

The 'nervous conditions' of neo-liberated higher education students

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Abstract

To the newly liberated citizens of South Africa, a higher education (HE) qualification in 1994 represented both a means to a prosperous end, and a hope-filled end in itself. Whichever party has managed to achieve political victory two decades later, the current South African HE situation remains one that requires critical thought and accurately applied resources from both the victors and others, because in failed HE there can be no victors. HE fails when an abnormally high number of students either fail or withdraw from their studies prematurely and involuntarily. This article aims to redefine the HE mainstream by presenting a window into the hope-taken, hope-lost, hope-deprived realities of a particular HE student body; their *nervous condition*. The majority of students enrolled at transforming higher education institutions (HEIs) hail from despairing socio-economic contexts. Desperation defines the neo-mainstream. Universities embarking on a hope-generating road terminate that same hope should they remain either ill-informed about, or non-sympathetic towards real-life situations of neo-mainstream students.

Keywords: higher education, main stream, nervous conditions, support, real-life situations, throughput

INTRODUCTION

'The devil votes DA,' remarks Hlongwane (2014, 1) satirically. Gramm (2001, 20) describes hopelessness as a 'hellish condition'. The devil's political affiliation then or now might be open for debate; the day-to-day consequences of the 'evil system of apartheid' (Katjavivind n.d.), and those keeping its practices alive then and now, are not. Higher education (HE) in 1994 marked, on a grand scale, the realisation of neo-liberatees' hopes and aspirations. It became both a means to a much-hoped-for prosperous end, and a hope-filled end in itself. Greater hope continues to turn to greater despair as many can either not gain access to mainstream higher education institutions (HEIs) or are forced to abandon their studies prematurely.

Jama, Mapesela and Beylefeld (2008, 993) report that the intent expressed by the Education White Paper 3 (DoBE 1997) was to see universities deliver not just more graduates, but more black and more female graduates in particular. They and others (Cross and Johnson 2008, 303) question whether HE can really deliver more designated graduates without accurate teaching and learning support, or without

empirical knowledge of their '*nervous condition*' (Dangarembga 1998). Gramm (2001, 22) states that '[t]he vehicle for ... multiple transformation must be hope [because] hope transfers need to deed'. Hopelessness, that *hellish condition*, is a condition essentially born of despair (Moltmann 2002), seldom of prosperity or boredom. Waghid (2008, 745) speaks of the need for conscientisation, which 'involves seeking to know, others and the [their] world'.

Before and immediately after 1994, there was hope that the newest democracy in Africa (SADET 2010) would be celebrated in many ways, most tangibly through access to jobs and education at all levels. For millions in South Africa, being employed, *per se*, and going to school or university, *per se*, represented the shift from liberation as an ideal (hope) to liberation operationalised (hope fulfilled). To families still awaiting their pioneer (first ever) university graduate, more sophisticated fruits of liberation, such as finding a job of choice and getting an education of choice were at the time 'the stuff miracles are made of'.

Currently, more and more pioneer students from the previously marginalised sectors of South African society are realising their hopes by becoming graduates first, and then life-long scholars, researchers and lecturers. At the same time, HEIs are the cause of major loss of hope as students join universities only to fall out during the first semester or at various stages of undergraduate study. These reasons are described by Bowman and Kearney (2011, 472) as ranging from the 'extremely life threatening' to those that are merely too challenging to endure. This while struggling to deal with the equally harsh realities of tertiary education, often far from home or other forms of support.

Universities are, therefore, challenged to create, revitalise and operationalise hope among potential graduates who, through suffocating real-life circumstances (hereafter, *nervous conditions*), are excluded from hope-realising opportunities. This article provides a critical, descriptive gaze at the *nervous conditions* of a particular population of South African HE students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data describing the *nervous conditions* of a particular population of HE students was captured through a convenience sample (Babbie 2001, 9). One hundred per cent of the total population of 270 students attended the researcher's classes for at least one semester. The students were conveniently accessible on the basis of their concentrated living in a captive setting, being forced to stay in institutional accommodation on campus. A voluntary return of 77 per cent of the total population was obtained. The survey was both quantitative and qualitative. The nature of the topic of this research lends itself towards a descriptive analysis rather than a purely quantitative analysis and report of results. Students' real lives constitute so much more than numbers and percentages; they are stories either revealed or to be uncovered through critical interpretation in the context of contemporary South African society at large.

WHAT UNIVERSITIES WANT

HEIs carry a dual responsibility. While they are potential gateways to realising students' hopes, they also foster their own 'hopes' and are often compelled to be quite clinical and pragmatic about attaining them. Their financial survival and institutional status depend on their success. For universities, the throughput (passing) rate of students cannot be at the expense of their more sophisticated, primary objective, which, according to Bowen, Schwartz and Camp (2013, 1) is to 'create, preserve, transmit and find new applications for knowledge'. As much as certificate throughput is a popular measure of a university's success (Sabatini 2009) and a reflection of graduate hopes realised, research output continues to be the dominant peer yardstick of a university's international status. Fortunately, in most contemporary HE spaces, graduate throughput and research output are no longer seen as opponents; the former is rather seen as a potential object of relevant research. HEIs now focus on improving graduate throughput and deepening graduate attributes, thus setting students up for using their first degrees as a launch pad for the more sophisticated objectives of universities, namely, research.

The problem remains the achievement of greater race, gender and ability based graduate throughput with a large body of students constantly subjected to factors potentially capable of terminating hope-by-graduation. HEIs that transform demographically without effecting an accurate, fitting, empathetic support or mitigation strategy do so at their own peril, and at the expense of thousands of hopeful students and their affiliated dependants. Leadership of HEIs requires empirical knowledge of what constitutes the hopeless, hope-stifling or hope-aborting realities of their particular neo-liberated student bodies to enable them to manage such students appropriately and empathetically.

The rector of a leading South African university in a keynote address at the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA) Conference (2010) remarked that, if the majority of a student body are from a despairing, deprived or struggling socio-economic context (abnormal society), then desperation and deprivation forms that institution's neo-mainstream. Consequently, abnormal measures are required to normalise HE education for millions of hopeful South Africans who, in spite of inclusive legislation and policy, in fact, remain excluded and without hope. As Freire (2006) has observed, after liberation more often than not much more is done for the previous haves (have-resources, have-access to money, have-health care, have-education, etc) and much less for the have-nots, and that a normalised political system seldom manages to socio-economically include the previously marginalised. This condition was confirmed by Archbishop Makgoba of Cape Town in an Anglican Church press release (2011) saying that the wealth gap in South Africa continues to widen, as shown by numerous finance-related incidents of student unrest every year. Universities have a shared responsibility to close this gap, and to normalise society before normal university life can be practised (Roberts 2011).

WHAT STUDENTS WANT

Students carry their own hopes and aspirations, and hold their own views of what the role of universities is in realising their hopes and dreams. The full quantum of their hopes and aspirations is difficult to determine. Hall (2011) for the Scottish Council for Research in Education aptly states: 'Students weigh the cost of studies against the benefits of studying, and when cost outweighs the benefits, they withdraw', either formally or psychologically. Simply passing (47.5 to 50%) rather than passing well (beyond 50%) is often the first and final objective for students who share rather fragile socio-economic backgrounds. Such students, often pioneer entrants, seek escape from an inheritance of poverty, unemployment, non-education and associated despair. Thus, merely obtaining a first degree is seen as the inflated *Wahrmacher* (Faix 2013) of hopes, an attainable escape from despair (Lewin 2010). Depth of performance and an extended post-graduate academic career are rarely *ab initio* objectives; they are often regarded as survival redundancies.

The measure of inflation of a first degree is directly proportionate to the perceived and real magnitude of this achievement in familial context. A first degree in a household of PhD parents carries much less prestige or effect than a first-ever degree in an extended family of educationally disenfranchised South Africans. However, the danger is that an extremely subjective experience of a relatively low academic achievement, a first degree, can lead to great disillusion when the real rewards following said achievement shortly after the cathartic fanfare of graduation do not meet the quantum of anticipated personal and extended familial returns. In real terms, examples abound of young graduates struggling to find jobs, *per se*, and high-paying jobs in particular, while non-graduates often appear to be 'better off'. Yet, obtaining a first degree in a country with a largely disparate educational history still remains a much desired and hoped for achievement. Whatever the motive or motivation, graduate throughput serves the interests of both students and their institutions of affiliation.

If education, *per se*, was the gate of exclusion that for generations kept the majority of South Africans from sharing in the spoils of the country, then HE or university access was the grand gate of exclusion. Consequently, primary and secondary education have to be the gateway, and HE the grand gateway to restoration, scaffolding for the restoration of humanity and pride for students emanating from poverty stricken and poorly schooled families. However, just as inherited wealth fosters further wealth, poverty inevitably succeeds in keeping the poor ... poor.

Students seek education either in view of finding a job, or in lieu of finding a job, as something useful to do while waiting upon employment. In some cases, HE studies even become the job. A study bursary, profoundly, sometimes provides a meagre temporary income, and serves as familial survival funds rather than the means of funding study material. This is proven by many students who, in spite of holding bursaries, still indicate financial constraints as a factor contributing to their failure. This condition is echoed by news reports that at a leading university 10 per

cent of its students regularly go without a daily meal (SABC 2012). South Africa remains a broken home from where potential graduates seek to find a passport to a degree certificate and the perceived realisation of an intact home and family.

SOUTH AFRICAN NERVOUS CONDITION'

Being employed remains the primary source of income and means of leading a reasonable life. South Africa's unemployment rate stood at 24.1 per cent in 2011 (StatsSA2011b). The inability of the South African economy to reduce this rate significantly is worrying (Soudien 2010), as it keeps millions of employable citizens and their families in the grip of poverty. Poverty pervades all aspects of a society to which any person belongs. Although more black Africans are currently entering the circle of the 'haves', as reflected through their acquisition of one of the crucial markers of socio-economic 'normalisation', namely property (Press 2014), the proportions remain askew. The 2011 General Household Survey (StatsSA 2011a) paints a rather disconcerting picture of the South African have and have-not reality from which students are likely to hail. More than 40 per cent of South Africans rely on state grants as a means of income; most South African residents do not have home insurance; around 4.3 million adults, mostly black Africans, live in squatter dwellings or similar informal housing; and there are on average 4.8 people per black South African household. Only 19 per cent of households in the highest income group (R750k+) belong to blacks (by inclusive definition) even though, '[g]rowing from a low base, the number of black households in the highest income group grew dramatically during the past decade' (Masemola and De Jongh 2009). If, according to a Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA) report (2011, 97–98), 'measures of income inequality do not alter significantly over time in either direction', HEIs will have their work cut out to manage the real-life situation (hereafter, *nervous condition*) of a student body that is materially and educationally both fragile and volatile. Inequality inevitably leads to different, often conflicting, expectations. Sporadic campus unrest over recent years, especially on campuses with socio-economically diverse student bodies, is no surprise. For students from fragile households, in Orwellian idiom (2006, 112), access to HEIs is, in fact, for some 'more equal than others'.

Kamoche, Debrah. Horwitz and Muuka (2004) regard black (South) African society as one characterised by extended family responsibilities, patriarchy, and mostly collectivist practices, that is, a society which, according to Mbigi and Maree, (1995) is based on the philosophy of Ubuntu – I exist because of others. In real terms, individuals' wealth is shared with their affiliates. In South African terms, so too is poverty. Depending on the particular life situation, conventionally hope-filled practices (marriages, coming of age, etc) often manifest as the exact opposite: emotionally strenuous, financially suffocating, performance-stifling, hope-terminating experiences. If good can have an adverse effect on people, so too can really bad things. The single most significant hope-stealing factor to impact either

directly or indirectly on almost every South African's life situation is HIV and Aids. This factor is likely to impact on the life of undergraduate students who by association form part of the 'high risk' cohort in terms of age and particular life situation. They are, according to an online Beacon of Hope report (2012), 'the most sexually active group' and thus subject to most new infections. Many stay long distances away from their partners or spouses for long periods on end. Muuka (2004, 44) pronounces that 'no development in the last 10 years has affected the Human Resource Management dynamic in Sub-Saharan Africa more than the HIV and Aids crisis'.

In the context of the current article, the effect of this disease on individual and institutional performance in terms of both direct and indirect costs is immense. Stover and Bollinger (1999) summarise direct costs as expenses towards medical care, drugs, hospitalisation, funerals, and so on. Whiteside (2002) adds to the list of direct costs the expenses associated with increased absenteeism (due to own ill health as well as that of families), productivity, and study time lost to mourn the deaths of loved ones or to attend the funerals of those who leave their families behind, either as physical orphans or as financial orphans, often as both.

Nervous parental condition

Mkhize (2004, 1) reports a 'dramatic increase in the number of "non-intact" families and child and female-headed households'. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF2012) annual report, '[t]here are an estimated 3,7 million orphans in South Africa, about half of whom have lost one or both parents to AIDS. 150 000 children are believed to be living in child-headed households', and the number is expected to rise in tandem with an increase in the frequency of disease and unemployment to reach as many as '5,7 million children by 2015' (Cotlands 2012). Who these children are, and how many of them are sitting in the lecture halls of South African HEIs, are unknown. HEIs dare not ignore this neo-mainstream factor, nor fail to strategise for it.

Nervous educational condition

For a student, physical orphanhood goes hand in hand with material and educational orphanhood (ie, the lack of academic supervision, role modelling, mentorship and nurturing by parents or sibling-parents in child-run households). By 2012, according to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 54 per cent of black African South Africans had a Grade 7 or less as their highest qualification, while almost six million had no schooling at all. White South Africans constituted only 3.2 per cent of this significant vulnerability. As a related historical and continued consequence of past inequalities, white South Africans outnumber other designations disproportionately. As a group they constitute 24 per cent of the total number of Grade 12/NTC III certified students; 51 per cent of the total number of bachelor graduates; 61 per cent of the total number of honour's graduates; and 69.9 per cent of the total number of master's or doctorate degree holders. If one considers that the number of black

students entering HE far outnumber white students, and that this number will only increase, performance threat and opportunity are flipsides of the same coin. The opportunity for greater representivity and correction of inequalities is threatened by low throughput of relevant designations for institutional and extra-institutional (ie, familial) reasons. The high number of physically, financially or educationally absent parents or guardians make the critical mass of current black students fragile at best. Students from such families remain at a severe disadvantage in terms of their exposure to a learning environment in which they can draw from the collective academic and financial goods of tertiary qualified immediate family or household members (qualifications, academic skills, knowledge, support and guidance, role modelling) to excel at HE through basic education. The more demographically inclusive a particular student body becomes, the greater the associated challenges and demands for accurate, empathetic, performance and hope-rejuvenating strategies, interventions and structures.

Nervous general wellness condition

Undergraduate student bodies at most South African universities, based on their age cohort, 19-24, are likely to reflect the greater socio-economic face of South Africans. These student bodies are thus equally likely to be exposed to life factors which range from 'the extreme life-threatening ones' (Kamoche et al 2004), such as fatal disease, and life-stifling factors such as unemployment and lack of a stable income to those conditions so comforting and supportive that the extent thereof is hardly recognised or noticed by those favoured by their 'invisible knapsack' of being privileged (McIntosh 1988). The question arises whether lecturers, administrators and management of universities who carry with them the inherited 'invisible knapsack of being privileged' explained earlier will possess either the innate or acquired propensity to deal with the *nervous conditions* that will increasingly confront them.

South Africa's poverty, disease and unemployment statistics, as well as the pronounced role financial stress plays in the lives of students who assume the role of financial caretaker in so many South African households, are well-recorded beyond this article. Such records raise serious questions about surface equality versus real equality in terms of access to universities, opportunity to perform, and conditions under which students have to perform. While some have to assume multiple roles of being physical and psychological provider, sole source of regular income, head of the family and many other associated roles at an early adult age, others from favourable socio-economic contexts of similar age can afford to act primarily in self-interest and maintain undivided focus on personal academic incidents and performance. In the following section a profile of a captive student body at a South African HEI will be offered against the national *nervous condition* of black South Africans offered above.

Institutional nervous condition

Students of the HEI surveyed are 95 per cent black per inclusive definition (black African, so-called Coloured and Asian or Indian). Based on the foregoing exposition of national demographic trends, household surveys, and institutional records, they are, bar a few exceptions, anticipated to be products of a similarly fragile socio-economic context. Students regularly report during informal interviews how they suffer emotionally and materially because they take financial care of a seriously ill parent, mostly mothers, as fathers are so often absent through death, divorce or migrant labour. They often have to arrange a funeral (meaning: pay for burial, transport and post-burial care of guests). Other potential caretakers are either unemployed, or basically employed and unwilling or incapable of offering support. Multiple similar scenarios make fragile students this institution's 'mainstream', as the following profile of the student body will reveal.

Data collection

An anonymous institutional survey was conducted through a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions which elicited biographical detail and the past and present socio-economic conditions of respondents as well as their immediate families. A relatively high return of 75 per cent of the total population of 250 residential undergraduate students at the HEI was registered. Rather than offering the quantitative results of the survey, a descriptive account of frequencies will be provided as the researcher's verbalisation of respondents' life situations.

Nervous familial condition

A compelling, yet disturbing revelation from the survey is that less than 44 per cent of the respondents were raised by both their biological parents. General causal factors of this frequency, *inter alia* forced migrant labour, political separation, violent crime, HIV and Aids, TB and other diseases, are well recorded. Clearly, the aftershock of family structure depletion is likely to affect all aspects of students' lives, no doubt also their HE academic performance, for a long time to come. Therefore, institutions that pursue excellence yet enrol a significant share of their student body from a similarly fragile socio-economic context will have to exercise a clear desire to know their students, have compassion in dealing with them, and put innovative strategies in place to manage the highs and lows associated with the drastic physical and psychological changes associated with loss of loved ones. Upon recruitment and enrolment students are generally faceless. However, their life situations are clearly real and tangible, and deserving of intelligent and empathetic recognition.

More than 45 per cent of the respondents had lost at least one close relative shortly before or during a formal academic assessment, either at school or at university; 33.5 per cent were expected to be physically present at sickbeds, funerals and other cultural incidents of both their immediate and extended family; and 58 per cent indicated that they were compelled to contribute financially to familial responsibilities such as

medical treatment, funerals, weddings and other cultural events or incidents. Current predictions of an increase in the number of major causes of South African deaths suggest that the physical and psychological disruption associated therewith will continue to be part of South African students' reality. Considering that a grieving period would inevitably interfere with one or more form of formal assessment (an assignment, test or examination) an institutional psychological and pastoral service that is culture and gender sensitive, trustworthy and indeed trusted, and accessible in times of crises is non-negotiable. In an institution where an unusually high turnover of incumbents of these professional services is the norm, trust is likely to be adversely affected.

Nervous financial condition

Of the respondents surveyed, 46 per cent had to contribute 30 per cent or more of their monthly income towards family responsibilities on a regular basis. More than 55 per cent of the respondents *belonged* to a household that shared an income equal to or less than double their own income. 'Belonged' is the accurate description here, because, in spite of their age, students are very strongly affiliated to the width and depth of the life incidents of their households. This clearly indicates the large financial burden placed on an income that is only as secure as students' respective academic performances. After all, under-performance implies forced withdrawal from studies, a downgraded career path, and, in certain instances, non-renewal of contracts, thus a return to unemployment. To prepare students in part for the potential trauma of forced withdrawal, a well-informed, well-understood psychological contract 'signed' at enrolment is clearly imperative.

Seventy-five per cent of the respondents reflected that they had high financial concerns away from the HEI. As students who are contractually employed and thus earning a basic salary plus associated benefits, these concerns do not include those conventionally associated with being a student, such as registration, tuition fees, accommodation, and so on. An alarmingly large majority indicated that it would be *best for their families* if they terminated their studies, but *not best for themselves*. This contradiction reveals a conflict of interest in terms of what students want, on the one hand, and what their families expect, on the other. 33.9 per cent and 28.6 per cent respectively indicated that either their own finances or those of their immediate family affected their performance to some extent; and 29.4 per cent indicated that studying closer to home or being in closer proximity to where trouble existed would have solved most of their financial challenges.

Nervous psychological condition

Rossouw (1993) defines a psychological contract as the sum of '[b]eliefs that individuals hold regarding promises made, accepted, and relied on between themselves and another'. Hendrich (2002) concludes that attitude and motivation ('buying in') provide the highest statistically significant correlations with academic

success. Clearly, a psychological contract impacts powerfully on the behaviour and attitude of a person who is party to such a contract, even more so if a strong power differential exists or one party is clearly more dependent upon the other. It is, therefore, worth noting that 34 per cent of the respondents never wanted to study and still do not want to, but saw paid studies (at state expense) as a means of getting off the streets. Distance learning, which would relocate the majority of them closer to both familial support and obligations, would be preferred by 27 per cent of the respondents. When prospective students are recruited and enrolled from a socio-economically fragile context, a well-communicated, mutually agreed upon psychological contract becomes all the more important. So too are well-designed psychological interventions throughout their studies. For many students 'getting in' is the desperate first objective, something many claim to do with scant regard for the demands to follow. Once 'in', 'staying in' is tackled as the next in a long line of obstacles they feel they will be able to cross once confronted with them.

The usefulness of their study programmes was acknowledged by 56 per cent of the respondents, yet 56.6 per cent agreed that they are interested only in those subjects that are useful to their future plans; 75.5 per cent agreed that they would study harder if they were able to select their courses or subjects; 19.5 per cent agreed that they were studying exactly what they wanted to; and 48.9 per cent indicated that passing a module is more important than mastering its content.

Nervous support condition

In most broken societies and sub-groupings, peer support is the support of choice for members of that society or group. In the current study, 33.1 per cent of the respondents made use of formal academic support structures or mentoring services. Significantly, 48 per cent stated that they can only be 'lured' into either seeking or offering assistance if such assistance is of similar cultural orientation. Of those who failed more than 50 per cent of their modules, 85 per cent indicated a preference for culturally similar lecturers and support. Whether ethnic role modelling and culturally similar interaction are performance inhibiting factors, *per se*, or merely subjective rationalisations for poor performance, requires further research. Less than 25 per cent of the respondents indicated that study assistance was sought from peers regardless of gender, race, age, seniority, or status. In terms of locus of control, it was quite reassuring that 72 per cent indicated that they were responsible for their own fate in terms of academic performance, and that they felt capable of doing something about their performance.

Notably, only 14.1 per cent indicated that they confide in existing psychological services when they experience personal challenges, and only 17.7 per cent of a largely male student body confided in the on-campus male religious leader. Only 18.5 per cent of a largely black student body in a rather intimate campus setting stated that they confide in the predominantly white, male, Afrikaans-mother tongue lecturing body in spite of the institutional English only language policy. Whether

this result is prejudice inspired, or simply a matter of professional distance, requires further investigation.

Nervous contentment condition

Generally low socio-cultural contentment is important managerial information in an HEI that promotes a 'work hard, play hard' ethos. Agar and Knopfmacher (1995, 115) emphasise the importance of affective contentment to academic performance. The performance of students frustrated and demoralised by being unable to constructively channel or relieve their built-up youthful physical energy and to satisfy their spiritual desires, is likely to be affected adversely when these students are discontentedly forced back to their books by an assignment, a test or another academic activity. In view of the compelling data about the familial challenges of South African citizens, in terms of finances and in terms of being stricken with illness and disease, this and other HEIs have their work cut out to generate an emotional safety net, a setting *in locō domus* conducive to performance. Only 26.2 per cent of the respondents agreed that the institution responds satisfactorily to matters that negatively affect students or their studies.

Extra-institutional contentment can potentially compensate for either lack of, or under-utilisation of intra-institutional support. Respondents recorded that only 49 per cent of them managed to satisfy their *social* needs on campus; while 39 per cent felt they could do so in the surrounding community. Forty-eight per cent could satisfy their *spiritual* needs on campus; and 47 per cent could do so in the surrounding community. Twenty-five per cent could satisfy their *cultural* needs at the institution; while 26 per cent could do so in the surrounding community. More than a third (35.2%) indicated that the institution does not allow them sufficient support or freedom to attend to culturally associated familial obligations. Sixty-seven per cent regarded neglect of cultural or spiritual rites or responsibilities as a reason for struggling with academic work. Thirty-five per cent of the respondents who failed two or more modules indicated low socio-cultural contentment as a contributing cause. This factor requires further investigation.

To aggravate the unavailability of opportunities to satisfy socio-cultural needs and desires, 47.6 per cent of the respondents lacked access to their own or 'friendly' transport to and from the nearest town amenities. The vast majority of students were between 300 and 2900 return kilometres from their respective homes. In view of the high frequency of responses indicating a need for socio-cultural contentment on and off campus, it is worth noting that the majority lack mobility for both short and very long distance relief of their voluntary and compulsory socio-cultural needs. Low contentment precedes high stress and frustration levels, and causes an increased need for empathetic psychological and affective care.

Nervous communication condition

Of all things humans do, communicating in their mother tongue offers the most dramatic, most immediate sense of comfort, security and control. The converse is also true (Braam 2012). To be confronted by a reality as alien as tertiary studies, *per se*, is difficult. To hear the alien message being delivered in a non-mother tongue is even more daunting. The thread language of the HEI under study is English, which is the mother tongue of no more than 7 per cent of students at this particular institution. Twenty-two per cent of the respondents indicated that they would perform better were the language of instruction not English. Notably though, 88.3 per cent found studying in English beneficial for their lives upon graduation. This discrepancy is likely to cause internal conflict and resistance. It is a matter of weighing the options and doing what is regarded best, without necessarily buying in.

HE classrooms are becoming increasingly polyglottal. At the HEI under study, at least nine official South African languages are represented among the students, and while the lecturing body is catching up rapidly, most lecturers are still Afrikaans mother-tongue speakers. Although regular barriers to message transfer (perceptual, physical, psychological, physiological, language) are commonly known and acknowledged, a particular noise or barrier is seldom noted or acknowledged, namely that of pronunciation of English via a multitude of mother tongues in a linguistically diverse lecture setting. Notably, 42.1 per cent of the respondents considered the English accent of particular lecturers a factor that influences their reception of a message, their understanding of that message, and their academic progress. Stated simply, an isiXhosa student listening to a lecture in English via the filter of an Afrikaans mother-tongue speaker finds it more difficult to receive the message of that lecturer than they would listening to the same message in English filtered through a Nguni mother-tongue speaker. Considering the amount of time spent in lectures, and the importance still afforded to lecture attendance as a means of knowledge transfer, this HEI and others moving towards diverse lecturing profiles need to acknowledge this factor, and might consider implementing lecturer voice enhancement technology and even classroom speech training. The impact of this factor on knowledge transfer requires dedicated research.

Nervous Ubuntu condition

Competition as a positive factor of performance was acknowledged by 56 per cent of the respondents. Less than 6 per cent regarded university studies as a dog-eat-dog environment where it is everyone for himself or herself. Despite being a student body largely affected by 'nervous [soci-economic] conditions', only 24.9 per cent sought mitigation for poor performance. Importantly, almost all who were Afrikaans or English mother-tongue speakers (previously [currently] advantaged?) indicated past oppression as no mitigation for poor performance. It seems the knapsack of being privileged referred to earlier might have influenced this result.

Nervous co-curricular condition

The philosophy of *mens sana in corpore sano* (translated as 'a healthy mind in a healthy body') is not disputed. However, 34.9 per cent of the respondents found it difficult to concentrate during lectures because they were tired from compulsory co-curricular activities. Twenty-six per cent indicated that, when they fall behind schedule because of these activities, they struggle to make up lost ground. In view of the reported correlation between 'poor start' and 'poor finish', the real impact of compulsory non-academic activities on students' academic performance calls for empirical research. Consequent structural adjustment of co-curricular activities might be required.

Nervous academic engagement

More than 75 per cent of the respondents agreed that they would write whatever a lecturer requires if it would help them pass; 30.8 per cent indicated that giving their own opinion in evaluations leads to poor marks; 47 per cent agreed that their marks were a true reflection of their knowledge; and only 6.3 per cent agreed that they would resort to (illegal) copying of material from sources for what they regarded as unimportant tasks. This correlates with Klos' finding that plagiarism is often an act of ignorance, rather than intent (Klos2011). Of the respondents, 73.3 per cent agreed that they had reasonable control over their academic fate or performance. Thirty-eight per cent indicated lecturers should set their papers in such a way that even struggling students should pass.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The South African HE landscape, deeply scarred by the wounds of apartheid, is still healing itself. Great successes in terms of demographics are regularly claimed, and some in fact have been achieved. Persistent student unrest on and off campuses contradicts most claims of normalisation. Non-substantiated 'success' simply fortifies the prevailing *nervous condition*. The visible face of HEIs across the country will have to reflect accurately at least their respective regional demographic setting, and then at all levels: student, support staff, lecturing and management levels. The less visible face of universities, their research outputs, teaching and learning curricula and methodologies, and their community engaged curricula should also be corrected to reflect the current South African condition.

HEIs and their respective faculties will have to strategise in order to create, on both macro- and micro-organisational levels, mechanisms capable of managing what will progressively become their mainstream: a student body that generally displays an alarmingly 'nervous' socio-economic and associated educational 'condition'. Surrogate homes away from largely broken homes are what high-performing HEIs in South Africa will have to become, at least until society normalises. A broken home away from home, or even worse, a broken home away from a broken home, is likely

to generate a counterforce strong enough to suppress university drives and objectives of ‘making the grade’ of international recognition through excellent teaching and learning, community interaction and research.

To achieve the desired institutional throughput with increasing numbers of students from ‘nervous’ socio-economic and educational ‘conditions’, those concerned should part with intra-institutional criticism of ‘too flexible’ selection criteria, and stop moping about not getting the ‘crème de la crème’. If ‘nervous conditions’ rigidly correlated with poor academic performance, scores of top academics through history would have failed before they started. Energy should rather be spent on ‘un-lynching’, replenishing and harvesting from those *nervous conditions* the suppressed and dented potential of predominantly pioneer graduates-in-waiting. Such structures and interventions are only as good and effective as the extent to which they are able to lure, not force, those in need into utilising them. Should HEIs manage to generate, equip and staff a comprehensive and authentic support structure, they will become launch pads from which thousands of students from ‘nervous conditions’ will not just perform (pass modules), but will excel (pass well and obtain multiple degrees). This in turn will contribute enormously towards relieving the individual, institutional, and national *nervous condition*.

In the final analysis, as stated by Dr Blade Nzimande, a keynote speaker at the 2011 HELTASA Conference, South African HEIs have to come to acknowledge and appreciate the fact that their student bodies, whether their conditions are nervous or stable, share one important factor in common: ‘They are South African students, not British or any other.’ HEIs have to deal with the fact that the end of any oppressive or repressive system does not by default bring an end to the ‘nervous condition’ it caused. It serves neither institution nor nation well to refute the width and depth of inheritance of deprivation that continues to leave millions of South Africans captive in their ‘nervous condition’.

Hopelessly Hopeful

(By an anonymous first-year student)

I am a dreamer and I know / the road however long and twisting / won't stop my hope
/ of victory never certain / ignorance and poverty never finite // I know pain, fear and
hopelessness / cement of my special dignity / my fearlessness borne from fear / of
becoming this potent, hopeful man // I lack education not / determination / to learn
/ if given a chance // I was chained by illiteracy / freed by desire / to read who I can
be / the ever-burning fire // my past was certain / -ly hopeless / my future hopeless
/ -ly certain // to study / my ultimate act / of courage / to graduate / from street / my
simple act / of faith // I loved the streets / now adore freedom / through education / my
only possible failure / failing to persevere // I shall break the cycle of my life // I shall
become the greatness I dream // I shall wash off the dirt, sweat and pain / as I risk all /
I am and have / on the unseen / to realise / the hope / I now / clearly / see//

NOTE

1. This section is based on a thesis submitted to the University of Johannesburg in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership in Performance and Change. Updated citations are added to this section. None of this has been published before. (This article is attributed to all pioneer students who championed forward against the odds to become well-respected mainstream graduates, researchers, university lecturers, hope-giving citizens.)

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