

MAKING SENSE OF THE TRANSITIONAL MAELSTROMS OF PART-TIME STUDENTS AND THEIR CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING AS MEDIATED BY CONTEXTUAL DOMAINS OF WORK, FAMILY AND SELF. A CASE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE, PART-TIME, POLITICAL STUDIES STUDENTS AT A UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA.

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Abstract

The traditional trajectory of young students in higher education in South Africa is currently under sharp scrutiny and the general provision is considered to be inadequate in terms of quality, diversity and quantity. There is a proposal to increase the participation rate of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 from 16% (in 2011) to 23% by 2030 (DHET, 2012). Already, the increase in access to young school leavers without the concomitant resource allocation has resulted in the inability of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) to continue to provide access to 'non-traditional' working adults in some of its programmes. The large classes for young undergraduates, the necessary foundation/support programmes to assist under-prepared school leavers, recent demands to increase postgraduate study output and to publish are related pressures influencing the decisions to limit undergraduate part-time studies for adult learners.

To address this 'dilemma' an action research project was launched to introduce lifelong learning opportunities that are conceptualised and provided in flexible ways. The intention is to challenge both the university and workplaces to interrogate understandings and approaches to professional development and to support innovation that will enhance successful access and success for working people. The Political Studies department at UWC is one of the pilot sites for the action research and initial reflections on the challenge to introduce flexible modes of teaching and learning revealed that the attempts may be constrained by prevailing conceptions of the trajectories of part-time students. Instead of the traditional, linear transition into higher education – normally associated with younger learners – trajectories for mature adult learners are less linear, more complex, and include 'stop-outs' and discontinuities within transitions (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012).

This paper describes the national transitional context of higher education in South Africa and the precarious location of working adults studying at UWC within this context. It further explores the transitional maelstroms as shared by a sample of part-time Political Studies students; it considers the roles and influence of the contextual domains of work, family and self; and examines the implications for mature students, their workplaces and the Political Studies department at the university.

Introduction

Education and training provision in South Africa continues to be in a state flux. The post-1994 education policy deliberations set the scene for a de-racialised unitary education system in the form of The National Education Policy Act of 1996 (DoE, 1996). This was followed by a policy for higher education in South Africa that articulated intentions to supply high level skills for the labour market, generate knowledge that would be of social and economic benefit and to develop critical citizens (DoE, 1997). Carrim and Wangenge-Ouma (2012) highlight some of the key pieces of legislation introduced to facilitate to opening of access to learning in higher education.

Reforms and other change initiatives in the HE system have since been informed and guided by three additional key documents: The National Commission on Higher Education report (NCHE, 1996), Education White Paper 3: A programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (DoE, 1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (MoE, 2001).

These legislative interventions resulted in the historically racially (differentiated) based 36 higher education institutions being reduced to 11 'traditional' universities offering mainly degree programmes with a strong research focus; 6 'comprehensive' universities offering a combination of academic and career-oriented programmes and 6 universities of technology, formally known as technikons that offer certificates, diplomas or degrees in technology, and lead students more directly into a career. These changes involved institutional mergers, restructuring of programme mix and reorientation of academic identities for most institutions. Besides the restructuring of the higher education landscape, the government established a National Skills Authority in March 2000, under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour, designed to increase investment in skills development. This was accompanied a National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS I) entitled 'Skills for productive citizenship for all'. A second National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS II) followed in 2005 entitled 'Skills for sustainable growth, development and equity'. Sector Education and Training Authority (SETAs) were established to implement the NSDS and to take responsibility for the development of appropriate skills in their sectors. Sectors are made up of economic activities that are linked and related, for example the banking sector, the transport sector and the chemical industries sector. For purposes of planning and managing the delivery of training, the economy was divided up into 25 sectors (currently consolidated into 23) each of which had its own SETA. The SETAs cover both public and private sectors. A third National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS III - 2010) was launched by the newly created Ministry of Higher Education and Training – an integration of higher and further education into one department, separated from the department of basic (school) education.

This development is particularly relevant for this paper because it signalled a clear intent to strengthen the relationship between colleges, universities, Sector Education Training Authorities as well as employers. The shift of the skills strategy from the labour ministry to that of higher education also indicated a shift away from workplace learning to institutional learning, particularly in so far as full qualifications were

concerned. The NSDS III gave prominence to public colleges, universities of technology and universities so that quality provision could be made accessible to many more learners, especially those who cannot afford market-linked (private institutions) fees.

Despite these and other initiatives, the Green Paper on Post-School Education (2012) laments that:

The system continues to produce and reproduce gender, class, racial and other inequalities with regard to access to educational opportunities and success. ... Equally important, the post-school system is not meeting the needs of the economy and society as a whole. (DHET, 2012, p. x)

Un- and underemployment levels remain unacceptably high. South Africa spends more on education than most developing countries (estimated at 20% of GNP) but the education system performs worse than comparable countries in maths, science and literacy and, according to a cohort study by Letseka (2009), there is a 50% dropout rate of students entering higher education institutions. Lack of finance, under-preparedness, institutional cultures and personal and family reasons were the primary factors recorded in that study. The prevailing poor performances of the education system indicate a disjuncture between policy aspirations and implementation. However, there is a growing realisation that there is no single education system in South Africa. It is a misnomer to speak of an average South African student because some (75%, majority black) occupy a system that is partly dysfunctional and others (mainly white) occupy a highly functional system and their performances on any given measure would concur, that is, 75% would perform below average and 25% would perform well above average. It is in this highly transitive higher education environment that mature, working adults in this study are attempting 'improve themselves', gain access to 'promotion opportunities' or as preparation to search for 'better economic opportunities' elsewhere. They generally do this with variable success, leading Buchler et al (2007) to argue for a study on the extent to which macro- economic and political factors continue to prescribe the demographics of adult participation and success in higher learning.

The mature, working learners in this study bring with them their adult responsibilities of economic sustainability, family and community commitments. They bring complex life experiences to the learning environments and their time is often very constrained. Most of them left full-time education for other roles such as parenthood, providers, care-givers or workers. The majority in this study are also first-generation university entrants, meaning that their parents never attended institutions of higher education. They speak many languages and English, the language of instruction, is often not their first language.

Working Students' Transition into Higher Education

Working adults' decision to undertake part-time studies is influenced by and informed by numerous factors. They need to ensure that work, family and finances support their decision. These factors will also have differential effects because, as Osman and Castle (2006) maintain, adult learners do not form a homogeneous group. Adult learners can be further distinguished by age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, and past educational experience, among others. Typically (at UWC at least) all part-time undergraduate degree students, post-graduate students, occasional students and adults who participate in non-accredited, short courses are categorised as part-time students. Osman and Castle (2006, p. 511) suggest that this 'blurred' typology is forced upon institutions to accommodate the existing funding formula that rewards 'full-time equivalents' in the main.

The question of who counts as a student becomes a key issue when links between student numbers (typically full-time equivalent students or FTEs, in credit bearing courses) and funding formulas are considered. ... Present formulas suppress the fact that what may be reported and counted as only one full-time student may in actuality be three part-time adult students each of whom has diverse interests and unique needs in relation to institutional support.

They cite Cross (1981) who identified the 'factors' above as barriers or obstacles part-time students face and classified them into three categories;

Situational barriers – arise because of the individual's life situation, and include issues such learners' work commitments, domestic responsibilities, as well as problems of child care, finance and transport. **Institutional barriers** include physical location, entry requirements, timetabling problems, as well as practices and procedures which hinder participation. **Dispositional barriers** are attributed to factors such as self-esteem, past experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs about learning. (Osman and Castle, 2006, p. 511)

These factors affect the transitions of mature learners into higher education and they are navigated differently by individual students depending on unique circumstances at any given time. There is a recognition that pathways to outcomes are non-linear and in most cases unique. Contrary to the generally accepted mantras that 'education leads to employment' and that the higher educated are more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, it is understood that the routes that individuals and social groups navigate through the education system, and the outcomes of those educational experiences are much more complex and multifaceted (Coffey, 2001). Here, there is agreement with Baruch (2006) who suggests that the days of predictable, secure and linear careers are long gone. Instead, the organisational system is now in a mode of all change, all dynamic, total fluidity; making careers unpredictable, vulnerable and multidirectional.

The study of Stevenson and Clegg (2012) on how adult learners orientate themselves to the future is particularly useful as they too question the notion of a 'neo-liberal subject who is able to create an individual trajectory in what are seen to be riskier employment futures requiring a flexible, dynamic, and future focused self.' Their focus on the representations of their participants and the interpretations, using an elaborated and expanded understanding of reflexivity, provides a framework for considering how personal values, beliefs, contexts and histories shape the lives of participants. They explain the different forms of reflexivity (drawing on the work of Archer, 2007) as;

Communicative reflexives – people who remain anchored in the natal social context of their birth families:

Autonomous reflexives – people who adopt strategic stances towards constraints and become socially upwardly mobile:

Meta-reflexives – people who are contextually incongruous: and

Fractured reflexivity – where people are unable to form and act on their central projects or cares. (Stevenson and Clegg, 2012)

They further maintain that debates within higher education privilege autonomous reflexivity and an orientation to the future as being obvious, awaiting and open. In the South African context, access, equity and success for adult learners are predicated by inefficiencies and contradictions. Prevailing inequalities in respect of race and gender enrolments in subject fields continue (DoE, 2001), as do disparities in fees charged by institutions for different courses. Making sense of transitions of adult learners is at the core of this study to enable the workplace(s), the academy and the worker-learners to understand how decisions, actions, policies, regulations, affordances, constraints and other navigational mechanisms contribute to and are connected to eventual outcomes for the learners.

Sense-Making Approach

This study is located within a pilot site of an ongoing Action Research project aimed at exploring flexible provisioning for part-time studies at the University of the Western Cape. The action research draws on Ghaye et al. (2008) who have elaborated the approach into what is called participatory and appreciative action and reflection (PAAR). This approach encourages; (i) the development of appreciative insight, an understanding of the root causes of success and the sustaining of strengths-based discourses ; (ii) collective learning through interconnectedness; (iii) the acceptance of more pluralistic view of ways of knowing and; (iv) the use of a reflective learning framework.

Existing gaps in our own understanding of the transitions of the Political Studies part-time students necessitated a methodological approach that would create an enabling

process, an invitational environment, collaborative space, generate 'appreciative insight' in line with PAAR and facilitative within the context we were working. A sense-making process that viewed participants as 'centred and decentred; ordered and chaotic; cognitive, physical, spiritual, and emotional; and potentially differing in all these dimensions across time and across space' as articulated by Dervin (1999), resonated with what was envisaged. A core assumption of sense-making is that of discontinuity. Discontinuity refers to gaps between entities, time and spaces; and as entities, individuals move through time and space dealing with other people, artefacts, systems, or institutions. It is the strategy that a person employs to bridge the gaps - making sense of – that is the central metaphor of the Sense-Making Approach (Spurgin, 2006). The sense-making approach requires researchers to acknowledge the experiences, theories, hunches, opinions and biases they bring to the research domain. It assumes that participants are experts of their own experiences and have opinions and theories of their own. Researchers must therefore take care to elicit the theories as articulated by the participants and include this in the analysis of findings and in the final report.

Brenda Dervin is credited by Weick, Duffy (1995), and, Ford (2004) as the originator of the sense-making approach. The approach however, draws on a range of theorists involved in sociological enquiry that sought to document everyday life using methods of ethnographic fieldwork and social surveys. Garfinkel (1999) used the term ethnomethodology as far back as 1967 to refer "to the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life." Elsewhere, Garfinkel (1986) distinguished ethno-methodological procedures from what he called 'constructive analytical approaches' to sociological enquiry, by citing ethnomethodology's procedure of 'indifference';

By formal structures we understand everyday activities (a) in that they exhibit upon analysis the properties of uniformity, reproducibility, repetitiveness, standardization, typicality and so on; (b) in that those properties are independent of particular production cohorts; (c) in that particular cohort independence is a phenomenon for members' recognition; and (d) in that the phenomena (a), (b), and (c) are every particular cohort's practical, situated accomplishment. (p. 167)

Scott (2011) reports that 'everyday life' enjoyed an 'absent presence' in sociology in the early twentieth century when the emphasis was on the grand narrative and enabling or disabling schemas. She further points to the post-modern era of mass media and the rise of social movements such as feminism, civil rights and gay pride that brought questions of identity and lifestyle difference to the forefront of political consciousness. These in turn interacted with new developing theoretical perspectives of everyday life, such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, structural functionalism and cultural studies.

Dervin (1989) similarly critiques the traditional approach to research where people are categorised by demographics, personality indicators, or cognitive style, assuming that people remain static across time and space. Such studies are considered tautological to the extent that, as a perspective, it may constitute an a priori assumption that is not tested within the research (Ford, 2004). In contrast;

Sense-Making focuses on the types of situations and gaps in which people find themselves at particular points in time-space, how people define those situations and gaps for themselves, the behaviors used to bridge gaps and make sense of situations, and the outcomes of bridging gaps and making sense. In this way, Sense-Making moves the analysis to a unit smaller than the person. The unit of interest is instead the situation, gap, or question as identified and described by the individual at a moment in time-space (Ford, 2004).

Dervin (2003) also outlines how a researcher is supposed to go about the sense-making process through the interviewing process. The sense-making interview, according to her, demands 'minimal intrusions and namings of the world by the interviewer. She proposes open-ended questions focused on allowing the respondent to communicate his/her process and that the entire interview should be constrained to the central query with its emphasis on time, space, movement, gap, power, history, constraint, outcome, repetition and change.

For the purposes of this study, the interview process as outlined by Dervin was interpreted as the interviewer respecting the respondents and knowing that the respondents/ participants have different values, beliefs and assumptions and can make sense from their own view points. To this end, the Free Attitude Interview (Meulenbergh-Buskens, 1997) technique was employed to solicit the opinions, thoughts, and feelings in a non-directive manner. The structure for each interview was the same; each open question, e.g. tell me your reasons... what have been your experience ... what do you think...; was posed and thoroughly exhausted through 'feedback summaries', 'stimulating pauses', 'asking for clarification' and 'final summaries'. All the interviews were conducted at the places of work of the participants.

This was not the only 'departure' from the guidance outlined in the literature about the sense-making process. Since this study is located within a broader 'action research' project, as indicated earlier, there was a need to have more than a basic insight into the lives of the participants – Political Studies part-time students. A survey questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic data – most of the latter is available on the university management information system (MIS) – however, additional data such as mode of transport, access to technology, employment status, type of employment, reasons for undertaking studies and more was accessed through this instrument. The questionnaire was administered to all students attending class. This may seem as a contradiction to the critique of 'traditional

approach to research' by Dervin (1989), but the questionnaire provided an opportunity to explain the overall research project to the students present, for them to ask questions and to invite volunteers to participate in interviews and other research initiatives.

Following the Sense-Making Process

All the part-time 'undergraduate' students registered - year I to III - in the Political Studies Department are included in the overall action research study. The staff and researcher are also aware that initiatives aimed at part-time students will invariably affect the full time students because the same staff members and tutors are involved in both full- and part-time courses. The staff members, 5 full-time and 2 contract staff members, plan collaboratively and each lecturer is aware of what is being done/ completed/ assessed in parallel courses, courses prior to theirs and those following on from their courses. In this study the focus was on the first year part-time undergraduate students only. The questionnaire instrument, designed to gather data about the first years, has subsequently been redesigned and modified for use with 2nd and 3rd year part-timers as well as full-time students. However, this study reports on data gathered from the first year, part-time class where (in 2013) 36 students were registered to attend. 27 Students were in attendance on the night the questionnaire was administered 9 were absent. After completing the questionnaire the students were able to ask questions about the specific and general action research studies and 8 volunteered to be interviewed at a later stage.

Findings from the questionnaire:

Of the 27 (100%) who responded, 63% are male and 37% female: 59% (16) indicated that they are single, 33% (9) married and 8% (2) divorced. The age-categories revealed were; age 18-25, 7%; age 26-33, 44%, age 34-41, 33%, and age 42-49, 16%. 85% are in full-time employ, 7% part-time, 1 person is self-employed and another, unemployed seeking work. The mode of transport used to travel to the campus was indicated as 77% using own car, 7% get lifts from others and 13% use public transport. The distances they stay from the campus were indicated as follows; 22% within 10km radius, 18% within 15km, 16% within 20km and 44% more than 20km from the campus. Twelve of them, 44%, indicated that they are paying for their studies, 18% have bursaries and 38% are being funded by their employers.

The following options were given as reasons for undertaking studies. Respondents could select any or as many as they deemed fit. The percentages indicate the 'popular choices'.

To be better skilled at current work responsibilities: 63%

Develop skills for workplace promotion opportunities: 59%

Requirement as part of employment contract: 8%

As preparation to search for better opportunities: 44%

To improve my business: 4%

To improve myself- personal growth: 30%

Other: 0%

Since an aspect of the flexible provisioning involved technology, the questionnaire included items related to access the students have to different types of technology that is, off-campus. Most, 59%, have access to a desktop computer – exclusively for own use; 13% have access but it is shared with others, 11% have limited or inconvenient access and 8% have no access at all. The exclusive use of a laptop computer is enjoyed by 51% of the respondents, 11% share a laptop with others and 38% have no access to a laptop computer. 33% indicated that they have access to broadband or wireless networks but the rest do not have access off-campus.

Most of the participants (89%) are enrolled for the B. Administration degree; the others are doing the B. Commerce degree. They provided the following job descriptions that represent what most of them are currently employed as: Office Administrator, Administration Clerk, Admin Officer, Finance Officer, Executive Personal Assistant, Supervisor, Data Capturer, Debtors Clerk, ICT Officer, and Director (self-employed). They work for the City, the Province, Parliament, the Police, at the Universities, a few private companies, and one has his own business.

Interview process(es) and findings;

When the questionnaire was administered, a desire/need was expressed to interview individuals more in-depth and volunteers were called upon to make themselves available. The entire group – those present – was assured that the sharing would be confidential, they would receive a list of questions before-hand and that the interviews would occur at their places of work at a mutually agreed time. Eight (8) people volunteered and provided their contact details. One student did not respond to repeated requests to set up an appointment, resulting in only seven (4 Males and 3 Females) interviews being conducted. They will be identified as M1 to M4 and F1 to F3 hereon.

The first question, or rather the invitation to share their reasons for embarking on further studies, without asking 'why', allowed respondents to decide where and how to start their narratives.

I have always wanted to be a medical doctor, since I was a little girl growing up in the rural Eastern Cape. In our village the doctor was the highest

qualified person and he was very caring, he helped lots of people. That was what I wanted to be ...[F1]

Well, for personal development, but I am aware that there are better opportunities and better paying jobs here at the university. I want to make use of those opportunities. If I don't get it here but I am qualified, I can go somewhere else. [M1]

I want to empower myself because education wasn't in the foreground for my family when I grew up. My parents didn't finish school and my eldest brother was the first to finish matric. My children must look up to me as an example. [F2]

I was told by my manager that I had to do something about my qualifications. The company wants to develop staff and give them opportunities – I would not have bothered if he had not approached me – and they are paying as well. [M2]

[F1] started her narrative by sharing her dreams and aspirations as a child growing up in a rural village where there was no access to electricity and she and her siblings had to fetch water for daily consumption. She continued her story by linking ongoing study and the improvement of her qualifications to that of putting her in a better position to serve her community – her community being the poor and marginalised. [M1] is more forward looking and aware of available opportunities, be they within his current environment or elsewhere. [F2]'s retrospection spurs her on to correct a past 'wrong' by 'foregrounding' the importance of education for the sake of her children. [M2] on the other hand seems externally motivated and is going along with the unfolding staff development policy at work. More interpretation of the sharing will follow later but at this point it is important to highlight – and this was the case with all the responses – the different starting points the respondents selected. When asked to share challenges they faced as part-time students they shared the following;

Time constraints, man, I struggle to handle the deadlines. I have to steal time from my sleeping time. I cannot be seen to slack off at work to focus on my assignments and it is almost as if the guys at work, all the guys man, are watching me. You see, some of these older guys will never study, they are too old. Now they see this youngster doing his degree at a university. I have to pull my weight at work otherwise they complain. [M3]

Traveling to campus is my biggest problem. The public transport is terrible. I am late for class most of the time. Sometimes I just go straight home, ja, I skip class. [M2]

My job requires me to travel, not often but I end up missing classes then I must catch up and I don't understand the work. I cannot say no to the field

trips, I like the work and the professors appreciate having me on the trips. My one colleague is very jealous because I get complimented about my work all the time. [F3]

All the sharing highlights the disjuncture in work and study lives experienced by the participants. While [M2] raises the issue of transport as a major challenge, it should be added that he has a similar problem with getting to work. He lives very close to the university and travelling to and from his workplace requires changing modes of public transport – a train and bus or taxi. When asked what support, if any they get from/at work;

Support? My supervisor demands 150% from me. She is completely threatened. I am not allowed to talk about studies. She feels it is unfair that the university is paying for my studies. I can't wait for her to retire. [F3]

Our company policy does not allow you to access private emails. All private emails are blocked and all websites visited are monitored centrally. I cannot access the university website from here. I try to get emails on my cellphone but it is difficult. [M2]

We have a formal policy regarding study leave. I come in earlier so that I can leave early to get to class on time and we get 10 days per annum to attend class and another 10 for study and examination purposes. [M4]

I get help with tuition fees, but not books but I discovered you can claim some expenses if you need to buy something for your studies. But sometimes it is very stressful you know. Because you sign that document for the bursary but if you fail you have to pay the money back. So after a few years you decide not to study anymore and then you still earn the same money but now they deduct that 'loan' from your pay and you get less. It's a gamble. But I will succeed. [M1]

By chance (not design), all the volunteers interviewed are being funded by their respective employers. The 'double edge sword' metaphor comes to mind when considering the affordances and constraints raised by the interviewees. The same company that encourages staff development and invests financially in the process has a formal policy that limits the ability of staff to engage with their 'development'. The financial incentive at the beginning of the 'journey' can become a financial burden if the student does not succeed. The interviewees were also asked to reflect on the effects on family life.

My children (two daughters) have busy schedules. I used to be able to assist with lifts and things. Now my husband and others must jump in. I also miss supporting them when they perform in their sports or other school activities. [F2]

I worry when my children are sick. At least, I now have medical aid but I am always stressed when one of them is ill. My brother works shifts, so sometimes he is there to look after them but it is very stressful. [F1]

The two respondents reported 'a loss' at least in desired connection with their children. It is also ironic that [F2] is engaging in further education to be an example to her children but in the process has to disengage from the educational process of her daughters. The male respondents generally indicated that they manage to work around family concerns and the other female is single with family living in a different part of the country.

Making Sense of the Sharing

Each narrative had a different starting point. For some, the historical significance of present endeavours, is 'obvious' and the current activities are aimed at an envisioned 'alternate' future. They do however point to articulated 'gaps' or 'discontinuities' as suggested by Dervin (1989, 1999, 2003) and the pursuit of further studies is an attempt to fill the gap or bridge into a 'better' future. The act of studying on the other hand is creating other discontinuities such as spending less time with family and children, dealing with stress within the work environment and working under pressure to fulfil coursework requirements. The latter can be construed as expected 'sacrifices' in the journey embarked on by part-time students who have to juggle work, family as personal challenges in order to reach their final destination. Those who best manage the challenges will succeed. This 'journey' metaphor however, reinforces the linear pathways created by universities, where it is the sole responsibility of the student to navigate the standard set curricula that will lead to graduates enjoying highly successful lives in an equally accommodating social, economic and political environment. On the contrary, as evidenced by the different starting points in the narratives, the 'transitional maelstroms' of the participants reveal involvement in yet another 'expedition' requiring huge effort, through unfamiliar terrain, getting little support from workplaces – beyond providing the fees-, and engaging with higher education institutions who prefer to deal with young learners straight from school.

There is also an example of an autonomous reflexive, as shared by Stevenson and Clegg (2012), who has analysed the constraints and options available and identified the pursuit of further studies as the most logical action to attain future objectives. Being based at the same university where the studies are offered, supports the decision, minimises the risks and enhances the chances of success. The different modes of reflexivity, communicative, autonomous, meta- and fractured, do not comfortably accommodate the individual who appears to be 'externally motivated' to engage in further studies. The fact that he has made the decision and is engaged in the activity, with a penchant to skip classes if the transport system lets him down, point to a kind of 'deferred/referred- reflexivity' where the locus of control, the agency and accountability are external.

The 'skipping of classes' is also not the habit of one student. The 75% class attendance during the administering of the questionnaire can be considered exceptional as the average attendance for part-time classes ranges between 40% and 50%. Part-time students skip classes generally to balance work/family demands with the academic challenges associated with studies. Those attending, more often than not, arrive late and some have to leave early because of their transport arrangements.

Workplace policies related to individual/group further studies differ and students negotiate the policy affordances and constraints as best they can. One can expect workplace policies to be in line with national strategies and policies. The plethora of skills strategies (NSDS I to III), sector wide initiatives and various general economic policies have failed to galvanise both the public and private sectors toward the desired economic growth. The lack of economic growth has resulted in a slowdown of uptake of the unemployed into the economy and an inability of employers to meet the demands of organised labour. Some analysts believe that it is the lack of consensus that is causing a paralysis in policy implementation, particularly within higher education.

Policy is almost always mediated in the realm of implementation by political (discursive), economic (or structural), and institutional constraints. In South Africa there has never been a strong consensus in the HE community on the content of the new policy framework, with a high degree of discursive tension and competing interpretations that characterized the policy debates since 1990. (Kraak, 2004: 244)

The national skills development strategy (NSDS III, 2010) for example promotes the building of partnerships and improved linkages between universities, colleges, SETAs and employers

This includes promoting training to meet the needs of both public and private sector employers and increased university research collaboration with industry. Partnerships should also be extended to building international links as well as supporting the role of community partnerships in planning and delivering local employment and skills support services. (p.27)

In reality, the part-time student enters the university as an individual in pursuit of personal gain, completely delinked from his/her employment sector. The employers on the other hand can claim that they are in compliance with national policy by making the necessary resources available to students who must apply in their individual capacity. These individual students have to rely on 'hard work and dedication' and 'determination and confidence' (February and Koetsier, 2007) to ensure success in their studies. If past trajectories of part-time students are considered (Watters et al. 2007) then 42% of the current students will fail to complete their studies.

The eventual 'sense' emerging from the sharing is one of a lottery. The lottery spinning balls image represents the maelstrom experienced by part-time students as they attempt to balance the competing demands of work, family, studies and personal lives. As with the lottery, success with studies is possible, it depends on the individual efforts. In this scenario, the lottery system – the set of balls, the numbers, the spinning wheels, the announcers are independent tools and arbiters of good fortune, above reproach and custodians of good and widely acceptable practice. Similarly, the workplaces, the universities and the related policies are the custodians for the part-time students' good futures. The fact that 42% will end up out-of-pocket and worse off than when they started is not calculated in this neo-liberal framing of 'skills development'.

Concluding Sense Making

For purely pragmatic purposes the University of the Western Cape has had to adapt its part-time curriculum delivery to suit both staff and students. The part-time curriculum is considered 'equivalent' to that of the full-time curriculum and subject to the same assessment criteria. However in practice, the same content is delivered using less time. A full-time student has 2 (two) lectures of 45/50 minutes, plus a tutorial session of 50 minutes per week, and a part-time student must attend one two hour session to cover the same content for the week- the tutorial is included. There is simply not enough time during a day to replicate full-time provisioning.

Employers need to be aware that as part-time students, their employees are being accommodated and treated differently to full-time students. There is an expectation that as mature learners they are more responsible, more capable, more motivated and more dedicated than full-time, younger learners. Whatever the veracity of the expectations, in reality, the mature learners must cope with more responsibilities, more demands, more pressure and more contextual concerns than their younger counterparts. They have less access to available support services, are subject to the same psychological, physiological, and sociological challenges but more often also carry the economic burden of other family members.

The affordances offered by both employers and the university relate to the principle of 'access'. The employers provide the funding and the university structures its programme so that the employees can be accommodated. The 'equity/redress' principle is sorely neglected and employees/students are treated as homogenous entities left to deal with unique challenges on their own. This affects the principle of 'success' that becomes a lottery instead of the natural outcome of a thoroughly prepared process. In their own study of access, equity and success for adult learners in higher education, Buchler et al. (2007) suggest that deep transformation is required from the micro teaching/learning relationships, to the meso organisational cultures, to the macro provincial and national environments. Workplace policy can be transformed by an acute awareness of multiple, possible challenges faced by mature students embarking on further studies. The university on the other hand should similarly focus on teaching and learning strategies that will facilitate engagement, enhance the learning process, and enable success for the mature learners. The

adult learners should also be made aware, through a reflective process, of the challenges, their own abilities, of available resources and their limitations. Making sense of the transitions of mature learners is an important step in the problem analysis process for considering flexible provisioning for this group of learners.

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