



Navigating the occupation of learning in higher education: Stories from marginalized students



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Background	Study context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Throughput of marginalised students has implications for social transformation (Whiteford, 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences (DHRS), University of Cape Town (UCT)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marginalised students report a low sense of belonging which affects their level of engagement, academic success and well being in university life (Goplan & Brady, 2019; Gravett, 2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Culture and curricula across the Divisions and Departments are still embedded within westernized knowledge and white-centric professional culture
<p>Historically white universities present significant academic and social challenges for marginalised students (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deficit view of students means that support staff and services still tend to locate the problem within the student and not the socio-political culture of the institution and inequalities within the broader context that impact students daily.
<p>Support services orientated to address challenges <i>within</i> the student, with no attention paid to how institutional relational culture contributes to social and academic participation (Galvaan, Crawford-Browne, Gamieldien, Kleintjes & Krenzer, 2019).</p>	

Research question and objectives

Research question:

How did UCT DHRS alumni, who identify as belonging to a marginalised group and accessed student support services, navigate their participation in university life?

Overall objectives of the study:

1. To conduct a scoping review to explore what is known about the factors that promote and preclude participation for marginalised students who access psychosocial, academic and financial support in low- and middle-income university contexts.
2. To describe the socio-political, structural and personal factors that shaped DHRS marginalised alumni's', who accessed student support, participation in university life.
3. To explain how these factors shaped their ability to navigate their participation in university life.

Research paradigm & Methodology

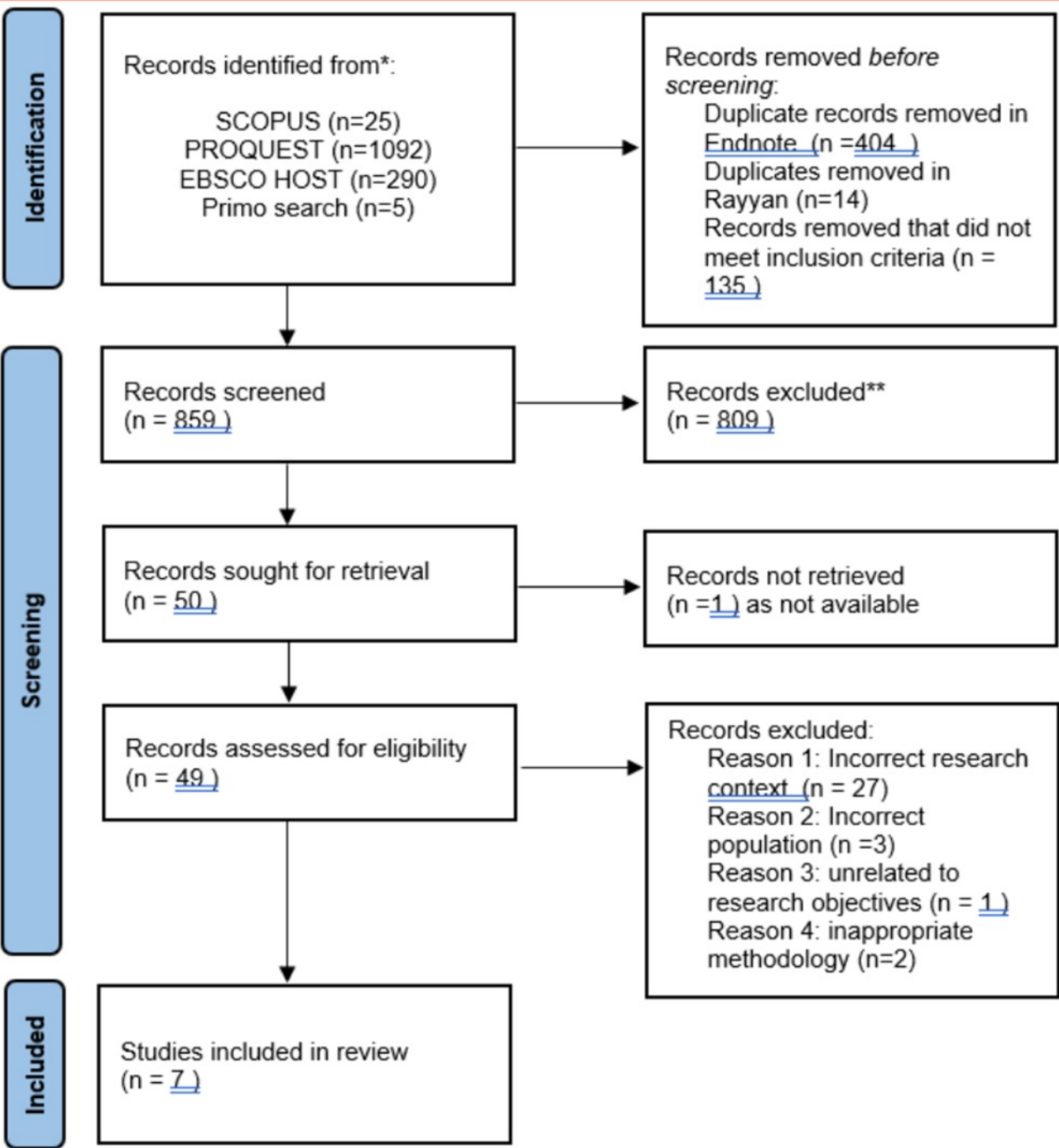
Research paradigm: Critical social theory (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010)

Research design: Qualitative design, using two methods to offer a comprehensive analysis of how marginalised students navigate academic success.

Method one: Scoping Review (Arksey & O'Malley's, 2005; Colquhoun et al., 2014)

Method two: Narrative inquiry – Topical life stories (Plummer, 2011; Creswell, 2007; (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010)





Scoping Review PRISMA flow diagram (BMJ 2021;372:n160)

Scoping Review findings

THEME 1:

SOCIAL DISCOURSES THAT HINDER PARTICIPATION

Socio-political burdens: Personal burdens, associated with their marginality, shaped both learning and social connections of students who did not feel like they belonged to the dominant culture.

Unwelcoming attitudes in academic and social spaces: the social discourse and rigid attitudes of staff and peers in both social and learning spaces.

THEME 2:

PROMOTING LEARNING THROUGH A RESPONSIVE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

Being and learning in community: enabled participation in higher education to be both a personal and academic learning journey with others.

Systemic and cultural reform: Acknowledgement and mindful consideration of daily struggle

Institutional responsiveness to students: Simple and practical changes to existing infrastructure and educational practices promoted learning



Narrative Inquiry findings

Theme: “Becoming the architect of my progress”

The complex process of agency that positioned participants as central agents in charting their course of participation within the university context

**Category 1:
Becoming a
player**

**Category 2:
Configuring
my way**

Category 1: Becoming a player

The daily sense making students engaged in to learn how to respond to the various aspects that the university context demanded from them.

- White-centric and ableist culture
- Relational culture within the university context
- Learning at UCT included studying the social discourse within the university; and learning how to learn within it.

“I learnt to choose my battles. I didn’t need to have the solutions to everything, and I didn’t need to be the one to bring change.”

Category 2: Configuring my way

- Building a base of belonging, through authentic connection to peers, staff and curricula, helped participants develop a relational blueprint in navigating towards academic success.
- Participants pursued opportunities to feel and be connected that served as a foundation on which to explore and build paths for progress.
- Participants came to learn what they needed to complete their journey of higher education through carefully and intuitively selecting resources and services that promoted their participation.

“...Until bit by bit, I started to find my head. There was an idea that occupied my mind, that in order for this to work for me, I needed to put things in place. Trial and error.”

Wayfinding as a personal strategy for academic progress

Contextual embeddedness: Students developed a critical understanding of the relational discourses within social and academic spaces and became astute to its ways of being and doing

Transdisciplinary epistemologies in belonging: Belonging was not only for relational connection but also for transformation of the individual and the collective through shared learning about what the context required from them (Woods et al., 2020). As students developed a sense of the relational landscape of the higher education context, new understandings about themselves emerged.

Emergent strategy: Wayfinding requires a practice-based understanding of space and adopts a 'becoming' strategy of emergent knowing and planning (Chia, 2017). Practical coping through purposive action means that marginalised students are not necessarily engaging in purposeful and deliberate action, but rather are applying emergent strategy as part of designing their progress. Unintentional actions often resulted in unplanned consequences that in turn confirmed and affirmed knowledge gained from the environment; and direction emerged (Bouty, I., Gomez, M., & Chia, R. 2019).

Personal monitoring: Recognizing that you are approaching your destination strengthens confidence (Farr, A. et al. 2012) and could be a source of hope and motivation to stay embedded, stay connected and pursue sources of support that meets the needs of the student.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Experiencing belonging is a foundational driver for academic progress in higher education.

Thus institutions who claim to be committed to social transformation, must:

- critically examine its existing barriers to relational inclusion and consider
- the value of belonging as a participatory approach,
- where knowledge and experiences of the collective, as well as personal growth, nurtures an emergent strategy for progress.

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Thank you



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