

How class and social capital affect university students

March 6 2018, by Sioux Mckenna



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There's a great deal of comfort to be had in the idea that success at university is primarily or exclusively the result of a student's hard work. All that's needed is for students to do their best and fairness will prevail. Students who don't apply themselves will fail. End of story.

Or is it?

A far more complex picture of [student](#) success and failure has emerged from [a study](#) tracking the influence of [higher education](#) on young people's lives. We worked with 73 people who first registered for a BA or BSc six years before the data was collected. They had pursued these degrees at three South African research-intensive universities.

Many of the participants shared a strong sense that their university years had provided them with access to powerful knowledge. They felt better able to act in ways aligned to their values and goals. But not all had been able to attain this overwhelmingly positive experience equally. Social class – as well as a range of other factors in the institutions themselves – played a huge role in people's experiences of accessing and succeeding in higher education, and then getting into the workplace.

Those from impoverished rural settlements or towns, or from peri-urban townships, experienced far more significant hurdles than their urban, middle-class counterparts. This was in part about connections: middle-class, urban students were able to draw on networks before, during and after university. So they tended to enjoy shorter, smoother routes through the institution.

This finding is neither new, [nor specific to South Africa](#). The study refutes common sense explanations of higher education success and failure that continue to dominate in our [universities](#). These understand higher education success to be predominantly a function of attributes inherent in the individual. Failure is understood to result from the student's [lack of such attributes](#).

Similarly, common sense explanations [conceptualise universities](#) as being acultural, apolitical spaces where people acquire skills. This maintains the fiction that higher education is a [meritocracy](#) which fairly

rewards individual students' hard work, motivation, "language skills" and intelligence.

Our data shows the institutional culture, the curriculum structure, teaching and learning approaches, and family support and relatives' own knowledge of how universities work all played a role in students' making their way through the system.

Our findings raise a number of concerns for institutions – and individuals – who would like to see fair opportunities for young people wanting to advance their education.

Family support

In South Africa, as in similar economies, it is a huge investment for a family to have a [young person](#) who is not earning for a number of years after school, and who might also add costs to the household during this period.

The families of some of the participants were able to manage this investment. Some funded their studies through a combination of resources from bursaries, family, or part-time work.

Others, though, came from families with absolutely no financial flexibility and were frequently in financial crisis. This pressure took a toll on the students' academic progress. Even those who had some funding from the [National Student Financial Aid Scheme](#) struggled: they had no safety net for any crisis. It took a great deal of energy to manage their basic financial requirements.

But the extent to which the family was able to foster aspirations and engage with the young person's deliberations and choices was perhaps even more important than financial support.

The data showed that having people with whom to discuss their decisions played a very important role in participants' higher education journey. This meant having informed people – not necessarily graduates themselves – to talk through their choices.

For instance, a young person might not get access to their first choice of university, and could turn to relatives for discussions and alternative ideas. A more challenging experience for some participants was when they failed academically in their chosen degree and had to figure out a new course of action.

Much of this kind of understanding came from another family member's experience of going to university. But it was also closely tied to [cultural capital](#): [social class](#) played [a significant role](#). The transition to the expectations of the university, to its peculiar and discipline specific knowledge making practices for example, is difficult for all students. But access to these powerful knowledge practices is uneven and it is a disservice to pretend [otherwise](#).

The social side of university life was also enormously important to these [young people](#), as might be expected. Fitting in, making friends and experiencing campus life were often mentioned. Students from less well-off families sometimes struggled, feeling they had to keep up with more affluent friends in a materialistic culture.

Cohesion

How can prospective students from settings where [family](#) members or teachers do not have the cultural capital related to university study get support in making decisions? And how can universities assist in attending to these needs once they have made their way into higher [education](#)?

While universities can't attend to all societal problems, the data would suggest that institutions have some role to play in forging social cohesion among their own staff and student body.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How class and social capital affect university students (2018, March 6) retrieved 19 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-class-social-capital-affect-university.html>

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