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Rethinking social spaces in higher education: exploring undergraduate student experience in a selected South African university

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ABSTRACT

Core debates in Higher Education are largely centred on the issues of formal access vis-à-vis epistemic access. In South Africa, universities have managed the issue of formal access that is, by focusing on merely attaining entry into university without much of epistemic access (Cross 2004; CHE, 2010). Following Morrow (2009), there is currently, a growing interest in Higher Education about epistemological access that entails becoming a member of the academic practice, student achievement and eventual success. This interest seems to have been necessitated in part by the growing diversity of student composition in universities.

As formal access broadens as a result of university transformation, it is not being matched with student success since it is accompanied by difficulties in adaptation especially 'non-traditional students' as they are known in South Africa. Like other institutions in the country, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is confronted with the dilemma of poor results which the students, particularly the undergraduates, achieve and the difficulties linked to their academic failure or success. Insomuch as the universities and, in particular Wits, have the onus to provide a rich and nurturing academic, social and cultural environment that promotes student achievement through non-discrimination, it is crucial to know how the student makes the best of this.

Most of the current studies on student experiences emphasise formal access and epistemic access without paying particular attention to campus experiences leading to student social and academic development. The studies are about what institutions do and what students should do to achieve epistemic access without taking into consideration the contribution of student campus life. The problem with this is that the campus is changing. It is increasingly becoming an extension of the classroom: a social learning space. This study explored epistemic access vis-à-vis campus experiences. The study used a qualitative case study approach to explore the ways in which undergraduates students experience their lives on campus and what meaning they make of such experiences to position themselves for success in their early years of study. The qualitative approach allows me to elicit answers to address the 'why' question of student experiences which is scant in previous studies (CHE, 2010). Specifically, the study seeks to obtain comprehensive information about the interactions between the university environment and the student's ways of involvement in the university's campus experience in so far as their achievement is concerned.

While it is extremely difficult to determine the specific forms of interface between campus life and student achievement, the study shows that as the university campus is increasingly turning into a

dynamic learning space where the interplay of institutional interventions and peer support influences development, it has become a critical component of the university goals and project. There is a shifting configuration of the campus spaces into an essential social learning space for student academic and social development. Within this pattern, learning communities emerge as a consequence of individual, collective and, in some cases, institutional agency. This requires a new approach particularly at a time when these trends are being precipitated by the extension of classroom practice into campus via Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). What has emerged from this study is of value to the university in understanding the campus complexity and suggesting specific spaces which require institutional mediation to maximise student agency and promote student development. I argue that what is perhaps needed is turning campus social spaces into social learning spaces that are flexible; where activities are delineated with and through students as creators of their spaces. There is need for the university to examine and understand students' actions on campus in order to arrive at suitable institutional mediation.

In this study, I propose a model from the emerging issues. The Achievement-Space Linkage (ASL) Model shows the interconnectedness of spaces that influence student achievement. Though fluid in nature, the model comprises of spaces that shape student campus experiences as experiences develop within them. This model could serve as an analytical tool to understand campus experiences and seek to move institutions forward.

Keywords: student experience; achievement; campus experiences; campus spaces; undergraduate students; campus spaces.