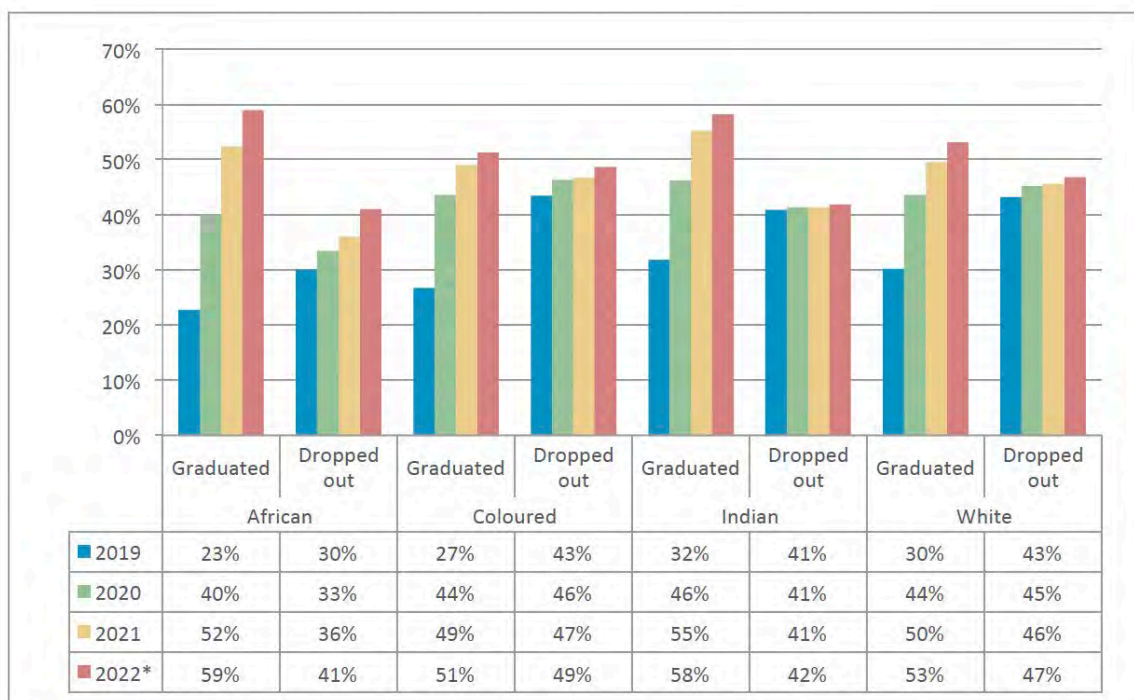


Figure 4: Throughput rates 2017 cohort for 360 credit diplomas (accumulative) (CHE 2024)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Throughput rate can be roughly stated as the number of students in a cohort who graduate over a period of time compared to the number of students who initially registered.

<sup>22</sup> A 360-credit qualification is intended to be completed in three years of full-time study. The 2017 cohort reflected in Figures 4 (diploma) and 5 (degree) should thus complete in 2019.

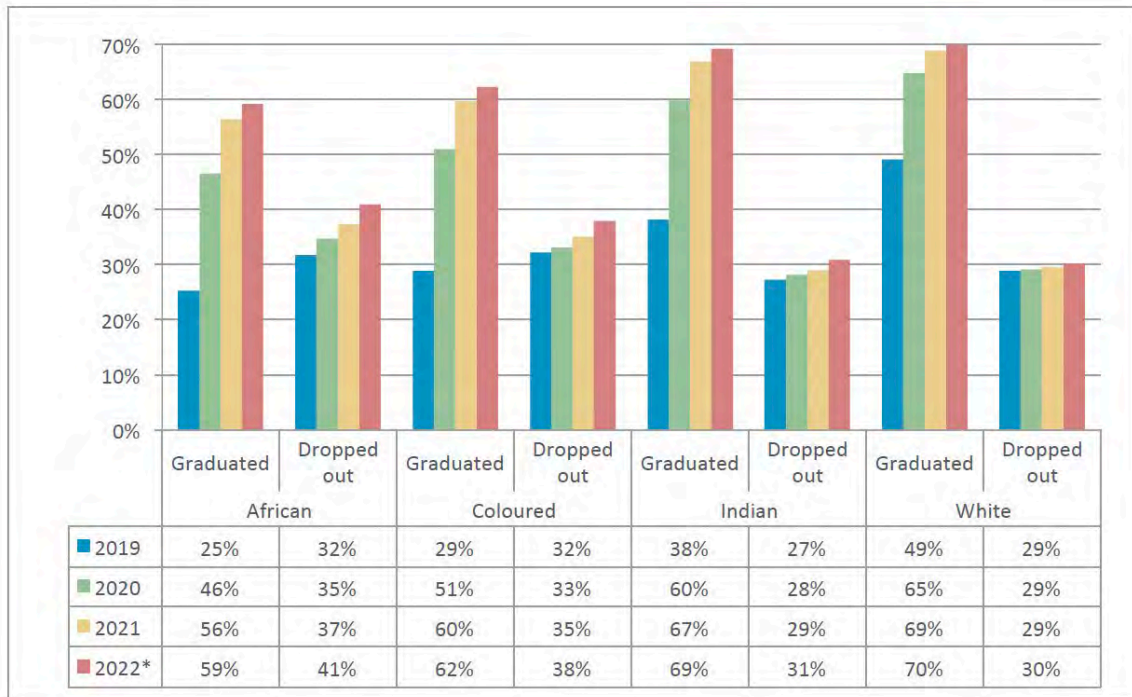


Figure 5: Throughput rates 2017 cohort for 360 credit degrees (cumulative) (CHE 2024)

If we only compare the African student body with the white student body, we can see that in the case of the diploma, after n+3 years, a cumulative total of 59% of African students have graduated, compared to the lower throughput rate of white students, of whom only 53% had graduated. In the case of the degree, white students continue to enjoy a better throughput rate, with a cumulative total of 70% graduating in n+3 years compared to 59% of their African counterparts.

Massification can thus be understood as a global trend that has had implications for Africa and, more narrowly, for South Africa and its HBUs. Massification can be seen to be a significant mechanism conditioning the context in which UCDG-funded student development initiatives were introduced. Mohamedbhai (2014) argues that massification should not be confused with success, which is what is often the perception in South Africa. Across Africa, higher education institutions battle with the capacity of these numbers of students due to insufficient infrastructure and resources that constrain effective teaching, learning and assessment (Boughey, 2024; Mohamedbhai, 2014).

Boughey (2024), Boughey & McKenna (2021), and Mohamedbhai (2014) explain that this is in part a result of the state reducing its public funding for higher education institutions over the years, making for more reliance on universities to sustain themselves through fees and third-stream income. This can be seen to emerge from the neoliberal conception of higher education as a private good, which is then seen to be the financial responsibility of the individual who gets such goods. This has resulted in universities becoming more like business organisations, where efficiency becomes the order of the day in what Boughey (2024: 01) terms “the New Public Management regime” of higher education, and which Hlatshwayo (2022) and McKenna (2025) relatedly describe as the “incursion of neoliberalism”. Neoliberalism, globalisation and massification have all shaped higher education around the world, including on the African continent.

### 4.3 African Higher Education Systems

Maasen and Cloete (2004), Mohamedbhai (2014), and Cloete, (2014) offer an extensive history of African education systems, where they explain how colonisation affected African universities and colleges. They point out that higher education in Africa during the colonial era was exclusively for the élite who resided in cities. This remains evident as most universities across Africa are in cities, and there are many differences (structures, resources, and geographical location) between those schools and higher education institutions in cities and those in rural areas. Many countries in Africa saw the colonial development of schools for all racial groups, but often universities were not developed, as the children of the colonists returned to Europe for their higher education. In some countries, such as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, universities were created, but these often served the white population only. Mohamedbhai (2014) explains that a major boost in the development of these universities was achieved by financial assistance from Europe.

Education, at both school and post-school levels, was a significant tool in the colonial process, and was used to ensure that the indigenous populations became literate, that they saw European cultures as enlightened, that indigenous knowledges (and

often languages) were dismissed, and that students were prepared for the taking on of the religion of the colonisers<sup>23</sup>. As Theal (1909 in World Bank, 2009) indicated, in relation to colonial education in South Africa,

Slave children under twelve years of age were to be sent to school, where they were to be taught the principles of Christianity as well as to read and write and to conduct themselves respectfully towards their superiors.

That education was specifically directed towards such goals in the colonial era meant that post-independence educational institutions had to completely reconfigure themselves. It should be noted that, while many countries in Africa moved from the colonial era to independence, some countries, such as South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe, went from colonial rule to a settler-colonial state. It was only decades later that democracy was achieved. Many of the inequalities of the colonial era continued into the settler-colonial era (e.g., apartheid in South Africa). This is why Mohamedbhai (2014) notes that some significant challenges in the African higher education systems were the deterioration of African economies in the post-independence era, whereby governments found it difficult to invest in higher education, given other needs which needed to be prioritised (e.g., poverty). This coincided with many political challenges in Africa, including, in some countries, dictatorships and poor governance.

This, in part, explains why the World Bank (2009; 2010) undertook a set of problematic studies, which concluded that the rate of social return on investment in tertiary [higher] education was lower than for basic education, and accordingly significantly reduced its tertiary education sector spending in Africa (World Bank, 2009, 2010; Mohammedbhai, 2014). The understanding of higher education simply as an issue of 'rate of return' made obtaining loans for higher education development extremely challenging for countries in Africa. The Structural Adjustment Programme

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<sup>23</sup> Across most of Africa, the religion of the colonisers was Christianity, and often the work of the colonial state in spreading Christianity was supplemented by the work of missionary groups. In some countries in East Africa, however, the religion of the colonisers was Islam and a similar process followed.

of the World Bank had dire effects on higher education on the continent (Nampota, 2015), and the conditions for obtaining such loans severely constrained academic freedoms. Even when World Bank funding for universities was available, universities were increasingly forced, if they wanted to obtain this limited funding, to bring in New Public Management practices of monitoring and measurement, alongside changes in understanding the university as a centre for skills training with a focus on competency-based frameworks. Knowledge was thus seen as pragmatic and for the purpose of applying skills for 'real-world' problem-solving and economic growth. This reduced the opportunity for knowledge to be understood as a means of understanding the complexities of the world in multiple ways.

The effect of this thinking also led to a rapid increase in student fees. Boughey and McKenna (2021: 5) explain that the thinking here was that

if knowledge was a commodity that successful students acquired, they could effectively trade their certified skillset in the global economy by selling their labour as 'knowledge workers'. Because individual students reap the economic benefits of such certification, they then should carry the costs of achieving it.

Thus, paying for their private goods was justified. It was not until the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in 1998 that the revitalisation of higher education was seen as central to addressing developmental challenges in Africa and to achieving economic, social and political stability (UNESCO, 1999).

#### 4.4 South African Higher Education System

In South Africa, before 1994, there were twenty public universities, thirteen technikons and numerous colleges, which included those that were dedicated to teacher training and nursing<sup>24</sup> (Jansen et al., 2002). As explained in Chapter One, the

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<sup>24</sup> Over the years, some teacher and nursing colleges were closed, and the qualifications were made available through other institutions.

number of higher education institutions was in part a result of segregation laws, where people were separated along racial and ethnic lines by the apartheid government. In South Africa, there are four main racial categories of people, namely, White, Coloured, Indian and African. White people were the élite groups of settler-colonisers who enjoyed the greatest benefits in the country. They originated from countries of the global North and were responsible for the colonisation and land dispossession of Black Indigenous people in the country, and are still regarded as the wealthiest minority group of people today (Chelwa et al., 2024). In 1991, when the transition to democracy began, this group made up 14% of the population. They now make up 7.3%.

Coloured people in 1991 made up 6% of the population, and currently make up 8.2% of the South African population. Indian people made up 3% of the population in 1991 and now make up 2.7% of the population. African people have always made up the majority in South Africa's constitution, 75% of the population in 1991, and 81.4% of the overall population in the country in 2022 (Brand, 1990; Stats SA, 2024). African people are the indigenous people whose history spans across the African continent and who preceded colonisation. They form various sub-categories of ethnicity, which come with different cultural and religious customs. African people in South Africa have many different languages, of which nine indigenous languages are recognised as among the official languages of the country<sup>25</sup> (Stats SA, 2024).

Universities were designated in accordance with these racial categorisations. There were more universities designated for white people than for Black people. No other race was allowed to enrol at an educational institution that was not designated for their race group unless under some very strict conditions – for example, for a Black person to enrol for a qualification at a white institution, many bureaucratic processes needed to be undergone from various Office Districts and National levels for approval. On acceptance of a non-white person in that institution, more stringent

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<sup>25</sup> The remaining two languages are English and Afrikaans. Many would argue that Afrikaans is also an 'indigenous language' as it came into being in South Africa and does not exist anywhere else in the world. It is based mostly on Dutch. It is spoken as a home language by about 7 million people, over 50% of whom are 'Coloured'. 39% of Afrikaans home language speakers are white and are known as 'Afrikaners'.

rules needed to be followed, like, for example, not living in the same residences as white students or accessing particular university services enjoyed by white students<sup>26</sup> (Bunting, 2004b; Cloete et.al., 2004; Lockett, 2024). Strict rules in the movements amongst the different sub-categories of Black people – such as African, Coloured, and Indian – were reported for those institutions, but these were not institutions of choice for many people because they were generally ill-resourced and constrained by their relationship to the state, as introduced in Chapter One.

Alongside the division of higher education into racial categories was the division of the higher education system into what was known as the ‘binary divide’ between universities and technikons (Polytechnics). Until the last few years of apartheid, technikons offered diplomas (rather than degrees), did not offer postgraduate qualifications, and had the content of their courses monitored by the state through a ‘convenorship system’. As (McKenna, 2025: 2) indicates:

Almost all education in South Africa was premised on fundamental pedagogics, but technikons bore the brunt of this narrow understanding of education. Fundamental pedagogics, as it was applied in South Africa, was closely entwined with Christian National Education, and positioned the education process as one of input-process-output, failing to take Structural and Cultural contexts into account. Knowledge was pragmatically understood as neutral rather than inherently political, and it was directed only towards practical implementation. Technikons were thus positioned as training centres, rather than higher education institutions. Like the universities designated for Black population groups, they also battled suffocating control by the state, including national oversight of all syllabi and textbooks via the convenorship system.

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<sup>26</sup> Very few Black students accessed white institutions. Those who did were mainly the children of Black middle-class parents who served white communities that did not have nearby Black universities, or who excelled much better in their academics and qualified for qualifications that were only meant for white people.

The effects of these forms of differentiation of higher education remain evident to this day, more than thirty years after democracy. The apartheid government positioned universities as 'creatures of the state' (Bunting, 2004b), and it has been difficult for them to claim new identities and move away from the conditioning of the past. For example, under apartheid, white universities were primarily seen to be responsible as the key sites for the reproduction of knowledge in the form of scientific research; these universities provided academic rationale for many aspects of South African policy, and their research output is still the highest in the sector. Universities like Stellenbosch University, the University of the Free State, and the University of Pretoria, for instance, "provided pseudo-scientific justifications for apartheid, educated apartheid's most notorious leaders and entrenched white supremacy" (McKenna 2025: 2). Universities such as Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town for instance – which were also universities but were English medium – contested the idea of being creatures of the state, but did little to overtly challenge the apartheid government (Maylam, 2017; Luckett, 2024). These universities stated that they wanted to remain critical and objective in social discourse and maintain their autonomy and independence from the state (Maylam, 2017; Luckett, 2024). English-medium universities have been documented in history to enrol more numbers of non-white students and sometimes ignore the campus rules and regulations for the monitoring of non-white students (Luckett, 2024), but many have contested the extent to which they truly stood up to the evils of the apartheid state, apart from the actions of a few brave activists (Maylam, 2017; McKenna, 2025).

The racially differentiated system came with stark differences in terms of quality and standards in teaching and learning, and of the student and staff experience; aspects of which are still experienced today (Heleta, 2016; Andoh, 2019). As was briefly discussed in Chapter One, these institutions of higher learning were funded poorly and inconsistently (Bunting, 2006; Maasen & Cloete, 2004; Cloete et al., 2004; Strehl et al., 2007). While white institutions enjoyed support from the government, with full autonomy over their finances, Black institutions did not enjoy the same funding

benefits, and funding was restricted to far lower budgets, as explained in Chapter One.

The introduction of globalisation and the expectation that universities would contribute towards this new world order became uniquely challenging for South Africa, due to its segregated past. This challenge was compounded by the academic sanctions that were in place, largely isolating South African academics from the rest of the world. Therefore, the incoming government of 1994 had to bring in policy reforms to respond to a globalised knowledge economy, and also to undo the racially differentiated higher education system (Maasen & Cloete, 2004; Bunting, 2006; Strehl et al., 2007). Thus, the goal of the South African government was to address the segregated past of colonialism and apartheid, which had resulted in a ruined state: the new government needed to undo several inequalities simultaneously to achieve social integration and address poverty while ensuring that the country was responding to and participating in global development. Such an endeavour needed a policy framework to guide the country towards this direction.

The first national economic policy that was enacted was the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which was premised on the socio-economic development of the country. The RDP was aimed at addressing the deep inequalities and socio-economic challenges left by apartheid (South African Government, 1994). Its key objectives were to meet the basic needs of previously marginalised people by providing housing, water, electricity, healthcare, and education, amongst many other social needs. It further sought to develop the human resources of Black people, build the economy, democratise the state and society, and restructure state institutions, amongst other things. While many gains were achieved by this policy framework, as large numbers of previously excluded communities gained access to basic services such as water, electricity and housing, the RDP was very short-lived, as the state began to experience budgetary constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and implementation difficulties. The government was also under pressure from the neoliberal markets, which did not value programmes such as the RDP (Terreblanche, 1999).

After just two years, the state shifted its commitment to achieving economic growth towards Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). GEAR was premised on the prioritisation of economic liberalisation over state-led development. This strategy was primarily focused on the need for a more market-oriented and driven economy, instead of the state (Department of Finance, 1996). The proponents of GEAR argued that part of the reason the RDP was not successful was because the economy was slow to support the RDP's social spending. GEAR sought to invest in the private sector and enhance the macroeconomic stability of the country, which also needed to ensure much visibility in the global economy. However, GEAR faced many challenges, and South Africa still battles some of the criticisms today, including the criticism that it shifted concern for social security in favour of more neoliberal approaches. GEAR was replaced by the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) and then the New Growth Path (NGP), but these also did not last long despite their optimism in the economic development of South Africa (The Presidency, 2009). In 2012, a long-term strategy aiming for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction was published in the National Development Plan – Vision 2030. In the NDP, education, skills development, healthcare, infrastructure and increased employment opportunities are the central focus (National Planning Commission, 2012).

The various shifts in economic policy had effects on the higher education sector as it attempted to move from its historical divides to what was intended to be a single, coordinated system. Badat, (2002) explains that, at the time the RDP was being developed, the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) Report of 1993 was published. Cloete (2004) identifies the NEPI report as a unique civil society initiative and a people's education project of that time. It was envisaged that the NEPI report would act as a vehicle to respond to a globalised economy post-apartheid.

The NEPI report informed the White Paper on Education of 1997 (and the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education), which was gazetted by the first democratic Minister of Education, Professor Sibusiso Bhengu. The White Paper was set out to

outline the new project for education in a democratic South Africa. It was developed to establish the first steps to developing a new education system away from the differentiated and segregated education system of apartheid (drawing from the principles of the NEPI report).

It was in 2001 that the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) sought to respond to the need for producing graduates needed for the social and economic development of South Africa. The 2001 NPHE stipulated a heightened understanding of the labour market as a great focus in relation to student enrolment trends. There was a great focus on increased participation rates and graduate outputs, while ensuring that these were a broad representation of the different racial groups. The plan also sought to redress issues of inequity in the higher education system by restructuring the institutional landscape. What was key was reducing the number of higher education institutions and the development of new institutional and organisational strategies (Minister of Education, 2002; Simpson, 2018; Ntshoe, 2002).

The main means of restructuring the racially differentiated higher education landscape was through a series of mergers. By 2004, South Africa had a plan to merge the segregated public institutions into only 23 public universities<sup>27</sup>. The mergers were intended to get rid of duplications and to ensure that the racialised differentiation of the past was reconfigured for an equitable higher education sector (Sehoole, 2005; Bunting, 2006).

The table below shows a summary of the universities and technikons that were merged or that retained their status post-apartheid.

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<sup>27</sup> This later became 26 with the development of two new universities and the dismantling of the merger of Medunsa with the University of Limpopo.

Historic Name		Current Status
<b>Universities designated for white people – English-medium</b>		
1.	University of Cape Town	Remained the same
2.	University of the Witwatersrand	Remained the same
3.	Rhodes University	Remained the same (its second campus amalgamated with University of Fort Hare)
4.	University of Natal	Now part of University of KwaZulu-Natal
<b>Universities designated for white people – Afrikaans-medium</b>		
1.	University of Pretoria	Remained the same
2.	Stellenbosch University	Remained the same
3.	University of the Free State	Remained the same
4.	Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education	Now part of North-West University
5.	Rand Afrikaans University	Now part of University of Johannesburg
6.	University of Port Elizabeth	Now part of Nelson Mandela University
<b>Universities designated for Black African Students</b>		
1.	University of Fort Hare	Remained the same (though Rhodes University's East London campus amalgamated into it)
2.	University of Zululand	Remained the same (but changed its differentiation status to comprehensive university)
3.	University of the North	Renamed University of Limpopo. (Initially merged with Medunsa - Medical University of South Africa- but that merger was later undone)
4.	University of Venda	Remained the same (but changed status to comprehensive university)
5.	University of Transkei	Now part of Walter Sisulu University

6.	University of Bophuthatswana	Now part of North-West University
7.	VISTA University	Comprised of multiple campuses throughout the country such as Bloemfontein, East Rand, and Gqeberha. Merged into multiple universities across the country, namely: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nelson Mandela University</li> <li>- University of Johannesburg</li> <li>- University of Pretoria</li> <li>- University of South Africa</li> <li>- Vaal University of Technology</li> </ul>
<b>Universities designated for Coloured people</b>		
1.	University of the Western Cape	Remained the same
<b>Universities designated for Indian people</b>		
1.	University of Durban-Westville	Now part of University of KwaZulu-Natal
<b>Distance Learning Institutions (Always enjoyed a more diverse student body)</b>		
1.	<b>University of South Africa (UNISA)</b>	Merged with Technikon SA
<b>Technikons – changed status to Universities of Technology</b>		
Technikons were also segregated according to race.		
<b>Technikons designated for White people</b>		
1.	Pretoria Technikon	Now part of Tshwane University of Technology
2.	Cape Technikon	Merged into Cape Peninsula University of Technology
3.	Vaal Triangle Technikon	Merged into North-West University (Vanderbijlpark Campus)
4.	Technikon Free State	Merged into Central University of Technology
5.	Witwatersrand Technikon	Merged into University of Johannesburg
6.	Port Elizabeth Technikon	Merged into Nelson Mandela University

7.	Technikon Natal	Merged into Durban University of Technology
<b>Technikons designated for Coloured people</b>		
1.	Peninsula Technikon	Merged into Cape Peninsula University of Technology
<b>Technikons designated for Black African people</b>		
1.	Border Technikon	Merged into Walter Sisulu University
2.	Mangosuthu Technikon	No merger (but changed to Mangosuthu University of Technology)
3.	Northern Gauteng Technikon	Merged into Tshwane University of Technology
4.	Technikon North-West	Merged into North-West University (Mafikeng Campus)
5.	Technikon SA	Merged into UNISA
<b>Technikons designated for Indian people</b>		
1.	ML Sultan Technikon	Merged into Durban University of Technology

Table 7: Public Universities and Technikons in South Africa during apartheid.

In these mergers, we saw examples of some white universities and technikons merging with public HBUs or technikons, such as the merger of Rand Afrikaans University, Vista University Distance Education campus and Technikon Witwatersrand to form what is now known as the University of Johannesburg. In some instances, Black universities, colleges and technikons also merged, for example, as in the case of the University of Transkei, Eastern Cape Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon, now known as Walter Sisulu University. Other universities remained untouched irrespective of their nature (historically white university (HWU) or historically Black university (HBU)), for example, Rhodes University (HWU) and the University of Fort Hare (HBU) (Hall et al., 2004; Hall, 2015; Schoole, 2005), though the latter did incorporate the East London campus. There was some criticism about leaving some universities untouched by mergers, especially as these were mainly HWUs, but the argument was that the sector could not afford to destabilise the institutions with the greatest research output.

Some have argued that the transformative agenda of the mergers was not met because it is still readily possible to identify which universities are HBUs or HWUs (for example, Jansen et al., 2002; Jansen, 2003). Also, some historically white institutions that merged with historically Black institutions still have separate campuses, like the Qwaqwa Campus of the University of Free State, which most Black students attend (Moyo et al., 2022; Jansen et al., 2002; Jansen, 2003). The university situated programmes like BEd qualifications, diplomas and certificates, which have a high enrolment of Black students on particular campuses, with consequences for racial profile differences across campuses. Similarly, North-West University has a racially differentiated student body, with its Potchefstroom campus having a far greater proportion of white students than its Mahikeng and Vanderbijlpark campuses.

However, as part of redress, the historically Black institutions that were not part of the mergers and those that were a merger (or amalgamation) of only HBUs, such as Walter Sisulu University, were designated Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDI) by the DHET, allowing them to receive certain earmarked funding to address their infrastructure challenges. As indicated previously, the HDI grant has since been re-named after the first Minister of Education, to become the Sibusiso Bhengu Grant (Parliament of South Africa, 2015).

Today, South Africa has three differentiated types of universities: comprehensive, traditional, and universities of technology, as shown in Table 1 of Chapter One. This brief history of the mergers after the end of apartheid offers some insight into the conditions under which the UCDG was used for student development in HBUs. Such contextual depictions of T1 serve to illustrate mechanisms at play in shaping the data collected in this study. In the next section, I look at Black students, who, as I explained in Chapter One, continue to make up the student body in HBUs.

## 4.5 The Success Challenge for Black Students in Higher Education

Despite the many efforts to restructure higher education to respond to the socio-economic needs of the South African population, there is still much to be done concerning success in higher education. Although South Africa's higher education system has massified and a more diverse student body is represented at the various public institutions of higher education in South Africa, many challenges in accessing higher education at its fullest form persist, particularly among the Black population. As noted from CHE VitalStats 2022 (2024), many Black students access higher education, and their success rates have increased significantly, particularly in Diploma studies. What remains problematic is accessing particular disciplines that are deemed highly powerful, specifically the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields. Many Black students are enrolled in disciplines within the Humanities and Social Sciences, and Education, while they are less represented in fields such as Engineering and Natural Sciences at most universities (Boughey, 2005; Lockett, 2012; Case, 2013c; Case, 2013a; Wolf & Lockett, 2013).

Morrow (2003; 2009) refers to this issue of who enters certain programmes and institutions as physical access, but he reminds us that we also need to reflect on epistemological access. He explains that true access to higher education by students is not just about getting into the institution: to be successful in higher education involves accessing the disciplinary ways of knowing. It is understanding and mastering the methods, practices, and knowledge systems that are central to the field of study that constitutes success. Authors such as Lockett et al. (2019), Boughey (2005), and du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) argue that insufficient progress has been made in epistemological access despite efforts in various higher education programmes.

One major programme designed to enhance epistemological access, which has been funded by the DHET, is the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP). ECPs were

previously known as Foundation Programmes<sup>28</sup>, which the DHET has funded since the early 2000s becoming widely established in the sector by 2004. They are currently funded through an earmarked grant<sup>29</sup>. ECPs were established as a way to ensure that all students who accessed university gained access to ways of knowing (epistemological access) in their modules (Council on Higher Education, 2020; Boughey, 2010; Bozalek et al., 2011). These programmes are designed to provide an additional layer of support within the curriculum to assist those who have previously not had access to quality education (which, as explained earlier, remains almost exclusively Black African students), by helping them to build the foundational skills and knowledge needed to be successful in their disciplines (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Centre for Higher Education Development, 2016).

Bozalek et al. (2011) and Slabbert and Friedrich-Nel (2015) highlight the role that ECPs have played in enabling previously marginalised students to access particular STEM programmes. ECPs can thus be argued to respond to Morrow's (2003; 2009) concept of epistemological access to higher education in South Africa (Conana, 2017; Shay et al., 2016).

However, despite the good work achieved in ECPs, the provisioning of this academic support has been critiqued, as several research works have examined the effectiveness of the ECPs and identified that where there is insufficient integration of ECPs into the mainstream curriculum, this reduces the effectiveness of this intervention (Slabbert, & Friedrich-Nel, 2015; Centre for Higher Education Development, 2016; Council on Higher Education, 2020).

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<sup>28</sup> In the early 1990s Foundation Programmes were soft funded at some universities designated for white students who were increasingly admitting black students. These "new students" often battled with their studies and Foundation Programmes were thus developed. The government started formally funding Foundation Programmes in the year 2000.

<sup>29</sup> An earmarked grant is given by a government for a very specific purpose. Earmarked grants can only be used for the specific purposes for which they are allocated. Each university also gets an annual block grant. This is calculated through a complex formula outlined in the national funding policy, which includes funding for enrolment, graduation, research outputs and so on. Universities have significant freedom in how they allocate their annual block grant.

Despite many efforts by the South African government to ensure Black students' success in higher education, there continue to be challenges. Such setbacks in the endeavour to improve the socio-economic needs of the previously marginalised South African population through higher education qualifications are unfortunate. And this necessitates conversations about the value of a higher education qualification and the need for more diverse approaches to the socio-economic development of the country.

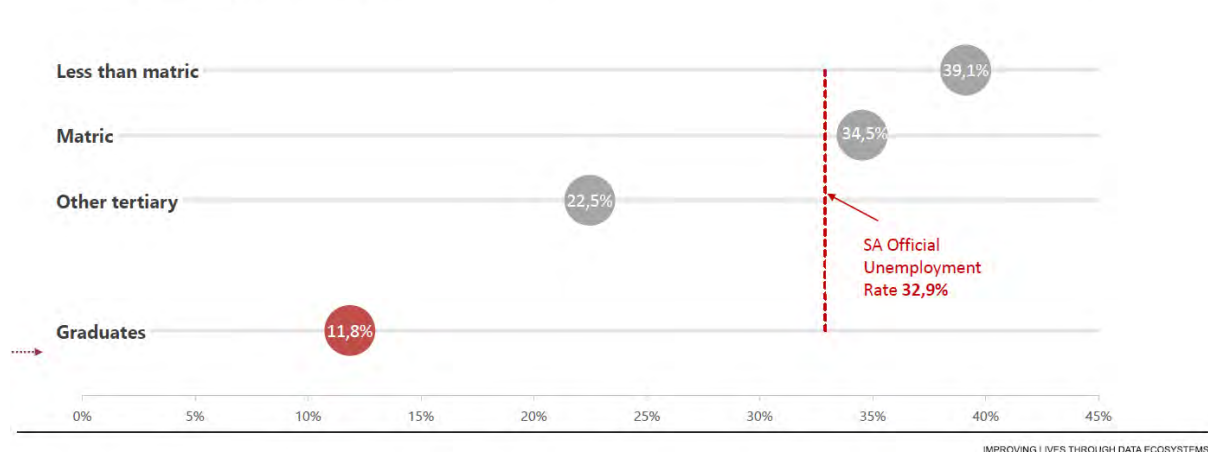
#### 4.6 Graduate Premium in South Africa

The 'graduate premium' is defined by Boero et al. (2021: 02) as "the magnitude of the earnings premium associated with a first degree". Research suggests that the graduate premium is reducing in value around the world. For example, studies in the UK show that since the early 1990s, the financial advantage of obtaining the first university degree has been declining, though this is greater in some degree programmes than others (Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014; Boero et al., 2021). Studies indicate that the level of study, location, and duration of study have effects on the graduate premium. For instance, those in the STEM fields continue to enjoy a much higher average than those in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, as do those with postgraduate qualifications. Similar concerns have been raised in the USA (Hummels & Akridge, 2024) and in Australia (Ross, 2024).

However, in South Africa, obtaining a higher degree qualification continues to enjoy a significant graduate premium, as graduates are more likely to be employed and to economically outperform non-degree holders (Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014). Monetnegro and Patrinos (2014) actually found that the graduate premium in South Africa is the highest in the world. Despite this, the South African Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) (2024), for instance, indicates an increasing level of graduate unemployment. The table below shows the slow increase in unemployed graduates in Quarter 1 of the year 2024 (Department: Statistics South Africa, 2024):

..... **Graduate** unemployment rate increased by 2,3 percentage points to **11,8%** in Q1:2024 compared to 9,6% in Q4:2023. Those with **matric** and **less than matric** remain vulnerable with an unemployment rate of 34,5% and 39,1% respectively which are higher than SA official unemployment rate.

Official Unemployment rate by level of education, Q1:2024



Source: Department: Statistics South Africa, (2024).

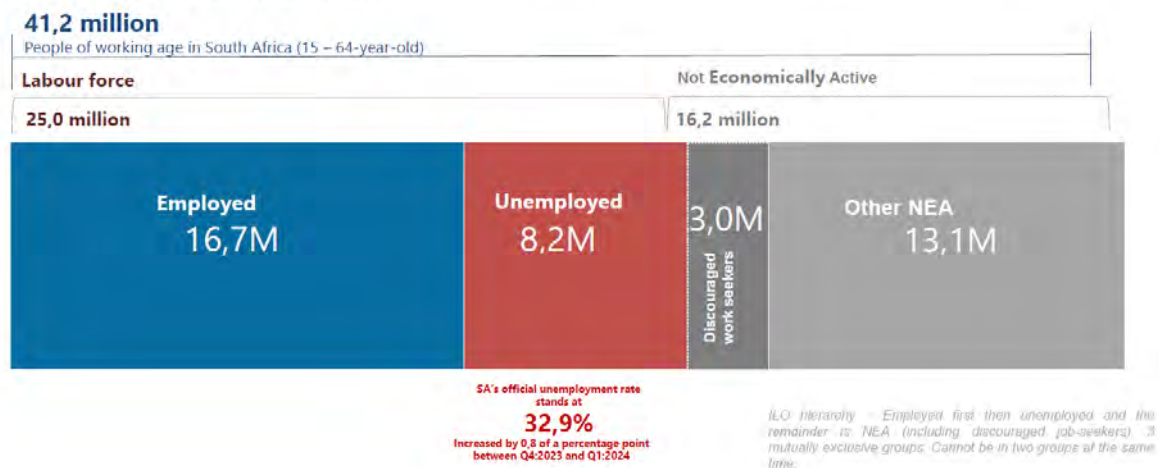
Figure 6: Graduate Employment Statistics: South Africa

The unemployment rate for graduates is 11.8% in Q1, 2024, an increase of 2.3% from 9.6% in 2023. This data suggests that though graduates are more likely to be employed than non-graduates in South Africa, there is a notable rise in joblessness among first-time graduates in South Africa, alongside severe general unemployment. The QLFS (2024) data shows that individuals with less than a matric face the highest unemployment rate at 39.1%. Those with a matric have an unemployment rate of 34.5%, and people with other higher education qualifications, that exclude degree qualifications (higher certificates, certificates, and diplomas), have an unemployment rate of 22.5%, while graduates have only an 11.8% unemployment rate.

Van der Berg and van Broekhuizen (2012) have noted that over the years, the graduate unemployment narrative has been exaggerated, as most data uses broad definitions of the term 'graduate', which often include any post-school certificates, college certificates and two-year diplomas, and do not necessarily focus on university qualifications. Furthermore, these authors show that the understanding of the unemployment of graduates is problematic as it fails to compare the much smaller percentage of unemployed graduates to the woefully high unemployment rate of the general population (van der Berg & van Broekhuizen, 2012). For example, they show how, in 1995, there were 456,000 graduates in the labour market and about 11,500

unemployed (2.52%), and by 2011, there was a drastic increase in employed graduates with a total of 1,096,000, and also an increase of unemployed graduates with about 45,000 graduates (4.11%) being unemployed. Similarly, the 2024 QLFS report shows that the general unemployment statistics for Quarter 1 in 2024 were 8.2 million; 3 million were identified as discouraged, meaning they were not actively looking for employment anymore, while a larger percentage of the population, 13.1 million, were not economically active (NEA), making the official unemployment rate stand at 32.9% for Quarter 1 in South Africa for 2024.

**The official unemployment rate** stands at **32,9 %**, an increase of 0,8 of a percentage point in Q1:2024 compared to Q4:2023.



Source: Department: Statistics South Africa, (2024).

Figure 7: Official Unemployment Rates.

When these unemployment statistics are segregated, and graduates are unpacked according to levels and types of graduate qualification, it is indeed evident that van der Berg and van Broekhuizen's (2012) argument about South Africa's graduate premium holds, and echoes the findings of the 2014 World Bank Report (Montenegro & Patrinos 2014). Van der Berg and van Broekhuizen (2012) suggest that when the media reports on graduate unemployment figures are in isolation from discussion about the wider unemployment rates, the low growth rate of the economy and the market's potential to absorb such graduates, it feeds into the discourse of graduate unemployment emerging from lack of work readiness, rather than graduate

unemployment levels being indicative of wider economic problems (see also, Boughey, 2010; Walker & Fongwa, 2017).

There is sadly no data that I could find about graduate unemployment by race group, but the 2024 QLFS report indicates the racial differentiation within general unemployment rates.

The unemployment rate among the **Black African (36,9%)** population group remains higher than the national average and other population groups.

OFFICIAL unemployment rate by population group, Q1:2024



Source: Department: Statistics South Africa, (2024).

Figure 8: Black African Unemployment Rates in South Africa

This data shows that Black people form the highest unemployed group in the country at 36.9%, and this figure has remained higher than the national average of other population groups for decades (QLFS, 2024). It thus seems that, despite the many efforts of the government to address the inequitable socio-economic development of the country through various efforts, racial divisions remain.

Thus far, this chapter has shown the various mechanisms higher education has put in place to work towards developing South Africa's economy in general and higher education in particular. These initiatives all shape the context in which this study takes place. Continuing this chapter's discussion on the T1 context into which UCDG-funded Student Development Programmes were introduced, I now turn to look at the emergence of a field known as 'Academic Development'.

## 4.7 Introduction to Academic Development and Support in HBUs

Academic Development takes different forms around the world, and different terms are used. For example, in the UK, both the terms 'Academic Development' and 'Educational Development' are used, but they refer to staff and curriculum development only, and not to student development. While the terms are used to refer to development initiatives for both staff and students, in many places, student and staff development are considered to be two entirely separate forms of academic support. In South Africa, Academic Development initiatives are often offered by different people: those who develop staff and those who develop students, though they might be housed in the same central unit.

In South Africa, most Academic Developers are housed within centres for teaching and learning. Centres for teaching and learning are generally known for their "dedicated spaces where ongoing excellence and support in teaching and learning is the primary focus, staffed by professionals with expertise in pedagogy, teaching innovation, and student learning" (Wright, 2023: 9). Volbrecht and Boughey (2004: 58) and Boughey (2010: 4) define Academic Development as an 'open set of practices' that are focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Academic Developers are typically put in place by universities to assist institutions in achieving efficiency, equity and quality in the university.

Historically, in South Africa, Academic Development came into existence in a few privileged white English-medium institutions that, in the last decade of apartheid, began to enrol Black students in some numbers into their programmes (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Bangeni et al., 2023; Lockett, 2024). These universities used short-term external funding (soft funding) to implement student development initiatives for the rising numbers of Black students who were perceived to be unprepared for university and who were identified as needing academic support programmes to assist them to learn how to read and write in the English language (Boughey, 2010; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015). These funds were received from business corporations and development organisations, often from the Global North, which ensured that

there were designated staff who could be available to assist Black students enrolled at white universities by conducting remedial classes for them (Boughey, 2007; Boughey & Niven, 2012). It has been argued that these universities were not ready to turn their gaze and admit how the university needed to prepare itself to accommodate these kinds of students; instead, the universities located students' learning challenges within the attributes they brought with them (such as motivation) or the skills they needed to develop (such as language). There was little consideration of the extent to which the university, with its alienating environment and peculiar cultural practices, could have played a role in the chances of students succeeding (Boughey & Niven, 2012; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Lockett, 2024).

Boughey (2010) and McKenna, (2012) discuss how Academic Development has historically taken a deficit approach to student learning and success. This is because Black students continue to be perceived as having problems that will prevent them from succeeding in university, which requires 'fixing' (Torr, 1991; Boughey, 2005, 2010). Most of these programmes offered by universities are not well theorised, and fail to consider the students as social beings who interact within social groups in and out of the university context (Moyo, 2018; Moyo et al., 2022). They fail to recognise that the university is a social structure which shapes students' daily interactions and relationships within society, and that their role is to make those social and Structural spaces conducive to student learning and success in higher education (Moyo, 2018; Moyo & McKenna, (2021); Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Instead, Black students were generally stigmatised and labelled as underprepared (Boughey, 2010). The literature indicates that this kind of support (underpreparedness), which dates from as early as the 1980s, is still visible in many forms of student development across all university types in South Africa today.

These remedial, add-on approaches to student development have been found problematic by many higher education researchers in South Africa, such as Boughey and McKenna (2021), Lockett (2012), Case (2013c), and Clarence (2018), and also internationally by other authors: Nekondo (2024), Yang et al. (2023), and Ashwin (2006), to list a few. These authors argue that having generic student development

parallel to the mainstream curriculum is not the best approach to introducing students to the expectations of any discipline.

Most practitioners who were tasked with Academic Development work did not possess 'academic' identities, and thus battled a lack of institutional credibility (McKenna, 2012; Moyo & McKenna, 2021; Adams, 2024). In these early days, Academic Development work was generally not integrated into the university, both because it was externally funded and because its position outside of the faculties was not balanced through management support. The possibilities of such initiatives having an impact on the mainstream curriculum or the institution's Structures and Cultures were thus very small. Their job was to render a service to a small number of students who needed additional support, and the 'soft funding' mechanism, which was not integrated into the budget of the university, did not help much as it continued to exclude them from the functions of the university (Boughey, 2010; 2024). In some instances, Boughey (2010), Volbrecht and Boughey (2004), and Lockett (2024) show how they were also not given opportunities to engage in faculty conversations regarding content delivery, as it was perceived that they were not adequately qualified to engage in faculty content, and that their work was only based on skills development, which was seen to fall outside of the curriculum scope.

Most of those involved in Academic Development belonged to an organisation which offered an annual conference, the South African Association of Academic Development (SAAAD), which later became HELTASA (Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association South Africa). During this time, a few voices began to emerge, critiquing what McKenna et al. (2022) have since called affirmative approaches to Academic Development, that served to support the status quo, rather than transformative approaches, which could serve to change it. The shifts in approaches to Academic Development can be considered as a series of overlapping phases.

Volbrecht (2003), Volbrecht and Boughey (2004), and Boughey (2005; 2007; 2010) explain how, over the years, Academic Development passed through three phases in

its development, namely: academic support, Academic Development and institutional development phases. They stress that these phases overlapped, and that different universities moved through these phases at different paces, with all three phases often being in evidence in a single institution at any point in time.

#### 4.7.1. Academic Support Phase

The academic support phase dominantly conceptualised Black students as a disadvantaged cohort, and student development was understood as separate from the mainstream curriculum. This phase initially emerged in universities designated for white students as Black students started to enter in some numbers, as described above, but it later spread across the whole higher education sector. The idea that Black students bore problems related to their learning, which could be remedied outside the classroom using additional classes, tutorials and non-credit-bearing modules dominated here. Student development was mainly understood as a 'Black student problem' in the university rather than as a problem with the university itself. Black students were seen to need various bridging or foundational work allocated in non-credit-bearing courses to prepare them for mainstream university programmes. The academic support phase is still common at most South African universities to this day. Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue that such notions about Black students draw on a deficit decontextualised learner conception, which believes Black students are isolated individuals whose academic success or failure depends entirely on their personal attributes and skills, ignoring how socio-cultural, socio-economic and institutional mechanisms shape their educational experiences.

#### 4.7.2 Academic Development Phase

Following the academic support phase was the Academic Development phase, which emerged in some universities in the early 1990s. During this time, authors such as Vilakazi and Tema argued against the academic support phase by suggesting that it was not the student who needed to be developed but the university Structures and

Cultures, and that the main role of the academic support approach was to enable universities to remain unchanged (Vilakazi & Tema, 1985).

The Academic Development phase was strongly influenced by the NEPI report of 1993, and promised to provide equity through “the improved distribution of educational resources to disadvantaged communities” (Cloete, 2004; Boughey, 2010: 9). However, Boughey (2010) mentions that equity was measured in quantitative terms – as it still is today – with equity being quantified as the number of Black students accessing white institutions. Boughey (2010: 10) argues that this Academic Development phase was characterised by the ‘social turn’, which involved shifting from individualising students’ challenges (academic support phase) to understanding them as social and cultural (Academic Development phase). While this entailed a positive move, in that students were less likely to be seen simply as ‘the problem’ and the need for Academic Development was seen to be a sector-wide concern, there remained a focus on both staff and student development happening outside of the mainstream curriculum.

#### 4.7.3 Institutional Development Phase

The phase that followed the Academic Development phase was the institutional development phase, where Academic Developers turned their focus to the need for critical institutions. Boughey (2010: 11) explains that some of the first authors to argue for the “infusing of student support into mainstream teaching and learning through staff development and curriculum development” did so because of a concern for institutional development. Walker and Badsha (1993) argue that universities needed to start looking at their curricula, literacies and pedagogies through the intersectional lenses of race and social class, and to identify how these inadvertently reproduce inequality in students’ learning. Volbrecht (2003) shares how these transformative discourses were often expressed in associations, with SAAAD challenging the historic view of student support and calling for institution-wide responses.

During this phase, which sadly never became dominant across the sector, Academic Developers increasingly drew on Social Theories to explain how learning happened and how it should be understood. Boughey (2010: 11) explains that “this was the time theorists such as Gee, Bourdieu and Vygotsky began to appear within Academic Development literature”. She also explains how projects such as tutorials were increasingly integrated into the curriculum, giving Academic Developers more time to focus on the development of tutors, and on other staff development projects centred around introducing academic staff to new forms of curriculum design and teaching. She does, however, note that this did not come without many Cultural and Structural challenges. Firstly, Academic Development work in many institutions continued relying on external funding, which affected its sustainability. Secondly, there was often resistance from mainstream academics who did not see the need to change. Where there was no institutional ethos for transformation, initiatives crafted within this phase often failed to enjoy uptake. Lastly, most Academic Developers did not possess PhD qualifications, and even those determined to draw from this ‘Institutional Development’ phase were often unaware of the critical social literature underpinning this phase. This meant they were unlikely to engage faculty more critically, nor were they especially knowledgeable about higher education teaching, learning, and assessment.

Fortunately, there have been many changes in approach towards Academic Development over the years, and in some universities, Academic Development now consists of a more overarching development and support system that not only looks at the student’s needs, but also includes the development and support of academic staff, and the development of meaningful curricula and initiatives focused on transforming institutional Structures and Cultures (Boughey, 2025). However, neoliberal discourses sadly remain powerful and have co-opted the quest for institutional transformation, reducing it to institutional efficiency to support improved throughput rates (Boughey, 2010a; McKenna, et al. 2022).

## 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a critical engagement with the literature to demonstrate some of the historical and Structural conditions (T1) into which the student development initiatives investigated in this study were introduced. Global forces intersect with national changes; for example, I indicated that in South Africa, the rise of globalisation intersected with the end of apartheid. The literature has shown how the newly democratic government faced the dual challenge of responding not only to the global market demands, but also to the urgent need to redress the deep social injustices and inequalities created by apartheid's racially segregated cultural systems.

The literature also shows that higher education was positioned as central to this dual response, enabling socio-economic development while acting as a tool for transformation at the same time. Therefore, the field of Academic Development emerged as a crucial mechanism aimed at addressing the 'underprepared' Black students who entered universities for white students. As well-meaning as the field may have been, literature shows that it lacked a transformative intent, and instead often reproduced deficit understandings of Black students, despite many transformative attempts from a select few (McKenna et al., 2025). There seemed to be a large focus on only 'fixing' students rather than interrogating the enduring institutional and Structural barriers that impeded their success. In doing so, Academic Development practices were shaped by an underlying logic that located the problem within the student, rather than within the historically conditioned university Structures.

This literature review has served as the time (T1) at which Structures and Cultures were in place at the point at which 'the people' of this study implemented UCDG-funded Student Development Programmes in HBUs. We can begin to see from this chapter how 'the people' (Agents) might be conditioned by various dominant discursive constructions and historical forces.

In the next chapters, I analyse the data to identify how UCDG-funded student development was conceptualised and implemented in HBUs. In so doing, I recognise that the historical global and national context discussed in this T1 chapter conditioned the findings that I present in the following three findings chapters, which collectively form my analysis of T2–T3.

## Chapter Five

### T2–T3

## Conceptualisation of the disadvantaged student in need of remediation

### 5.1 Introduction

In Chapter Four, I explored the higher education landscape to provide context on how higher education emerged globally, internationally and nationally. Archer's (2013) Social Realist Morphogenetic Cycle is used as the framework to study the emergence of events; thus, the previous chapter explored the conditions into which the UCDG funding for student development was introduced (T1). T2–T3 of the morphogenetic framework outlines this period in which the funding was used to conceptualise and implement student development, conditioned by the powerful Structures and Cultures of T1. Therefore, this chapter offers findings around how Student Development Programmes were conceptualised and implemented in the ways that they were at these HBUs. As discussed in Chapter Two, social systems and the allocation of resources in the Structural domain and discourses in the realm of Culture are not understood in a deterministic way to cause the emergence of specific student development initiatives; rather, they acted as conditioning mechanisms which enabled the emergence of the findings shared here.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven present key findings from my analysis of the events and experiences evident in my data. These findings pertain to the research questions of how UCDG-funded student development was conceptualised and implemented. As a Realist, I endeavour to move beyond describing these events and experiences to identifying some of the conditioning mechanisms from which they emerged.

The key finding presented in this chapter is that the 'disadvantaged' nature of the Black student body became the overwhelming means by which participants characterised students, with this dominant conceptualisation of the student acting

as a powerful mechanism conditioning the implementation of student development. Much of the data pertained to the Structural realities of poverty, whereby students could not afford fees and accommodation, much less the resources privileged students might take for granted, such as data, laptops, or books.

*that you cannot let you, you, your brother, go hungry if you have bread to give them. (Thandeka)*

*...but fortunately I was involved in the process of designing the plan, the UCDG plan, so, umm, I purposely included the computer, uhm program there with the hope that it will be a continuation, umm, Yeah. (Mandisa)*

*So, for you, to sit in or work very closely with them, you must understand that this student is hungry. The student is [needs] residence, the student is going through this. So that is the length of the student is going through a lot, so, so you need to understand...(Pumlani)*

But this 'disadvantage' was an attribute consistently ascribed to the individual student rather than as a consideration of the university's wider social context. This meant that the focus was largely on 'gaps' in Black students' preparedness for higher education, requiring remedial interventions, rather than poverty being seen as a social structure affecting the whole university context and requiring a university-wide response.

This dominant focus on Black students' disadvantage as an individual characteristic was not malicious or uncaring. Indeed, many participants emphasised their commitment to their students and valued what they termed 'holistic, student-centred approaches'. Nonetheless, the focus on the student as the problem served to absent the possibilities of other conditioning mechanisms being at play.

Furthermore, and as I will show in this chapter, the way that the theories of holistic and student-centred education were drawn upon was largely misappropriated, such

that they were complementary to the dominant discourse of the Black student as a disadvantaged individual in need of remedial interventions.

## 5.2 The context of poverty

The participants were acutely aware of the challenges students face because of their financial situation. Most students who access higher education through HBUs in South Africa would historically have been unable to gain access to university<sup>30</sup>, therefore, HBUs in the South African higher education sector play a significant role in providing university opportunities to the underserved communities of South Africa. Many of these students are the first in their family to enter university, and do not have employed family members to rely on for financial support. In the data, there were multiple instances where participants shared encounters with the harsh realities that Black students faced in pursuit of a higher education qualification. Participants spoke of the challenges students encountered at the most basic level, including being without food at times.

Most Black students in HBUs have managed to access university thanks to funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme<sup>31</sup> (NSFAS), a process whereby students who cannot afford fees or related costs of supporting themselves during their studies can access a government loan/bursary<sup>32</sup> (NSFAS, 2019). NSFAS has been shown to improve students' chances of graduation: 31% of students nationally drop out of their undergraduate studies, compared to 21% of those funded through NSFAS (DHET, 2023: 159). Despite the financial support provided by NSFAS, these

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<sup>30</sup> As discussed in Chapters One and Four, universities designed to serve the Black population under apartheid were generally attended by the children of teachers, doctors, nurses, and policemen. Bunting (2004a) and Cooper (2015) show that these students largely moved to HWUs when apartheid ended. Massification meant that the HBUs became a possibility for young Black people whose parents were labourers or unemployed and unlikely to have attended further education themselves during apartheid.

<sup>31</sup> In 2019, ZAR27.7 billion was spent across all South African institutions of higher learning. The largest amount of NSFAS funds qualifications in the Humanities (37%). Females are the majority funded by NSFAS. 44% of funded students are first-time entering students. Black students form the majority of funded students (93%), Coloured (4.7%), White and Indian students (0.6%). Between 40 and 60% of all HBU graduates per year are funded by NSFAS (2019).

<sup>32</sup> Following the #FeesMustFall protests, NSFAS has now been turned into a bursary for first-time recipients.

students experience constant fears about money. As Likho explains, in an HBU, the reality is that most students need NSFAS; he points out that understanding students entails understanding their financial realities:

*So, for you to sit in or work very closely with them you must understand that this student is hungry. (Likho)*

In many cases, the student may be under family pressures and responsibilities that lead to an expectation that they will use their NSFAS funds to support family members (Mzileni & Noveve, 2025), and they may choose accommodation that is not suitable for studying but is much cheaper. Increasingly, NSFAS students forgo staying on campus in residences, where they would have Wi-Fi and other affordances that support studies, in favour of cheaper off-campus accommodation. In some cases, there is simply not enough residence accommodation available within the university, so *"Our students do not have residences"* (Thandeka)

Many researchers, such as Bunting (2006), Strehl et al. (2007), Mzileni and Noveve (2025), and Masutha (2023) have shown the correlation between financial well-being and students' mental health.

*Because I've seen ever since I've started here, umm, our students are depressed, you know. So, we try to offer them support, but in terms of academically, you know, umm, yeah, I can't do anything, you know. (Pumlani)*

The challenge of attempting to address students' academic needs when their basic human needs are unmet was a reality that confronted all the study participants.

*Students are depressed, like coming from your portfolio, because you could always say, you know, I see a lot of students who are depressed and they're*

*depressed about one, two, three and these [identified] areas don't necessarily fall under 'psychosocial'<sup>33</sup>. (Thandeka)*

This has enormous implications for the work of those tasked with student development.

*They are struggling because, umm, they've never been coached. So, you become a coach at the same time, and more than being a coach to the extent of being a brother to some because they come to you and confide. (Sifiso)*

It was within this context of the very real Structural consequences of poverty in students' lives that the participants were identifying students' needs. What became evident across the data, however, was a silence on how such large social inequalities were pervasive realities confronting the university. Instead, the participants spoke of having to address challenges related to poverty as if these were individual student characteristics. Poverty was thus a condition to be addressed in the individual student, to the limited extent possible. It was not discussed as something of significance to the university as a whole. There were no conversations more broadly about what it means to be a historically disadvantaged university in a rural area serving a community grappling with poverty and social injustices. None of the participants saw it as their role to contribute to larger discussions about an institutional or national response to the context.

Among other mechanisms likely at play in conditioning the participants' discussion of poverty as an individual student attribute were the history of HBUs and massification. As discussed in the previous chapter, HBUs have always been underfunded and positioned in rural areas with all the Structural constraints associated with that. Their student bodies have also always been and remain Black. As a result, many researchers have argued that their student demographics have remained the same, but this is not the case (Cooper & Subotsky, 2001; Cooper, 2015).

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<sup>33</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter Seven, and as per the Ministerial Statements on the Implementation of the UCDP, 'psychosocial support' is a category identified by DHET as acceptable for UCDG funding.

In the apartheid past, HBUs generally served the children of 'middle-class' Black people. 'Middle class' needs to be in inverted commas because the entire Black population was kept in relative poverty under apartheid, and few Black people, particularly African and Coloured people, could be considered to be 'middle class' in the same way as the white population largely were. However, the children of Black policemen, teachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, business owners and other professional people would have attended HBUs under apartheid (except for the few who were able to access HWUs by ministerial permission). In the last years of apartheid and thereafter, middle-class Black people generally shifted to the better-resourced HWUs. The HBUs experienced a brief drop in student numbers at the same time as HWUs and technikons experienced massive growth (Cooper, 2015), but their numbers soon increased again when working-class students entered. While it may seem at a surface glance that HBUs have always served children from unemployed and working-class families, this is not the case. The inability of the participants to see poverty as a Structural and social issue that could not be accounted for simply as attributes in the individual needs to be seen within the context of this shift in the HBU student body after apartheid.

As discussed in the previous chapter, massification, according to Trow (1973), is when the student body comprises more than 20% of the country's youth and therefore is unlikely to represent only a homogenous elite. Massification took place in South Africa very rapidly after apartheid ended, and so the study participants would have joined a university which was becoming rapidly diversified; therefore, the extent of poverty as a structuring condition may have become more acute in recent years.

There was also silence on how these students demonstrated incredible resilience to access higher education within such circumstances and how this resilience might be harnessed and nurtured by the university system. There was silence on what the university norms and expectations were and whether these were always appropriate in the university's immediate social context. Into this silence came the complementary discourse of the disadvantaged student as being in deficit.

### 5.3 The disadvantaged student discourse

Much of the data pertained to identifying the gaps in students' skills and practices and to developing remedial student development interventions to address these gaps. As I will illustrate, participants pointed to the students' poor schooling to explain these gaps. I refer later to a lack of computer skills and 'language problems' as two examples of such gaps raised by the participants.

One of the dominant concerns among participants was that students came to higher education with very poor schooling experiences that left them ill-prepared for their tertiary studies. Many of the participants referred to collecting data on their students in order to understand them and their needs. They indicated that questionnaires were used to collect information to conceptualise appropriate Student Development Programmes and to ensure early detection of students' academic challenges.

*... but also being proactive, Umm using, you know the data that we have [collected] because we've, we have students you know coming in all the time, and we've had students in the past, so, so our experiences from what we've learned about student should help us, umm at least predict you know what the initiatives and the needs would be. (Mandisa)*

*... a baseline [study] which has given the – the current state of affairs in terms of academic performance. (Lukho)*

One of the key pieces of information these questionnaires collected was about their students' schooling backgrounds. It should be noted that this information, along with some of the other information that the participants indicated was collected by questionnaires, was already available within their institutions' Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). This was the first concern I had about the reasons for and purposes of the student surveys that many participants referred to.

In South Africa, the public schooling system is divided into quintiles<sup>34</sup> depending on the socio-economic status of the area in which it is found. Quintile 1 and 2 schools are no-fee schools and are found in the poorest areas; they are also often understaffed and have poor infrastructure. Some universities have programmes that seek to address these 'high school problems' while students were still in high school:

*... so, in terms of pre-university entry programs, for instance, we would do high school visits and would do career expos. We would do - help students with the application process, and then we know we have taken care of those students that would come to our university, so that when they come, umm we at least, we have helped them, you know, with that transition from high school to university (Mandisa).*

Pumlanani explained that it was important that those in Academic Development had sufficient information about the schooling backgrounds of each student. He explained that those students who went to lower quintile schools were at risk of failing in higher education. Mandisa explained that if they did not identify the schooling problems and implement programmes to address the gaps the poor schooling left, then *"students may have, umm a hard time, you know, succeeding in their studies in graduating at record time<sup>35</sup>, which is often the case"*.

*... We are working closely with student tracking [...] to develop a survey. [This will capture] ... [name] diploma in [name] campus and the modules are the following..., He's coming from this quintile one, quintile five and [...] some of the questions kulo [in that] survey would have to identify [...] so that we understand where the students coming from. (Pumlanani)*

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<sup>34</sup> The South African context uses categories to classify basic schooling based on their relative poverty levels. The purpose is to allocate more resources and determine fee structures. Schools are divided into five quintiles (1–5). Quintile 1 represents the poorest schools, and Quintile 5 represents the least poor. This classification impacts funding and school fees. Lower quintile schools receive more funding from the state and are no-fee schools, whereas Quintile 5 schools charge high fees, which allows them to employ more teachers.

<sup>35</sup> 'Record time' is a common South Africanism for 'regulation time'. If anyone completes their studies in the required three years for an undergraduate degree or diploma, it is colloquially known as 'record time', which perhaps shows how uncommon this is.

The extent to which this capturing of student details was actually useful in planning student development interventions is doubtful, for various reasons I return to later. Thandeka understood the limited usefulness of this kind of information, given the type of institution they were at, i.e., an HBU: *"You know we've got huge challenges with regard to, especially, the calibre of students that we get. As you know, historically Black universities get students who are often underprepared from the high school system"*.

From the outset, participants discursively constructed Black students primarily through the characteristic of 'disadvantaged'. Coming to understand their needs entailed identifying gaps in skills due to poor basic schooling. The participants did not engage with the Structural and systemic mechanisms that Black communities are confronted with when it comes to access to quality education. While the participants would be unlikely to have the Agency required to address the large social structures of poverty and inequality, understanding the students as collectively shaped by such structures might have led to very different sets of initiatives within the university. However, because the consequences of this context were discursively constructed as characteristics of the individual student, the response was to create interventions focused on the student.

*How are you going to introduce pedagogical approaches that respond to this particular student? ... How are you going to go move forward as a lecturer, now si-muvile [we have moved on] from an institutional or campus-based approach, orientation, we're saying as a lecturer and then ... Teaching Development Specialist come onboard give this lecturer pedagogical approaches to make sure that they teach this student in a particular way. (Pumlani)*

Identifying students' poor schooling background through these surveys was seen to be key in ensuring the development of interventions targeted at such gaps.

*The First Year Experience is a very good idea that, umm will close the gap between umm, high school and the university. (Mandisa)*

There is no denying that rural high schools are under-resourced, but participants failed to understand that this basic schooling problem is a systemic social challenge, and that the mere fact of students being in university is not only an achievement of their own, but of their entire families and communities. Furthermore, there was no recognition that schools prepare learners for a wide array of futures (given that the 24% participation rate in higher education means that 76% of youth do not attend university) (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2012). Schools do not prepare learners for higher education; reading, writing, and learning practices expected at university level are very different from those needed in school, and differ significantly across discipline, thus demanding that successful students take on varied literacies (Christie, 1985; Clarence & McKenna, 2017b). The responses to this issue, therefore, focused on the need to 'fix' the students, rather than to reconsider what the university needed to be for its student body, given this context. There was also no appreciation of these students' Agency and the kinds of capabilities students brought with them to the universities, despite such Structural conditions. The repeated framing of students as 'disadvantaged' did not seem to leave space for discursive framings of resilience.

Alongside concerns that students' schooling caused gaps in their knowledge, which made success in higher education unlikely, was the identification of some of these gaps. For example, participants explained how digital skills are a prerequisite for university study, and that 'disadvantaged students' did not possess the necessary digital skills.

*... It is technology access and literacy. I am saying this because students should have access to technology and the skills to use it effectively, especially in a rapidly digitising world, and this is minimal...(Makhadzi)*

*Even the computer you know because some of the students haven't seen a computer, you know before ... Also in terms of the computers because the student, can't type even something like an e-mail, you know they don't use their*

*student e-mail because they don't know how to access it, you know, they don't know how ...[interrupted by phone ... so yeah, it's one of those things because sometimes we get to assume that everybody's is on the same page ... whereas, umm, some...most of them, they're not on the same page. Sometimes they get more confused. (Thandeka)*

*We make sure that our first years, umm, are digitally fluent, so we ... orientate them, on the university's Learning Management System, but also other emerging technologies, umm, and we have academic writing workshops, induction workshops with them ... (Mandisa)*

*Because kule class yakho, (in your class) 50 of the students out of 60 have never touched a computer, don't even have never seen a laptop for argument's sake, have never done [inaudible], are you still going to use the same approach? ... if we provided a Blackboard [Learning Management System] training, you know, academic literacy, writing support, they get value out of it. (Pumlan)*

Another practical example of gaps in skills that participants indicated students from poorer schools might experience, such as computer literacy, was the thorny issue of language. Participants repeatedly indicated that a significant gap in students' preparedness for higher education was that they lacked language competency in the medium of instruction, English. Participants reflected on how their students found the use of English in the academy to be challenging, and they preferred being taught in their home language.

*[Students] don't like it when you speak in English they prefer you address them in [South African language] and as much as I try to say to them, you know, let's practice because English is a language that you are going to be using at your workplace, you know, and they don't enjoy when you keep on like speaking in English. (Thandeka)*

*You understand that these are students that has never been in this environment, but also the issue of language is another issue. (Pumlani)*

*I don't know how we can, umm, change their mindsets, you know, along the language issue. (Likho)*

Despite such concerns, participants noted that the students who found studying in English to be a challenge did not call for courses to be offered in their home language. In keeping with participants' claims that students wanted English to remain the medium of instruction, Xulu-Gama and Hadebe (2022) found that most Black students prefer to have qualifications in English even if this is not their mother tongue. They argued that such a finding is tied to the issue that English is seen to be linked to economic success, as opportunities to access employment are widened when one can speak English better.

Out of this repeated concern about the language proficiency of students came a call for interventions to address the 'language problem'. There was consensus across the data that students needed remedial assistance with English and that such assistance should focus on the technical aspects of the English language, such as spelling and grammar, outside of how such language is used in the university.

*So I think there are programs that should be compulsory at the first year level, like English. (Sifiso)*

*... Grammar, you know, so the students who would be better equipped at communicating in English. (Pumlani)*

Such discursive constructions about Black students dominate despite many scholars in the field speaking against such deficit constructions (for example, Boughey & McKenna, 2002; 2015; 2016; 2021; Lockett & Lockett, 2009). These authors unpack the ways that 'the language problem' is a discursive means by which to construct 'the student problem' and 'the language problem' as connected, and both

being deficits within the student. The student is the problem, thereby the university absents itself from reflecting on its purpose and ways of engaging with students.

Boughey and McKenna (2016) highlight that in South Africa, the so-called 'language problem' has always been a contentious issue. These authors suggest that accounting for problems students encounter with their studies as emerging from a lack of language proficiency allowed universities to move away from the apartheid thinking of Black students as cognitively different. Framing Black students' academic struggles as 'the language problem' thus allowed universities to move away from racist explanations but to nonetheless continue to identify poor success rates as emerging from deficits in students, rather than deficits in the university's capacity to address students' needs.

Importantly, this understanding of language use as emerging solely from technical proficiency meant that the problem could be addressed through remedial courses outside of the mainstream curriculum, and the larger university structures could continue as usual. Street (2003) identifies this as an autonomous understanding of language, as if using language in a History class or a Chemistry laboratory, for example, simply required a generic set of skills comprising spelling and grammar competencies. This understanding of language sees it as a skill, separate from the contexts in which it is used. In contrast to this, Street (2003) argues that only at its most basic level is language autonomous. Once someone has achieved proficiency in the 'nuts and bolts' of a language, the issue of context comes into play. Street (2003) and many others, such as Christie (1985), Gee (2004), and Bassett and Macnaught (2024) argue that meaning is made in context, and so becoming adept at using language entails coming to understand the norms, values, and expectations of language use in the context in which it is used. Research thus tells us that language use is indeed not autonomous from context, but rather it is ideological in nature in that the ways of using language emerge from the values of the specific context (Street, 2003). Students entering the academy, therefore, need to be able to make sense of the peculiar ways in which language is used in different disciplinary

contexts. This understanding would be vital to strongly theorise approaches to Academic Development (McKenna, 2010), but it was lacking in the data.

It is important to note that “academic discourse is no one’s mother tongue, but the children of middle-class families find it considerably easier” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994: 8). There is a wealth of literature locally (for example, Hlengwa et al., 2018; Sobuwa & McKenna, 2019) and internationally (Guinier, 2007; Mettler, 2014; Guinier, 2015) that shows correlations between social class and higher education success, regardless of the student’s language. It would thus seem that higher education practices, as diverse as they are across disciplines and universities, are easier for middle-class students to acquire than for those who come from working-class families. This has enormous implications for social justice, particularly in HBUs where few students come from middle-class families, and, as I have argued above, there have been significant shifts in social class of the student body since the last years of apartheid. If this were understood as a Structural problem, the university would need to reflect on whether its practices and expectations promoted social justice or reinforced social inequalities. Instead, discourses are drawn upon in the realm of Culture to position the matter as a ‘language problem’ experienced by the individual ‘disadvantaged student’.

Thus far, I have argued that participants focused on students’ disadvantaged status and the need for remedial interventions to target gaps in their knowledge. This focus absented any idea of the university as a whole needing to adapt to serve the students it had or to respond to the social context in which it existed. There was also silence on the idea that students were resilient and brought knowledges and ways of being that were not recognised within the academy. This is not to say that the participants were malicious or did not care about their students, but rather that they drew on dominant discourses of student deficit in somewhat uncritical ways.

Across much of the data, a strong commitment was shown by participants towards students and student development, in the interest of preparing students for higher education success. From the data, it was clear that the participants had a collective

goal for students to pass and do well in higher education. This was often framed as being a 'holistic' or having a 'student-centred' approach to student development.

#### 5.4 The misappropriation of 'holistic' and 'student-centred' as descriptors

There was a repeated reference to the need for student development to be holistic in nature.

*The student who is holistically developed.* (Mandisa)

*This is holistic because we want a human being here.* (Likho)

*I think holistic still could be about making sure that they experience what you want to give to your student, umm, is inclusive of both, umm, living and learning issues...So in a nutshell, holistic is about the total person, in trying not only to react to their problems.* (Thandeka)

Such a holistic approach to student development led to initiatives such as "*helping the students with adjusting to the university through the orientation [programme]*" (Mandisa). The participants suggested that this commitment to a holistic approach informed many of their plans.

*You have to be intentional about what you're doing it; It can't be something that you wake up and decide to do one day; you know it, it's got to be well thought; it's got to be intentional umm it it's not your one size fits all, because it's all about being responsive you know, to the student's needs and their context; and it's it can't be called student development in my opinion, if it is not holistic in nature.* (Mandisa)

*One must be a very committed somebody, understanding the student profile.* (Pumlani)

Again, in reference to being 'student-centred' and 'holistic', there was mention of collecting data, often through questionnaires, to understand the exact nature of the student body in order to develop initiatives that matched their needs.

*... So, we're using data, we're using surveys to interpret or come up with interventions so that we can come up with interventions. (Pumlani).*

*... so, we will do surveys of student engagement as part of the First Year Experience. (Mandisa)*

*[data] to be aware of different student communities and their needs. (Likho)*

There was no evidence of exactly how the interventions were then flexibly tailored to specific students, as a result of the data collected through the questionnaire. Indeed, as I show in the next chapter, programmes were pre-approved as part of the UCDG funding application and implemented in a uniform way across the student body. Furthermore, the deficit discourse drawn upon to describe students was fairly monolithic, as all the students were described as having gaps that needed to be addressed. This idea that the student development initiatives could respond to the data collected at the start of each year seems unlikely, and participants were unable to give me examples of how such data allowed flexible, 'holistic' responses.

*These initiatives should target different types of students. (Mandisa)*

*...and so, for me, student development to be effective, it should consist of a mix of what I can call, mix of initiatives...(Mandisa)*

*First Year Experience is a very good idea that, Umm will close the gap between uhm, high school and the university but, Umm, the way that things are happening at the moment, it's not happening that way, so I don't think if you can interview one of our students, they will tell you that they have the first Year Experience right. (Thandeka)*

The literature on holistic education can broadly be grouped into two categories. On the one hand, holistic education is the idea that students' mental well-being, physical health, and intellectual capabilities are all intertwined (for example, Salazar, 2013; Keskin et al., 2022). In such literature, a focus only on students' academic work without being concerned with other aspects of their being is seen to be problematic, and there is a call to understand what students do in their extracurricular and social lives. On the other hand, in the area of critical education studies, holistic approaches are understood from a philosophical position that meaning and purpose in life can only be achieved through connection to nature, spirituality, and community. In this philosophical understanding of the 'holistic', a focus only on education as a set of skills is seen to be problematic (for example, Miseliunaite et al., 2022; Owen, 2021). The data only drew on the former category of understanding, whereby 'holistic' remained focused on students as 'the problem', but expanded the focus to include their lives beyond the classroom.

*... There is proper life, student life, out-of-classroom life, student well-being, wellness and then their development. (Likho)*

Thus, in the data, the idea of taking a holistic approach to student development meant going beyond the realm of the university classroom to support them.

*When you have a student in front of you, they are not only at the university, umm, about you know, studying, but it is our responsibility to ensure that we, uh, look at, you know, the other side of the human being. (Mandisa)*

*...about the total person in trying not only to react to their problems, but also being proactive, umm, using, you know, the data that we have. (Pumlani).*

*...So, this is holistic because [we] want a human being here who is holistically developed, yeah ...so we need to go all out in terms of uh ensuring ...So I managed that space of governance. Is there proper governance, ... proper life, student life, out-of-classroom life, student well-being, wellness, and then their development? (Likho)*

Participants framed themselves as being 'good Academic Developers' because of their commitment to students in a holistic way. Across the understandings of 'holistic' approaches to teaching and learning, there is a great consideration of students' voices as a central tenet (Miseliunaite et al, 2022; Owen, 2021; Keskin et al., 2022). This seemed to be evident when Sifiso indicated as follows:

*It must be underpinned by the involvement of students, must engage students and not just for the sake of doing it. Listen to the voice, but also be, umm, reflective and reflexive, you know, if students have something to say, if they have opinions, if they have requests, if they have certain needs that they state it's important that as student development and Academic Development practitioners, we take that and do something about it.*

But when I followed up on the involvement of students in development programmes, since literature suggests a gap in this regard (Yang et al., 2023, and Mathebula & Calitz, 2018) Sifiso admitted that including the students' voice was often "an afterthought" and was not always considered. It would seem that the term 'holistic' was being used selectively, if not misappropriated.

*Our experiences from what we've learned about students should help, umm, at least predict, you know, what initiatives and needs would be, but not forgetting the fact that our students are different all the time. Hence, we need to be responsive, you know and to their needs and their current needs and their context. (Mandisa)*

The term 'holistic' seemed to relate specifically to the identification of gaps in students' knowledge, rather than offering an awareness of the range of students' knowledge and capabilities – or even the students' understanding of what higher education is all about – and then developing resources that would allow students to navigate the higher education space. In some cases, the term 'holistic' seemed to mean coming to a fuller understanding of the specific weaknesses of each student in the class.

There was some kind of contradiction between the rhetoric of establishing and responding to the individual student's needs holistically, and the data suggesting that a remedial discourse was being drawn upon and that students were fairly generically conceptualised as disadvantaged and lacking in key skills.

Salazar (2013) argues that the misappropriation of educational terms such as 'holistic' can be understood historically as part of education's goal for students of colour, dating back many years. According to Salazar (2013), it has been a historic practice for Black students to replace their culture and assimilate into mainstream values and practices at school, and when academic difficulties are experienced, their struggles are attributed to their individual cultures, languages, and backgrounds. The discourses of disadvantage and remediation were dominant, even though there was frequent use of the term 'holistic'.

*I think holistic still could be about making sure that they experience what you want to give to your student. Umm, it is inclusive of both, Umm, Living and learning issues. (Mandisa)*

*Most of them, it's the background because, you know, in the rural areas - some deep rural areas, they still have this tradition, which is called ukuthwala<sup>36</sup>. (Thandeka)*

*So most of them come here, you know, with that mentality as well. So, in my office, I was trying to break all of those things. (Thandeka)*

Another concept that was mentioned often in the data was 'student-centred', which was also largely used in relation to a desire to be responsive to students' needs. Literature on student-centred approaches argues that it entails a pedagogy whereby students are actively engaged in their learning. It requires a high degree of flexibility in the classroom so that the content is presented in ways that are appropriate for the needs of all the students in the classroom (Allen et al., 2013). Student-centredness

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<sup>36</sup> Ukuthwala is a traditional practice found in some rural parts of South Africa, particularly among certain communities. It historically referred to as a form of forced marriage, where men would forcefully 'carry off' a woman without their consent as part of a customary marriage process.

emerged as a key concept in the early 1990s in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Boughy & McKenna, 2016; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), with a call for a shift away from teacher-centred approaches, where the teacher drives the pace and content in a largely transmission mode of education, while not considering the diverse experiences and needs of students present in the classroom.

*...Umm it it's not your one-size-fits-all, because it's all about being responsive, you know, to the student needs and their context. (Mandisa)*

*Hence, we need to be responsive, you know and to their needs and their current needs and their context. (Pumlani)*

Indeed, holism and student-centred approaches in higher education post-apartheid are necessary for South Africa, as the large numbers of students who access higher education come from diverse backgrounds and bring diverse sets of knowledge. However, there was little in the data suggesting that the concepts of 'holism' and 'student-centredness' were drawn on to guide the pedagogy. There was no data depicting how such understandings were used in structuring holistic, student-centred initiatives. Indeed, it seemed that the concepts of being 'student-centred' and 'holistic' were misappropriated to mean that individual students' gaps or problems were identified in a manner that was decontextualised from the students' position in the larger society and from the university as a social structure with its own norms, values and expectations.

*If we have this programme, we can conduct early detection of the report, which is a risk to give to the institution, because the student is not performing well. Because ... so it means that the student is likely to drop out and not graduate, and we receive funding from graduating students. (Likho)*

Such a misappropriation would not be unusual, as it has been discussed in some depth in the literature, as shown, for instance, in Ashwin (2014) and McKenna and Quinn (2020). This literature suggests that the call for flexible pedagogical approaches that enable student engagement is often absent when the term 'student-centred' is used. Instead, the term is used to argue that the student body needs

remedial skills of one kind or another. Being 'holistic' about student development should entail a deep engagement with the students' identities and those valued in the academy, and a reflection on the disjuncture between them, as well as an understanding of knowledge and knowing as having multiple forms. The activities students would be expected to engage in within the university would then be seen to have implications for the students' identities and would need to be mediated appropriately.

While both the terms 'holistic' and 'student-centered' featured predominantly in the data, neither seemed to provide a discursive understanding of student development initiatives that were truly offered in a theorised manner. Instead, these terms were drawn upon from a common-sense understanding that reinforced a dominant discursive structuring of the students as having deficits that needed remediation. No data suggested an understanding that the university demands practices that may be wholly unfamiliar to many students (McKenna, 2013), and that being 'student-centred' and 'holistic' entailed recognising the identity implications of this. There was little discussion of what these terms meant for conceptualising and implementing student development initiatives, beyond the repeated mention of needing to collect data about the student body to identify the specific student needs so that 'holistic' and 'student-centred' responses could be developed<sup>37</sup>.

Such understandings tended to psychologise students' experiences, implying that individual students came to possess psycho-social challenges because of their context of disadvantage. It is worth noting that the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of UCDP also drew from this understanding, as it identified psycho-social challenges as one of the areas that need to be given attention by universities in developing students (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). For example, Thandeka, throughout the conversation, continued to understand students at her university from a deficit decontextualised learner conception, but as she listed the shortcomings of the students, she reflected by saying, "*You know, and what I*

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<sup>37</sup> The frequent use of these two terms may well stem from their use in the DHET UCDG documentation, an issue I return to in Chapter Seven.

*found out was, it's more social than academic, you know, they experience a lot of social ills". But she also complained that the students she taught were not of the "right calibre". Therefore, the context of disadvantage was not understood as a social structure with implications for the university as a whole, but rather as an attribute possessed by individual students (Boughey & McKenna, 2016).*

Drawing on the discourse of disadvantage to frame the students was not out of a lack of compassion. There was frequent reference made to the need to consider students' mental well-being and their development of social connections as they transitioned into higher education. For example, Mandisa felt strongly that Student Development Programmes should be:

*... integrated with living environment, umm, personal issues and psychological issues just taking care of the total person, umm in the sense that when you have a student in front of you they are not only at the university, umm about you know, studying but it is our responsibility to ensure that we, uh, look at, you know the other side of the human being. (Mandisa)*

*...so when that student is with us, that student should have a sense of home away from home, a sense of belonging. (Likho)*

*... you have to understand the context that they [students] are coming from. (Pumlani)*

Sifiso also showed a good understanding of this, as he said that *"most of our students come from the rural communities' rural schools. So, they come into this big university life and then they get overwhelmed"*.

However, what was starkly evident in the data was that participants viewed the concept of student development initiatives being 'holistic' and 'student-centred' from an individual approach, rather than understanding students as social beings.

*... because we want a human being who is holistically developed. (Likho)*

Black students' lack of success in higher education has historically been attributed to their poverty and psycho-social context. Thandeka, for instance, echoing Sifiso, indicated this by saying that the students:

*... have anxiety, most of our students come from rural communities and rural schools. So, they come into this big university life, and then they get overwhelmed, and it's peer pressure on the other side, and they get exposed to many things, you know.*

Likho argued that students' home cultures were problematic:

*... most of them, it's the background because, you know, in the rural areas, some deep rural areas, they still have this tradition that is called 'ukuthwala', you know, where they just grab the maidens, you know and take them with, you know, by force you know.*

The socio-cultural contexts students came from were identified as the problem that affected students' ability to integrate into the university. These were the contradictions that emerged throughout the data. On one hand, the participants were well-intentioned, and it was clear that they perceived themselves as focused on student well-being, but they were seemingly oblivious to how larger systemic structures of inequality conditioned students' lives. Instead, they focused on how disadvantage affected the individual student and necessitated remedial interventions. Alongside these discursive constructions of students as disadvantaged was another discourse about efficiency.

## 5.5 The discourse of efficiency

One of the ways in which the participants discursively constructed student development was that its purpose was to ensure efficiency. In particular, there was

emphasis on the role of the Academic Developer to ensure that students complete their studies in 'regulation time'<sup>38</sup>.

*It's all about progression, and like the first year, they lose focus when they are entering university, but the senior year experience is about making sure that we pay attention to progression issues because you want the students to succeed.*  
(Pumlani)

All students want to complete their studies in regulation time, to enjoy success and to avoid the many financial challenges related to extended study periods. Furthermore, students who do not pass at least half of their subjects each year risk losing their NSFAS funding. Between 20% and 30% of students never finish their studies, and most students take more than the regulation time (NSFAS, 2022), so time to completion is a crucial issue for Academic Developers to consider. However, it is worth considering the extent to which the discursive framing of efficiency is related to a neoliberal conception of higher education (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Hlatshwayo, 2022). The tracking and monitoring of student progression was an example of how efficiency was understood, with students completing their studies in the prescribed time.

*We don't want them to drop out, we want them to perform well in their studies so that they can graduate as soon as possible.* (Likho)

The idea of gathering information and using that to inform a collective understanding of the nature of students and their needs in higher education is not uncommon. But it has not become commonplace without critique. Beetham et al. (2022) refer to this gathering of information on students as the 'datafication discourse'. As Beetham et al. (2022: 18) explain, "Higher education is a site for the operation of surveillance practices where human behaviour is monitored and made visible to others for the use of commodity". The datafication of higher education suggests that students'

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<sup>38</sup> 'Regulation time' in the higher education sector refers to the minimum prescribed duration for completing a qualification. This concept reflects the influence of neoliberal discourses that sometimes prioritise efficiency, standardisation, and throughput over more holistic or context-sensitive measures of student success.

challenges and successes can all be captured quantitatively. For example, this datafication discourse arguably was necessary for the rise of national programmes such as the First Year Experience (FYE) and data-focused organisations such as Siyaphumelela<sup>39</sup>. These projects, which are nationally endorsed across the higher education landscape of South Africa, encourage universities to use data on students to conceptualise efficient Student Development Programmes that respond to the high numbers of low throughput rates of Black students in higher education (Jaffer & Garraway, 2016; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020; Siyaphumelela, n.d.). Beetham et al. (2022) do not reject the value of using data in planning, but rather argue that exclusive reliance on it suggests that these numbers offer all that is to be known about a complex social phenomenon. Foster and Francis (2020) argue that the worldwide focus on data analytics in higher education needs to be understood as being shaped by globalisation, as more universities are increasingly positioned as markets responding to neoliberalism. They argue that good data analytics, however, is concerned with making sense of the status quo and determining appropriate action, and should not be seen simply as the collection of data. Boughey & McKenna (2016; 2021) argue that the problem with having data but then applying theories that decontextualise learners is problematic. They suggest that data should be gathered and interpreted with theory from the student's social being in mind.

Participants indicated that national student surveys were undertaken alongside the surveys done as part of institutional student development: *"We will do surveys of student engagement"*<sup>40</sup> (Pumlani). These national surveys were also indicated to assist their understanding of who the students were who were registered in the university, and the kind of learning support students needed:

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<sup>39</sup> Siyaphumelela ("We succeed") is a South African initiative focused on improving student success rates in higher education, particularly among historically disadvantaged institutions. The project aims to assist universities in using data more effectively to understand and address barriers to student success, retention and graduation. It was initially funded by the Kresge Foundation, a US based philanthropic organisation.

<sup>40</sup> This is a national survey tool used to measure the level of student participation and engagement at universities to gather comprehensive information relating to high-impact experiences and behaviours identified as having an influence on the teaching and learning experience.

*Um, so upon my survey ... I find out that the students want somebody to lean on, you know (Thandeka).*

It seems like participants were indeed drawing on the idea of datafication being a useful process, as they all worked towards gathering information from students so they could get a sense of who the students were and what their needs were. The focus was thus on converting the complicated social practices, expectations, and experiences of the students into numbers that would explain the gaps in the students that accounted for their failures. But there was very little evidence in the data as to how this data informed student development initiatives or the pedagogy used.

*i-vision [the vision] is that, if we work together from the time that our students apply, a Grade 12 learner is applying to study, umm, BCom Accounting at [name of university]. We are saying to work closely with the Student Tracking Unit, develop a survey. That survey it should be mandatory for each and every student who applies at [name of the university] online of taking online to complete that survey. That survey is going to give us a student profile, understand ukuthi, [that] this is a student who's coming from this background, so that...and is applying for this program. That student, let's say, for argument sake is taken, is going to be starting a national diploma<sup>41</sup> in this, what, what kule [from this] campus and the modules are the following, his coming from this quintile, quintile one, quintile five and [inaudible] and some of the questions kulo [in that] survey would have to identify or probe the student so that we understand where the students coming from. So that survey is going to give us a profile of each and every student per campus per faculty per programme (Pumlani).*

*Once we have that picture before we even conduct an orientation will sit down and say for [name of university], this is the type of students that we have for this faculty for this programme and all in all, and this is the history of the*

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<sup>41</sup> During Apartheid, Technikons offered National Diplomas where all institutions had to follow a state approved curriculum through what was known as the convenorship system. Since the end of apartheid, all Diploma qualifications are developed at institutional level in the same way that degrees are. However, despite these changes, some universities still refer to a 'National Diploma'.

*programme, all of those things. So, we sit down together, your [gives a list of the student development units and centres within the university], your registrar, your faculty, even your HoDs, and we say that's an idea I... approach (Pumlan).*

*[We] sit down and [we] say we are going to have an orientation from the survey, the students indicated that we need 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. We would like to know A, B, C and D instead of having an orientation that speaks to what it did, what, what we think students should know we then zoom into what the student, the current ... the 2023 student is saying this is what I want to know instead of me going there with my PowerPoint presentation and that's telling them ukuthi, [that] this is, what we do at [name of centre], it's well and good, but what is that I want to know as a student now I'm getting that from the survey. That is the plan before, and so our orientation is solution and context driven, so each and every item of that orientation program will speak to what the students are saying, admitted students have been saying (Pumlan).*

However, from the conversation, it was clear that this process was not smooth sailing, as some of the ideas about what should be implemented were still in their planning stages. The data from surveys was seen as the vehicle to achieve those espoused goals. Therefore, the main 'data' that were collected through the questionnaires were used to get a fuller understanding of the students, and the goal was to 'fix' the identified gaps through the various student development interventions they conceptualised.

## 5.6 Conclusion

The findings shared in this chapter related to the participants' conceptions of Black students at HBUs in South Africa. There was a strong discourse of deficit, and the 'problem' of student failure was seen to emerge entirely from shortcomings in the individual student. Despite the students coming from similar Quintile 1 and 2 schools and grappling with similar issues of poverty, the issue of poor schooling and disadvantage was seen to be an individual attribute to be addressed through student development initiatives.

The many socio-cultural and socio-economic challenges Black students experienced in higher education, affecting their throughput rates, were accounted for as a lack or deficit in Black students, as opposed to Structural and systemic challenges conditioned by the mechanisms presented at T1 of this study. Participants throughout this chapter constructed Black students as a 'problem' that needed fixing, with little understanding of the complex Structural and systemic challenges, including the nature of the university itself. Instead, the participants discursively drew on deficit conceptions that individualised Black students' challenges, reducing the 'problem' to gaps in skill sets, such as computer skills and their inability to speak English. Concepts such as holistic student development and student-centredness were repeatedly called upon, but in ways that misappropriated these theories in ways that prevented an understanding of the student as a social being and the university as a social structure. Instead, these words were used in ways that were complementary to the decontextualised learner discourse, which has been highly dominant in the field of Academic Development for some time, as discussed in T1.

Many of the large Structures discussed at T1 conditioned the emergence of discursive constructions of Black students in an example of upward conflation, where social structures are seen as the sum of individual actions. Such upward conflation has been dominant in Academic Development work, as it often draws on the assumption that it provides opportunities for academics, in the case of staff development, and students, in the case of student development, to resolve problems, rather than understanding that such issues are contextual and causally efficacious (Behari-Leak, 2017; Motshoane, 2023). For change to occur, this upward conflation needs to be addressed, and instead, a more complex understanding of the status quo is needed if it is to be transformed. This may well include staff and student development, but it would also respond to institutional, curriculum, political and other mechanisms.

I move from this discussion of the discourses drawn on to construct the Black students to an analysis of the conceptualisation of the actual student development interventions that were planned in the UCDP institutional plans.

## Chapter 6

### T2–T3

#### The conceptualisation of generic, ad hoc student development

##### 6.1 Introduction

As was described in the previous chapter, the discourse of the decontextualised learner was consistently drawn upon in T2–T3, where participants constructed students as mainly the sum of their disadvantage, perceived to be individuals who needed remedial assistance (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). This remedial discourse allowed a Situational Logic of protection (Archer, 1995; Kotta, et al., 2014), which enables the status quo to be buffered from challenges. The logic of protection was because the remedial discourse was complementary to an understanding that the university itself did not need changing (Vilakazi & Tema, 1985). This chapter continues reflecting on the discursive constructions of Black students by considering how the discourses discussed in the previous chapter conditioned the conceptualisation of Student Development Programmes.

The data I discuss in this chapter shows that participants understood student development as a mechanism for attending to the ‘disadvantaged student’ who previously did not have access to learning resources, such as computers, libraries, laboratories, career advising, and ‘good’ high schooling. Conditioned by this understanding of ‘the problem’ of poor retention and throughput being caused by students needing ‘fixing’ and an absence of understanding around the university as a social space, deficit and remedial Student Development Programmes were conceptualised. Such programmes were seen to be a response to the need for improved throughput and student success at these universities, and, thus, the discourse of efficiency discussed in the previous chapter was also at play in conditioning the conceptualisation of the interventions discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Two introduced Analytical Dualism to avoid 'the fallacy of conflation', whereby I may conflate Agency with Cultural or Structural systems and thereby fail to show the emergent properties of each (Archer, 2000). This chapter shows that the many events and experiences at T1, emerging from previous Structural, Cultural and Agential powers, shape the student development initiatives discussed here as T2–T3. Using Analytical Dualism, I artificially separate these intertwined complexities of how the UCDG Student Development Programmes were conceptualised by the various HBUs.

In the previous chapter, I showed how participants drew on a set of discourses in the domain of Culture to conceptualise the students and their needs; in this chapter, I look at the various interventions that emerged in complementarity to the discourse of 'disadvantaged students in need of remediation' and the discourse of 'efficiency'.

## 6.2 Brief overview of UCDG-funded initiatives at HBUs

The Institutional UCDP plan reports show how HBUs described student development projects. These projects included activities and programmes such as the recruitment of Academic Advisors who would focus on conceptualising and implementing various workshops which focused on monitoring, evaluating, and supporting students who are underperforming and seen to be at risk of failing or dropping out. Other common projects across many of the HBUs were multilingualism, academic writing and support initiatives, which in some universities comprised literacy and writing workshops that sought to train students on how to read and write academically. First Year Experience [FYE], tutorship, and psycho-social interventions were also common, with projects designed to respond to the students' problems within each HBU.

DHET data related to the implementation of the UCDG in higher education also shows that over ZAR63 million in the financial year 2021 to 2022<sup>42</sup> was spent on Student

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<sup>42</sup> Most of the universities did not have data on all three-year cycles, hence only calculating as year 1 of the cycle.

Development Programmes by seven<sup>43</sup> HBUs on these kinds of programmes. The highest amount budgeted under this project was for activities related to projects focused on capacity building, enhancement, monitoring, and mentoring, through programmes such as student academic advising, FYE support programmes and tutoring. Table 8 below shows the different programmes that were conceptualised and the money spent on the implementation of the various student development projects within each HBU for the year 2021–2022.

Such examples show the dependence some of these HBUs had on the UCDG to implement projects that are arguably fundamental to the function of the university, such as tutoring (Moyo, 2018). This dependence on funding for student development suggests that these universities would not otherwise be able to support their students should funding be depleted.

It seems that such a discourse of ‘disadvantaged students in need of remediation’ and the discourse of ‘efficiency’ was further conditioned by the DHET, as Tiroyabone and Strydom (2021) suggest; for instance, it indicates that the DHET encouraged the development of student support in the early 2000s through the UCDG (known as the TDG back then). They note that the DHET was intentional about the development of academic advising through a collaborative grant led by the University of the Free State as part of the workstream, which formed part of the Siyaphumelela initiative. The collaborative grant also led to the formation of the first Academic Advising Association for South Africa, namely ELETSA, which means ‘advising’ in the Sesotho language (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). It may be from these Structures that Academic Advising emerged as a very recent and key concern throughout the university sector in South Africa. It is within this understanding that I argue the influence of organisations such as Siyaphumelela, having increasingly developed a neoliberal understanding of higher education in how it encourages the datafication and efficiency discourse. As a consequence, study participants spoke of advising as a practice to improve coordination and effectiveness, and to enhance student success in university. While such initiatives are relatively new, their characteristics

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<sup>43</sup> I could not access data from the 8<sup>th</sup> institution.

share much with the student development initiatives in the early phases of Academic Development in T1, as discussed in Chapter Four.

<b>University A</b>	<b>Money allocated to each project</b>
Project 1: First Year Experience	ZAR 3,528,360.68
Project 2: Academic Literacy, Advising, Referral and Counselling	ZAR 3,622,701.98
Project 3: Student Tracking and Data Analytics for student success and retention	ZAR 2,287,110.49
Project 4: Student Mentoring and Tutor Development	ZAR 6,891,158.43
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – Student Development projects</b>	<b>ZAR 16,329,331,60</b>
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – All university projects</b>	<b>ZAR 37,612,091.00</b>
<b>University B</b>	<b>Money allocated to each project</b>
Project 1: Student Academic Monitoring and Support	ZAR 3,787,000.00
Project 2: Multilingualism, academic and research writing	ZAR 1,313,891.24
Project 3: Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) awareness and simulated work readiness	ZAR 1,706,000.00
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – Student Development projects</b>	<b>ZAR 6,806,891,24</b>
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – All university projects</b>	<b>ZAR 12,305,892.00</b>
<b>University C</b>	<b>Money allocated to each project</b>
Project 1: First Year Experience	ZAR 591,500.00
Project 2: Peer Assisted Student Services for high-risk courses	ZAR 1,061,100.00
Project 3: Undergraduate student capacitation for practice and employability	ZAR 1,751,600.00
Project 4: Post-Graduate Students Capacity Development Programme	ZAR 668,800.00
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – Student Development projects</b>	<b>ZAR 4,073,000.00</b>

<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – All university projects</b>	<b>ZAR 13,747,995.00</b>
<b>University D</b>	<b>Money allocated to each project</b>
Project 1: First Year Experience	ZAR 1,826,242.00
Project 2: Tutorship and Mentorship programme	ZAR 2,383,648.00
Project 3: Management and sustainability of the Writing Centre	ZAR 2,989,594.00
Project 4: Student Academic Professional Learning Programme	ZAR 300,000.00
Project 11: Postgraduate Capacity Development	ZAR 543,200.00
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG2021 – Student Development projects</b>	<b>ZAR 8,042,684.00</b>
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – All university projects</b>	<b>ZAR18,680,173.00</b>
<b>University E</b>	<b>Money allocated to each project</b>
Project 2: Enhancing students' throughput and success	ZAR 5,458,560.01
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – Student Development projects</b>	<b>ZAR 5,458,560.01</b>
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – All university projects</b>	<b>ZAR 16,874,726.00</b>
<b>University F</b>	<b>Money allocated to each project</b>
Project 1: Making your mark online programme	ZAR 694,051.00
Project 2: The Gender quality and empowerment project	ZAR 318,000,00
Project 3: Undergraduate student success	ZAR 7,166,807.00
Project 4: Postgraduate student success: Developing the student researcher	ZAR 350,000.00
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – Student Development projects</b>	<b>ZAR 8,528,858,00</b>
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – All university projects</b>	<b>ZAR 18,161,932.00</b>

<b>University G</b>	<b>Money allocated to each project</b>
Project 1: Student Mentorship Project	ZAR 2,406,957.00
Project 2: Tutorship project	ZAR 1,701,100.00
Project 3: Supplemental Instruction Programme	ZAR 1,461,850.00
Project 4: Reading & Writing Centre	ZAR 1,331,500.00
Project 5: Multi-modal research development for postgraduate student project	ZAR 3,398,052.00
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – Student Development projects</b>	<b>ZAR 10,299,459.00</b>
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – All university projects</b>	<b>ZAR 25,626,682.00</b>
<b>Total Amount spent on UCDG 2021 – HBU Sector</b>	<b>ZAR 143,009,491.00</b>

Source: UCDP 2021-2023 (2021) Annual Progress Report.

Table 8: UCDG Annual Expenditure on Student Development for the year 2021–2022, 31 March.

Further to the table, it was interesting to see how the descriptions of projects varied in the way they were written and motivated at the same institution for different projects (for example, Academic Literacies and Monitoring and Support). There was clear evidence of different actors drawing on different theories and understandings of student development within a single university. For example, the data quotation below shows an uncommon and clearly framed understanding of academic practices being discipline-specific:

*A key finding from writing researchers studying the phenomenon of academic/research writing is that writing is discipline-specific, meaning how written language is used to accomplish particular goals in one discipline differs substantially from how it might be used in another discipline. (University B)*

*Such approaches have encompassed writing in the discipline programmes that assume a developmental approach to writing, and embed writing support in students' subject courses while offering faculty members support in developing effective writing assignments and evaluation tools that evaluate students' learning in ways that help them developmentally become thinkers and communicators for their fields of study. Writing support is then embedded in teaching of the course material, for example, when learning about course content, writing is the vehicle to learn. (University B)*

However, while these data quotes suggest that this university positions academic literacy as discipline-focused, and they argue that academics should be supported to embed writing in their pedagogy, this was in stark contrast to the framing of the Monitoring and Support projects from the same university:

*Students are presumed to be at risk because they carry with them either one more of the risk indicators, such as First-Generation status, lower school quintile, low motivation, home language, academic preparedness, disability, and poor socio-economic background ... (University B)*

*... A thorough analysis of risk indicator patterns and associated relevant information will help both academic and student support departments better understand the root causes of student disengagement and academic failure.*

(University B)

In the above data quotes and various other segments of University B's plans, there is an understanding that students' problems emerge from their disadvantages. The nature of these disadvantages is seen to be individual, requiring individual assessment and to be addressed through initiatives that allow the mainstream status quo to remain protected.

Another incoherence in the data was how the projects were, at times, at odds with the limited narrative aspects of the proposals. For example, in institution A, the challenge of Academic Literacies acquisition was well conceptualised as being a student, staff and curriculum issue, but none of the activities focused on the curriculum, staff and programme development. In their project motivation, within a discussion of students indicating that *"95% of first year students at [University A] require assistance in developing linguistic and writing skills in relation to academic literacy"*, University A indicated that:

*Lecturers do not address academic writing issues adequately in their teaching. Furthermore, Lecturers also do not always adhere to assessment principles and procedures, instead, they tend to rely mostly on assessing lower-order cognitive levels. To address these challenges experienced by both students and staff, the Writing Centre intends to introduce a new model, one that integrates academic writing into the curriculum. This approach provides student support by working closely with academic departments and faculties (in contrast to the current focus on students).*

However, the list of projects to attend to the above motivation was as follows:

- |  |
|--|
| <p><b>Activity 1</b> - Writing Centre Coordinators conduct Write-Right individual consultations</p> <p><b>Activity 2</b> - Writing Centre Coordinators run Write-Right faculty-based group consultations/workshops</p> <p><b>Activity 3</b> - Academic advisors conducting academic advising one-on-one sessions</p> <p><b>Activity 4</b> - Academic Advisors run academic advising group consultations/workshops</p> <p><b>Activity 5</b> - Writing Centre Coordinators conducting residence-based Write-Right workshops in selected residences</p> <p><b>Activity 6</b> - Writing Centre Coordinators run language development activities</p> <p><b>Activity 7</b> - Student counsellors provide psychosocial support to at-risk students.</p> <p><b>Activity 8</b> - Student development practitioners run second curriculum programmes</p> <p><b>Activity 9</b> - Human resources directorate appointing Writing Centre Coordinators</p> |
|--|

*Table 9: Example of project description from University A (2021 - 2022)*

Such ideological and theoretical inconsistencies within a single university, and even, as in the case above, within a single project, were frequently evident in the documentation. It would seem that even where theories, such as academic literacy theory, were drawn upon in the narratives of the student development initiatives, they failed to inform the actual projects. This suggests that even where individuals have been able to use their Agency to insert alternative explanations of the problem of poor student retention and throughput, this was not enough to gain traction with the larger group responsible for conceptualising and implementing UCDG-funded student development. The Structures and Cultures of T1, and the discourses conceptualising students and efficiency that emerged from the data and were discussed in the previous chapter, were strong enough to prevent alternative understandings from holding sway. And, as is shown in the next chapter, the Agency of those working in Academic Development was often constrained by their institutional positioning. The Situational Logic of protection, which emerged from the necessary complementarity

between these mechanisms, allowed the status quo of student development to continue.

### 6.3 A-theoretical Student Development Programmes

Throughout the data, there were examples of Student Development Programmes offering students “tricks and tips”, often in the form of once-off workshops. “*Student development is ... uh, workshops for students*” (Bongiwe). Student development interventions largely comprised a range of once-off workshops, and even where longer-term interventions were in place, such as computer literacy courses and tutoring, these were nonetheless add-on interventions focused on the students’ gaps in skills and knowledge outside of their mainstream education. Student development was primarily conceptualised in various ways to prepare these Black students for the mainstream curriculum, which was not in itself an object of concern for the participants in this study.

*We must train them as well for them to be able to function to – ... to understand what their role is.* (Likho)

The deep concern most participants had for students is undoubtable, but the absence of data indicating reflection on what the university expected of students, what higher education is for, or how different disciplines engage students in specific ways was notable.

*Umm, i-student development is about any activities or interventions that are designed to enhance, umm, the student experience in the university.* (Mandisa)

*It's basically to make the life of the student easier and to make their experience better.* (Bongiwe)

*So, where I'm sitting outside that currently, ndingatsho ndithi [I could say that] i-student [the student] development is understanding i-student [the student] and*

*giving the student a platform and resources and services and making sure that there's awareness of the support available ... from the time they apply to the time they leave the institution and even beyond that continuum of support, availability and all. Yeah. (Pumlani)*

Some participants saw the purpose of student development as enhancing the student experience; others saw it as an opportunity to provide access to resources and support to which students had not previously had access, for example, computer skills, academic advising or psycho-social support was offered to assist them in navigating the university.

*We provide programmes that support the academic, like study skills, how to deal with peer pressure, how to deal with depression, and other related programmes that support academic success, because there is an academic project, all our activities should support the academic project of the institution. (Likho)*

While the purpose and nature of Student Development Programmes were explained in ways that varied by participant, as will be shown, the dominant understanding of Academic Development work across the data echoed that of Boughey and McKenna (2016). They indicated that the main understanding of student development across the sector is that Black students are not prepared to be in higher education and that they need various kinds of skill sets due to their disadvantaged backgrounds (Boughey & McKenna, 2016).

Such impoverished understandings were causally efficacious in the kinds of Student Development Programmes that were conceptualised. While there is ample literature on how mechanisms of institutional norms and values, disciplinary expectations, and student Agency shape the student experience, there was little evidence of such issues in the data. Related to this, one of the key findings in this study was that there was limited engagement with literature about higher education in general and student learning in particular.

It emerged from the data analysis that there was a lack of theoretical underpinning to the student development initiatives conceptualised and implemented by participants. Participants could list a range of interventions funded through the UCDG, for instance, Mandisa explained how the various programmes implemented at her university were a “*continuum of activities that range, you know, anything from, umm, Pre-University entry and right to when the students uh graduate and leave higher education*”. However, she - like the rest of the participants throughout the study - was less able to explain how and why these specific interventions were selected or how they contributed to knowledge, learning and success at their university.

Pumlani, on the other hand, tried to show that he knew that these programmes should be based on scholarly research by saying:

*The quality of teaching and learning, student support, teaching and learning and academic support, student learn, teaching and learning component and even the scholarly component in the notion of research. Even the policy itself I'll use the Archerian approach model whereby we were able now to influence Structures to change Culture, but be Agents of that, so I'll say [name of university] has been an agent for that and then the Culture is changing slowly but surely and also structures are being established that the policy formulation related to student success, using data driven approaches ...*

While Pumlani could certainly articulate a theoretical stance, as with the example of the academic literacy theory evident in University A's narrative above, there was no evidence that the theory was being used in deciding what student development initiatives should be implemented or how.

In various interviews, I tried to probe understandings of exactly what skills and practices students needed to succeed in their chosen studies and what kinds of interventions might scaffold their taking these on. The dominance of the student deficit discourse meant that there was a strong common-sense understanding that students lacked skills, which were neutral in nature and which constituted a gap that needed addressing. As Moyo et al. (2022) argue, there is nothing inherently wrong with

common sense, and we rely on common-sense understandings to rapidly navigate our way through a complex world. But given that teaching and learning is a complex social process, which has been well researched, it is problematic that so little theory was called upon in the study data.

Researchers locally (such as Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Sobuwa & McKenna, 2019; Case et al., 2018; Shay et al., 2016; Vorster & Quinn, 2017) and internationally (for example, Clegg, 2009; Rowland, 2009; Trowler et al., 2022) have suggested that student success is often misunderstood to be entirely the result of the individual student having sufficient intellectual capacity, and working hard and being motivated, with the result that initiatives to enhance student success focus only on the student. Such common-sense understandings fail to reflect the extent to which higher education is a specific social space with values, histories, norms and ways of being and doing. Such common-sense understandings of students and student development absent the university, and the student is decontextualised from the norms, values, knowledge and ways of being and doing that they bring with them (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). This study sadly reinforces the call for theorisation made in such prior literature, in that there was very little evidence that engagement with research on teaching and learning guided the student development initiatives.

Alongside the exception of Pumlani, who referred to Archer (but not how Social Realism informed student development), was the exception of Likho, who explicitly referred to Tinto's theory of persistence. Likho spoke about various programmes he oversaw, which were geared towards preparing students for leadership roles while they are in their first year:

*We've got programmes for students who are first years, leadership development programmes for first years, we call them emerging leaders or future leaders. So, because we want to create that sense of belonging and a sense of ownership of the university ...*

He not only mentioned Tinto, but he explicitly indicated that the programme drew from 'Michael' [Vincent] Tinto's Persistence Theory. He explained that a lot of students are unable to persist in university and thus drop out.

*... when I was proposing this project, umm, it was driven by that, that it's quite student persistence theory, umm, it seeks to combine academic and social life of students, umm, for holistic development ... There's a lot of students who are unable to persist, but there's a theory by Professor Michael [Vincent] Tinto. It's a persistence theory. That students tend to, uh ... drop out of the system due to a number of challenges ... Uh, particularly in the historically disadvantaged institutions and so through these programmes, huh, that seek to support uh, student success, umm, we are trying to - we use that theory. (Likho)*

Likho explained that students lacked leadership skills and that he believed there was a link between student success and such leadership skills. Interestingly, though, his reflections were more about student disruptions and protests than about student learning.

*Students who are not doing well academically tend to resort to a more forceful way to disrupt. Because they see they have nothing to lose here, but a student who is committed academically, the student who's committed to being part of the university ...*

According to Likho, his use of Tinto's theory to conceptualise student development initiatives mitigated the disruptive nature of students, which he saw as arising from a lack of ownership or sense of belonging in the university and, further, which he associated with poorly-performing students. As discussed elsewhere in this study, student protests have historically been about systemic challenges that Black students experience in higher education, such as debt, which results in the non-registration or exclusion of students (Maringira & Gukurume, No Date). Protests are also often related to challenges regarding accommodation and administrative issues. The 2015/16 protests were unusual in that students in the HWIs joined in, and the protests included a focus on institutional and curriculum transformation and then, more

specifically, on fees (Langa, 2017; Wangenge-Ouma & Carpentier, 2018). Likho was clear that, in his view, students' protests can be seen to relate to their lack of leadership skills and a sense of alienation from the university.

*Students should have a sense of home away from home, a sense of belonging, a sense of ownership, because if they own, they cannot damage what they own. Because it is theirs and they also believe, so that it is theirs.*

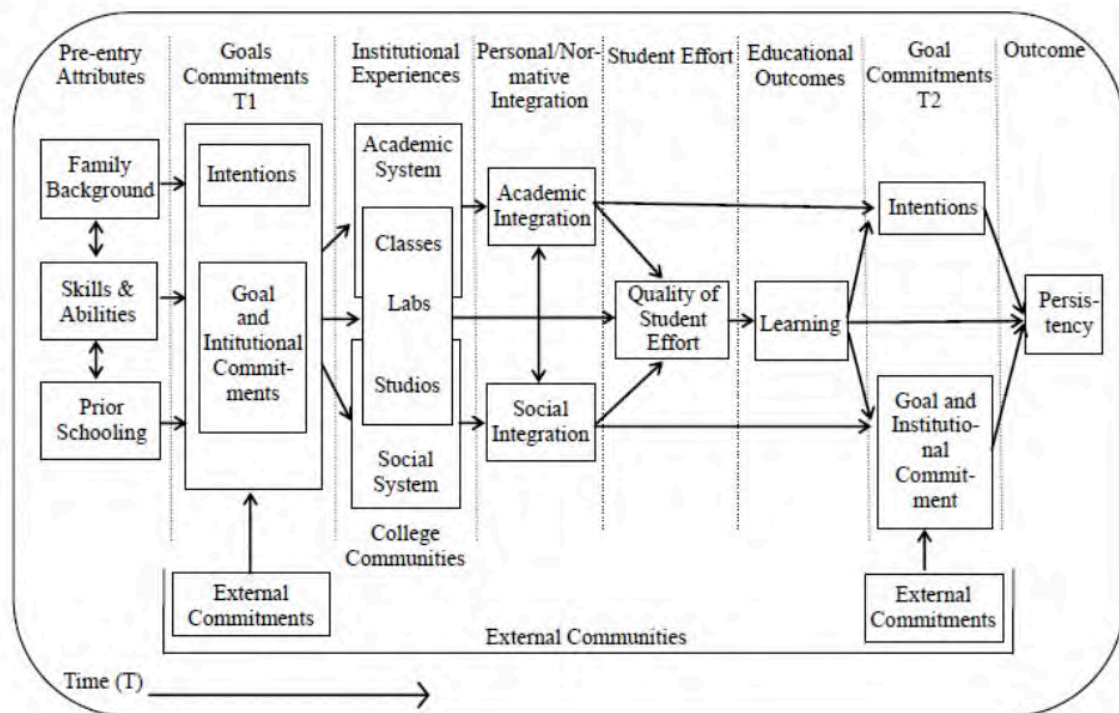
He believed that his student development programme would teach students a strong sense of ownership, "... if I damage this institution, I'm damaging my home ...". He continued to explain what the programme entailed by saying:

*... We teach them on the values of the institution – we talking about the strategy of the university we teach, our vision and mission, but were ... what we are more in are the values of the university. Values such as respect and values such as excellence such as integrity. Whatever you do, moral standard high moral standard. As a leader, as a student, or as a member of the [Name of the University] community [...Inaudible...], respect, respect yourself, respect other people. Ubuntu, we respect one another, excellence, and accountability. Those are the values that are espoused and each person, and each person who enters that gate to the premises of the university. Whatever value we hold, values were holding all your you leave them outside the gate. And you come with these values of the institution.*

Likho seems here to have been attempting to make some of the university's norms and values explicit to students. What was missing in this example by Likho was any reflection on the complex challenges that Black students experience socially, politically, and economically in society, and on the fact that the higher education environment can exacerbate these challenges, making learning difficult for them. It also suggests that the Structure and Culture of the university comprise generic and immutable values captured in vision, mission and values statements. There may well be merit in discussing such institutional statements, but from an Archerian theory of

emergence, we can see that such statements are unlikely to clarify the specific ways of being and doing expected of students.

Likho suggested that drawing on Tinto's work was fundamental to how he framed his student leadership training. Tinto sought through his theory to develop awareness about the behaviour of American college students, and about how the underlying causes of such behaviours affected student persistence (Nicoletti, 2019; Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). While some have argued that Tinto's Persistence Theory is overly simplistic and fails to fully account for the causal mechanisms leading to students persisting or dropping out of their studies (Nicoletti, 2019, and most notably Tierney, 1992). The theory does offer a useful heuristic of students' movement through higher education. Tinto argues that students come to the university with skills and abilities (see Figure 9 below), but also recognises that the university is a social system that affects the likelihood of students succeeding.



Source: Nicolette (2019: 61)

Figure 9: Representation of Tinto's Persistence Theory

Given the general lack of acknowledgement in the data of the idea that students bring competencies to the academy, and the lack of acknowledgement that the university is itself a system, this seems a useful framing. Notably, however, a key critique of Tinto has been that his theory “places too much emphasis on the student as individuality and his ability to integrate into the university environment, without fully considering the broader Structural factors that may impact student success” (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023: 9). This critique echoes my critique of the dominant discourse in the data of the decontextualised student in need of remediation.

Perhaps more notable was that it was unclear to what extent Tinto’s theory was actually used in the development of Likho’s UCDG-funded leadership programmes. The way that he understood students’ protests as emerging from individual dissatisfactions and disruptiveness, rather than being conditioned by socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political structures, was much the same as how student development was understood by the other participants. That is, it is about who students are as individuals with deficits, rather than being aware of how students’ social constructions and identities come into conflict with the Structure and Culture of the university and wider socio-economic conditions.

As shown above, there was very little overall in the data indicating engagement with theory. As a result of the reliance on common-sense understandings, participants seemed unable to provide any concrete answers as to what comprised ‘development’, ‘learning’ or ‘knowledge’. Pumlani acknowledged this as a shortcoming on his part, as he mentioned that much of his work lacked a scholarly base:

*... ndizotsho ke uba [I must admit that] I have never written a paper before,<sup>44</sup> and so one understands that more than being a coordinator, being involved the student development, one needs to be very scholar in terms of approach, looking at the pedagogical approaches that one uses, at least now initially my approaches*

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<sup>44</sup> It is telling that the participant sees journal articles as something one is meant to publish rather than something one can read and learn from. The ‘publish or perish’ environment conditioned by neoliberalism has led to various negative consequences for the relationship between academics and acquiring knowledge through reading (Mutongoza, 2023).

*were very .... I'm just looking for a word ... Common sense. Yes, common-sense approaches are used, but now, as one begins to engage with students and nakule [in this] position ndikuyo [that I'm in], one is able to say, look I need to be more scholarly in my approach and even my pedagogical approaches in facilitating i-session and even training my tutors and PALs [Peer Assisted Learning] to facilitate how they facilitate, there's a level, there's a change in approach.*

Interestingly, though there was little reference to theory in the discussion of how interventions were designed and implemented, there was frequent mention of the need for alignment between interventions and institutional policy and strategy.

*So, if you have this thing, you need to develop documents, charters, policies, you know, so that those documents will guide operations of these. ... That programme should speak to the strategy of the university? (Likho)*

*You don't want to have a process that is not in line with your strategy as an institution that is not in line with your teaching and learning and a policy as an institution and strategy as an institution ... And then when we, you know, assess the projects, we are then able to see which one is within the broader strategy of the university and the teaching and learning strategy of the university. (Sifiso)*

A number of participants indicated how their centres aligned their work with the strategic goals of the university. In the absence of theoretical understandings informing their student development work, this reference to institutional strategies is particularly important.

In the previous chapter, I indicated that the use of the word 'holistic' was prolific in the data, despite little engagement with its meaning. I suggested that this word was widely used because it was included in the DHET documentation about UCDG-funded student development. Similarly, it should be noted that proposals for UCDG funding and the UCDP Ministerial Statement (2021–2023) require an explicit statement of how the planned initiatives align with the university's strategy. This is another example, from

many others in the data, where participants made use of words from the UCDG policies and other documents without fully engaging with their intended meaning. Regarding the term 'holistic', we have the following examples, among others, in UCDG documents:

The University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) will enable an integrated and holistic approach to student development, staff development, programme development and curriculum development in the university sector, partly supported by the UCDG, but supported by other DHET and institutional resources as well (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019: 3).

A holistic Student Development Framework for the UCDP ... For the purposes of the UCDP, student development is understood to encompass activities and initiatives that provide academic, life skills and psycho-social support to undergraduate and postgraduate students with the aim of enhancing their chances of success in their university studies, understanding that student success is also heavily dependent on addressing the life/logistic challenges that students face (2021–2023 DHET Ministerial Statement, 2020: 18).

Whilst funding from the UCDG cannot fund life/logistic support needs, a holistic student development approach would involve advising students on how these needs can be addressed and directing them to the institutional resources that can assist (ibid.).

The frequent use of the term 'holistic' in the participant interviews suggests that the UCDG documents had influence over the wording used, though not necessarily over the conceptualisations of student development.

Similarly, there was mention in the DHET UCDG documentation of the need for alignment with policy, including this being a required section of the proposals developed by institutions.

The development and/or renewal of academic programmes and curricula that are of strategic importance and are national priorities (2021–2023 DHET Ministerial Statement, 2020: 16).

The evaluation component of the UCDP will thus typically address whether the Programme is 'successful' in terms of specific evaluation criteria, such as effectiveness, efficiency, strategic relevance and sustainability (2021–2023 DHET Ministerial Statement, 2020: 38).

It would thus seem that there was an understanding that student development initiatives should align with institutional strategies, visions, missions, and so on in order to comply with UCDG policy. But while such alignment was claimed by the participants, it remained unclear how the specific nature of their university had a bearing on shaping the forms of student development offered.

Without strong engagement with the theory, and with only superficial reference to alignment to the specific institution's mission, vision and strategic plan, participants instead drew on discourses of the decontextualised learner in need of remediation. This shaped their conceptualisation and implementation of generic Student Development Programmes.

So far, the findings introduce us to the nature of programmes which were conceptualised from an a-theoretical understanding, absencing reflections on the nature of the university as a social structure and the kinds of Agency it demanded from these students who were not familiar with them. This led to the development of add-on initiatives that were implemented outside of the mainstream curriculum.

#### 6.4 Generic, Ad hoc, Skills Focused Student Development Programmes

The student development initiatives funded by the UCDG were almost all generic in nature. That is, they were offered by a central student development centre and were offered across faculties and departments in a 'one size fits all' model. This offering of

generic initiatives can be seen to emerge from the complementarity of a number of mechanisms. It is logistically simpler and financially more efficient to offer one set of initiatives across the student body rather than adapting such initiatives to specific programmes for specific students. The use of generic initiatives also suggests that these can be taught centrally by people without disciplinary expertise. And significantly, the student deficit discourse discussed in the previous chapter enabled the development of such generic, centrally offered initiatives.

As shown in T1 of this research, Academic Development work has drawn much from this understanding (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Boughey, 2024; Luckett, 2024). It seemed that the participants of this research continued to draw from the prior understandings and practices of this time. There was little reference in the data to how these Student Development Programmes addressed 'learning', or how 'learning' was understood, and there was no reference in the data to the nature of knowledge or how 'knowledge' was central to the higher education project. Furthermore, while the participants were able to list the interventions, they were not able to indicate whether they contributed to student throughput and success in higher education. Despite attempting to interrogate this in the interviews, I was unable to elicit their understandings of how any intervention related to the nature of learning or to the student's target disciplinary knowledge.

The discussions about orientation programmes, for example, as the data quotes below show, all referenced generic, add-on initiatives:

*... we help the students with adjusting to the university through the orientation programme. (Mandisa)*

*... we're going to follow a certain model where uh, we, you know, have onboarding programmes and to integrate our first years, and so we would, for instance, have an orientation program. (Thandeka)*

*... we have an on - a continuous orientation programme, a year-long orientation program based on that survey. (Pumlani)*

*So, it's like an orientation of some sort, because we call everyone in the university to come in and present what they do in their corners. So that's at least they know exactly where to go if they have a problem. (Babalwa)*

*... we help the students with adjusting to the university through the orientation [...] we will do surveys of student engagement and [...] make sure that our first years, uhm, are digitally fluent, so we [...] orientate them, [...], on the uiniversity's Learning Management System, but also other emerging technologies, umm, and we have academic writing workshops, induction workshops with them ... (Mandisa)*

As indicated earlier, the focus was on students needing to adapt to the university environment, and no initiatives were implemented to better understand ways the university could restructure itself to accommodate the social practices of its students. As indicated in Chapter Four, T1, this critique of student development being a means by which the university is protected from making Structural changes can be traced in the literature for decades, including Vilakazi and Tema in 1985, pointing this out in the early years of Academic Development.

Across the data, programmes such as the orientation, the FYE, academic literacy courses, academic advising, tutoring, and other UCDG-funded programmes at these universities were generic; that is, they were offered in the same way and to the same people regardless of the programmes and subjects for which the students were registered. The common understanding was that students lacked generic skills and that these could be addressed through generic, add-on programmes. There was a lack of understanding of their need to take on the peculiar practices expected in their different fields (Boughey, 2010; McKenna, 2010; Clarence & McKenna, 2017), or of university programmes being constructed around different forms of knowledge requiring different kinds of practices. This genericism was conditioned by the skills-centric notion evident in T1, that university education pertains mainly to neutral skills

that all students need to demonstrate (Gee, 2004; Street, 2003). This idea that university success rests on neutral and generic skills, as opposed to socially constructed and context-dependent practices, was especially evident in the discussions on language.

*... So I think there are programmes that should be compulsory at the first year level like English grammar you know, so the students who would be better equipped at, at communicating in English, so yeah, it's one of those things because sometimes we get to assume that everybody is on the same page whereas, umm, some most of them, they're not on the same page. (Thandeka)*

The above participant comment illustrates what Street (2003) refers to as the 'autonomous model', whereby language competence is understood to comprise a set of generic skills pertaining to grammar, vocabulary, and so on, which can be learned separately from the contexts in which language is used. This is another example of the context of Academic Development history in South Africa at T1 (Boughey, 2010), conditioning the experiences in T2–T3.

*They don't like it when you speak in English they prefer you to address them in Zulu and as much as I try to say to them, you know, let's practice because English is a language that you are going to be using at your workplace, you know and did, they don't enjoy when you keep on like speaking in English, you see them one by one they leave. And I don't know how we can, umm, change their mindsets, you know, along the language, especially you know? (Thandeka)*

However, contestations from students are to be expected as language use is always socially contextualised and related to identity. As Street (2003: 2) argues, interaction between students and lecturers "is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the students". In many ways, therefore, the 'generic' nature of any language support they received had the potential to reduce the likelihood of students coming to understand that to succeed at university, they would need to take on discipline-specific literacy practices.

In contrast to the problematic 'autonomous model' is the 'ideological model' (Street, 2003), which acknowledges that language use is never generic or simply related to linguistic competence. Rather, in the ideological model, there is an understanding that language use occurs in context and in ways deemed appropriate to that social context. This means that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill that can be easily transferred and embedded across socially constructed epistemological principles.

However, most participants did not have this ideological understanding, and thus constructed generic initiatives to support students, a phenomenon which was continuing the practices identified in T1. In cases where a few participants had a better understanding of this, the data shows that it was never implemented, as they either reverted to the autonomous model or were conditioned by the Structural constraints of the university to implement such ideas, as will be shown in the next chapter.

It is generally accepted in the Academic Literacies literature that students come to university without the peculiar literacies valued in higher education (Clarence & McKenna, 2017a; Kapp & Bangeni, 2011). But while academic language is no-one's mother tongue (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). There is an acknowledgement that taking on discipline-specific practices is easier for some than others (Christie, 1985). The emergence of these generic approaches in T2–T3 are conditioned by the kind of autonomous understanding of student development work.

Throughout this research, participants failed to understand how the medium of instruction, and whether that is the student's home language, is a significant mechanism in becoming successful in higher education (Christie, 1985; Kapp & Bangeni, 2011; Mason, 2017), and this should not be underestimated. But understanding students' higher education challenges as emerging only from technical language competence is extremely narrow, because the language is more than the 'vehicle' by which meaning is communicated (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Taking on the language practices of a specific discipline is also about taking on the norms and

values of that field (Ellery, 2017, 2019; Clarence & McKenna, 2017b). This entails epistemological access, and not just having the basic language tools of grammar and vocabulary.

Developing students' literacy practices thus requires that exposure to such new literacies be embedded in the social practices where they will be used. Only by seeing how language is used in a particular field will students be able to take these literacies on. Developing students' academic literacies is thus closely tied both to identity and to enabling epistemological access. Such understandings are readily available in the literature but were largely absent in the data. Nonetheless, Pumlani indicated some understanding of the connection between language and identity as follows:

*Now if you understand the type of students that you have [you have] to understand the context that they are coming from and also they are getting in you easily adjust in terms of you looking at your lessons and your approaches even code switching, because you understand that these are students that have never been, one, in this environment, two, but also the issue of language is another issue. So, how do we make sure that you assist a student to understand the course content? Immediately one understands that – which is where I come from –, you, become more flexible and also, umm sympathetic, but at the same time, firm, because you do not want to deprive student of knowledge, but at the same time you do not want the student to be uncomfortable in expressing him or herself or her level of understanding of that particular content.*

While Pumlani was mindful of how he could utilise code-switching to include his students, he possibly evidenced a deficit conception of his students' linguistic repertoires. He allowed the use of students' home languages 'sympathetically' because he did not want students to 'feel uncomfortable'. While appreciating Thandeka's opportunity to allow them to grapple with the English language in their learning as shown earlier, and Pumlani's openness to code-switching, it needs to be noted that participants were so focused on the students' skills gaps as the central

problem that they could not see the ideological implications of becoming adept in a discipline, or the identity benefits of translanguaging (Madiba, 2024).

There is a great deal of research that indicates the value of translanguaging in the classroom in ways which recognise the power of being multilingual (Mason, 2017; Mashiyi et al., 2020). Indeed, Mashiyi et al. argue that language can play a key role in decolonising the curriculum and making the classroom a more inclusive space, because “the use of one’s language in high domains such as education can help affirm one’s identity and enhance learning” (2020: 160).

Where issues of language were explicitly addressed in the Student Development Programmes, these were always through generic initiatives that sat separately from the mainstream courses, except for one institution, which planned to “*capacitate lecturers on academic literacy and assessment practices in piloted writing intensive course*” (University A). Sadly, this output was not realised, as they reported:

*Target not achieved. This activity was not achieved as the funds were re-prioritized to curriculum workshops on accreditation forms. (Activity x in this project) CHE Forms Assessment practices. (University A)*

Two interventions regularly noted in the UCDG proposals were so-called ‘Academic literacy’ courses and writing centres. Much of the data shows that the content of the courses and the kinds of support available in the centres were generic, and focused on surface-level technical issues of language correctness in relation to Standard English use, and not on how language was used to create and disseminate knowledge in disciplinary ways.

*The subdomain analysis of the academic literacy test pointed glaring deficiencies in areas such as grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, text genre and inference, among others. (University A)*

*1.78% of first-year students who wrote NBTs at [name of university] were deemed proficient in academic literacy in 2018, and only 2.71% in 2019 (see table below). The rest of the students performed poorly ... The implication, therefore, is that more than 95% of first-year students at [name of university] require assistance in developing linguistic and writing skills in relation to academic literacy. (University A)*

*Academic literacy is a basic requirement for every student at an institution of higher education. However, the most students at [university] struggle with academic literacy ... Students who participated in academic literacy sessions experienced a boost in confidence when taking module assessments. (University D)*

Disciplinary 'ways of knowing' in Physics are fundamentally different to those of Sociology, and these are acquired incrementally over the years of university. Participants did not seem to have this understanding, as they saw their generic Student Development Programmes as effective across all university disciplines. (Street, 1995; 2003) argues that students need to grapple with very different forms of knowledge and very different ways of representing such knowledge. Therefore, the generic one-size-fits-all approach, which was evident throughout the data, is problematic.

*... this is indeed an important project because it is going to assist our students, maybe with the right skills, because we have a project on, you know, writing centre. (Likho)*

*So, this kind of project, you know, it's a no-brainer ... students need support when they do their assignments. Where they can go and consult the writing centre consultant so that they can develop their academic writing and professional writing. So, this is, you know, the snapshot of the kind of things that we look at when we assess projects. (Sifiso)*

*I'm doing writing centre coordination work, so that understanding is limited to my academic literacy understanding, and that is my understanding of the deficiencies attached to a student based on academic literacies as an Academic Advisor.*

(Pumlani)

Evidence about the extent to which such Academic Advisors are themselves academically literate in the kinds of practices students were expected to engage in did not come up in the data. It seems unlikely that the identities, experiences and qualifications of those appointed to do such student development work would enable them to scaffold students' taking on discipline-specific practices. The issue of student developers' experiences and qualifications is an issue I return to in the next chapter.

Another example of a generic skills approach was in computer literacy courses. Jabu argued that aspects of computer literacy are generic and need to be learned before students commence their studies:

*... digital technologies, and as well as computer literacy, it is something that needs to be embedded as early, as, you know, as students come in, because what we have in the institution is something that is called computer literacy, which is part of the core curriculum, but it was just done, you know, sort of like in an assumption that, yes, you providing basic computer, but remember, before the students go to class, right, they needed to engage maybe with the learning management system, or with some sort of a Turnitin, or whatever, you know, a technology that is used for learning. But in the institution, we're not paying much focus to those sorts of skills. (Jabu)*

Jabu explained that students not only needed to learn the basics of computer literacy (such as how to save a file or create a folder), but also needed to learn how to navigate the university's Learning Management System (LMS) and access other learning technologies, like the example he gave of Turnitin. He highlighted that such preparatory training courses became essential during COVID-19, as students needed to use these skills while learning from home.

Such introductory computer courses were common across the HBUs. Thabo, for instance, also explained that their university had developed a massive open online course (MOOC) in which all first-year students were enrolled before classes commenced:

*... we have developed a MOOC, which is a massive online course that we enrol students on. But we do it as an intervention rather than as a course ... because it is not bearing credits. (Thabo)*

Thabo's university also had an End User Computing module, which, unlike the MOOC, is credit-bearing: "because they do have the course that is being credited, which is End-User computing", he said. He continued to explain that the student development centre also had ad hoc training during orientation, despite there being a module on computing at the university:

*... we try to get students from the point where they start with orientation, that space when they still there would still be no teaching yet. To try to push them to get to this course, do this course. And we bring them to the computer labs, we try to show them, "Okay, this is a computer. This is how it works". We get them to be to know also that their phones are also computers and computers are working the same way - just to remove the stigma of these big computers that the only finding here at university. (Thabo)*

There seemed to be agreement that while end-user courses offered during the first year were needed, there were some basic expectations around computer usage that students needed before classes commenced.

*So just get them through maybe perhaps the first 30% or 40%, of the skills that they need, so that from now on, they can, from that point on, they can build on those skills ... sort of like introduction to the LMS, introduction to how to use a computer, and a little bit of Microsoft word tools and PowerPoint ... We also build*

*on the skills of right now artificial intelligence is the big thing. So we try to create interventions so that they use it in a responsible manner. (Thabo)*

It seemed clear that students needed basic computer skills and knowledge of the specific computer practices, and that students could benefit from such an introductory course before commencing their studies. Even here, it is arguably essential for such support to be complemented by support from disciplinary lecturers. It is through the authentic practice of using the LMS within their courses that students come to know what is expected of them. (Pangrazio, et al. 2020: 455) suggest that where computer, digital or information literacy is understood as a cognitive skill, it is generally taught in a “more generic and instrumental way and avoids drawing on the specific operational context of the learner”. They argue that if such literacy were instead understood as a socio-cultural practice, it would be developed within the curriculum in which it is used, with significant improvement in the acquisition and implementation of such practices.

Therefore, gaps identified in the students, whether in academic literacies, digital literacies, leadership skills or academic skills, such as time management and notetaking, were seen by the participants as issues to be addressed outside of the mainstream curriculum. Participants seemed to think that if students were afforded an opportunity to gain such generic skills, they would be able to transfer these to their various courses, and this would address their learning challenges.

The development of add-on student development initiatives, based on the premise that students lack generic skills, is not peculiar to these HBUs or student development funded by the UCDG. There is a wealth of literature in the field known as Academic Literacies research (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Clarence & McKenna, 2017a; Nekondo, 2024), which points to problematic attempts to address gaps in students’ learning in ways entirely unrelated to the actual practices expected of students at university. It is important to note that these problematic, generic, ad hoc approaches in UCDG-funded student development initiatives did not simply emerge from the Agency of those interviewed. The literature, as referred to in this chapter and in the

depiction of T1, indicates that this is both a global and national phenomenon. In a recent study of academic literacy development in Namibia, for example, Nekondo (2024) identified that such courses comprised what is known as a 'relativist code'. Legitimation Code Theory, which Nekondo was using, identifies the forms of knowledge and knowing that are legitimated (or 'valued') in each field. While Physics, for example, strongly legitimates very specialised and abstracted knowledge, Sociology more strongly legitimates a disposition of critical 'knowing' and knowers who take on a particular identity. The Academic Literacy courses he analysed, however, were 'relativist', in that they had a weak knowledge base and also lacked the development of a specific kind of knower (Nekondo, 2024). The consequences of this relativist code included that students did not take the courses seriously, and anything learned from these courses was unlikely to be transferred to students' mainstream courses. Nekondo (2024) suggests that a key reason such initiatives continue despite their lack of impact is that they can be taught by more readily available non-experts, and the courses are unlikely to require changes to the mainstream teaching, content or assessment. While this study did not look at Academic Literacy courses as such, there is sufficient data to suggest that the problems identified by Nekondo (2024) were very much in evidence in the forms of courses developed using the UCDG.

The exception to a complete absence of focus on knowledge and learning was in the data related to the tutorials, which explicitly augmented the mainstream courses. By being part of the mainstream curriculum, tutorials arguably had the potential both to be discipline-specific and to feed back into the curriculum. But tutorials were also to some extent add-on, in that there seemed to be no opportunities for the lessons learned in the tutorials to enhance the teaching, learning and assessment of the mainstream courses. The participants discussed tutorial programmes primarily from the position of tutor training and support. It seems that their responsibility was largely only at the point of tutor training, and that they did not engage much with tutorial programmes after that, other than managing the registers and payments.

*Even with the tutorship programme that we provide departments and academics, they do appreciate that kind of support because it's also assist them a lot within*

*the faculties and departments to have tutor so provide extra support for students/academic support for students because another challenge you have is in institution like [name of university] you have one lecturer was dealing with like six hundred - five hundred students and then if you have got like two or three tutors in that particular module, it goes a long way to assist students who are struggling in that particular module. (Sifiso)*

The Academic Developers provided the generic tutor training, but it would seem from the data that the mainstream academics were not involved in any way in the development of tutors through designing tutorial materials or through discussions on facilitating learning in their disciplines. Academics were happy to get teaching assistants for their large classrooms who were trained outside of their departments. Again, this suggests that the tutorials were also fairly add-on, without the potential to affect the mainstream curriculum.

*They would select tutors and everything, and then we come in in terms of the training of those mentors and tutors, continuous training, you know, making sure that you also capacitate them ... (Sifiso)*

Volbrecht and Boughey (2004), Roux (2009), and Layton and McKenna (2015) argue that the tutor function should be provided with more recognition, because tutors can fulfil a valuable task in scaffolding learning in ways that academics wouldn't be otherwise able to. Clarence (2016) not only advocates for ongoing tutor training, but also suggests that it needs to be "in-depth professional Academic Development training which further develops them to realise their role" in student learning and success in the university (2016: 39). The training that was offered by those involved in tutorials was both generic and short-term, comprising one-day or "three-hour training" (Bongiwe). Significantly, it took place separately from the discussion about the domain knowledge that the tutors would be scaffolding.

As Bongiwe indicates, there is not much opportunity to focus on the integration of tutorial activities within the curriculum:

*... So, I'll do generic training like how to be an effective tutor, do's and don'ts, etcetera. And it ends there, I think that's what I'm saying. I don't really have a formal relationship [with the departments where the tutoring happens] (Bongiwe).*

Pumlani noted the benefits to the tutors themselves in their acquisition of soft skills:

*A tutor today said ukuthi [that], "When I joined [name of university], I was a shy person, but through ... because of this engagement okanye, being part of the programme, my presentation skills, my communication skills, my, my tech skills improved and my confidence was built"... so that to me is a resource in the terms of social capital. So that student is able to go out and say and stand out there because she was part of the programme that gave her resources, in this case, to leave or to a fully fleshed balance, to graduate.*

The participants did not discuss the extent to which tutor training enabled the tutors to create spaces for epistemological access. They were not able to answer questions about the content of the tutorials or how the tutors learned how to offer tutorials in ways that did indeed scaffold epistemological access to domain knowledge. Rather, because they only worked with the tutors, and not the mainstream lecturers whose classes the tutorials accompanied, and because they only worked with the tutors at the time of initial training, it seems that tutor training was largely conceptualised as being a student development opportunity for tutors.

*But also, imhlambi singatsho ukuthi ...(maybe we can say) in terms of the programme, we're looking at a student who will not only have confidence, but also who is given i-skills (the skills). Where future-ready work skills, employability skills and ezinye izinto ezinoba ...(and other things that could be) entrepreneurs ... I think event planning, planning a project management, umm, could also be one of those things, because the number of students have started projects based on that have helped their families and communities based on, interacted with communities outside [name of university] from the programme and the resource. (Pumlani)*

*But the main thing of student development is to capacitate students [as tutors] so that when they leave university they leave as all-rounded individuals for social, academic ... make them employable, you know, that's it. (Bongiwe)*

When I pressed directly as to the purpose and structure of the actual tutorials, Pumlanani indicated that the tutors needed to focus on the course content outside of the tutor training. His response seems to suggest that his role was to offer his generic tutor training, which focused on the tutors' skills, and he implied that it is the role of a tutor to ensure disciplinary learning takes place in the tutorial. He did, however, go on to say that in many cases, the key benefit of tutorials is that students could engage with someone who would use their language in the tutorial space, rather than English, "*and that for a student is very beneficial*", he said. He also argued that because tutors are senior students, they would have an understanding of the students' contexts and could thus be "*a mentor, a brother, someone, a coach to send someone that can confide with, not necessarily on the academic aspect, but also in life in general*". It would seem that the tutorials thus had an important role to play in supporting students in navigating university demands.

*... that student [tutor] is, is able to give an overview of what a university life is all about and ... he goes beyond being a tutor. He goes beyond being a supporter, but just somebody who can say "For this, you can go there. For this, you can go there" njalo-njalo [and so on]. So for this student who is new, a first-year student, for an example, that student benefits a lot, and that particular tutor becomes a resources to that person, umm, that student. And then in terms kengoku [of] i-retention and graduates, umm, rates and then you see students coming out of the system feeling ...ayithi ke ayinazo [it does not say there are no] ii-mistakes or challenges, that's the reality. (Pumlanani)*

Bongiwe shared her understanding that tutorials were to make life easier for the students by saying:

*Basically to develop the tutors, for example to make them understand their role: to make life easier for i-students (the students), ... so I teach them i-skills (the skills) nhee, so that when they do their tutor training, they're able to implement it in a way that would make - make it easier for them [the student tutors], but also make it easier for the student.*

*... when I speak to "holistic", I speak to that, I try to emphasise to them that, you know, it's not just trying to earn money, but this is really just a bit a chance for them just to see how when they employed, how they are going to be as employees essentially. (Bongiwe)*

There was no data about the tutorials as specific teaching and learning spaces that could contribute towards students' epistemological access, although the literature suggests that well-planned and implemented tutorials can be a bridge between what students do in class with the lecturer and what they are expected to do in relation to grappling with their study materials, and can thus be a key component of knowledge building (Ashwin, 2006; Layton & McKenna, 2015).

Therefore, this section shows how 'the people', that is, my participants, used their Agency to draw from various Structural and Cultural interactions to conceptualise their Student Development Programmes, but their approaches absented knowledge, and the interventions were generic and ad hoc, and offered outside of the mainstream curriculum. This allowed a Situational Logic of protectionism, as the status quo of the mainstream curriculum was able to continue unchanged.

## 6.5 Academic Development conceptualised outside of the mainstream curriculum

In keeping with the finding above, participants seemed to believe that student development was the responsibility of Academic Development centres and practitioners. Student development was repeatedly discussed as something that they, as Academic Development practitioners, undertook (rather than as being the

responsibility of academics in mainstream departments). Furthermore, student development was seen to be something to be attended to by them outside of the mainstream classroom. Participants did not consider that, inasmuch as students navigate their lives inside and outside of the classroom, solutions to their success need multiple social interactions in and out of the university, and not just from Academic Developers. As I have shown, understandings of student development as 'holistic' were understood by participants as the student having a life within and beyond the classroom, rather than seeing the university as part of a holistic system. Participants seemed committed and eager to take on the responsibility of student success as a challenge they could accomplish alone. Participants even went to the extent of indicating that commitment to supporting the student was what made for a 'good' Academic Developer. Participants drew from this idea that Academic Development is outside the mainstream curriculum in ways which complement the Culture of the university. They continued to draw from various deficit understandings that constructed Black students as their disadvantaged backgrounds, which enabled the implementation of short-term, generic responses focused on gaps in students' skill sets.

*...students who are unable to persist, but there's a there's theory by Professor Michael [Vincent] Tinto. It's a persistent theory. That students tend to, uh...drop out of the system due to a number of challenges...Uh, particularly in the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions, and so through these programmes, huh, that seek to support uh, student success. (Likho)*

*...a student who is not socially integrated at the university, umm, is highly likely to drop out. (Mandisa)*

A rare example of a student development initiative including people beyond Academic Developers and the students themselves was the establishment at one institution of a student development committee that brought together faculty HoDs, the university's registrar, finance, the SRC, student affairs, the library, and the Centre for Teaching and Learning to map out a full understanding on how students navigated their lives in university. The participant who established this committee explained it as follows:

*What I've picked up is that we somehow understand what's student development based on where we are or what we are doing based on the fact that I'm focusing, I'm doing AA [academic advising] work, I'm doing writing centre coordination work, so that understanding is limited to my academic literacy understanding and that is my understanding that the deficiencies attached to a student based on academic literacies and then as an Academic Advisor, I'm going to look at issues of lack of planning and all that is my cocoon. (Pumlani)*

Pumlani observed that many of them in the university understood student development from their own 'cocoon'. This participant was concerned about everyone's understanding of student development, which he implied was isolated both internally (in his department) and externally (in other departments) in the university:

*... what I've picked up is that you have lecturers who understand student success, or other students are post-development or support as academic excellence, that's where they end, that's the level of understanding of student development. (Pumlani)*

The isolation of Academic Development work from the mainstream curriculum and the day-to-day running of the university is the norm across South African universities (Volbrecht & Boughey, 2004). The data showed many examples where participants were disconnected from the community of the university, and understood student development based on what they offered to students in their context, thus being isolated from the entire university. Pumlani showed a minority view when he argued: *"What we should be working towards is an integrated model"*. Much of their isolation and individualistic work culture was also visible in how they implemented their work, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

*You have your student affairs colleagues who understand student development of student support as focusing on social aspects of students, and that is outside the classroom. So, for you to work very closely with them, you must understand that this student is hungry. The student needs residence, the student is going through this. So that is the length of the student is going through a lot, so, so you*

*need to understand, so once you are in that work closely with those colleagues, you understand where they're coming from in terms of their initiatives and their level of understanding of what student development is all about. Student Representative Council student [they understand] student development of student success is about seeing our students ... they need NSFAS, and they need to make sure that they are available resources and they are exposed to they know the services, so that is student voice they want to see around. And then you come to [name of Academic Development centre], whereby we are focusing on student Academic Development for us here ... we focus on academic aspects. (Pumlani)*

The purpose and role of this multi-disciplinary student committee, formulated at this university, was developed to address students' challenges collectively. Such a space allowed them to develop a collective understanding of the student challenges and needs that would be reported to the university management. Pumlani felt that such a collective understanding was necessary, as he believed that none of the staff members understood how students intersected their lives while in university through the separate projects and programmes they each offered to the students.

*When will you find out that their level of understanding of child development is limited to their own when they get into the system. Once they apply their student number, it ends there. There's nothing, there's no cognition. So, you see these fragmented understandings. They really, really, really become a challenge. (Pumlani)*

He thus used his Agency to form a committee that consisted of various stakeholders of the university to meet and get to know the student experience from a shared perspective. Such a committee allowed them to develop what they referred to as a 'holistic' student development approach. From what we have seen modelled by Pumlani, he was using his spheres of influence as a Social Actor to bring together others to develop Corporate Agency. He was now able to influence some changes by establishing a committee on student development and influencing others to join his personal project (Archer, 2000), which was focused on his specific interpretation of 'holistic' student development. While it seems that, within this collective, they drew on

the student deficit and disadvantaged background discourse that absented the university as a social structure, this initiative did at least bring together various stakeholders, something that was not evident elsewhere in the data.

Throughout the data, participants did not seem aware of the deficit notions by which they were constructing students in the academy. There was also a strong belief that those working in Academic Development were responsible for providing the additional support seen as key to student success, and that this was unrelated to what happened in students' interactions with their lecturers or with their target knowledge. In the next chapter, we will see that these UCDG programmes had to be endorsed by the entire university up to the level of the DVC, but the data indicates that the student development initiatives were understood to be the responsibility of Academic Developers alone.

Therefore, the data shows the extent to which 'the people' understood their work both in isolation from others (such as mainstream academics) and in isolation from the conditioning powers of 'the parts', thus constraining the implementation of student development from a holistic approach within the university.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This chapter builds on the previous chapter, in which I discussed discursive constructions that participants held about the nature of students and showed how participants understood the nature of student development. Participants drew on their various emergent powers to conceptualise and implement generic and ad hoc programmes that failed to consider the student as a social being or the university as a social structure. These interventions sought to 'fix' Black students' challenges through the implementation of skill sets that were generally based on common-sense understandings of 'the student problem'. Where theory was drawn on in the conceptualisation of some of these Student Development Programmes – like Tinto's Persistence Theory – the data shows that it was often misappropriated to complement the dominant deficit discourses about Black students in higher

education. The concepts of 'knowledge' and 'learning' were often absent in these Student Development Programmes, and all of them were implemented outside of the curriculum.

This chapter has shown that the events that manifested in UCDG-funded student development emerged from the interplay of many causal mechanisms. These events play out in the social world in ways that are complex. The history of higher education and the nature of Academic Development in South Africa, as discussed in T1, shaped how 'the people' conceptualised and implemented Student Development Programmes using the UCDG.

## Chapter 7

### T2–T3

## The Implementation of UCDG Student Development Programmes

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I continue from where Chapters Five and Six left off, where I show how the nature of Academic Development as a field in South Africa conditioned participants to conceptualise and implement UCDG Student Development Programmes in particular ways. Chapter Five showed that the Structural conditions of Black students who enrol at HBUs were generally understood as the full account of who they are. This explanation for students' challenges within the university allowed protection of the status quo because it absented a focus on systemic realities of South Africa, such as poverty, lack of access to resources, and inadequate schooling. Such systemic conditions – that emerged from colonisation and apartheid, and then continuously were shaped by neoliberalism – were neglected by discourses focused on the individual attributes of students. Chapter Six then showed how the Structural and Cultural conditions led to conceptualising generic, add-on and ad hoc UCDG Student Development Programmes.

Chapters Five and Six showed that various discourses which emerged from powerful mechanisms conditioned 'the people' to conceptualise students on a basis of their socio-economic backgrounds and inherent traits. Such an understanding of students' challenges in higher education – being understood as their socio-economic backgrounds and inherent traits – led 'the people' to conceptualise Student Development Programmes focused on remedying deficits.

To understand the interplay of Structural, Cultural and Agential mechanisms that enabled or constrained 'the people', this chapter looks at some of the mechanisms pertaining to the UCDG itself, and the nature of the university sectors that were

powerful in enabling and constraining some people to implement UCDG Student Development Programmes in their institutions.

## 7.2 Conceptions of the UCDG that drew from or ignored DHET documents

The purpose of the UCDG is stated in the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP (DHET, 2018: 7) as:

a steering mechanism used to steer the higher education system in the direction of good practice and ongoing capacity development, and towards achieving specific objectives in its areas of focus.

Section One of the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP (2018: 7) states that:

The UCDG is meant to be catalytic, as much as this is possible in a constrained fiscal environment. It is intended to provide the resources that enable universities to take some risks and embark on activities that innovate, that test, that seed, with the intention that those activities that prove their worth in terms of the positive impact they have on university functioning, and the rewards they bring in terms of enhanced performance are taken up as a regular part of the functioning of the university, funded through regular block grant funds rather than earmarked funding sources.

The document thus encourages universities to experiment and establish what might work best in their context. The idea that the UCDG is a 'catalytic' means of working out what is needed within the specific university was thus clearly stated from the start. The idea that the UCDG initiatives that worked should eventually be funded through the block grant as part of the normal running of the institution was thus also explicitly stated in the documents, but this was never referred to in my participant data. Neither the participant interviews nor the project proposals provided any indication that these were a space for 'trying out' initiatives destined to become centrally funded once found

to be successful. That these initiatives were never intended to be long-term, small-scale initiatives was also stated in the DHET documents:

The UCDG is meant to be transformational. It should assist to support initiatives where relatively rapid and large-scale change is needed. (DHET, 2018 and 2020)

Again, this data quote indicated that the focus was on systemic change, and that the issue of transformation discussed in Chapter Four was meant to be central to the overarching UCDG agenda.

The main purpose of the UCDG is to provide a development resource that contributes to addressing transformation imperatives in the university to enable: High levels of success for undergraduate and postgraduate students ... the review and renewal of curricula to enable responsiveness to transformation imperatives in higher education. (DHET, 2018 and 2020)

However, nowhere in the interview data was there deliberation of these larger goals of the UCDG. The idea that the UCDG allowed for innovations, with a view to establishing which initiatives would have the most positive impact before these are part of the activities funded by the block grant, such as outlined below, was also absent in my interview data.

... to provide the resources that enable universities to take some risks and embark on activities that innovate, that test, that seed, with the intention that those activities that prove their worth in terms of the positive impact they have on university functioning, and the rewards they bring in terms of enhanced performance are taken up as a regular part of the functioning of the university (DHET, 2018: 7).

These larger discourses constructing the purposes outlined in the ministerial statement on the implementation of the UCDP do not seem to have shaped the implementation of UCDG-funded initiatives at all.

Reference to the Ministerial document by the participants was only about its use in funding the specific example initiatives mentioned in the document. The discourse of efficiency, identified in Chapter Five, seems to have allowed for a partial engagement with the DHET documentation, whereby the understanding was that student development needed to enhance throughput and retention. The issues of throughput and retention were certainly evident in the DHET documentation, but were framed more generally by a discourse of systemic transformation. This discourse of systemic transformation was not drawn upon by the participants in their conceptualisation and implementation of student development.

While the participants reflected on their determination to address low throughput rates and high dropout rates, and this was stressed by the participants as the key goal of the funding, I did not identify efforts to determine the causal mechanisms of low throughput rates and high dropout rates at these HBUs for the purpose of conceptualising and implementing Student Development Programmes. Instead, and in keeping with the findings of Moyo (2018) and Moyo et al. (2022), participants drew on dominant discourses of student development that were 'common sense' in nature, rather than informed by research. In cases where the participants did attempt to draw from research or existing approaches and frameworks, they did so incoherently or in appropriated ways that complemented the dominant discourses of the student as requiring remediation, as shown in the previous chapter.

The introductory pages of the UCDG documentation offered alternative understandings of the UCDG as a lever for change, and potentially offered alternative understandings of student development. The Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP (DHET, 2018: 3) also states that:

The UCDP will enable an integrated and holistic approach to student development, staff development, programme development and curriculum development in the university sector, partly supported by the UCDG, but supported by other DHET and institutional resources as well. It is essential that

resources across the system are drawn on in a coordinated fashion to address the transformation challenges that confront the system.

However, nowhere in the data did participants show an understanding of a holistic approach requiring integration of student, staff, programme and curriculum development. Their focus was only on the student, as I have shown in Chapters Five and Six. In the few cases where they spoke about staff, curriculum and programme development, these were understood as isolated projects, usually carried out by separate groups of people. This silo approach to the use of the UCDG was no doubt enabled by the way that the funds were allocated for specific projects. Despite reference in the UCDG documentation to such projects being 'innovative' and addressing 'system-level problems', the actual funding was allocated to projects that had to be identified as being either staff or student or curriculum or research development. The Structural arrangements of the funding thus constrained the potential for the funding to be used in ways that might enable system-wide transformation.

*...So, if there's an intervention that you want to intervene, you can send your proposal, and then you must be along these lines: it needs to be academic staff development or it needs to be curriculum or student development. (Likho)*

This challenge was raised by Babalwa, who was an academic teaching students with disabilities. She shared how the university, for a very long time, did not include students with disability in their conceptualisation and implementation of student development projects, leaving these students uncatered for because of the silence of their needs from the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP.

*... the Disability also should have a share in the grant ... So it's only this year that it is there written in black and white that Disability Awareness campaigns and workshops should be done in the university, and it is located funds for that.*

On the issue of disability, Jabu also indicated that his university did not cater for students with disabilities at all, but this was a new area of awareness they were starting to embark on at their university.

*...then student assistive and the technologies for disabilities. Now, in the institution, we don't have a disability unit, you know, as other institutions. So what we found over the years is that we do have students with disabilities, like those with wheelchairs, those with other ones, for instance, can't write fast, and eyesight is a problem. So, because we didn't have, you know, such a unit, so that means there was not much priority, you know, that was given to those type of students. But in terms of what we're trying to do now is to develop a lab, you know, for those particular students, where they could have or where we could deploy all these various, you know, assistive and learning technologists for them.*

It seems that because the UCDG funding was allocated along separate lines for separate projects, this constrained its potential to bring about equity for all. Those who were involved in the implementation of the UCDG only focused on their interests in student development (or staff or curriculum development), neglecting those that were outside their interests. Such a silo view failed to reflect on a systemic notion of inclusion and social justice and so neglected students with disabilities.

Section Four of the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP (DHET, 2018: 10 and 2020: 19) states its view on student development as follows:

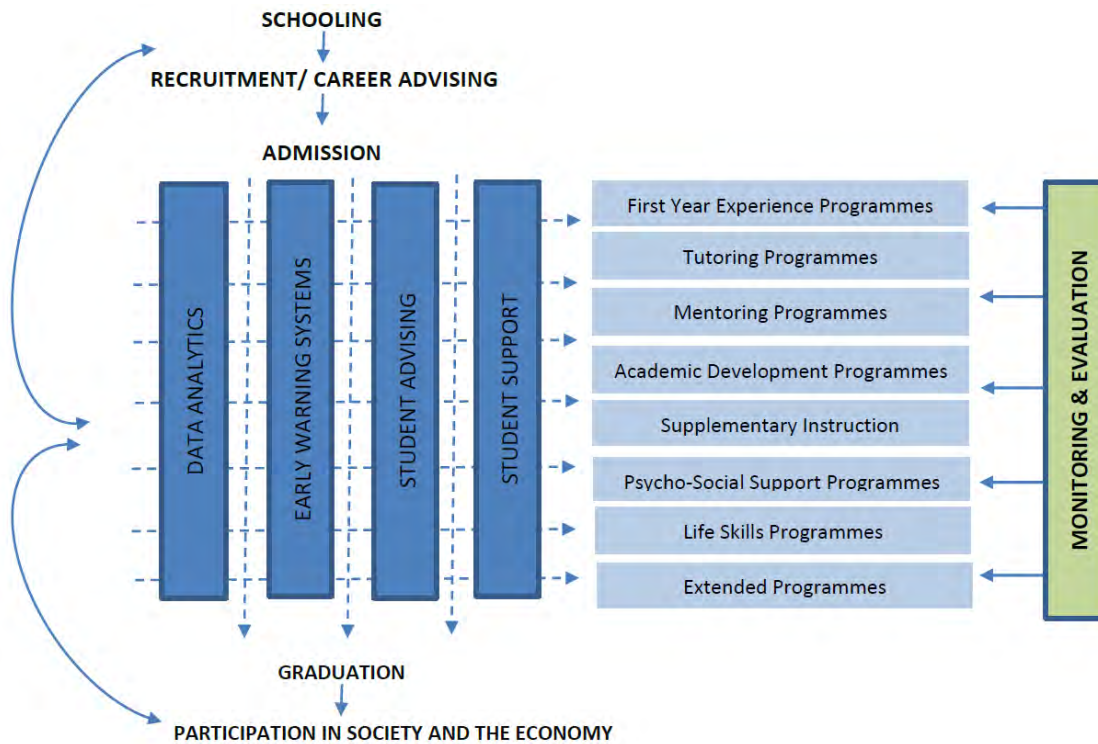
... student development is understood to encompass activities and initiatives that provide teaching and learning focused academic, life skills, and psycho-social support to undergraduate and postgraduate students with the aim of enhancing their chances of success in their university studies, understanding that student success is also heavily dependent on addressing the life/logistic challenges that students face.

The UCDP seeks to support a structured approach to student development that relies on a number of pillars to be in place, the last of which is the range of student support initiatives that are possible.

Despite the earlier data quotes evidencing an understanding that UCDG funding could enable major transformative initiatives, the above quotes seem to draw from a similar understanding of 'holistic' as being about all aspects of the students' lives rather than about the higher education system as a whole, as was seen in the participant data discussed in Chapter Five. It is beyond doubt that, as the DHET document indicates, a student's life in higher education is influenced by many other mechanisms, and the aim should be to support students throughout their higher education journey(s). Students are not only intellectual beings at the university to learn, but they are also social beings, and holistic support indeed entails understanding their whole lives and striving to support all aspects of this. However, as discussed in Chapter Five, a holistic approach that focuses only on the student is an example of upward conflation, because it assumes that if the student receives developmental opportunities, their problems will be addressed. The mechanisms conditioning low retention and throughput are thus seen to be inherent in the student. Systemic poverty, institutional history, culture, disciplinary norms and values, and other mechanisms are all hidden from view.

The earlier focus on transformative and integrated UCDG initiatives, evident in the opening pages of the document, seems to fall somewhat away in the latter part of the UCDG documentation, which addresses student, staff and curriculum development as three sets of initiatives to be funded separately. The notion that holistic is only about all aspects of the student (and not anything to do with staff or curriculum development) is also evident in the latter part of the UCDG documentation.

In particular, the document introduces what it refers to as a "structured approach to student development" in the diagram which follows:



Source: Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP (2018: 10 and 2020: 19).

Figure 10: UCDG Diagram of Student Development

This diagram<sup>45</sup> outlines the student's journey from schooling right through graduation from university and participating in society and the economy. In my understanding, it seems to suggest that student development begins when the student is at school (basic schooling). Career advising and recruitment of learners take place before admission commences. After students are admitted, four main interventions are given as what are presumably examples of the interventions that are needed. The diagram itself is not explained, so it is an assumption that these are examples of interventions, though all my participants referred only to these four and seemed under the impression that these were the four required interventions and that alternatives were not permitted.

<sup>45</sup> This is my own explanation of the diagram based on sessions with the DHET, where we had it explained to us. The Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP does not explain this diagram beyond simply providing the illustration (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018); (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020).

*They dictate that your projects have to be in line with the objectives and the purpose of the UCDG, or else I don't think they will fund you. So, what you are doing is what is stipulated and outlined in terms of the possible projects, in terms of the UCDG policy framework, umm, so everything that we do is within that particular framework, all the projects that are approved by DHET in our UCDG programmes are within that framework. (Sifiso)*

The first of the four support interventions in the diagram is 'data analytics'. It is not clear from the document how data analytics is to be understood or used. As was shown in the previous chapter, theorised understandings of data collection and analytics were absent. Foster and Francis (2020) raise a concern that data analytics needs to be associated with qualitative data and with research on learning for this to be helpful. This was not the case with how my participants reported on their use of data analytics, which seemed rather to be a superficial drawing on the term found in the UCDG documents to simply mean 'collect student data'. De Freitas et al. (2015) argue that data analytics in higher education has emerged as a field because so much data is available online to track trends in student behaviour. This, they say, is because most higher education materials are now online, and so it is possible to see what students spend their time on, what they ignore, what they battle with and so on – and to then adapt the course content, teaching and assessment accordingly. In the absence of clarity in the UCDG documents as to what 'data analytics' means, participants in this study used this term to refer to the collection of student information through surveys that students were expected to complete in their first weeks at university.

Possibly, this lack of detail in the UCDG documents as to how the term 'data analytics' is to be interpreted is a positive indication that institutions are expected to use their institutional autonomy to make sense of these examples of student development and implement this in ways aligned to the context and academic project of their specific university. But, as discussed in Chapters One and Four, historically Black universities had a long history of state micro-management and control during the apartheid era,

which arguably positioned them to be compliant in their relationship with DHET (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Strehl et al., 2007; Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

Given that the data analytics is connected to the example of intervention in the diagram, Early Warning Signals, it is assumed that the data analytics should enable the identification of at-risk students, as shown in Chapters Five and Six. The data from participants made it clear that the risks were understood to be vested in the students who needed additional support. There was evidence from my participants to suggest that the data analytics and early warning systems would be used to flag problematic courses, teaching, or assessment.

The next two examples in the diagram are 'student advising' and 'student support', both of which were discussed in some detail in the previous chapter. What is crucial to note is that the eight interventions listed in this diagram were all evidenced in the data from the participants and the data from the DHET reports, and no other kinds of intervention were implemented. It is not clear whether DHET intended this list of eight interventions to be the full spectrum of student development initiatives that could be funded, or whether these were simply offered as examples, but it was clear that my participants interpreted this as the complete list.

Sadly, the diagram itself seems to understand the student development journey in isolation from the curriculum, staff development and programme renewal, as those aspects of the university context are not included. It was very evident across the data that the structure of the funding, with different streams for staff, student and curriculum development projects, combined with the selective reading of the document with the focus on the diagram rather than the initial deliberation about the purpose of the grant, was complementary to how Academic Development had largely been framed as 'support' in T1. When Vilakazi and Tema argued back in 1985 that Academic Development allowed the universities to remain untransformed, they were pointing to a set of conditions that seem to have remained relevant in my study data forty years later.

This is arguably an example of a Contradictory Situational Logic (as discussed in Chapter Two), whereby the earlier segments of the UCDG documentation seem to call for an integrated approach and for one that is transformational, but this was largely contradictory to the status quo and so was 'eliminated'. There was simply no reference to these understandings in the data. The latter diagram in the document and how the funding was allocated according to separate projects was, however, complementary to the status quo and the dominant discourses of the 'student problem', and so these were drawn upon to develop fairly superficial approaches to student development.

### 7.3 Superficial and compliance interpretations

The extent to which the Ministerial Statement on the implementation of the UCDP (DHET, 2018 and 2020) shaped the student development interventions was evident across the data; not only were the interventions only those listed in the diagram, but also many of the keywords in the document were repeatedly used in the interviews, too. The words 'holistic', 'student success', 'data analytics' and 'framework' were repeatedly used by all the participants, even though, as shown in Chapter Six, participants did not fully engage with these words and what they might mean for their context. Here are a few examples of phrases and words taken from the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP, which were frequently used by my participants:

*Staff Development Frameworks for the UCDP ...*

*A Framework for Enhancing ...*

*A holistic student development approach would involve advising students on ...*

*A holistic student development framework for the UCDP ...*

*Data analytics draws from data on students before they enter the system ...*

*Data analytics enables the development of early warning systems that allow early identification of students who may require specific kinds of support to enable success.*

In one example, a university developed a document outlining all aspects of student development. It was clearly evident that their understanding of their students' journey in university was drawn from the Diagram on the UCDP Structured and Integrated approach to improving student development in the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP (DHET, 2018 & 2020).

Their document sets out the student journey and how students are supported in a 'holistic and integrated' manner. This university seemed to have a good understanding of what constitutes holistic and integrated student development systems on this diagram. It shows many university parts that are integrated into student development. The university understood that students need support at six different phases in their journey to higher education: preparation, connection, entry, progression, completion and employment phases.

At each phase, this institution shows that there is a clear distinction between the roles of players who are responsible for assisting students in achieving their academic and personal goals while at university in an integrated manner. There was a chain of command where various sets of interventions were interrelated. To ensure that staff are informed about the student's journey, six deliverables were sought to identify the students' challenges at each phase.

However, despite this detailed approach, the student development initiatives remained focused only on attending to the student, separately from the staff, the curriculum and the university as a Structure. For example, during the Entry phase, Academic Advisors, Quality Assurance Officers and Teaching Development Specialists were from the outset expected to interview and workshop "student identified areas that lead to non-performance". Referrals to Teaching Development Specialists were made when these "non-performances have pedagogical or didactic implications". Thereafter, Teaching Development Specialists were expected to increase "awareness of the student exclusion policy by monitoring and evaluating the construction and use of learner

guides". Tracking and Monitoring Specialists collaborate with Academic Advisors and Academic Development coordinators in identifying at-risk students as part of the first test intervention.

At every step, any problems identified are seen to be vested in the student, and those staff who were responsible for supporting the student in addressing these problems were not academics and so would not have an understanding of the disciplinary expectations placed on the student.

This institution missed an opportunity where Academic Advisors, as part of their deliverables, could, for example, have gathered data from students to get feedback on the challenges they experienced. Teaching Development Specialists could have used the responses from students in discussion with lecturers to explore how teaching, learning, and assessment took place in the classroom and what changes could possibly be made there. It was evident from the data that Teaching Development Specialists, Academic Advisors, and Quality Assurance Officers were all expected to work with the students in this case, enabling the protection of the status quo.

Therefore, the superficial and compliance-driven approach to student development, drawing in part from the Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP, led to contradictory conceptions of what constituted student development. It is, however, noteworthy that the tri-annual ministerial statements have been constantly improved upon each release, as some ideas about what the funding seeks to achieve have been gradually changed or made much clearer. Despite these edits to and elaborations on the document, it is interesting to see that participants were all still drawing from the much older versions of the Ministerial Statement.

#### 7.4 Silos and competition

The superficial, compliance-driven approach to student development shown above, and the lack of criticality and coherence in conceptualising student development projects described in Chapter Six, led to reduced potential for these initiatives to bring about institutional change. This was exacerbated by how these projects were largely

conceptualised as discrete projects. Mandisa, for instance, raised the issue of not being able to collaborate with others in the university due to a lack of role clarification within the university's UCDG plan:

*... the other issue that makes collaboration so hard is that, firstly, people don't understand their roles in the partnership, so that needs to be clarified so that everybody knows, this is what, you know, these are the boundaries, these are the responsibilities and roles that my department should be playing on its own.*

She also highlighted that the UCDG plan in their university had clashes and duplications that were not always clarified, thus making people, at times, feel as if they were competing with one another.

*But there are also those that we intersect on, so if that intersectionality is not clarified, then that's where I think we have been experiencing a lot of problems because people, instead of collaborating, start competing.*

Babalwa, on the other hand, showed how it was difficult for students with disabilities to be included in the UCDG student development projects because they were not mentioned in black and white in the institutional plans, thus seeing disability as a separate initiative from the holistic development of students.

*Yes, I'm saying it's only been this year that it has been in black and white and that UCDG document that the disability also should have a share in the grant, previously it wasn't there whenever we wanted to conduct whatever, if it you know, things that workshops that relates to academic stuff, you would go around how to talk to the owners of the current UCDG and ask them to fund you, so if you want to do awareness campaigns on student development you would have to go to the project manager ... to ask them to give you money to allow you to conduct that awareness campaign.*

The lack of collaboration and a sense of competition was evident across much of the data. For instance, Bongiwe shared her frustrations about an FYE programme that she indicated she knew nothing about but was tasked to run urgently, as there was over ZAR700,000 worth of funding that needed to be spent within that year.

*I have recently started with this FYE, and you know there's so much money, FYE, but you find that there's a very little capacitation or little activities that are done for students. And it's so sad, it's really sad because, yho, it's so difficult to even get buy-in from the faculties ... Two weeks back is because when I was told, "OK, you gonna do this thing", then we called like a workshop. We called all the Deans or representatives from each of the faculties to come - it's just to try and get buy-in and explain ... And then you saw people are doing their own little FYE things in their own in their departments, you know, unnecessarily through the UCDG fund but through their own initiatives. So it's not, but yet when you see other institutions like your Stellenbosch, UCTs and CPUTs, it's a big thing, student development, it's a big it's a big thing, it's got its own unit, yet you find [at my university], I'm like, who am I as a one person to be told that, with no help, no administrator, nothing, hit up this FYE thing for all the faculties?*

In the extracts above, she shares how the FYE intervention was implemented in a rush when it was established that funds needed to be spent. Bongiwe illustrates the extent to which this is seen as an add-on initiative, separate from the mainstream academics who seem to have had little knowledge of the programme, and she bemoans the duplication between this project and similar ones run in different academic departments.

Instead of working together, it seems that departments often saw their UCDG-funded projects as being in competition with each other, possibly enabled by a general institutional Culture of hierarchy and competition.

*So now because we trying to boost up this thing through the UCDG funding and trying to get everyone all the parties involved and also we all speak the same*

*language so to benefit the students essentially it now becomes a “No, this is my thing, I don't want you to take it, it's mine, it's not yours and we've been doing this thing” (Bongiwe).*

In a similar example in the extract below, Aya details how there was a duplication of programmes between Academic Developers and Student Counsellors.

*The problem here, it is assumed that we don't want to work with student counsellors, of which that is not, well, I personally don't mind working with people. I don't know about other people. Now ... what happens is that – I'm going to make an example with the [Name of programme]. I would write a management report and say I am planning on doing a career expo. The Student Counselling Unit will jump in and say career expos are their mandate, they are responsible for them, and then I am forced to compromise and change the wording of my management report, but still, it would not be approved. I don't know what is going on here, seriously.*

It was clear from responses to my follow-up questions that there were few opportunities for those who had UCDG-funded projects to meet together and reflect on how they could collaborate for greater impact. Mandisa, who is at the same institution as Aya, indicated that the lack of collaboration was because of “*individual attitudes and personal interests*”. She suggested that such individualism was part of “*the institutional Culture*”:

*Another issue is just what I want to call the institutional Culture and history, in the attitudes that people bring, you know, umm, to the work environment. There are staff members who will come with the attitude of, you know, thinking about “What's in it for me?” So it's not about the public good, you know, it's about their own issues about their own private good, if I can put it. ... I think people have personal interest ... because and again these are just my opinions and my observations.. umm they are, the people see the job as a way of creating wealth for themselves ... and they're not service oriented.*

The scarcity of funding, especially when the amounts are reduced due to the lack of implementation of projects the previous year, was seen to exacerbate a pre-existing Culture of silos and competition.

*[Funding] has been reduced this year. And now that it's reduced, there are a lot of us, we have student counsellors and we also have Academic Advisors, tutor coordinators ... and the other practitioners..., we are fighting for the same nantsika [thing]. (Aya)*

However, despite this competition for funds, Aya indicates that she feels she was unable to implement much by way of student development initiatives:

*Personally, for mna [me], this year. If you can sit me down and ask me, what did I do? I did nothing because everything I think of never really materialised so-nje, yho ha-a [sign of frustration and despair]. (Aya)*

In the end, the stress surrounding the competition for UCDG funds and the challenges in managing such initiatives led Aya to withdraw from such projects entirely:

*... activities that don't need funding to happen successfully – they are successful. I am trying to say that we avoid using the UCDG project funding because everything that has to do with it is conflict.*

Likho tried from the start to get buy-in from faculty members as he saw this as central to the success of such initiatives, but he also reported problems in this regard:

*... issue of not getting full support from everyone, ... what I have noticed, which then is everyone is not pulling in the same direction, it tends to delay the speed of the movement*

Similarly to the concerns expressed by Bongiwe and Mandisa earlier, the lack of collaboration and competing interests affected the implementation of Likho's UCDG-funded programme too.

*I've noticed that sometimes, not necessarily resistant, resistance in a true sense, just that maybe one takes longer to accept what is coming or new.*

Likho raised another issue, which was that for his programme, lecturers who were allocated to mentor students refused to participate without getting additional payment:

*Some would want an extra pay for being coaches ... whereas the idea is to include this programme as part of their work, you know ... Others may view it, that "No, this, it's an additional responsibility and it may require an additional compensation", ... so you have to convince ... you need to show them what benefits are they going to, derive from the project because if I'm a lecturer for example and I become a coach that means there's an additional skill that I'm going to acquire...*

It seemed that the coordination of the programme outside of the faculty conditioned lecturers to understand this as an external project which fell outside of their employment responsibilities. Conversely, Adams, (2024) argues that academics with fragmented identities struggle to integrate teaching, learning and research. Without a strong, coherent academic identity, it was perhaps a challenge for these lecturers to see this mentoring role as fundamental to their work.

Moyo (2018) also identified that the implementation of the UCDG Student Development Programmes externally from faculties and academic departments meant these were not seen as being relevant to them. Pumlanani pointed out that because decisions about the university often took place in discussions between managers, it was perhaps unsurprising that those involved in Academic Development would feel dislocated from what academic departments and faculties did:

*But now ... as a manager and sitting there in campus management committees, you are able to hear what Deans and support staff, colleagues or managers are saying, and you are able to link, "What if we can do it this way?" (Pumlani)*

By virtue of his position as a member of institutional management, that is, as a Social Actor, it was easier for Pumlani to establish a student development committee which would coordinate all student development initiatives on his campus.

*... hence the existence of that Student Success Committee, which coordinates everything, and I'm the chairperson of and I'm able to understand that this is what we should have done, and these are the models that we could have introduced.*

Pumlani explained that his committee comprised all the stakeholders who worked with students' development on campus. It was in these meetings that they developed a shared understanding of student development.

*Where I'm sitting as the chairperson of the committee and ..., let me just paint a picture of what the committee is composed of. You have student affairs practitioners, you've got DLT practice, you've got HoDs, and you also have registrar colleagues, and you also have a colleague or colleagues from finance, and you also have an SRC representative in academic office.*

However, despite Pumlani using his powers as a Social Actor to coordinate these efforts, he pointed out that his influence only extended to the campus where he was a manager. This model of trying to ensure collaboration across those involved in any way with students did not extend to other campuses of the university. Such a statement suggests that there is indeed a hierarchical Culture in his university and that only people in powerful roles can encourage change, though he, too, could not influence everyone at the institutional level. He also acknowledged that his fostering of a collaborative space was only concerned with student development initiatives and that issues of staff and curriculum development were not considered.

*... it is not as easy as one would expect iveske, kuveske kwenzeke njee uyaqonda, [it just happens that, you know] you'll find out that there's resistance umm. So you are dealing with those barriers, Structural barriers because for [my campus], it has worked, it does not mean that it's going to work for [name of another campus], ... also ke [then], I think those leadership Cultures or dynamics, when you want to introduce something that is very unique and then you find out that i-resistance [resistance] is there not because the idea is not good, but because ... we're more territorial than developmental.*

Echoing the comments from many of the other participants, Pumlani raised concerns about the extent to which individuals implementing UCDG-funded projects saw themselves as competing with each other, leading to a lot of resistance, which often constrained primary Agents from changing the status quo. This was exacerbated by a lack of wider ownership of the UCDG project across the university.

## 7.5 The UCDG funding managed outside of the faculties

The data suggests that the lack of collaboration and the competition that took place among UCDP coordinators emerged in part because this grant was seen to sit outside of the faculties. Most participants understood the UCDP funding as funding 'belonging to' a Centre for Teaching and Learning, or an Institutional Planning Unit, or similar. It was not seen as a university-wide initiative housed in the faculties.

*I think at most other universities, there's a DVC responsible for coordinating a grant. At [name of university], all of our DHET grants are coordinated through institutional planning. (Marianne)*

*So it's those things because we had everything under control [when we were working with just the DVC] ... (Thandeka)*

While there was senior management oversight of the funding, and those with UCDG projects reported to the highest offices of the university (deputy vice-chancellors or

vice-chancellors), participants were very clear that this funding was managed externally from the faculties and academic departments and controlled within support units.

*And then all the other projects are sitting with Teaching and Learning [Centre] because they are the one that has Academic Developers ... And then it's Research [Division] and they only deal with research. (Thandeka)*

It seems that when the funding was more widely conceptualised in the previous iteration of the funding, the Teaching Development Grant, many of the projects were implemented within academic departments, albeit still in an uncoordinated way. But as the UCDG documentation became more specific about what could be funded by this grant, the projects were increasingly centralised into units outside of the faculties.

*... at first, it was [open to everyone] we had like 15 project leaders, but it didn't work, you know, and then when the second cycle came and then we sat and decided you know what? Let's just have control, you know, let's just try and have between Research and Teaching and Learning [Centre] to be project leaders ... If the faculties or one department come with a proposal and saying they need assistance this is what they want to do, and we see that it is valid [and] viable, then it gets assisted. (Thandeka)*

*It was more in the academic ... academic departments ... for you take it now to the support space - it's a new phenomenon and ... we had to sit down with the leadership from [Name of Centre] to sell this idea, because we noted that in the manual that was submitted by DHET there was a specific programme for funding which was, was student development. We found that there's professional development of academics, there's leadership, and development of the institution, but there was also student development funding. (Likho)*

In stark contrast to this, at Marianne's institution, she explained that to avoid a lack of communication and to ensure everyone is updated on the availability of the funding

and the university's strategic approach towards it, they initiated a fifteen-month consultative process before their submission to the DHET for approval.

*So, I think where that comes in, I'm not necessarily going to link it to teamwork, and I think at [University], our institutional operating plan is that the process of developing that plan is very consultative. So, it's the last, the last plan took us, ... it was during COVID, it did take longer than planned, but it took us about 15 months to develop the plan. We had 11 task teams, and we had lots of different engagements at different levels. So by the time that the plan is approved, it has involved colleagues from all the support units, all of the faculties, as well as student reps. And then it goes back to faculties, it goes through all the governance structures. We have different kinds of what we call leader engagements, all HoDs, Directors, so people who have a key responsibility in terms of implementing the plan. [They] are pulled into the process in different ways throughout that period of 15 months. So, what it means is that by the time the plan is approved, it's already well known and people participated in the process, and it's a process that we manage in different ways in different cycles. But the last one, for example, the task teams were not led by the University executive. The task teams were led by senior academics within the institution, and then we expected them to consult with executive leaders as well. But it means that it becomes a plan that's crafted by a collective. It's not a plan, you know, it's not like Moses coming down the mountain bringing the plan.*

Such a consultative process was also echoed by both Mandisa and Sifiso, as they also explained the lengthy consultative process at their institutions to ensure that all the stakeholders were well informed and fully participated in their respective institutions. Sifiso even went to the extent of highlighting how he knew everyone's projects due to the monthly monitoring and evaluation meetings they further held at his institution during the implementation phase of the approved projects to assess their overall progress. Later in this chapter, you will also see how this was necessitated by the strict monitoring, evaluation, and reporting culture that universities were compelled to have.

*So, for instance, in the [Centre for Teaching and Learning], umm, somebody or people that are responsible or in charge of the different units within the Directorate, umm, would be asked to represent their units, umm, in this team, this university-wide team that is involved in putting the proposal together. So, it would be a big, big team of people making sure that all the necessary entities in the university are represented. And it's up to the way I've seen it, I think it's up to each team to decide who they would put in that team to help write the concept for a particular portfolio, for instance, in the [name of centre]. Uh, project one, uh, what was project one was student experience. So, umm, people involved in student experience would normally be [Centre for Teaching & Learning] and Student Affairs [Office], so you make sure that those entities, umm, are represented in student experience and research. You would identify the different elements of research and make sure that all those areas are represented, and so on and so forth. And that's how the proposal is written: each team writes its section, and that is all put together and that forms the application. (Mandisa)*

*So I am part of that team, when you are part of that team you become familiar with almost everything because we have our monthly monitoring and evaluation meetings where we ask departments, uh, the progress, spending, their challenges so that, you know we don't have, you know, underspending or overspending and all these things even with the UCD report, the final document that goes to the head is written by us. (Sifiso)*

These were however, the minority, as most participants indicated that everyone worked in silos with little understanding of the range of student development initiatives, never mind their connection to staff and curriculum development. And, most significantly, even where Mandisa and Sifiso reported shared deliberations, there seems to have been a lack of deliberation with academics, though in Marianne's case, academics seem to have had input into the development of the UCDG proposals. And in all three cases, Mandisa, Sifiso and Marianne, in keeping with all the other participants, reported that the student development projects being proposed, developed and implemented were undertaken outside of the mainstream curriculum.

The nature of the UCDG funding – being project-based – seems to have conditioned the understanding that the ownership of the UCDG is external to most faculties in the university. The individual project nature of the grant conditioned people to see the UCDG as separate from the mainstream functioning of the university, and to see student development as being separate from staff and curriculum development. The framing of the UCDG in the opening pages of its documentation as offering universities an opportunity for innovative experimentation before taking on such initiatives as part of their block grant-funded activities was thus entirely absent.

## 7.6 Insufficiency and inefficiency of UCDG funding

The uncoordinated and individualistic project-based use of the UCDG was conditioned in part by how the funding was received from DHET and managed within the institutions. Many participants were frustrated by the insufficient allocations of the funding, claiming the funding was not enough to implement all the programmes they had conceptualised for students.

*What do departments and factors require versus what we are providing, and what you are getting through the UCDG, right? And then there was a huge gap, so they would require just for argument's sake. If you look at all the faculties that maybe they say seven million, and then maybe you get three million through the UCDG. So that shows you that it's not enough. (Sifiso)*

There was a strong sense that part of the problem was that HBUs did not have resources they could draw on beyond the UCDG funds, or the ability to start to implement UCDG initiatives while waiting for funds to be transferred.

*I would say the main challenges are resource limitations. This is because there is insufficient funding for programmes, facilities, and staff can limit the effectiveness of student development initiatives. (Makhadzi)*

*Other universities have got billions in reserves, they can always use their own resources to augment what they're getting. But for some projects that are entirely dependent on UCDG, like our academic advising, if you cut the funding ... But specifically for Black institutions and institutions which have no resources, like [name of the university], is obviously not enough. (Sifiso)*

What was evident was that many projects were entirely reliant on UCDG funding, despite some of them, such as tutoring, seemingly being central to the academic project.

*So, if the UCDG, if they were, the department would say actually, we are cutting everything, we don't have money anymore, everything would collapse. (Mandisa)*

*... what I did was to do an institutional-wide, you know, uh, sort of assessment in terms of what are the needs as far as tutorial support is concerned from departments. (Sifiso)*

In contrast to this, Marianne claimed that for sustainability reasons, due to the late budget allocations and administrative challenges that came with the use of the grant, her institution was careful not to use it for any activities central to the university's academic project.

*... we are paying staff from the grant, but we're very careful about that. So, staff that we pay from the grant are mostly staff who come in to assist with certain things and develop certain programmes or projects. I think in terms of sustainability, there are projects. If I take, for example, our postgraduate support programme, we've used the UCDG funding to develop a lot of material.*

It is very important to note that within the HBUs are differences in context, as discussed in Chapters One and Four. While all HBUs are resource-constrained, the extent to which finances impinge on the day-to-day running of the university varies. Marianne's statement about not relying on UCDG funding for initiatives she considers

to be central to the academic project is thus likely conditioned by the specific history and current financial well-being of that particular institution.

In contrast, Mandisa explained how her institution was fully dependent on the UCDG, and this seemed to be common across most of the institutions. She explained that although there was an institutional budget for student development at her university aside from the UCDG projects, it was “rigid”.

*... Uh, umm, I'm looking for a way that I can use to say it's rigid. Yeah, that's the word I'm looking for. It's rigid in the sense that, umm, you don't really have much, uh, you know, influence in terms of what goes in there.*

*... And in all the years that I was the manager, not once was my budget taken into consideration. Instead, even though you've budgeted, when the budget has been finalised, it's not what you asked for.*

*You are given a budget, and that's how you should use it, and most of the time, it's very little budget. For the year 2022, it was ridiculous. It was so small that there is not much that you can do with your budget. So that is why a lot of everything that the [centre] does had to be, umm, funded it through, umm, the UCDG*

Thus, it seems that some universities had a student development budget as part of their block grant, but their budgets were minimal, if present at all.

*So, we normally would use that budget to supplement a shortfall of the UCDG. Otherwise, the bulk of all the student development initiatives are funded through the use of the UCDG. (Mandisa)*

Mandisa went to the extent of arguing that if the UCDG funds came to an end, “... It would be a disaster. There would be no money to run any of our activities. And it gets less and less every year”.

Moyo's study (2018) found that the project-based nature of the funding led to a lack of sustainability and constrained the extent to which UCDG-funded initiatives were taken up as activities to be funded through the block grant. This was exacerbated by UCDG payments often being late, being reduced in the case of underspending in previous years, and having interest on these grants reclaimed by DHET:

*... the funding is not enough. And what makes it even worse is that I think this year they were saying that they are going to be some cuts up to 22% or so. (Mandisa)*

The allocation of UCDG funding as project funding by the DHET, and its management separately from the mainstream academic planning and practices, resulted in the lack of financial prioritisation within institutions, making student development understood as somehow external to the university's day-to-day activities. This set of Structural conditions complemented the understanding that student development was an external practice offered by external people, allowing the status quo of T1 to continue. As discussed in Chapter Four, T1 was characterised by a differentiated and segregated higher education system along the lines of class and race, with stark differences which still show today. Sadly, the UCDG, a tool for the transformation of teaching and learning, does not seem to have impacted these inequalities. The late allocation of UCDG funds to universities resulted in a reduced period for the implementation of programmes, with the consequence that funds were sometimes unspent.

*Under expenditure, you know, unspent funds, because they give us the money very late, and then we couldn't really, you can't spend five million in three months. (Pumlani)*

Throughout the data, participants explained how the HBU context was different from the HWU one, in that HBUs do not have any reserve funds in their accounts to draw on while awaiting promised UCDG funds. Nor could they draw on such funds to augment the budgets for UCDG initiatives. Sifiso clearly articulated how this becomes a vicious cycle, as HBUs cannot implement initiatives until the funding is actually in their accounts, but are then penalised for underspending in future allocations:

*... last year, for instance, they released funds very late and we couldn't even implement some projects ... they release funds, like two months, three months prior to reporting time and then suddenly you have got all this money that you can't spend within that three months and then you now have a huge amount of unspent, you know, unspent funds ... Whereas if you are a university with the resources, whilst you're still waiting for the DHET, you can use your own money to implement some of these projects ... but we don't have that luxury at an institution like [name of university]. (Sifiso)*

Therefore, the project nature of the funding and its allocation timelines affected the efficiency of the implementation of Student Development Programmes at these institutions. Participants suggested that the current DHET approach to the release of funds affected HBUs more than HWUs, who continued with projects using other institutional funding in the meantime. Participants also reported that HWUs had more efficient administrative processes to ensure that the money was spent.

*At some point, you know, sort of suggesting that they adopt a slightly different approach, especially with your HDIs [Historically Disadvantaged Institutions], because your HDI, it's a fact, they don't have resources that your UP [University of Pretoria], Stellenbosch [University] and UCT [University of Cape Town] are having. They have the resources. They can do it. So if you're using the same formula across the board, you find out that you are leaving a big chunk of your students, not receiving the kind of stuff ... that you intend to give them because you're not releasing the funds on time, and it's a problem. (Thandeka)*

*... procurement wants to see the two million rands in your account before they can even go for tender or anything ... And then three months down the line, before the reporting, DHET gives you the two million rands. Now, the whole procurement process on its own can take up to three months. So now you have to report in terms of how you utilised that two million rands, and then you can say you know because you released the two million rands late, I couldn't use it because that's*

*not in the audit in your audit standards, the auditors are going to come in. They strictly look at what is required. (Sifiso)*

Sifiso's comment above reflects not only that HBUs could not advance promised funds but had to wait until such funds were in the institution's account, but also that the administrative processes were cumbersome. The requirement to go out to tender on capital purchases, rather than simply to obtain a few quotes, is an example of how HBUs have notoriously slow and cumbersome administrative processes (Jansen, 2023). In the quote below, the issue of late payment is coupled with onerous and lengthy HR processes:

*Our programme is likely to take us this long. The appointment of an Academic Advisor is going to take us this long. If we need an Academic Advisor, you take all those things into consideration. But the bottom line of it is that even if I want to advertise for an Academic Advisor, HR needs to see the money, where is the money for this? They don't want your stories with DHET and all these things, and then until they see the money, they are not going to go through with the process. Otherwise, there's no funding for that particular post. And in terms of the process, that's not allowed. (Sifiso)*

This data suggests that there are intersections between constraints coming from late payments of funds by the DHET and the administrative processes of efficiently spending the money in short periods within HBUs. The issue of late payment by DHET was thus compounded by lengthy administrative processes, with many participants referring to problems with tender processes and with unwieldy HR requirements. It was unclear where or why tender processes would be needed for UCDG-funded initiatives, but it was certainly evident that advertising and interviewing, even for short-term appointments, were extremely inefficiently managed. The challenges in actually accessing UCDG funds were also indicated to be problematic, with university financial and administrative systems being extremely cumbersome. This echoed Moyo's (2018) findings that the history of universities in the country continued to play out in the levels of function or dysfunction in their administrative systems.

*The administration, part of the grant, it's not working for us, and as a result, we end up not doing anything. (Aya)*

The next data quote from Bongiwe is a long one, but clearly indicates his frustration with the onerous bureaucracy in his institution, which he suggests is a significant constraint on the implementation of UCDG-funded initiatives:

*... like I must spend those three amounts, and yeah, that's how it works. But then, how it is, is that we must now like, xandifuna utya lamali<sup>46</sup> [When I want to eat (spend) the money] ... I fill out the [name of form] and [name of form], I must keep my own quotations, I must book my own venues, et cetera, and get the whole documentation in order. And then the, ndithumele kengoku [send] to the administrator, the administrator kengoku yena, [will then] ... (sigh) ... I'm telling you, I still haven't gotten a response, it's actually the third week now. So, they'll send a response and say to me I'm going to send [the forms] to [name of office] and I'm still waiting for that response ... Umm, so they will send it to [name of office], then [name of office] takes another week, to say OK, the venue or whoever, whoever we approving, whatever you're doing ... it goes to [name of office] if it's above ten thousand rands according to our institution andiyazi ngezinye [I don't know about others], Then ibuyele kwi [it will go back to the] administrator, the administrator will then say, OK, fine, ibuyele kwi [name of office], and then it goes, my understanding is that then goes for signing kengoku [only then] ... sorry before iye ku-[it goes to] [name of office], xa iye ku-u-u ... [after it goes to the] administrator iya kwi [it goes for] signing, then kwi [from] signing iye kwi [it goes to] [name of office]. Then from [name of office] it comes back after that week, and then kengoku ihambile iye ku [it goes to] finance, then finance takes another week. (Bongiwe)*

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<sup>46</sup> In the isiXhosa repertoire, this phrase is used to indicate a person who is spending money irresponsibly.

The late payments by DHET and the poor administrative and financial management processes were, however, not seen to be sufficient justifications for the lack of spending, as participants indicated that they still felt a burden of accountability when it came time for reporting:

*... when the money is not being spent, that those projects. I'm the one who's accountable as to why the money was not spent on those projects and not necessarily u-[saying the administrator's name]. (Bongiwe)*

Under apartheid, and as discussed in T1, HBUs were only allocated annual budgets, which they were prevented from investing. This resulted in a 'use-it-or-lose-it' approach to money, with fiscal dumping of any remaining money at the end of each year to prevent the National Department of Education from reclaiming unspent funds (Bunting, 2006; Hall et al., 2004). This has now been duplicated in how the UCDG is allocated as project funds. The HBUs are arguably conditioned to not trust that promised funds will be received, and so they would be less likely to allocate such funds before the tranche is received, even if they had the resources to do so. They also do not have strong and efficient administrative systems, so even when the funding is eventually received, the processes of implementing the projects take a long time.

Alongside these financial and administrative constraints that were identified in the data, and which clearly echo those identified years previously by Moyo (2018), it was also evident that the identities of the people implementing the student development affected the success of these initiatives.

## 7.7 Academic Developers' Identities

I have shown how most of the UCDG-funded student development initiatives were undertaken by people outside of academic departments, typically in Teaching and Learning Centres. Much of the data shows that many of these participants were new to Academic Development. For example, Thandeka's educational qualifications and previous work experience were in administration. Before joining the university, she

worked in the business sector as an executive secretary. She started to work in student development after she had been the administrative manager for the UCDG. Thandeka later moved to Student Affairs, where she became the residence coordinator responsible for a UCDG-funded student development programme in the residences. At the time of data collection, she was only one year into this contract position. She indicated that her knowledge of Academic Development generally, and student development in particular, came from her experiences as a contract employee administering UCDG funds.

Similarly, Bongiwe started at her institution in 2019 after she completed a master's degree in business commerce. She had been involved in teaching and learning as a Supplemental Instructor during her undergraduate and postgraduate student years. She indicated that she drew on these experiences in implementing tutor training:

*My understanding for example, kulento ye [in this] tutor training, student development is basically to develop the tutors, for example, to make them understand their role, to make life easier for i-students, zabo [their students], so that, so I teach them i-skills nhee, so that when they do their tutor training, they're able to implement it in a way that would make it easier for them. (Bongiwe)*

It is unsurprising that Bongiwe and most other participants did not show a depth of understanding of the purposes of the UCDG, nor understand the role of criticality in student development. The inability to theorise their practices and the reliance on common-sense understandings of the 'student problem', illustrated in previous chapters, need to be understood within the context of who is appointed to undertake student development work. Bongiwe continues to explain that she was not trained to do her work, and there was a general expectation that she would simply draw on common-sense understandings to do so.

*As I said to you, it was an initiative that I just thought of and said, OK, let's do this. And essentially, I mean, my manager coz yena, [because she] she was part of FYE, and then she just said to me, I must facilitate that ... there's no management or,*

*like, in terms of top-level where people say, "OK, fine, this is how it's supposed to go". Yeah. And I was, I was just told that this is the money that you have, and that's it. This is the project, like literally like, like I was told, "OK, you are in charge of this and this and this, this is the money you have to do, you have to spend this money at the end, there, qha! [that is all!]"*. (Bongiwe)

Likho indicated that he had worked in Academic Development for some years but had been focused on staff development. He was then asked to take on the role of student development using UCDG funds. The data repeatedly suggests an understanding within the universities that student development was an activity that anyone could do, because it relied on common-sense understandings accessible to all, and that it could be done outside of the mainstream academic activities, thereby addressing the problem of poor throughput and retention, while leaving the status quo untouched.

Sifiso came to his current institution from similar work elsewhere. In his role at the time I interviewed him, he was responsible for both student and staff development, but what was interesting is that he did not seem to see the link between student and staff development, or, for that matter, their connection to curriculum development. He spoke about tutoring and academic advising as entirely separate from the staff development programmes he oversaw.

Two others who had some experience of academic work were Pumlani and Mandisa. Pumlani, who was now acting as a manager, narrated his long journey in higher education and the field of Academic Development:

*[I am] currently working and permanently employed as a [tutor] coordinator at [name of university and campus], and then also, I'm acting as a Manager, [name of centre]. Also the same time, I have been involved with the student success portfolio. As one of the team members to establish student success or to institutionalise student success at [name of university], which encompasses different aspects of any student-related support, whether academic or social related, umm, unit or section.*

It is through such experiences in higher education and Academic Development that both Mandisa and Pumlani reflected on their growth and understanding of the UCDG and the field of Academic Development over time. They both suggested that they were able to see and understand things differently once they were in management positions.

Apart from Mandisa and Pumlani, and to some extent Sifiso, all the participants were fairly new to Academic Development work. They were mostly appointed on contracts, and there was no induction into the field or spaces for their development.

The instability in these positions was also evident in senior management. Thandeka, for instance, explained how in her institution, senior management responsible for the UCDG changed very often, affecting the direction of the UCDG funding in the institution negatively, as each new manager would come in and replace the ideas of the previous one. Such changes in Social Actors have a huge impact, as they condition the implementation of Student Development Programmes.

*So, you start, this is the first year of the UCDG. You start with this director, then the next year the director leaves and then another one comes and then when this one comes it has got a different idea, you know there's no continuation, you know, and it ends up messing up the whole thing because when this one leaves and then another one comes with their ideas and the other one comes and maybe they don't understand what this fund is all about. And then if you want to do things, they think you just want to waste money and, you know, and most of our funds anyway, they go back to DHET ... because of not being spent.*

It was clear that the participants were positioned as primary Agents in the institution. They were largely appointed on short-term contracts, with little by way of orientation. They were external to academic faculties, and there was a general expectation that they would draw on common sense to implement student development initiatives. Their dedication to student well-being is not in question, as was discussed in Chapter

Five, but they did not have access to the kinds of powerful knowledge that might allow them to understand students' challenges in more nuanced ways. In the absence of such powerful knowledge and in the absence of being social actors with much by way of institutionally recognised Agency, they drew on the dominant discourses of the student requiring remedial support.

The repeated concern they expressed about their work in implementing UCDG-funded student development was the pressure to use the funds within the required time. This burden of navigating onerous administrative systems in the short time between receiving the funds and submitting the reports to DHET emerged repeatedly as a major stress for the participants. It is to such reporting on the funds that I now turn.

## 7.8 UCDG Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

Moyo (2018) tracks the increased regulation on UCDG spending (in its earlier form of TDG and RDG) and increased reporting requirements. He points out that such stringent measures on the implementation of the grant were a response to misuse of the funds on infrastructure and, in some cases, the funds going missing or being unaccounted for. In response to these issues, several changes in funding management were implemented in 2013. The focus of the monitoring was to ensure that the allocated funds were spent on the approved projects only. It would seem that this has indeed led to funds being used only on approved projects, albeit that the problems of late payment and underspending that Moyo identified in his study are still in evidence in mine.

Participants mentioned that having a limited number of projects that were aligned with the strategy of the university allowed good management and control of the use of the grant. And the stringent measures on ring-fencing the funding allowed them to spend the money only on what it was meant for.

*... there must be a particular, umm, purpose, you know, for those funds to be given, and so it's normal that funds are used for what they were intended for, and that's the case with the UCDG. (Mandisa)*

*So, I think [name of university] deals with this in a unique way. I think at most other universities, there's a DVC responsible for coordinating a grant. At [name of university], all of our DHET grants are coordinated through institutional planning and also because we think it's important that implementation and coordination should be separated and DVCs in most instances are directly involved in implementing initiatives within their lines and institutional planning sits a little bit outside of that and our role is to constantly search for ways to optimise the grants to support the institutional strategy and vision ... And what helps about the approach that we take is that in planning, we have a bird's eye view of all of the grants. (Marianne)*

Thandeka indicated that at her university, despite the need for clearer reporting, with evidence of activities, problems in this regard remained:

*... they will spend the money and then when it's time to report, you know, because you know, DHET wants things like attendance registers, programmes and reports, you know, and then the reports were not coming, so the reports were not coming, and then the money is gone.*

*And I used to sit there, like sucking my thumb now, "What's going on?", you know? And now I have to go back and look at the plan ... and try and write something according to what the initial plan was saying about that project. So that is the issue that we were having because these people will come and send the proposal and say no, we want to do 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and then we said, "Go ahead, because you the leader of the project, go ahead". When it comes towards the end of the year, when we report to the head before it could get audited, the report was not coming. People responsible, you'll e-mail and e-mail nothing ... Nothing. So, I used to*

*literally sit there and write reports for everyone. I used to sit and write reports for everybody ... You know...*

The more regular reporting against the objectives for each project was thus not without challenges. In particular, the universities were unable to respond to any specific challenges or innovative ideas that might have emerged within the lifespan of each grant funding cycle, as they were forced to implement projects exactly as planned many years before, often by people who had since left the institution. Change requests sent to the DHET often took more than a year or more to be approved<sup>47</sup>. Furthermore, if one project proved very successful and another did not, shifting funds between projects also required a change request to be sent to DHET.

*... but it is kind of limiting in the UCDG as far as I'm concerned, that when you are allowed to, umm do what they call virement. In other words, by shifting funds you can only shift funds within the project and you not shift funds from one project to another. (Mandisa)*

*... over those three years, things may change you know and you may find that perhaps, you don't need as much funding for certain activity that you applied for in that project, and you have another project that is doing so well and that you need more funding, you know, to support what you're doing, but you are not allowed to take funds from Project Five for instance, shift them in into Project Two. Funds can only be shifted within a project. (Sifiso)*

The challenge in getting the necessary information for reporting purposes also seems to have conditioned the decision to house the grant and all its projects in one unit, such as the Teaching and Learning Centre. The participants, however, argued that such strict monitoring and evaluation of funding was one-sided by the DHET, in that they were not accountable for their late release of funds, and still expected universities to spend their monies within the regulated time frame.

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<sup>47</sup> This has now been improved in 2025; Deputy Vice Chancellors of universities are now able to complete permission for the movement of funds between projects as long as it is reported to the DHET in the next reporting cycle.

*You get caught in a catch-22 situation that at the same time university processes can't allow you to proceed and then you are not getting the funding from DHET you know on time for whatever reason that they have within their processes ... he who controls. the cookie jar, the money, uh, they tend to, you know, to have control.*

What is important to note is that all of this reporting, coupled with evidence in the form of registers and so on, was monitoring and evaluating that the funds were spent as per the approved proposals and following proper financial practices. There was very little, if any, monitoring and evaluation of the appropriateness or impact of the interventions. The templates that institutions had to complete for each sub-project each year focused on the project's goals and target groups, along with the project's short-term and long-term impact, indicators, and sources of evidence. But there was extremely little space for narrative as to what happened in the intervention, how it was received, what impact it had on mainstream teaching and learning, and so on.

For example, the table below shows how the university reported on its project for a student development project aimed at improving student support services. The goal of this project was to ensure that first-year students adjusted well to the academic environment.

<b>Medium-term impact or outcomes</b>	<b>Impact indicators</b>	<b>Sources of evidence</b>	<b>Short-term outcomes</b>	<b>Outcome indicators</b>	<b>Sources of evidence</b>
More students complete their courses on time	1.1. Increased pass rates 1.2 Reduced dropout rate	Pass rate statistics in the University Planner's office	1. Confident and motivated student mentors 2. Motivated mentees (students) benefit from	1.1 Motivated students 2.1 Improved academic performance	1.1 Session evaluation forms 2.1 Session attendance registers

			dedicated mentorship guidance on their academic progress		
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Source: DHET Institutional UCDP Annual Progress Report (2021–2022)

Table 10: Example of Project impact/outcomes, outcome indicators and sources of evidence

The descriptions are very vague, but most importantly, there is no indication of students’ experiences of undergoing such student development projects accounted for in this table. The reporting is focused on the numbers reached and fails to offer any interrogation as to the actual intervention. The use of metrics for monitoring educational activities is conditioned by the wider neoliberalism discussed in T1. Shore and Wright (2024) trace the extraordinary rise in numeric performance indicators for managing organisations and governing populations. They suggest that universities are increasingly “repurposed around the targets and incentives, and every individual is impelled to concentrate on ‘what counts’” (2024: 19). They strongly argue that most of what is meaningful in higher education sadly cannot be counted, and that managerial systems of metrification fail to evaluate what works, and instead measure what complies.

The very nature of the reporting templates prevents critical reflection on the purposes and impact of the interventions. There is also a real problem of correlation being reported as if it were causation in these reports. If, for example, as indicated in the table above, pass rates do indeed go up at the same time as the student development initiative takes place, is this because of the student intervention?

Year 1 Target	Year 1 Progress	Year 1 Target (Numbers)	Year 1 Target (Achieved)	Year 1 Reach (Number of participants)	Year 1 Sources of Evidence
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Table 11: Example of Total Outputs

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Year 1 Output target</b>	<b>Year 1 Target in numbers</b>	<b>Year 1 Target achieved</b>	<b>Year 1 Performance</b>	<b>Year 1 Reach</b>	<b>Year 1 % Spent</b>
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Table 12: Example of Year 1 Dashboard

The above two tables indicate the headings that are used in sections of the reporting template. As indicated at the start of this chapter, the UCDG is presented in the DHET framework as a “catalytic in a constrained fiscal environment by providing resources that enable universities to take some risks and embark on activities that innovate, that test, that seed for positive impact on universities” (DHET, Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the UCDP, 2018: 7). But this understanding is nowhere captured in the reporting processes.

## 7.9 Conclusion

The previous two chapters (Chapters Five and Six) looked at how the study participants conceptualised students and how that conditioned their conceptualisation and implementation of student development initiatives. I was able to show that students were largely seen to be in deficit and to need remedial assistance. This was provided outside of the mainstream curriculum and separately from any staff development in generic, add-on interventions. In drawing on such discourses and developing such student development initiatives, these participants can be seen to have been strongly conditioned by the Structures and Cultures in which they found themselves.

However, to more fully understand the mechanisms conditioning the Student Development Programmes, it was important to look at the structure of the grant itself, as I have done in this chapter. The grant is framed in the earlier pages of the UCDG documentation as a catalyst for transformation. It was anticipated to provide the funding for universities to experiment at a system level on how to enhance higher education. Despite this framing, almost every other aspect of the UCDG was complementary to the status quo and enabled the Situational Logic of Protectionism. As I have shown in this chapter, the grant was provided in siloes of student, staff and curriculum development initiatives, and the examples in the grant were taken to be the

complete list of interventions that could be funded. The grant was often paid late, and this, coupled with onerous administrative processes in the HBUs, meant that funds were often unspent. DHET then penalised universities for such underspending in ways that echoed the control of the state over HBUs during apartheid. The nature of the grant led to project-based initiatives often being housed in Teaching and Learning Centres, rather than being integrated into mainstream work, and to these initiatives often being undertaken by inexperienced staff employed on contract.

In the chapter that follows, T4, I look at the current situation and suggest that the UCDG grant has led to the emergence of morphostasis, whereby the conditions remain largely unchanged. I also conclude the thesis and offer comments on its contribution.

## Chapter 8

### T4

## From Structural, Cultural, and Group Reproduction to Elaboration

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as a conclusion of my Social Realist account on the mechanisms that enabled or constrained the conceptualisation and implementation of UCDG Student Development Programmes at HBUs in South Africa. As I have shown in the previous findings chapters, HBUs have been strongly conditioned by various Structural and Cultural mechanisms at T1, which served as constraints on their UCDG student development conceptualisation and implementation. These mechanisms conditioned their conceptions of who Black students are, thus constructing them as a product of their disadvantaged past and leading to an understanding that there was a need for various interventions to support students to succeed in university. Shaped by these conceptions, participants and larger university processes drew on various deficit discourses to conceptualise remedial, once-off and ad hoc Student Development Programmes that largely drew on the discourse of the decontextualised learner in ways that were not informed by theory. The nature of the UCDG funding, as short-term project-based and paid within silos of student, staff and curriculum development, also conditioned how these student programmes were conceptualised and implemented. Participants drew on common-sense understandings shaped by the discourses at T1, even though the UCDP Ministerial Statement (2018 and 2020) on the implementation of the UCDP encouraged them to think 'transformatively'.

The participants did not consider the extent to which Black students were affected by the many larger socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions of South Africa, which preceded them. There was no engagement within the university's Structural and Cultural spaces in an understanding of how these enabled or constrained students' integration within the university context. Participants were only focused on 'fixing' the

skill set of students in a deterministic way. Student Development Programmes funded through the UCDG were understood to have direct causal effects.

This study has shown that for development to be effective, we first need to consider the transcendental question, “What must the world be like for things to be the way they are?” This assists us in going beyond our experiences and attempting to understand what conditioned events and our experiences thereof. In doing so, we then need to identify the extent to which Structures, Culture, and Agency condition events and how we experience them. In this way, we will be able to discover whether the status quo has remained or transformation has indeed occurred.

This study has answered the research questions as it shows that, despite the commendable foundation the field of Academic Development has achieved since its establishment over the past four decades in South Africa, much work in the field is still needed for more change to happen in terms of institution-wide development.

## 8.2 Overview of what emerged in T2–T3

Chapters Five, Six and Seven collectively reveal how dominant deficit discourses continue to shape the understanding and implementation of student development in South African higher education, particularly at HBUs. Chapter Five highlights how Black student failure is often framed as a result of individual shortcomings, such as poor English proficiency or lack of computer skills, rather than as outcomes of systemic inequalities rooted in poverty and under-resourced schooling. This individualised framing reflects what Archer (1995, 2000) terms upward conflation, where Structural and Cultural conditions are ignored in favour of attributing outcomes solely to individual Agency. Such thinking underpins the belief that Student Development Programmes can resolve educational disparities, thereby obscuring the need for institutional and pedagogical transformation.

Chapter Six builds on this by showing how these deficit assumptions informed the conceptualisation of UCDG-funded student support initiatives. These programmes

were often generic, ad hoc, and disconnected from the curriculum, with Academic Developers positioned as the primary Agents of support. Faculty members were generally not involved in these efforts, reinforcing the notion that students must independently overcome academic challenges. Academic Developers, lacking disciplinary expertise and theoretical grounding, were unable to influence teaching and learning practices meaningfully. This chapter shows how entrenched deficit discourses prevented critical reflections on pedagogy and institutional responsibility, thereby limiting the potential for institutional change.

Chapter Seven extended the analysis by examining the implementation of UCDG-funded projects at HBUs. It reveals a widespread misinterpretation of the UCDG's purpose, which was intended as a "steering" and "catalytic" mechanism for institutional development. Instead, participants adopted a compliance-driven approach, designing isolated and competitive programmes with little contextual adaptation. Structural and financial constraints – such as limited infrastructure, low third-stream income, and bureaucratic barriers – further constrained effective implementation. Academic Developers, often lacking qualifications in higher education, were seen as generalists with limited Agency, reinforcing their marginal identities within the universities. Additionally, the UCDG's monitoring, evaluation, and reporting framework functioned more as a policing tool than a developmental one, pressuring institutions to prioritise spending and output delivery over meaningful impact. The late allocation of funds and strict spending timelines exacerbated these challenges, leading to panic, inefficiencies, and unspent funds.

Together, these chapters demonstrate that Structural resources alone are insufficient for transformation. Drawing on Social Realism, the study argues that genuine change requires the alignment of Structures, Cultures, and Agency. Without a shift in institutional Culture and the empowerment of those implementing change, funding mechanisms like the UCDG risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to dismantle.

These findings emerged through the conditioning of the Structures and Cultures described in T1 of the cycle. It would seem that there was a strong Situational Logic

of necessary complementarity between mechanisms, which resulted in protectionism. This protectionism was a protection of the status quo of the university processes and practices, norms and values. It would thus seem that at T4, what we have is largely a case of morphostasis. Morphostasis occurs when social-cultural conditioning of groups at T1 is consistently drawn upon by groups at T2–T3, and then the reproduction of events occurs, leading to no changes in the system. When Agents cannot enact their personal goals, the status quo remains, and the Agents are constrained – whether they know about it or not. Change, or lack thereof, cannot be enacted by Structures and Culture; it needs Agency. But these Structures and Culture can constrain Agents when they want to enact change.

This study has shown that HBUs are constrained by many Structural, Cultural and Agential conditions, leading to the uninterrupted ways of understanding Black students at these institutions. Such an event results in a Situational Logic of contradiction, which is contingent. Archer (1995; 2000; 2013a) explains this Situational Logic as one where two ideas can co-exist, but could also exist without each other. Such situations led to participants focusing on what they were doing, leaving the university to continue its practices (protecting its interests), which then resulted in elimination. This is why, despite the good intentions of those engaged in student development and despite the structure of funding of the UCDG, I did not identify significant shifts in how student development was conceptualised or implemented institutionally. T1 has shown how this was largely difficult and still continues to be during the current cycle of T2–T3. Indeed, the participants were clear that their initiatives were focused on the individual student level and not at the level of institutional transformation.

While the UCDG did allow for a range of initiatives to be implemented and new primary Agents to be introduced into the system, largely in the form of Academic Development practitioners, there was no evidence of the systemic-level impact that the UCDG framework suggests was the intention.

## 8.2 Mechanisms at T4

For the UCDG funds to act as the catalytic force they were intended to be, a number of changes will need to take place in the next cycle. In this section, I identify some of the Structural and Cultural mechanisms evident in this T4 (which would be the next cycle's T1) that I suggest could be drawn upon by Agents to enable the emergence of morphogenesis.

The interplay between Structural, Cultural and Agential mechanisms in developing an integrated institutional development plan for higher education is highly dependent on the mobilisation of powerful Agents, social actors in the sector, to drive institutional change. Alongside the structure of the UCDG grant itself are various mechanisms at T4 that such individuals could draw upon to bring about future change. These include institutional autonomy, the potential for corporate Agency to be developed through collaborative structures, the availability of strong theory, and the PEPs of those actors engaged in student development.

### 8.2.1 Institutional Autonomy

In South Africa, universities are bodies established under various Acts, which regulate their institutional autonomy as they are publicly accountable and subject to national laws and policy regulations under the DHET. University autonomy refers to the institutional independence of universities to govern themselves in academic, administrative, financial, and other internal affairs without undue interference from the state. Institutional autonomy means universities have the full autonomy to make decisions about their academic offerings, that is, deciding on the curriculum, the research ethos and the academic standards it seeks to uphold. In terms of governance, autonomy entails selecting their own leadership and governance structures (e.g., the Senate). They also have autonomy over their finances, that is, the management of budgets, structuring of fees and provision of resources. They may, in addition, define their internal rules and regulations, as well as the management of the institution. Having been 'creatures of the state' during apartheid (Bunting, 2006),

universities were tasked with a very different agenda in the new democracy. There was a determination by those working on the Constitution, the National Plan for Higher Education, and similar documents that universities should never again bow to the agenda of the state. Institutional autonomy was thus explicitly stated in documents specifying university governance, and the term 'academic freedom' was inserted into Chapter Two of the (South African Government, 1996).

However, it seems that for HBUs, this newly promised autonomy was heavily conditioned by its relationship to the state during the apartheid years, as discussed in Chapters One and Four. The extent to which these universities have claimed their autonomy and developed their own identities and their academic projects is uneven and debated (Lockett et al., 2019; Jansen, 2023). HBUs have also not been granted the financial and other support that was necessary to redress historic inequalities. Their unique societal role and student demographics have not been acknowledged. I therefore argue that for these universities to gain their autonomy, there needs to be leadership within the universities and encouragement to take transformative risks and be involved in the generation of context-responsive policies and scholarly research.

The challenge of constrained autonomy is not exclusive to HBUs. Nor is the lack of autonomy only a vestige of the state's control during apartheid. The broader South African higher education sector is increasingly subject to managerial and bureaucratic control, both within its management structures and through the state's accountability mechanisms. State accountability has arguably become more of a means of 'steering' the sector. Regulatory structures such as the Council on Higher Education arguably serve to homogenise the sector and ensure compliance, rather than to support and develop it. Audit reports, for example, are meant to serve as a tool for assuring and enhancing quality, but these have frequently become prescriptive and compel universities to adopt general approaches, thus compromising institutional autonomy (Boughey & McKenna, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2024). Government funding is essential to public higher education institutions, and HBUs, which have very limited opportunities for third-stream income, and which serve student bodies unable to pay

high fees, are particularly dependent on this income source. But the blunt nature of the funding formula, which treats all universities identically despite the impact of their varied histories and current context, arguably also constrains institutional autonomy to determine the university's own academic project and niche focus areas (Council on Higher Education, 2008; Boughey & McKenna, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2024).

This study found a lack of enactment of institutional autonomy in how the HBUs positioned themselves and their approaches to student development. Instead, there was a strong compliance approach to the development and implementation of UCDG-funded projects. Institutional autonomy and the model of cooperative governance enshrined in the Higher Education Act of 1997 is a significant potential Structural enabler of institutional transformation and development (Council on Higher Education, 1997). However, HBUs in particular need to claim their autonomy to disrupt historical continuities and shape futures aligned with their missions and communities. At the same time, all universities in South Africa must act in solidarity to resist the creeping managerialism of the state and internal stakeholders. For a socially just and decolonial higher education landscape to emerge, universities must reclaim their right to define their purpose, practice and paths forward.

### 8.2.2 Building strong sector-wide collaborative structures

For universities to reclaim and sustain their autonomy, disruptive internal and external structures and strong leadership are essential. Autonomy is not only an issue of legal policy, but also a condition that must be actively cultivated and defended from within. Universities must leverage the legal protectionism afforded by the Constitution and the Higher Education Act of 1997, including their right to public funding, without internalising a posture of dependency or giving in to pressure (intimidation by the state to take away funding or not grant qualifications) (Council on Higher Education, 1997). There also needs to be clear policies that protect against the undue influence of external actors, whether from government or other funders. Sadly, Jansen (2023) suggests that at times, dysfunctional universities in South Africa, those plagued by corruption, often use the concept of institutional autonomy to resist being called to

account. The building of institutional autonomy has to be tied to the ongoing articulation about the role of the university and the need for all to safeguard its academic project. Without this, universities can be susceptible to influences from all kinds of bodies, including the state.

This study has shown that external funding often enters the university through weak structures that are desperate and thus unwilling to be critical or creative. This is but one example of how universities have reduced their autonomy by failing to build resilient leadership, by avoiding accountability, and by not exercising institutional Agency.

Moreover, intermediary bodies such as Universities South Africa (USAf, previously HESA [Higher Education South Africa], and before that CUP [Council of University Principals] and CTP [Council of Tertiary Principals]), HELTASA (previously SAAAD and SAADA<sup>48</sup>), and COSAS, seem to have little transformative edge in the sector. While some, such as USAf, represent a collection of the vice-chancellors, social actors who might collectively shape the future of higher education, others, such as HELTASA, comprise primary Agents who could collectively activate corporate Agency. Sadly, however, this study has shown that these structures seem to lose their credibility over time due to political influence and changes in strategy. These bodies rarely take strong, principled stances on systemic injustice or the need for transformation in the sector for the benefit of society. The competition between and within institutions in this neoliberal age of rankings and concerns about institutional branding work against the possibilities of strong sector-wide collaborations, but the possibilities are still there.

If institutional autonomy is to be more than a formal idea, universities must not only resist external pressures but must also rebuild strong, value-driven internal cultures and associations that can speak truth to power, advocate for context-sensitive

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<sup>48</sup> South African Academic Development Association (SAADA) was established in 2002 as an interim structure after the fragmentation and inevitable decline of SAAAD. <https://heltasa.org.za/our-history/>

governance, and defend the sector's integrity. Only through such reconstruction can South African universities move from morphostasis to meaningful transformation.

### 8.2.3 Research-informed academic practice

While powerful institutional structures are necessary to uphold university autonomy and drive the academic project, they are not sufficient on their own. When both Primary Agency and Social Actors align their understanding of the university's mission and work collaboratively to advance it, then morphogenesis becomes possible. Autonomy is not only about resisting external influence, but it is also about cultivating internal coherence and reflexivity. There are mechanisms available in the Cultural domain that Agents can use their PEPs to enable. For example, there is a wealth of strong explanations about how learning happens, about the role of knowledge, about how universities are social structures which can be mediated and changed, and about the value of adopting a social model of students and the university. There is also a wealth of literature on the importance of having a strongly stated academic project. Having a sense of stewardship of an academic project is central to the functioning of a university and to the reduction of corruption that is so rife in many of these institutions (Jansen, 2023). The White Paper of 1997, referred to in Chapter Four, calls for universities to take a very different position at the end of apartheid. Instead of being 'creatures of the state' (Bunting, 2006), universities were tasked with being a 'public good' that nurtured 'critical citizens'. The extent to which post-apartheid universities have embraced this responsibility and nurtured strong academic projects has been questioned by many (Jansen et al., 2002; Lockett et al., 2019; Muthama, 2020). Sadly, these ideas, potential mechanisms in the Cultural domain, do not seem to have been activated in ways that might enable the emergence of morphogenesis.

When strong Structures are supported by strong Cultures, universities can begin to foster environments in which academic freedom, shared governance, and mutual accountability thrive. External supportive bodies, such as councils and professional associations, can then serve to protect academic rights and ensure that power within the institution is not abused. In such a Culture, internal checks and balances are not

only formalised through governance but also lived through a community of practice that values Agency and critical dialogue.

Universities need to move beyond Cultures of individualism and competition. In many institutions, fragmented practices create silos that undermine collective efforts. As this study has shown, the separation of student development, staff development, and curriculum development, for example, has contributed to a narrow, individualistic view of student success. Responsibility for student outcomes was often seen as the domain of Academic Development units (and then, within these units, as student developers' responsibility), rather than a shared responsibility across the institution. This disconnection fosters competition and finger-pointing rather than collaboration.

In contrast, enabling Cultures are those in which institutional Agents understand their roles as interconnected. When faculties, Academic Developers and university leadership align their efforts and communicate across boundaries, they are better positioned to identify the causal mechanisms that shape student experiences and institutional outcomes. This reflexive, Realist-informed approach shifts the focus from surface-level events to the deeper Structures and conditions that constrain or enable change.

In such a Culture, Academic Developers are not peripheral actors but are central to the university's academic project (Luckett, 2023; 2024). Their grounded insights into student journeys can inform broader institutional strategies, particularly when supported by a Culture that values their contributions. Similarly, staff involved in curriculum and research development must engage with the social realities students face, recognising that academic success is embedded in complex institutional ecosystems (Young, 2016; Council on Higher Education, 2020; Boughey, 2025).

One approach through which such a Culture can be cultivated is through the use of strong theory. While the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is uneven, and many have claimed that much of it is poorly theorised (Shay, 2012; Ashwin, 2022; McKenna et al., 2022), there is within this large body of work much that can help us to

understand what is typically narrowly conceptualised as ‘the student problem’. SoTL can provide a structured scholarly space in which university staff can collectively reflect on teaching, learning and student development within their institutional context. If universities were to prioritise and institutionalise robust SoTL engagements, framed not merely as Academic Development but as a core institutional project, they could begin to surface the underlying causes of systemic challenges, such as low throughput rates. Through critical SoTL conversations that focus on institutional development, universities can move beyond surface-level explanations for poor student success and begin to unpack the deeper socio-cultural, Structural, and pedagogical factors that contribute to it. These engagements promote a scholarly, inquiry-based culture that strengthens reflexivity and builds collective insights across silos. In doing so, SoTL can become a powerful mechanism for creating the kind of enabling Cultures that support both institutional autonomy and meaningful transformation (Ashwin, 2022).

Enabling Cultures foster a sense of shared ownership over the university’s mission. Rather than treating institutional development as the responsibility of a single unit or group, all Agents participate in a collective project of transformation. This shared Culture encourages criticality, supports innovation, and resists the fragmentation that undermines autonomy. It allows the university not only to protect its independence but also to pursue its purpose with confidence and coherence.

#### 8.2.4 Enabled Agency

Alongside nurturing strong enabling Structures and Cultures to protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy, individuals within the university, both staff and students, need to be positioned to draw meaningfully from the academic project. In such a context, institutional Agents will not merely follow pre-defined roles; they will be empowered to exercise their PEPs, thus shaping and reshaping their identities within a supportive environment.

A university that fosters autonomy and supports reflexive structures will allow its members to explore and embody multiple identities, whether through obtaining PhDs

and advancing scholarship, or as practitioners who are informed of their pedagogical approaches, or advocates for transformed institutional development. Through structures like disruptive theory-driven SoTL culture, integrated across institutional and national levels, Agents will be able to develop and sustain scholarly identities that are deeply rooted in their context, disciplines, and commitments to social justice. As this study showed, HBUs lacked this Agency, as participants did not have strong Academic Development identities, nor did the university have a strong ethos of its academic projects. Such a stance allowed them to limit their implementation of UCDG in ways focused on complying with monitoring and evaluation regulations, and shaped by the problematic internal bureaucratic process, leaving them without many opportunities to enact their Agency.

This assumes both a level of scholarly identity and an assumption that the university structure would nurture this. At present, the literature suggests that many neoliberal practices actually deprofessionalise or deskill the work of academics (Di Leo, 2017; Kaufman-Osborn, 2017). As managerialism increases, in the form of performance management with its key performance indicators and constant surveillance and monitoring, those working in universities experience less trust in their abilities (Burton & Bowman, 2022). The idea of making a university which nurtures Agency and makes spaces for empowering staff development, thus requires enabling spaces of resistance.

This enabling Agency is not only about academics; it is about transformation. It not only enables staff within the university to become intellectuals and scholars, but it also opens these pathways for criticality in students' learning. When academics can exercise their power within the curriculum, such transformation can also lead to transformative student experiences. For example, by undertaking postgraduate studies up to the PhD level, there will be a contribution to the disciplinary knowledge, thus influencing both the university and society. Others may choose to become critical analysts or public intellectuals who challenge dominant narratives and advocate for equity within and beyond the university (for example, through bodies such as COSAS and USaf). In such a system, critique and activism will not be viewed as threats to

institutional harmony but as a necessary component of a healthy, critical academic culture.

Therefore, when autonomy and freedom are protected, it does not mean the protection of the current fragmentation and divisiveness; rather, difference in perspective becomes an opportunity for dialogue, learning and transformation. The university becomes a space where voices across the spectrum (academic, political, social) can be expressed and heard. A culture of critical dialogue emerges, one that continuously interrogates Structural inequalities and strives for the emancipation of the oppressed.

In such a system, which is enabling, both students and staff are not just participants in a system, they are co-constructors of knowledge, identity and transformation. They become collectively responsible for defending and advancing the academic project, not just for institutional benefit but for broader societal change.

While this study focused only on student development funded by the UCDG and concluded that there was largely morphostasis born out of a protection of the status quo, there were also opportunities for transformation. In this section, I have briefly alluded to some potential mechanisms that are in evidence at this point of T4, and which have emergent properties that could bring about much needed change.

### 8.3 Contribution to knowledge

The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (Council on Higher Education, 2013) indicates that a doctorate should make a “contribution to the frontiers of a field”. While it does not indicate the extent of this contribution, this is still a daunting notion. In this section, I reflect on some of the contributions to knowledge that I tentatively suggest might have been offered by this study.

#### 8.3.1 Understanding transformation through a Realist lens

This study has contributed to the broader theoretical and practical understanding of how transformation occurs within organisations and social structures. It highlights

that no system or collective efforts begin from a clean slate. All Structures are embedded in historical, cultural, and social legacies, and the individuals who enter these systems bring with them prior experiences, identities, and discourses that shape their interactions with institutional or social projects.

A central insight from this research is that successful transformation requires more than Structural change, as was the case with the UCDG funding for student development. It requires an intentional effort to build a strong, collective understanding of the shared purpose among Agents. Without this shared foundation, individual actors often default to familiar ways of thinking and acting, which may unconsciously reproduce the very patterns that change efforts seek to disrupt.

Drawing on Social Realism, this study shows that the interplay between Structure, Culture, and Agency is central to understanding both elaboration and reproduction. Culture and Structure do not merely shape individual behaviour; they condition how people interpret, respond to, and enact organisational goals. This ongoing conditioning process can either enable or constrain transformation, depending on how well-aligned the Cultural environment, institutional Structures, and Agentic capacities are.

By bringing attention to these relational dynamics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of why organisational tools intended to bring about transformation often reproduce the status quo. The study argues that what is required to enable meaningful elaboration is the careful understanding of such relational dynamics. It offers a framework for recognising the causal mechanisms at play in complex systems, helping practitioners, leaders, and scholars think more critically about how to initiate and sustain transformative processes in any organisational context.

### 8.3.2 The Neoliberal Logic on Transformation

Another contribution of the study lies in exposing how the rise of globalisation and neoliberalism has shaped the way transformation is conceptualised and implemented

in social change. With these global forces, the emphasis in transformative initiatives has increasingly shifted away from substantive outcomes and towards a perceived, quantifiable output. This study shows how such an understanding can subtly but powerfully constrain the very change it seeks to promote. As shown in this study, even well-intentioned interventions, such as funding aimed at enhancing and providing learning capacity, can become co-opted by managerialist imperatives. Rather than focusing on the actual development of students or the quality of their experiences, attention becomes diverted towards financial reporting and compliance management, which only demonstrates value for money. This Situational Logic prioritises short-term accountability over long-term transformation.

Moreover, the pervasive Culture of monitoring and evaluation erodes a Culture of trust. When people within institutions are constantly scrutinised and not given full autonomy on how they can critically (yet accountably) use funding, they often shift their focus from reflective engagement with Structural and Cultural constraints to performative compliance. Such an experience results in them overlooking the deeper and contextual mechanisms of transformation. The process becomes about satisfying external reporting requirements, not engaging with the lived realities of change.

Therefore, this contribution highlights the importance of Realist insights by recognising the conditioning of powerful forces such as those of neoliberalism, as they can constrain Agency aimed at transformation. Recognising and resisting these powerful forces is important for the development of initiatives that are contextually grounded for transformation.

### 8.3.3 Reclaiming the University's Role in Knowledge and Social Development

This study has shown the critical role that higher education can serve as sites of knowledge production, critical inquiry, and societal advancement. However, this role is

under threat as institutions become entangled with state-driven agendas<sup>49</sup> and neoliberal funding logics.

A key contribution of this research is to argue that universities must remain critically engaged with the state and internal management and governance structures to resist the uncritical acceptance of regimes that prioritise metrics, compliance, and performativity over meaningful transformation. For instance, while substantial funding is directed towards student success through national and international initiatives, the persistent high rates of student dropouts and low throughputs suggest that these efforts are not yielding substantial results. This is not necessarily a lack of resources, but rather a lack of a clearly articulated and critically theorised notion of the academic project.

Therefore, universities must reclaim their role as global drivers of scientific and socially relevant knowledge. When external actors impose narrow accountability frameworks or ideologically driven agendas, the university's academic project risks being diluted. This study, therefore, calls for a reassertion of institutional autonomy, not only on governance and finance, but also in knowledge production and intellectual leadership. Without this, the legitimacy and purpose of the university in society are gradually eroded.

### 8.3.4 Repositioning Academic Development for Institutional Transformation

Finally, this study contributes to the redefinition of the role of Academic Development within universities. It argues that Academic Development must move beyond its traditional focus on individual academic support and isolated teaching and learning interventions. Instead, it should take on a strategic, institution-wide role oriented towards deep Structural and Cultural change. The field must shift from being

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<sup>49</sup> As I write this final chapter, the US government under President Trump has indicated that Harvard University has “lost [the] privilege” of enrolling foreign students because it did not report on students’ protest actions. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem said this decision was based on the administration’s determination to “enforce the law and root out the evils of anti-Americanism and antisemitism in society and campuses.” Harvard has indicated that they will use the full weight of the law to prevent this incursion on institutional autonomy. The current geopolitics of the world thus suggests that state-driven agendas are a very real threat to academic freedoms, globally.

perceived as a reactive, remedial, service-oriented space which ‘fixes’ academics and students through one-off workshops, towards becoming a central driver of institutional development.

Academic Developers need to establish institutional relevance by leading and advising on systemic issues that impact the university’s ability to transform. This includes engaging in strategic planning, influencing policy, and facilitating the creation of enabling Structures and Cultures that support the academic project of the university. This will require a critical look at the experiences and expertise of those in Academic Development positions and the extent to which they are using powerful theory to drive transformation. Academic Development should not be peripheral, but must be embedded within the institutional core, with a mandate to build coherence across teaching, research, curriculum and student success. This contribution challenges the historic marginalisation of the field and calls for its reimagining as a critical partner in shaping universities that are reflexive, inclusive, and capable of addressing complex social and academic challenges.

#### 8.4 Conclusion

This study concludes that effective development in higher education requires a deep ontological inquiry into the conditions that shape our experiences. Specifically, we need to ask the transcendental question: *“What must the world be like for things to be the way they are?”* By examining the interplay between Structures, Culture, and Agency, we can assess whether transformation has occurred or if the status quo persists. While Academic Development in South Africa has laid a strong foundation over the past four decades, institution-wide transformation remains limited. The conclusion chapter (T4) reflects on what emerged in T2–T3 and proposes that for UCDG funds to catalyse meaningful change in the next cycle (T1), agents must leverage structural and cultural mechanisms to enable morphogenesis—a process of transformative change.

To support this, the study identifies seven key considerations: Institutional autonomy, enabling universities to govern themselves academically and administratively; Sector-wide collaborative structures, protected by legal frameworks like the Higher Education Act, to resist undue external influence; Research-informed academic practice, drawing on rich theoretical resources to guide transformation; Enabled agency, where universities foster scholarly identities and reflexive practices; Contributions to knowledge, particularly through a lens that critiques neoliberal shifts in transformation discourse; Reclaiming the university's role in social and knowledge development; and Repositioning academic development as central to institutional transformation. These mechanisms, if mobilised by powerful agents, can drive integrated and sustainable change across the higher education sector.

These Structural and Cultural mechanisms offer a roadmap for institutional transformation, and my journey into higher education was never just about personal advancement – it was a political act born from a life shaped by poverty, marginalisation, and the daily realities of growing up disadvantaged. As I navigated the university space, I became increasingly aware that while access had been granted, liberation had not. I undertook this study to awaken a Black consciousness within us as we enter these institutions – not to be assimilated into white, colonial discourses, but to challenge and transform them. Too often, Black students leave university with degrees but without a sense of self, having been shaped to fit into systems that were never designed for them. This is why, despite our educational achievements, we have not fully transformed our communities for the public good. We exit university and escape our poverty-stricken backgrounds only to assimilate into a neoliberal, individualistic Culture that erases who we are as Black people and disconnects us from the collective struggle for liberation.

What troubled me most in this study was witnessing how many of the Black participants – those who themselves had walked the path of exclusion – did not appear to possess a critical Black consciousness. Rather than interrogating the university's narratives, they reproduced them, drawing uncritically on deficit discourses that pathologised Black students. I cannot accept these narratives. I, too,

(unknowingly) was once labelled as lacking motivation and the necessary skills during my undergraduate years. But when I was exposed to such understandings, I knew that these were not truths. They were projections of a system that refuses to change. How could Black Academic Developers, who have lived these realities, not contest these ideas? Is it that they have internalised colonial ways of understanding Blackness in higher education so deeply that they no longer recognise them as oppressive, thereby also referring to Black students as not being the right *calibre*?

In the spirit of Black Consciousness, I have come to understand that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. This study has revealed that while the physical chains of apartheid have been broken, the mental chains remain fastened (Biko, 2017). Higher education, as it stands, continues to reflect the architecture, values, and knowledge systems of a colonial and apartheid past. It was never designed with the Black body in mind – neither to include it, nor to affirm it. The curriculum, the language, the spaces, and the very idea of what counts as knowledge continue to exclude the lived realities and epistemologies of Black people. I, like many others (Black students), entered this space not as one who belonged, but as one who had to constantly prove my worth in a system that was never meant to see me as capable of contributing meaningfully.

Yet, I cannot deny the transformative power of education. It is through higher education that I have moved from the margins of poverty to the centre of national discourse. I now possess the tools to critique, to reflect, and to guide [South] Africa in the right direction. The post-apartheid government has made significant strides in expanding access and opportunity for Black South Africans, and the education sector has played a crucial role in this progress. I am living proof that higher education can change Black lives. But transformation cannot be reduced to access for Black students into higher education. It must be about ownership, about recognition, about reimagining the university as a space where Blackness is not merely tolerated, but celebrated – where Black students are not seen as problems to be *fixed*, but as intellectuals with something vital to offer.

This thesis has taught me that true liberation lies in the awakening of critical consciousness. We must move beyond the illusion of inclusion and confront the reality that many Black students remain intellectually and culturally alienated within institutions that were never built for them. The university must be decolonised – not just in rhetoric, but in Structure and Culture. We must dismantle the deficit discourses that continue to pathologise Black students, and replace them with Structures and Cultures that affirm their humanity, their histories, and their knowledge systems. Until then, we will remain trapped in a cycle of morphostasis, mistaking motion for progress. As Biko taught us, *“Being Black is not a matter of pigmentation – being Black is a reflection of a mental attitude”* (Biko, 2017: 52). It is time for higher education to reflect that attitude in its fullest, most liberating form.

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## Appendix 1 - Ethical Clearance

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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](mailto:dean.education@ru.ac.za)

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11 December 2024

Mr simbongile ntwasa

CHERTL

[g16n8912@campus.ru.ac.za](mailto:g16n8912@campus.ru.ac.za)

Dear Mr Simbongile Ntwasa

**Re:** Student Development Programmes at Historically Black Universities in South Africa

APPLICATION NUMBER: 2021-5328-6454

This letter confirms that your research ethics application has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (EF-REC). Your permission letter(s) where applicable have been received and you are free to proceed with your study.

Approval is granted for 1 year. An annual ethics renewal application needs to be submitted each year. 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,

**Prof Mags Blackie**

**Chair: Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee**

## Appendix 2 – Request for Permission to Conduct Study at Each Institution

### PERMISSION LETTER TO HEAD OF INSTITUTION



**Date:**

#### **REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT (NAME OF INSTITUTION)**

**The Registrar:** Name of university

My name is Simbongile Ntwasa, and I am a Higher Education Studies (PhD) student at Rhodes University (RU) in Makhanda, South Africa. This letter serves to seek permission to approach staff members who work on Student Development Programmes in the institution. The research I wish to conduct for my thesis will involve interviewing academic development staff members and any other staff member who works with student development programmes funded within the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG).

This research will be conducted under the supervision of Professor Sioux McKenna, Professor Chrissie Boughey, and Dr Temwa Moyo. You are welcome to contact Professor Sioux McKenna at [s.mckenna@ru.ac.za](mailto:s.mckenna@ru.ac.za)

I attach a copy of my research proposal, which includes copies of the consent and forms to be used in the research process. My ethical clearance certificate from Rhodes University is attached. As part of this, I undertake to ensure that the data collected will be accessible only to me and my supervisors.

Upon completion of the study, I undertake to provide you and the participants with access to the research findings and establish possibilities for the future. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0739285023 and [simbongilentwasa@gmail.com](mailto:simbongilentwasa@gmail.com).

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,|

Simbongile Ntwasa  
0739285023  
[simbongilentwasa@gmail.com](mailto:simbongilentwasa@gmail.com)  
Rhodes University

# Appendix 3 - Participant Consent Form

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM



**Research Project Title:** Student Development Programmes at Historically Black Universities in South Africa

**Principal Investigator:** Simbongile Ntwasa

**Contact Details:** ☎: [simbongilentwasa@gmail.com](mailto:simbongilentwasa@gmail.com) / 📞: 0739285023

### Participation Information:

- The research study has been explained to me
- I understand the purpose of the research study and my involvement in it
- I understand the risks and benefits of participating in this research study
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research study at any stage
- I understand that participation in this research study is done on a voluntary basis
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will remain anonymous, and no reference will be made to me by name or identifying position
- I understand and agree that the interviews will be recorded
- I understand that I will be given the opportunity to read and comment on the transcribed interview notes
- I confirm that I am not participating in this study for financial gain

I confirm that the above information was explained to me by **Simbongile Ntwasa** and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I confirm that I understand this document.

☞-----

### Voluntary Consent

I, ....., voluntarily give my consent to participate in the above-mentioned research.

Signature: .....

Date: / /

Researcher Declaration I, Simbongile Ntwasa, declare that I have explained all the participation information to the participant and have truthfully answered all questions asked by the participant.

Signature:.....

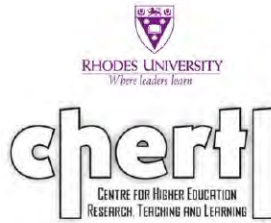
Date: / /

Supervisor contact details:

[s.mckenna@ru.ac.za](mailto:s.mckenna@ru.ac.za)

## Appendix 4 - Participant Interview Questions

### Possible Interview questions



**Please note:** These are some of the questions that will be asked during the interview process, more questions may arise as this will be an open-ended discussion with participants.

#### **Possible questions:**

1. Can you tell me about student development in your university?
2. How would you describe student development and what it is in your context?
3. What forms of student development are implemented in your institution?
4. How long have these forms been in place and why?
5. Have these forms of student development been effective or not, why?
6. Do you see a need for student development in your institution?
7. How is student development managed in your institution?
8. Does student development form as a centralized or decentralized form at your institution?
9. What has been the consequences of such a position (centralized or decentralized)?

## Appendix 5 - Permission Letters from Participating Institutions



Research Directorate

UMLAZI KWAZULU-NATAL  
PO Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban  
Tel: 031 907 7450

07 July 2022

REF: RDO/02/2022

Mr Simbongile Ntwasa  
Rhodes University

Dear Mr Ntwasa

**PROTOCOL: 'Student development programmes at Historically Black Universities in South Africa.'**

The MUT Research Ethics Committee considered your application at their meeting held on 01 July 2022. It is my pleasure to inform you that permission to conduct the research project above was granted.

The approval is valid for two years from 01 July 2022. Any changes to the project must immediately be brought to the attention of the MUT Research Ethics Committee.

Your acceptance of this approval denotes your compliance with South African National Research Ethics guidelines (2004) and the MUT Research Ethics Policy, Procedures and Guidelines

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A Mienie', is written over a horizontal line.

Dr A Mienie  
Director: Research

Date: 06<sup>th</sup> May 2022

**Simbongile Ntwasa**

Rhodes University

Department: Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL)

Email Address: simbongilentwasa@gmail.com

Dear **Simbongile Ntwasa**

**Permission to conduct Research at the University of Venda**

You are hereby granted permission to conduct research at the University of Venda.

The research will be based on your Doctoral research titled: **“Student Development Programmes at Historically Black Universities in South Africa.”** registered at the Rhodes University.

**Supervisor: Professor Sioux McKenna**

**Co-Supervisors: Prof. Chrissie Boughey, Dr Melanie Skead & Dr Temwa Moyo**

The conditions are that all the data pertaining to University of Venda will be treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles and that will be shared with the University upon completion of the project. In addition, consent should be sought by you as a researcher from participants.

Attached is our policy on ethics.

Thank you



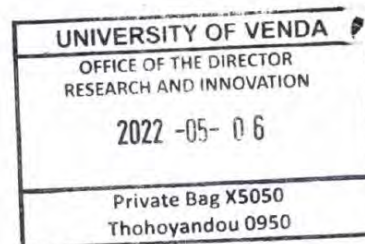
Prof VO Netshandama

**Chairperson: UREC**

Cc: Prof N Feza (DVC Research and Postgraduate Studies)

Cc: Senior Prof GE Ekosse (Director Research and Innovation)

Cc: Prof TS Mashau (Chairperson RESSC)





University of Fort Hare  
*Together in Excellence*

University of Fort Hare  
**OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR**

**Alice (Main) Campus:** Private Bag X1314, King William's Town Road, Alice, 5700, RSA  
Tel: +27 (0) 40 602 2501 • Fax: +27 (0) 40 602 2577 • Email: akaturura@ufh.ac.za / registrar@ufh.ac.za  
**East London Campus:** Private Bag X9083, 50 Church Street, East London, 5201, RSA

5<sup>th</sup> August, 2022

**Simbongile Ntwasa**  
**Faculty of Education**  
**Rhodes university**

[simbongilentwasa@gmail.com](mailto:simbongilentwasa@gmail.com)

Supervisor: Prof Sioux McKenna: [s.mckenna@ru.ac.za](mailto:s.mckenna@ru.ac.za)

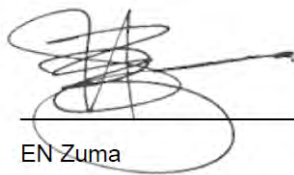
Dear Simbongile

**RE: Permission to Conduct Research at the University of Fort Hare.**

We have reviewed your request for permission to conduct research at the University of Fort Hare for a PhD in Education project on “**Student Development Programmes at Historically Black Universities in South Africa**”.

This letter serves to notify you that permission is hereby granted for you to carry out the research and to utilise the data for this project as laid out in

- your request for this gatekeeper's permission
- your research proposal
- your informed consent letter,
- the semi structured interview questions submitted, and
- in accordance with the stipulations under which ethical clearance for the study was issued by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Rhodes University.



EN Zuma

University Registrar



**UNIVERSITY OF  
ZULULAND**

University of Zululand, Private Bag X1001, KwaDlangezwa, 3886

**W:** [www.unizulu.ac.za](http://www.unizulu.ac.za)

**T:** +27 35 902 6434

**E:** [MothilalD@unizulu.ac.za](mailto:MothilalD@unizulu.ac.za)

**Office of the Registrar**

Our ref: Permit: 22/2022 30 May 2022  
Your ref:

### **PERMIT TO COLLECT DATA**

The University of Zululand hereby permits Simbongile Ntwasa to conduct research and collect data in accordance with his Ethics Clearance Certificate 2021-5328-6454 issued by the Rhodes University dated 9 December 2021, and UNIZULU's POPI Declaration and Indemnity form dated 24 May 2022.

The Researcher may commence with data collection from the date of this Permit. This permit is valid for 12 months from date of issue.

UNIZULU retains the right to withdraw or amend this permit if:

- Any unethical conduct is revealed or suspected;
- Relevant information has been withheld or misrepresented;
- Regulatory changes of whatsoever nature so require;
- The conditions contained in the Declaration has not been adhered to.

**D MOTHILALL  
REGISTRAR**



## UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

DEAR **Simbongile Ntwasa**

This serves as acknowledgement that you have obtained and presented the necessary ethical clearance and your institutional permission required to proceed with the project referenced below:

### RESEARCH TOPIC

Student Development Programmes at Historically Black Universities in South Africa

**Name of researcher** : Simbongile Ntwasa  
**Permission valid till** : 31 December 2022  
**Institution** : Rhodes University  
**Ethics reference** : 2021-5328-6454  
**Permission reference** : UWCRP873301

You are required to engage this office ([researchperm@uwc.ac.za](mailto:researchperm@uwc.ac.za)) in advance if there is a need to continue with research outside of the stipulated period. The manner in which you conduct your research must be guided by the conditions set out in the annexed agreement: Conditions to guide research conducted at the University of the Western Cape.

Please be at liberty to contact this office should you require any assistance to conduct your research or require access to either staff or student contact information.

Regards  
Dr Ahmed Shaikjee  
Deputy Registrar Academic Administration

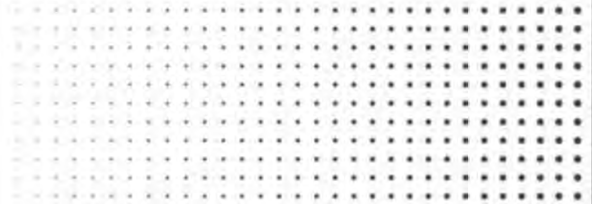
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**Approval status:** **APPROVED** 6 April 2022

To verify or confirm the authenticity of this document please contact the University at [researchperm@uwc.ac.za](mailto:researchperm@uwc.ac.za).



UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE  
Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, 7535, Republic of South Africa



**DIVISION OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AND RESEARCH  
DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION**

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*wakpan@wsu.ac.za*

*Buffalo City  
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EAST LONDON  
Tel: + 43 708 5444  
Fax: + 43 708 5458*

17 May 2022

Mr Simbongile Ntwasa  
Rhodes University  
Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning  
MAKHANDA  
6140

Dear Mrs Sikuza

**Gatekeepers Permission Letter to conduct research at Walter Sisulu University**

**Ethical Clearance Number:** 2021-5328-6454

**Institution:** Walter Sisulu University

A Gatekeeper Letter is hereby granted for the study "**Student Development Programmes at Historically Black Universities in South Africa**" provided that copies of your completed study will be submitted to the Campus Rector of the campus in which the study will be conducted and the Directorate of the Research & Innovation.

All data pertaining to Walter Sisulu University will be treated confidentially and you are required to abide by ethical principles at all times. It is your responsibility to seek consent from participants.

Kind regards Directorate: Research Development

WALTER SISULU UNIVERSITY  
PRIVATE BAG X1 MTHATHA 5117  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA  
TEL: +27 47 502 2137 FAX: +27 47 502 2185

**Prof W Akpan**  
Senior Director: Research & Innovation