

## **Chapter 4: The socio-educational experiences of Black Stellenbosch University commuter students**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter presents qualitative educational and related social experiences of three black students who travel more than 20 kilometres daily to and from Stellenbosch University to access their university studies. It draws on data collected in interviews with three black commuter students who studied at Stellenbosch University (SU) recently – Gilla, Zoe and Mzwai (pseudonyms). Their lived experiences of studying while commuting represent the stories of many other black students whose university encounters are inflected, conditioned and complicated by the double challenge of being black and poor and having a commuter identity. Their stories highlight the one-dimensional institutional discourses in historically white universities that continue to misrecognise commuter student identities and how they engage in their university learning. Despite various physical and emotional challenges, the study provides a glimpse of the self-formed practices that commuter students develop to open a viable university pathway.

Over the past twenty years, as more black students have gained admission into South African universities, student diversity has increased. Universities have also recognised that they need to address questions of access and support for all their students. Despite the efforts made at SU, student movements such #OpenStellenbosch at SU highlight the continuing institutional racism and lack of spatial justice that continues to reinforce black students' exclusion and non-belonging that constantly renders them as "bodies out of place" and "space invaders" (Puwar, 2004 in Hlatshwayo, 2020, p. 167).

In exploring the educational journeys of selected black commuter students at SU, this chapter reveals how these students encounter the structures of the university and establish the socio-educational practices that make up their journeys. While only three students' stories are described, this data aligns with the findings of the Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Racism at Stellenbosch University, which issued what became known as the Khampepe-report (2022, p. 13-57). This report indicates that being a black student in a university is characterised by insularity, sporadic violence, and racial discrimination. Commuter students, mainly black and poor, continue to feel marginalised, despite the university's attempts to integrate them into residences and increase their access (Van Zyl, 2018). This chapter is my attempt to challenge homogenous, unnuanced accounts of commuter students' university experiences.

This chapter begins by defining the concept of commuter students and drawing on relevant literature comparing such students to residential students. The data from each of the three students is then presented in terms of their journeys between university and home, challenges of commuting to SU and the impact on their university experience as well as their constructed mediating practices. A discussion of this data follows before the conclusion.

### **Literature on commuter students**

Commuter students are generally defined as those living off campus (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013) or outside university-owned housing (Krause, 2007; Jacoby, 1989). On the other hand, resident students are defined by Amole (1997) as those residing in the university residences during their studies and day students as students who live outside the university campus; non-resident students include those residing in their own homes or hired accommodation outside the university.

Research comparing commuter students to residential students (see, for example, Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Jacoby, 1989) often painted a deficit picture of commuter students in terms of academic aspirations, socialisation and achievement. 'Learn to go' students, as Jacoby & Garland (2004) calls them, have different adjustment processes than resident students. Lutta (2008) assessed the retention of students at American universities in the south and found that more than 75% of students who did not return to university for their final year were commuter students. Some of the literature's main concerns for commuter students revolve around issues such as lack of transport, support systems, developing a sense of belonging and multiple life roles (Jacoby, 1989). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Pokorny (2017, 544) writes that commuter students who fail to develop a sense of belonging when engaging in university life are more at risk of dropping out.

The South African literature on commuter students addresses student housing shortages, geography, family responsibilities, precarious transport arrangements and the relationship between social integration and academic success. The Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities (DHET, 2011) highlighted the explosion in student enrolment in its residential university system, which only caters for 20% of all enrolled students nationally. SU, for example, houses about 28% of its more than 33 000 students in campus residences. Shortages in student housing continue because of insufficient funding (Nzimande, 2016). Under-resourced students, says Machika & Johnson (2015), often do not have sufficient funds to pay for on-campus housing even if such housing becomes available to them.

Most former white universities are situated in the city centres and towns that are previously exclusively white zones, or (as in the case of Stellenbosch) in neighbourhoods once reserved for whites. Physically accessing the university for families who live on the periphery is often time-consuming and challenging. Family circumstances often tie commuter students to living with their families in their neighbourhoods (Holton & Riley, 2013).

The way institutions like universities are organised can include or exclude students (Tinto 2014, p.9). Most commuter students reliant on public transport at Stellenbosch University (SU) are black and poor and spend long hours commuting between their homes and the university. Spending so much time travelling negatively impacts their quality of academic engagement and access to resources, safety, building support networks and engaging in social activities in the university (Van Zyl 2021, p.122).

Commuter students most often rely on public transport between home and university. Important to note is that the public transport system in the Western Cape has more or less collapsed (Githahu, 2022). During this research, the passenger rail system was at a complete standstill because of vandalism and railway invasions, bus services were beset with robberies and arson, and the minibus industry was engulfed in conflict. Commuter students must negotiate constant danger, monetary challenges and inconsistencies while coping with their

studies. These are factors beyond the commuter students' control. Although commuter students can find ways to leverage long commutes, extended time spent travelling to and from campus takes away valuable time that could have been used to build their social and educational experience at the university (Kalenkoski, Hamrick and Andrews, 2011; Holloway-Friesen, 2018). This can exacerbate feelings of isolation and exclusion.

A student's sense of belonging includes identifying with others around them and connecting with the university (Jackson, 2016). A sense of belonging contributes to student adjustment and persistence (Hurtado et al., 2015) and may be particularly important to marginalised students' experiences (Hurtado et al., 2015; Kuh, 2016; Yearwood & Jones, 2012). Pokorny et al. (2017) specifically focus on students' sense of belonging within the context of students in private accommodation and students living at home. These observations will be considered in this study. Although efforts are visible in the university to accommodate all students, it is contestable if enough is done for this group by the university. Despite their challenges, some commuter students navigate their university studies, building a productive educational path.

These students' sense of inclusion or recognition often informs commuter students' 'sense of place' at the university. Commuter students continue to encounter the university as peripheral characters. One-dimensional institutional discourses in historically white universities often result in overlooking who students are and how they engage in their university learning. Fraser (2009) posits that students can be constrained from participating as equals by institutionalised cultural hierarchies that simultaneously value and devalue certain groups. Inequalities structured around race, ethnicity, class or other social identities can thus prevent certain groups of people from equal participation. Following Fraser (1997), universities are challenged to recognise the arduous journeys of their commuter students and understand how their struggles impact their studies.

It is important to note that commuter students are more than mere recipients of structural-reproductive circumstances. Despite its durable characteristics, their commuter-based circumstances lead to the students establishing personal creative agency to engage in their studies (Bourdieu (2000, p. 235). Even while structural power dynamics restrict people in a given social field, they can still respond creatively and, in this way, open out viable pathways or spaces of possibilities (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 235) for themselves. Focusing on their agency is helpful as it helps us to understand commuter students' practices and how this assists them in adapting to and surviving university.

## **Data presentation**

The data is presented around three major themes, namely the daily commute of each student, how challenges they faced impacted their SU experience, and the mediating practices and pathways constructed to stay on course through university.

### ***The journey between university and home***

Gilla (pseudonym) is a former B.Ed.-student who hails from Delft on the Cape Flats. She studied at SU from 2015 to 2018. She commuted two to three times weekly between her home and the university. She described her living context and daily commute in this way:

The area we live in is renowned for criminal activities like murder and gang violence. So, for me, as a female was incredibly risky. It still is today to walk through my neighbourhood early in the morning or late at night. I travelled to university and back throughout my studies using public transport because we don't have the means to buy our own vehicle. Initially, I took a 15-minute train ride from Delft to Stellenbosch and then walked from Stellenbosch station to the campus. That all changed when people started setting fires to the trains. After this, I had no other choice but to take a taxi. My journey to Uni (short for university) started at 3 am in the morning because I had to wash and get myself ready to be able to get the first of two taxis to uni. These were trying times because walking from my home wasn't walking from my home-it was literally running in fear of the elements. With the adrenaline pumping through my veins, I would finally take my seat in a taxi, making sure that my bag is in front of me and its contents well protected. It's not the easiest of rides because people are in very close proximity of each other, and everyone holds on to their seats as the taxi swerves through traffic, sometimes at breakneck speeds, to pick up most of the commuters. This competition often brings about violent verbal confrontations and sometimes threatening gestures from fellow motorists as the taxi squeezes through traffic. Every journey brings about something new, but the hooting, swerving, speeding, sudden stop and goes, and tense commuters are a constant. Throughout my commuting, it was always very obvious to me how the landscape changed from small little houses, narrow streets filled with people in Delft to vast open planes, lush green pastures of land, broad roads and beautiful scenery as one came close to Stellenbosch.

Zoe (pseudonym) was a B.Ed. student between 2017 and 2020 at Stellenbosch University. She commuted daily by train from Wellington to Stellenbosch. Zoe spent most of her day in transit, "leaving the house early and getting home late in the afternoon or evening". Zoe shared her experiences with transport and taxis. She explained:

In the beginning, I used to travel by train. The trains were not always on time, but it seemed a bit more open, less dangerous than the taxis. There were many students travelling, so one felt a sense of togetherness...like our own group identity among the crowd. If I was lucky and got a seat on the train, it allowed me to do some preparation reading. Then all the sudden, the trains started to be less punctual and sometimes would not even show up. This caused enormous challenges for me because your lecturers did not always understand or cared to understand that these were circumstances beyond one's control. It was only later that I discovered that the taxi people are benefitting from the 'derailed' train services. The taxis had preferred customers and did not always work on a first-come, first-served basis....while in the taxi, people were generally minding their own business, but at times there would be someone who is obnoxious, rude or even threaten other patrons...travelling with taxis involves great risks because the drivers are often under the influence of substances or break traffic rules left right and centre in order to get from one point to the next quicker than the next taxi.

Mzwai (pseudonym) is a former B.Ed student who studied at SU from 2017 to 2020. He commuted from Grabouw, a town in the Overberg area that was an hour's drive from Stellenbosch. He is currently employed as a teacher in a primary school in the town. As the youngest of four from a low-income family who moved from the Eastern Cape to a shack in

Grabouw, he was unfortunate not to qualify for a bursary. His parents used their stokvel money and loans from money lenders in their community to support his studies at Stellenbosch University.

Commuting between Grabouw and Stellenbosch daily required Mzwai to wake up early and ensure he did not miss the one taxi ride that travelled daily to Stellenbosch. As he recounted, the hour-long journey over Sir Lowry's Pass and sneaking into Stellenbosch was "often a rush of danger and prayers. I always chose the left window seat whenever possible to experience the breathtaking view at the top of Sir Lowry's Pass overlooking the Gordon's Bay area and the ocean as you come from Grabouw". The taxi was cramped for space as taxi drivers squeezed in as many people as possible. Early morning travelling was essential to be on time and not get stuck in the morning rush hour. So, he would usually arrive in Stellenbosch way before the start of classes. He remarked: "I usually greeted the vendors who set up their fruit and veggie stalls for the day". We later got familiar, and sometimes I would be lucky to score a bag of fruit for next to nothing".

The data depict these students' daily commute from their home areas like Delft, Wellington and Grabouw to the university and back. The participants (two females and one male), all black and poor, depend on public transport. Two of them used the train initially, but the challenges with the metro-rail forced them to travel by taxi. They described their transport arrangements as precarious, unreliable, and even dangerous. These students had to transact their lives in difficult material circumstances, interrupted by constant movement from one living place to another. As Lefebvre (1991) suggests, space is tied up with inequality, power and politics. Poor young black people often find themselves on the receiving end of these inequalities in South African society.

### ***Challenges of commuting to SU and the impact on their university experience.***

The participants described the challenges of commuting in relation to their university experience. Gilla painted a vivid picture of her day with these words:

Arriving in Stellenbosch around 6 am- unscathed, was always my first victory for the day. After catching my breathe and thanking God for still being alive, I would find a sheltered corner on campus and get into my homework. The library only opens at 8 am, and my classes usually started around 9 am, so there was not really much time to get into all the work. I basically just used the one hour in between to get myself orientated for the day and blend in. If I were fast, I would get a book that I was looking for. Later, I started to place books in secret places so that other students could not find them using the library system. On my way home in the taxi -cause then there was light, at least I would read over my notes and reflect on the day's work, even making summative notes. This often helped me forget the precariousness of being in a taxi.

Lecturers, she said, were like "smash and grabs". She explained that she had limited time "to get as much information down on paper because I didn't have a laptop which, by the way, was risky to travel with also-and get ready for the next class". She further explained how she felt feelings of exclusion. In her own words:

Sitting among other students with the latest laptops, i-devices, and whatnot was intimidating and sometimes made me feel inferior. Not to speak of fellow students

wearing the latest fashion clothing and giving you an up-and-down stare of condescendence. I just sat there with my war attire (jeans and tekkies) because I had to be ready for action. From the stares I caught every now and then, I sensed they were thinking I'm low class, but yeah.

She elaborated:

On other occasions, especially after the lunch hour, my concentration seemed to wane because I was worried about transport to go back home. Socialising on campus was not even an option for me. On occasion, on my way to the Neelsie during lunch hour, I would see interesting activities on the (Rooi) Plein, but usually, I didn't have time and just walked past. I was, therefore, at Maties but cannot call myself a Matie. More a taMatie, if you ask me.

For Zoe, her dependence on public transport placed time pressures on her academic engagement. She remarked:

Catching a taxi for early classes was fine to some extent, but the afternoon was difficult. You have no choice then but to take the early taxi and spend the whole day on campus. Classes later than three, are just not possible. In fact, one starts to get worried about your trip home after lunch already.

The dependence on public transport was often overwhelming for Zoe. She experienced commuting as "isolating" (being among lots of students and still feeling alone) and "anxious", "constantly being between the safety and comfort of your home, elements like the weather, events that can quickly change like a protest or rivalry among taxis". This often "influenced the concentration levels on her work, especially on days when she did not feel well physically and emotionally". The attitudes of the academic staff sometimes exacerbated the challenges of engaging in her academic work. "Some of the lecturers", she added, "would understand if you explained your challenges, but most would have the attitude of: you have signed up for this; we treat everyone the same' no special treatment. So, in that way, learning could not just occur like everyone else".

Being a commuter student affected her socialisation at the university:

One couldn't be actively get involved on campus life (watching a movie, having a coffee with a friend) because of boundness to transport; I didn't have the advantage of socialising like students on campus or those within walking distance from campus; In my second year I went to cry by housing cause I knew another year with public transport would have a negative impact on my studies because then I had first and second-year subjects that I had to redo; So I never really experienced what other students in my class experienced; Although there was this gap in socialisation between me who commuted and residence students, I was still proud of being a Matie- student, although maybe not fully.

Mzwai experienced the daily commute as "dangerous", "time-consuming", and "costly". He often had to "choose between taxi money and food or essentials". He further explained:

Time constraints often limited you in terms of having enough time to access certain areas or facilities on campus. This also negatively affected the quality of time spent with academic work. I could never really 'get under the skin of things'-as one of my

lecturers used to call deep immersion in the literature. For all the years, I wanted to, but could never gym or even watch a Varsity game. Booking venues also had to be coordinated with my travelling time. Just this constant state of moving was somewhat of a challenge. It's like you are always in a hurry, always rushing.

He followed this up with:

I think travelling students have different challenges than on-campus students because of the time you spend on the road and what comes with it. This automatically impacts on how you engage with uni[versity]. I engaged with my work mostly at a superficial level and could probably have done better. My constant travelling made me feel like a different kind of Matie student. Not a full one, because I don't know if I ever felt like being part of the life of the university.

The university's one-dimensionality in class timetables and lecturer engagements, as well as the time- and emotional pressures brought on by constant commuting arrangements, positioned the participants as peripheral characters who thought of themselves as different kinds of Matie students. They were Matie students who could never fully participate in the university social life, access its facilities the same way as other students did, or use the resources available to on-campus students.

Gutmann (1994, p.25) notes that "one's own identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence." Because of the misrecognition, the 'subordinated' feel threatened. Institutionalised cultural hierarchies that simultaneously value and devalue—recognise and misrecognise—certain groups, says Fraser (2009), can constrain students from participating as equals. For Fraser (2009), social justice can only be achieved by participatory parity in conditions that facilitate equal participation with peers in social interactions. Participatory parity in the university requires the equal distribution of resources (social or economic dimensions) to enable all students to interact equally with others in social interactions. Students must feel that they have equal status regardless of their perceived attributes (race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, etc.). Conditions must be set under which all students can achieve social esteem (cultural dimension). All students must have access to a political voice to influence decisions that affect them (political dimension). For social justice to be achieved and for participatory parity to be promoted, all three dimensions must be addressed. However, the university's predominant focus on residence-based students in terms of their planning around access to facilities positions commuting students on the periphery and makes them doubt their sense of belonging, - whether they are Maties.

***Mediating practices are constructed to stay on course through university.***

Gilla hesitantly commented on her navigational practices:

I am ashamed to say it, sometimes, I would purposefully misplace a book in the library to be able to read it longer, especially if I could not take it out. Due to the constant time pressure and not being able to focus on the prescribed readings properly, I would also get information from dodgy sources and hope that the lecturer doesn't pick it up among the many scripts they had to mark. I used the pre-class hour to read up a bit and orientate myself for the day. Another strategy among commuter students was strategically sitting at the back of the lecture room to slip out undetected and run to catch your ride home. The daylight in the taxi on my way back also gave me a

chance to read over some work. I wish the university facilities were open earlier though. It would really have been helpful.

The constant time pressures made Zoe's engagement with her academic work feel "lighter than I would want it to be". Having no choice but to skip classes after 3 pm, often made her feel anxious and affected her concentration levels. She resolved to try and make the most of her situation by:

Getting on an even earlier train to do research in Humarga; Studying right through the night in Humarga because of no transport home on evenings when writing exams-I'm not sure if that was even legal; Sometimes bunking up (sleeping over) with a friend in Idas Valley.

She would maximise the opportunities brought about by this situation. In her own words:

One could spend your campus day catching up on work, utilising some of the facilities for students, set up meetings with lecturers and engage with other students. Making voice or video recordings of the lectures helped me to keep notes, but yoh sometimes, having to listen back to them -especially after a long day on the road, was challenging. If only one could have a more flexible form of classes. I don't know if this is possible, but it is something I think the university must look into.

Mzwai explained that, as a commuter student, he often had to make tough choices between money for food or money for taxis. The "constant state of flux" negatively affected the "quality of time with [his] work". For him, "learning was challenging, but also created opportunities". He elaborated that he could slip out and catch my taxi by sitting by the door closest to the exit in the back of the class, especially after the lunch hour. Yes, I know, but what else can you do? I wasn't the only one, though.

Technology helped to some extent because one could continue conversations/discussions online. That is, if you had data. Receiving brood [notes] from others were not always helpful. There is also a website; maybe I shouldn't mention it here... one can find notes and even exam papers for a few bucks. I know it is not ethical maybe, but one utilises what is available to get through the studies.

The data shows that all three participants experienced some form of emotional or mental stress from constantly being in motion. Space is socially constructed within multiple and interwoven social relations (Massey 1994, p. 3). Their engagement with their academic work would have been more intense had it not been for the constant pressure of commuting. Lefebvre (1991) contends that space is not an empty container separate from human action; instead, the notion of lived space suggests that human activity is constructed of dynamic interaction with the physical attributes of the environment. A key point about space, or 'lived' space, is that it is produced by human agency. Despite their challenges, all three students took creative steps to mitigate their circumstances and establish generative paths. Space involves the production of material and symbolic practices in specific localised contexts, themselves produced within wider circuits of global, national and local scales (Lefebvre, 1991/1971, p. 2). The participants, through self-formed mediating practices and bodily dispositions across spatial environs (Nespor (1997,122), transformed 'limiting spaces' (such as the cramped spaces in taxis, inaccessible university facilities, one-dimensional timetabling structures and lecturer attitudes towards students) into spaces of opportunities through self-formed activities



(utilising the sunlight in the taxi; finding a quiet corner before class for orientation and preparation reading, strategically taking seats in class to slip out undetected).

## **Discussion**

One-dimensional institutional discourses in historically white universities often misrecognise commuter student identities and how they engage in their university learning. Transport (like shuttles) is readily available for students but is limited to students residing in the Stellenbosch area. Therefore, commuter students living further away could not use the facilities the university claim is open to all registered students. Their commutes, experienced as dangerous, unreliable, unsafe and costly, are not recognised in the university's planning around student transport. Institutionalised cultural hierarchies that simultaneously value and devalue—recognise and misrecognise—certain groups, says Fraser (2009), can constrain students from participating as equals. For Fraser, universities are challenged to recognise the arduous journeys of their commuter students and understand how their struggles impact their studies. The university's predominant focus on residence-based students in terms of their planning around access to facilities positions commuting students on the periphery and make them doubt their sense of belonging- whether they are Maties.

Commuter students are, however, more than mere recipients of structural-reproductive circumstances. They are also active participants in their contextual realities and develop agency in response to the difficulties that accompany their daily university access struggles. Despite the time constraints that negatively impacted their socio-academic university engagements, these students developed complex readings of the different spatial environments and requirements and maximised what was available. Their methods, though unconventional (like purposefully misplacing books in the library, strategically sitting in the back of lecture rooms, relying on dodgy resources for information, and sleeping over in university venues), assisted them in staying on course through the university. Some also turned their mobile environments and long commute time into productive spaces for study time and related academic tasks. In this way, these students build up bodily knowledge (Nomdo, 2015, p.26) that helps them navigate social practices across places, spaces, and times (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010, p.331). However tenuous, they employ mediating capacities (Norodien-Fataar, 2018b, p.101) that enable them to stay the course in their university educational engagements.

Although there are efforts to include all students in the university, there are many blind spots about commuter students' struggles regarding the university's teaching engagements and assessment planning, decisions about socialisation times and venues, access to university facilities, and student transport arrangements. As things stand, commuter students still have to navigate their university life through a complex balancing act (Wood & Lithauer, 2005) between narrow university transformation initiatives and their lived realities as they move across the physical environments of their townships and universities in taxis and the social practices required within these spaces (Fataar & Du Plooy, 2012, p.8). To achieve more tangible transformation, the university can do more to understand and recognise commuter students' specific needs and align their transformation plans accordingly.

## Conclusion

The chapter discussed the lived experiences of selected commuter students' experiences at SU in terms of their daily commutes, their socio-educational engagements, how it positioned them in relation to the university, and the mediating practices they constructed to stay on course through the university. I argue that the black commuter students' experience is conditioned and complicated by the double challenge of being black and poor and having a commuter identity.

Universities should be understood as a product of social relations, produced in a society where individuals are influenced by hegemonic imaginations deeply ingrained in the psyche. How universities are organised (in terms of their accommodation of students, times and venues of social functions, access to facilities, class timetables, and lecturer engagement with students) can thus knowingly or unknowingly include or exclude students. This is especially so when a university space is characterised by insularity, sporadic violence and racial discrimination (Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Racism at Stellenbosch University, 2022, pp. 13-57). This hurts these students' sense of belonging (doubting whether they are Maties).

While the university's efforts to promote student engagement among commuter students through its amaMaties hub-initiative (Van Zyl & Fourie, 2021) is a step in the right direction, more research is needed on the impact of public transport on commuter students' socio-educational engagement in the university. The university should re-evaluate its teaching and socialisation activities with these findings in mind. This will go a long way to transform commuter students' feelings of operating on the periphery to feelings of inclusion. In this way, commuter students can view themselves as (full) Maties too.

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