



## What kind of people have we formed in our university graduates?

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Going to university: The influence of higher education on the lives of young South Africans

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Globalisation has had an enormous impact on all who work or study in higher education today. Discourses constructing the role of universities as providers of the ‘knowledge workers’ needed to fuel the global economy have impacted on the expectations of students, on the curricula with which they engage, on the work of academic staff as well as on the ‘management teams’ that now make key decisions. Other discourses, associated with what is widely termed ‘New Public Management’, focus our attention on efficiency and accountability. Of course, state-funded universities need to be accountable and efficient, especially in a country like South Africa where the demands on the public purse are many and, often, desperate. Problems arise, however, when efficiency and accountability discourses lose sight of the fact that higher education involves human beings. When this happens, we focus on the ‘production of outputs’, where the term ‘output’ refers not only to artefacts such as publications in the form of journal articles and books but to the young people passing through our universities.

In all this, *Going to University*, authored by Jenni Case, Delia Marshall, Sioux McKenna and Disa Mogashana, offers a very different understanding of what our universities can do and of the experiences of their students. The book does this through drawing on 73 in-depth interviews with students. All of the student participants in the study had entered one of three universities – the University of Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape or Rhodes University – in 2009. By the time the research project on which the book is based began in 2015, 6 years had passed. The vast majority of interviewed students had succeeded in attaining degrees. These were not always the degrees they had imagined when they enrolled and not always at the university at which they began their academic careers. Some had ‘dropped out’ – victims of the ‘attrition’ that causes so much alarm and which occupies many individuals, particularly ‘managers of teaching and learning, with finding solutions. However, what the book does, and what the ‘big data’ of cohort analyses never could do, is illuminate the richness of the experience of these individuals in a way which ultimately must give us hope and which offers a very different perspective on the gloomy picture most often presented of our higher education system.

The problem of ‘attrition’, or ‘dropping out’, is often associated with concepts such as ‘wastage’. The book reveals very clearly that the lives of the young people participating in the study who dropped out of university certainly were not ‘wasted’. The interviews show that the experience of being in a university gave these young people confidence, allowed them to draw on networks they otherwise would not have accessed and, in cases in which they wanted to, the means to eventually complete a degree at another institution.

Although the book is very accessible to a wide range of readers, it is not ‘light’ on theory. The authors draw on complex theory, more specifically the work of Archer<sup>1</sup>, in the design of their small-scale study based on in-depth interviews. While the use of this theory is rigorous, it is never intrusive to the reader, not least because details of the methodological approach are included as an appendix rather than as a chapter that ‘interrupts’ the stories. Some of the theory used to support analyses and explanations of the data – most notably in the area known as the ‘sociology of knowledge’ including, for example, the work of Bernstein<sup>2</sup> and Maton<sup>3</sup> – is notoriously difficult to access. However, the use of interview data to illuminate concepts (for example, that the way knowledge is structured in different disciplinary areas can make progress in the humanities different from that in the sciences), means that the book functions as an extremely useful resource for the increasing number of postgraduate students using this type of theoretical approach.

Other merits notwithstanding, what makes the book especially significant at this time in our history is the hope it offers. This review began by pointing to the pessimism surrounding higher education in South Africa, a phenomenon which was arguably exacerbated by the student protests of 2015 and 2016. Although the protests elicited very negative reactions from many sectors, the protesters’ descriptions of their experiences in our universities as ‘suffering’ has to make us think about what is going wrong and what is going right. *Going to University* shows us that we are getting some things right as well as what we could do to make things better.

In the context of all the negativity around higher education, perhaps most important is the authors’ response to a question they ask at the end of the book: ‘What kind of people have we formed in our university graduates?’

Their response is that, according to their study, the young people who have been through our universities ‘...are independently minded and socially progressive. They are getting traction in their careers and they are acting with thoughtfulness and responsibility. They are thinkers and they mostly engage critically with the world and their place in society. Many are aware of inequalities in society and of their own experiences of privilege.’

*Going to University* is important reading for anyone who cares about higher education in South Africa. The fact that the book is published by African Minds and, thus, is open access is but one more reason for it to be read widely.

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