

BELONGING AND BECOMING IN THE SPACE[S] OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intimate entanglement of students *Becoming and Belonging* in the informal spaces of higher education. In so doing, it raises the many possible ways of belonging and becoming at a South African university. The entwined relationship's contribution to student identity construction and the potential to exercise agency [or not] is discussed. The theme of Belonging and Becoming emanated from a PhD study that employed visual methodology, specifically photography, to capture students in informal spaces on campus that were of significance to them. The data arose from interviews with student participants and a larger body of students who viewed the photographs as part of an exhibition on campus. The article draws on the concepts of mobility and spatiality, recognising the dynamic nature of campus spaces that are constantly in a state of being socially reproduced. The article recommends that higher education's obligations extend beyond students' academic advancement.

Keywords: informal spaces, higher education, belonging, becoming, identity construction, agency

INTRODUCTION

Accessing higher education (HE) requires both a “great change” and a chance for a “new life” in which students have to manage both the adjustment and the opportunity afforded. These adjustments and opportunities constitute a border crossing as students transition between high school and university, from being a teenager to becoming grown-ups (Christie 2007). Students are exposed to new forms of learning, engagements and means of interacting with knowledge within unfamiliar spaces at university. This change is significantly more demanding for students who have not had the guidance of immediate or extended family members who have attended university to lead them through being and becoming HE students. This article extrapolates the entangled theme of *Belonging and Becoming* that arose from my PhD study on students knowings of higher education spaces (Horner 2021).

Becoming and *belonging* are discussed individually to expose their core elements. However, they are perceived as a paired couplet, entangling each other in shared balance instead

of being opposite ends of a continuum. Similarly, this article argues that these concepts are not independently operating states of being for a student in HE but are in constant dialogue within and through the student as they navigate spaces and their relations with people on campus.

THEORETICAL APPROACH: MOBILITY

Mobility (Finn and Holton 2019) was employed as an analytical lens to view students' HE experience more broadly. Their experience was then considered relative to their transition to independence (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012; Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens 2009), their learnings across the informal spaces of HE (Morieson et al. 2018), their aspirations for the future (Nikora 2013; Walker 2018) and their becoming (Barnett 2009) out of and attachment to the place of HE [belonging] (Naidoo 2018). In turn, mobility was perceived as border crossing, the physical movement of students (Christie 2007; Pokorny, Holley, and Kane 2017), and epistemic and personal mobility.

Students make many choices in coming to HE, one of which is whether to live with family and take public or private transport to campus or leave the home base and find accommodation elsewhere that is more accessible to the university (Holton 2015). Leaving home to access education, particularly within South Africa, leaves some students with limited choices. Students living far from urban areas or within informal settlements do not necessarily have the option of staying home and commuting to university. These locations are historically poorly served by tertiary institutions as part of the apartheid legacy. The challenges of overcoming distance and unfavourable learning spaces require students to move closer to campus. Becoming mobile is thus necessary to access HE. Thereby rendering essential the spatial mobility of many "non-traditional" (Jama, Mapesela, and Bylefeld 2008; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003) "first-generation Black disadvantaged students" (Fataar 2018; Langa et al. 2017) in South Africa.

STUDENTS AND INFORMAL SPACES

The informal campus space (Anggiani and Heryanto 2018) was perceived as more than the physical bricks and mortar. It was broadened to include mental and social conceptions of how space and relations therein are produced and reproduced (Lefebvre 1991). Thus countering the dominant understanding of space as a passive backdrop to students' lives but instead that both space and students change and adapt as they are constantly in flux (Hillier and Hanson 1984).

Informal spaces support students' material needs and services and are also where students gather at will. This includes car parking areas, bus stops, cafés, food stalls, residences and other spaces outside lecture and tutorial venues. Spaces in which students interact with others accidentally or purposefully and where students and members of staff interact, engage and pass

by one another. Informal spaces form part of the everyday life of a student in HE.

The complex mixing of students and their multiple identities is accommodated in informal spaces. Informal spaces could be seen as full of internal conflicts, and coalescence as different students' identities compete for their use and come together to construct new forms of social interaction. Thus, informal spaces are seen as dynamic and enabling of practices and relations while at the same time not insusceptible to structures of domination or prohibition constructed both from within and elsewhere (Massey 1992). Furthermore, informal spaces lay bare for students the multiplicity of viewpoints, cultures, and sexualities that exist and perhaps better equip them to live in a multiracial society and contribute to the production of democratic citizenship (Klemenčič 2015).

BELONGING AND BECOMING EXPLAINED AND EXPLORED

What is most notable for students transitioning from high school to HE is the feeling of not belonging (Meehan and Howells 2019). Students feel a sense of being out of place or suspended between one place and another. Palmer et al. (2009, 47) remarks that the experience of placelessness prompts students to “unmask, build or redefine ... [or] reinforce existing identities of university life”. Belonging is a process that takes time and, in some instances, requires “turning point experiences” [an event or experience] or a “critical thread” [friendships and symbolic objects] to generate a sense of belonging (Palmer et al. 2009).

Belonging refers to deep-rooted ties to a specific place and a rapport with the people of that place. In the HE space, belonging relies on students' capacity to form purposeful relationships [with people and place] to better adjust to campus life (Palmer et al. 2009). In contrast, *becoming* is a process through which one comes to be through maturation and intellectual growth through interaction with the curriculum. Essentially, epistemic growth is growing in content or discipline knowledge through what is learnt at university (Barnett 2009). An “epistemic becoming” (Fataar 2018) thus acknowledges the process of mediating the numerous ideologies and standpoints formally [and informally] existing within the HE space.

Becoming was also explored as personal growth, an awakening or coming to know – foregrounding individual, unique learning points that develop one's character, personality and social actions.

Suppose belonging is about attaching and growing roots to firm one's position in a place and fostering a relationship with the people in the place. In contrast to *becoming*, which is about mobilising or developing from a place. Becoming fosters mobility, whilst belonging contributes to immobility

METHODOLOGY

The PhD study employed visual methodology (Mitchell 2008), drawing on photographs of students in campus spaces that were significant to them. Seven students were selected through engaging in various participatory action projects on campus. They were then photographed in their chosen campus spaces in a collaborative process in which they decided how they wished to be represented in a particular space. Photographs were chosen for their emotive contribution, ease of use and interpretation, and ability to represent the spatial and social context in one composition. Students selected photographs were presented as part of a focus group discussion and to a broader student body in an exhibition on campus. The study drew on 49 interviews with students of varying demographic, socioeconomic, and disciplinary backgrounds, years of study, accommodation arrangements whilst studying, and means of access to campus.

Informal spaces associated with eating, sleeping and transportation were the focus of this study. Informal spaces accommodate activities such as learning, teamwork, and social mixing (Lomas and Oblinger 2006), supporting students' feeling of belonging, personal and career development and being part of the intellectual and communal life of the campus (Gebhardt 2014).

Data collection for this study was undertaken before the COVID-19 pandemic, following which HE failed to exist as a physical space for contact-based learning. However, with the return to contact teaching in 2022, the concepts of belonging and becoming remain important as they allow one to reflect on the importance of the campus space in students' development [epistemic and self] and identity construction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis of the findings introduces each concept [*Belonging and Becoming*] as discrete from the other. Belonging explores the relationships formed [or not] on campus and the places where they are produced, focusing on students' conscious choice to be alone in contrast to being lonely. Becoming reflects on students' personal development in support of their non-academic self and epistemic development in support of their academic self. After that, factors such as peer support, housing arrangements, and social relations that contribute to students becoming are deliberated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: BELONGING

The analysis of *belonging* presents students' voices to explore relations between people and place. Students' ability to initiate, develop and maintain relationships with peers contributes to

their feeling of belonging on campus, describing their relationships with fellow students as “being alone”, “always alone”, or “with friends”. Being *always alone* or *lonely* is not a mindful action but a sad consequence of not belonging on campus. In contrast, being alone is a decisive and mindful action taken to avoid others to make time to reflect, revise, plan, dream or participate in another activity. Shrewd students can assume tactics to fit in, whilst less perceptive students struggle to connect with other students and campus spaces. The paragraphs below discuss students’ experiences of adapting to fit in with their peers on campus.

A student defined her coming to university: “[w]hen you first enter university, you do find that you become lonely, but there is an opportunity for you to make friends”. Being surrounded by others, one does not know, heightens the feeling of exclusion. Belonging relies on students to take the initiative to turn the possibility of engagement with other students into lasting relationships. Not all students can do so, which means that not all students’ experiences of their peers are the same. Experiences include feeling like they are part of a family and that they are assimilated into this family without any preconceptions, “I like it; we are all like a family ... on ... at *** I really like feel very welcome. No-one ever looks at you ... like what are you doing here ... sort-of-thing.”

A student with a different experience notes how she tried for two years to feel like she belonged on campus and then gave up on her peers as contributing to her belonging. “I just realised that I ... did ... didn’t need people for me to feel like I belong. Cause I think for the first two years it was ... yah. I did not think ... like the university ... I fitted in with the people here.” She further expresses her inability to be seen on campus, “I can tell you I don’t think any of the people in my class ever recognise me. But I can recognise all of them.” This student’s experience of her relationship with her peers offers a disturbing view of not fitting in or being acknowledged on campus. Her sense of belonging to the university (as a place) became detached from its link to the students (people).

Students transitioning from high school to university assume specific approaches to fit in. Such methods aim to enable one to fit in with peers and the institutional culture. A perceptive international student noted that the language spoken on campus differed from that of his own. His assimilation strategy was first to note the particular cultural norms of the local students. He chose to learn the language of his peers, which is not the primary language of teaching and learning at the university, “I was shy because I was in another province. For the very first time ... it was a different language. I speak Swati and it’s [the university] [name of language] speaking nation During that process, I spent a lot of time observing the life and the society, and all of that, and university as a whole.”

To build his confidence in engaging with his peers, he adopted the language and became

a member of various clubs and societies offered on campus, “[b]ecause when I came here, I joined such club and societies programmes in my first year. First-year, first semester I was still observing. And the second semester, I started attending programmes as well to see how things are done here.”

Students either change or establish tactics to blend in or are unable to do so and, in the process, lose their sense of self-identity. Claiming they become invisible. Transitioning from high school to HE is thus challenging for some students. Upon entering the HE institution, an essential tactic is watching how things are done whilst simultaneously assuming an identity that adapts to the norms of those within. Once the game’s instructions are known, the student can transition from spectator to active player engaging in student life on campus.

BELONGING – PLACE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

“Place” includes the physical campus space and the virtual social media space. Students defined the place of HE as “feeling at home”, “like being in prison”, or “you are not just at any university, you are at [a particular] university”.

There are specific spaces on campus for which students have a tangible affinity. A student photographed her friends on the lawn outside a colonial building. Explaining her attachment to this place, she referred to the grounds as “more homely” and the people on campus “like a family”. She felt acknowledged for who she is and where she is on campus, “[It] feels more homely I like it; we are all like a family ... on ... at *** I really like feel very welcome. No-one ever looks at you ... like what are you doing here ... sort-of-thing.”

While the grassed area felt “homely” for one student, its meaning lay outside the student body for another. For the other, the grassy patch signified the new systemic and social space she now inhabited. She regarded the turf as representative of this particular university and its meaning to a broader student body. The student referred to the lawn as a “perfect garden and the background”. She noted that this space [and the colonial architecture in the background] was a recognised location by students for self-portraits that would be uploaded onto social media. The self-portraits indicate being “in **** [name of institution] college”. She was referring to the space as a recognition of having met the university entrance expectations, thereby acknowledging that she had met the epistemic requirements [her becoming] to make it there. She, therefore, felt she had the right to claim the physical space to demonstrate belonging to the university, claiming to be known as “***** [name of institution] student”.

These students’ reflections illustrate how belonging can be both virtual and physical. As both a confirmation through an internet community of an affinity with a particular place of HE and a real tangible connection to specific spaces on campus. It is imagined that these depictions

of university spaces through internet platforms permeate other social spaces and networks with which students connect outside their immediate academic community. The HE space and the students' representative depictions and use thereof become a connection and communication with this broader world.

BELONGING – ALWAYS ALONE AND FRIENDSHIP

An undervalued aspect in the scholarly text is the social aspect of university life, the importance of which came through strongly in the responses. This finding could be attributed to my focus on informal learning spaces rather than formal ones. Nevertheless, students tended to offer specific views on transitioning from high school to HE. Once within the university space, they had to rethink the usefulness or not of friends and what it meant to be lonely.

Loneliness is a genuine factor students experience upon entering HE and requires a significant adjustment to both their academic and social life. A student spoke openly about loneliness, “in high school, you knew all of the people almost personally. In coming here [university], you don't know anyone. You have to start making friends and meeting new people. Well, I think for me, I thought what I was in high school, I was going to be in university.”

Her experience of transitioning from high school to university speaks of several changes and adaptations over and above the spatial transformation. This included an identity adjustment from pupil to scholar and a social change from knowing everybody to knowing nobody. Herein lies the erroneous supposition that one's former school identity would stay intact in the transition to HE.

Further alienation ensued as she positioned herself in spaces that she described as “private spaces not exposed to people and stuff”, such as in the LAN “in the corner”. There was no opportunity to walk past her in a corner, contributing to her feeling of not being recognised. For her, the spatial and social context of the LAN enabled students to work alone. The LAN was her protected and secluded space. Extreme loneliness was spatially defined as the corner of the computer LAN, sitting still and in isolation, with limited prospects of students walking past.

A recurring concern among some student participants was the limited meaningful interaction with fellow students. They resorted to understanding university as a space of loneliness, potentially impacting their non-academic and academic growth. Students who wandered about aimlessly on campus also spoke about being lonely. Other than the LAN as a space to hide, some students who owned cars would sit alone in their vehicles and would work or sleep. As one said, “I don't have too many friends. I can relate to walking around, sitting in your car to work.”

Defeating loneliness is essential to students if they wish to persist and reach the targets

they have established for themselves. Drawing inspiration from an image of a postgraduate student seated alone at a bus stop, a student reflects, “People have abandoned you or your friends that were there with you... [You] are no longer there. Do not forget the ultimate goal.” He observed that, even though the young woman was seated at a public bus stop on the campus, she remained disconnected from the institutional world around her. He asserts that the university space is generally acknowledged as a lonely world.

However, friendships can also be fostered in the campus space. This study revealed familiarity and recognition of other students from repeated interactions in smaller classes, and sharing several courses was a positive counter to loneliness. As a student expressed,

“The first year you ... everyone is ... like ... doing everything. And you don’t get to know anyone really. Like you know lots and lots of people, but you don’t actually have a connection with anyone. So second year ... now ... um ... you start finding yourself doing the same subjects as certain people”

The large class sizes of first-year programmes are critiqued for producing further alienation for a first-entry student to the university environment. She expresses that this exaggerated the feeling of being invisible and lonely. This experience is significantly magnified when coming from a small high school or home schooling. The institution’s size of functioning and the adjustments required to be made therein are often undervalued by those acquainted with discourses of space and time in HE systems. Significant transitional learning for the first-year student is adjusting to the independent navigation of time and space of lecture venues, timetables and tutorials. This is outside of the epistemological engagement that HE expects.

A consequence of not belonging is being alone, which is worsened by many factors, such as large lecture sizes and students, especially new students, being unable to reinvent their identities. Students’ incorporation into university life and culture requires more deliberation.

Having friends on campus has several encouraging associations such as contentment, “a bit of joy in life”, self-expression, “to express herself with her friends”, and having a good time; “I can feel like I can laugh and talk”. Friends serve as a supportive community “to talk about her problems” and access to recreation “to chill”. A student clarified how access to friends enabled finding both leisure time and recreational spaces on campus,

“I have a close-knit group there are only ... like ... four of us. I like that, you know, support around you all the time Because last semester, I felt very ... not outcasted ... because I did have friends, but ... like ... no one that was very close to me. So a lot of the times, if I did not have any lectures ... or ... um ... and stuff like that ... I would just ask my mom to come fetch me. Because there was no reason [to stay longer on campus].”

Reflecting on time spent with friends on campus is significant for some students, “we are making memories. You are not going to remember [the] test you had or the assignment due, but ... but ... [you will remember] time spent with friends, the food.”

Food and eating on campus are often associated with other people or friends. The student would not have dined at the cafeteria and bought from the food stalls on campus if she did not have friends. Similarly, another student noted that only when he was working with other people did he buy lunch on campus, “buying lunch is something that I don’t do when I am alone”.

By contrast, another student regarded food as triggering individual challenges. He avoided eating in public because he “[does not] feel comfortable ... like ... in open spaces and eating”. He even evaded some of the food places on campus as these he felt were associated with “cool” kids. He commented on the food outlets: “it’s a cool people place, and the cool people hang out there”. He did not feel he belonged to this community, claiming that his friends did not like the campus spaces very much. They gathered in the university gardens, hung out in residence, or went off-campus. Underpinning this commentary on the current food spaces is a sense that they don’t allow a person of his class to feel welcome. He noted that the food spaces were a public display of students keen to impose their self-assured personalities, something he was uncomfortable doing. No mention was made of whether finances regulated his conduct of not participating in food spaces on campus. Instead, he declared that he did not eat in public areas and chose to disconnect into private [less visible] spaces to assert his personality.

Eating on campus integrates and segregates students into communities based on socioeconomic class and popularity. Whilst aimlessly walking around campus to seek out spaces to pass the time is related to loneliness, the more passive activity of sitting and inhabiting leisure spaces is related to having friends. It is within the informal spaces of HE that the potential to nurture these relationships to form long-lasting friendships is activated. However, developing friendships requires a spatiality of familiarity and students taking, or being enabled to take, the initiative.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: BECOMING

Students recognise becoming as personal development and growth in discipline knowledge within HE. The factors contributing toward student becoming, such as fellow student support, residential accommodation, and relationships with others, are discussed further.

BECOMING – EPISTEMIC GROWTH

An image of a student pointing to many sticky notes of varying colours attached to the wall in his residence room was read by a master’s student as follows:

“[It] [l]ooks like a whole lot of ideas that don’t necessarily make sense at the time, but you are putting them together: making sense of them, explaining them, questioning them, having to ... kind of ... own them. Knowing that you don’t know a lot. That’s about a whole journey of knowledge and learning processes.”

The participant indicates that the student in the image epitomises the university experience as an intellectual path, coming to know and be as a scholarly process. This process was unrelated to the student’s chosen career path but was seen as contributing to acquiring knowledge and learning how to learn.

A further interpretation of the same image connected students’ becoming within higher education as related to a specific career path and noted that attaining “lawyer, engineer, architect” status requires both forward preparation and scholarly achievement. She states, “This is how I aim to become this lawyer or engineer, this architect ... architecture student, so this person now ... is ... has a plan on the ground, and they are now writing down their ideas on the board.”

These two responses highlight different views about becoming; either the development of knowledge or a professional toolset to upskill students for employment. Which viewpoint students should aim for is undecided, but this exploration can demonstrate that what drives some students’ intellectual growth is fear of failure, not the potential of success.

A student notes that fear of being perceived as a failure by her family fuels her propensity for knowledge accumulation. Hence a determining factor in maintaining her good academic standing. “If you don’t take the initiative and do your best and stuff, then you are almost a failure to your family. So ... um. So, I want to do the best in everything I can do because I ... um ... don’t want to land up not getting somewhere in life. And I suppose, I don’t like the idea of becoming a failure,” she said.

Intellectual support within student accommodation can also occur through carefully pairing compatible roommates. Two first-year students taking different courses were unequivocal in noting the importance of sharing a room with someone with the same self-motivation and determination. Furthermore, given a choice, they could both see the benefit of sharing a room with someone taking the same courses as themselves. The key motivator for perceiving this as beneficial was their commitment to fulfilling their academic expectations as it “helps you academically”. Students from the same discipline could share calendars, charts and information, which benefitted them as a space-saving mechanism in tight rooms and from an academic perspective in sharing information and “motivate[ing] each other”.

Whilst having flatmates that share one’s drive can support intellectual development,

overcoming extensive distance and time commuting between accommodation and campus hinders many students' epistemic growth. A student retorts, "I stay in a commune ... it's far ... it's almost 30 minutes walk". The same student notes how the time lost in travelling makes becoming unachievable: "Yeah, we don't have um time to recover. We don't have time to-to-to become."

Students recognise the path to epistemic becoming as both a gradual advancement and an endpoint in and of itself, enabled by relations with other students and family pressure. However, becoming is thwarted by insufficient time left in their daily lived experience for fulfilling academic obligations, or for themselves, with consequences of failing courses and well-being issues.

BECOMING – PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Becoming on campus can also be about an awareness of aspects related to the self that occurs through contact with peers and others. Sparking this awareness could be the courses chosen and the realisation of an incorrect or inappropriate route selected for gaining access to the university. A student reflected that his career choices were not driving his passion. Paradoxically, what gained him entry to the university, namely his natural affinity for mathematics, was where his passion lay. He was a tutor for first-year students in a challenging course appropriately designated by another student as a "welcome to university" module. Through tutoring and assisting fellow students, a self-awareness of his becoming began to emerge, which he clarified as, "I express myself usually when I help someone ... like ... I usually become a tutor so when I am helping someone. Yeah that's when I ... okay ... express myself. Yeah."

Students construct identities based on their high school experience with friends and bring these identities with them into the university space. The realisation that these constructed identities are not who they thought they were becomes uncomfortably honest for some students as they transition into university. In this new society, students confront their identity and what this might be. A student explained that this caused discomfort and distress:

"[B]ecause high school was our comfort zone. Then when you got out, you got to discover what kind of people we are, what exactly do we like, not what our friends tell us what we should like. I had no idea what was mental health, what was what. You see when I got here I realise ... gosh ... I have been facing these issues for a long time now. And I never really understood what it was. So, I think a university for me, has been like a great change."

In contrast to this experience, another student had a powerful understanding of who she was, what she wanted to become, and with whom she would foster relations in developing her

becoming. “If they do I tell them where to get off, I am like ... this is me. This is Scarlett. If you think I am this type of person or that type of person. Go leave me alone.” Her becoming was driven by a clear recognition of who she was, what she enjoyed doing, and how this would guide her selection of modules for further studies. Scarlett’s intellectual becoming directly influences her personal becoming; as she explained, “I am going to pursue a post-grad in drama, acting and directing [be]cause I love creating where people speak their voice”

Becoming is an identity alignment with the chosen career path, its corresponding significance to the student [academic becoming], and an awareness of one’s self and well-being, including future goals and aspirations [non-academic becoming]. Academic becoming can awaken the non-academic becoming of a student. Should this not be successful, students will search for alternative educational offerings or seek other resources on campus to help fulfil their aspirations. The relationship between these two becoming’s alludes to the significance of developing the whole student.

BECOMING – ENCOUNTERS WITH DIFFERENCE

Universities should be places for students to engage with difference. Being exposed to differing viewpoints, cultures, socioeconomic status, political affiliations, and lived experiences can mould and change students to be more tolerant of residing in pluralistic or multicultural communities.

In residences and campus spaces, students have opportunities to spend extended time with peers, which can sometimes have undesirable repercussions, as in the case of one of the participants not fitting in with her fellow students on campus, thereby contributing to her feeling of being lonely. However, these opportunities for interaction are sometimes limited when the community they live and socialise within is homogenous.

One of the respondents discovered that her residence offers limited opportunities to engage with students from diverse races, cultures and nationalities. The focus of her interview was an image of a student studying in her room. The student knew why this was not a room in university accommodation because of whom she associated with living in residence. She notes, “I have seen Indians, I have never seen white ... I am lying, oh my God, I am lying ... I forgot Addison. Only international students stay in res. Only international students” She realised that white students do not stay in residence unless they are international students, and even then, this was so uncommon that it was unlikely to be remembered. Her recollection of *Addison* as an exception to the norm also refers to the insider or outsider (McNess, Arthur, and Crossley 2015) aspects of residential accommodation and how students group and categorise one another through race and space. The category “international student” signified being excluded from

racial profiling and not from this place [South Africa]. Addison was not an insider. In comparison, *Indian* reflected being from this place, a South African, thereby secured to the racial categorisation norms that this nomenclature imbues – Indians are perceived as insiders but not insider-insiders.

A male student referred to fellow students in his class, “you only stick with the group you are with otherwise you don’t see anybody else. It’s hard to interact with other people, if you don’t see them on a daily basis. Because you are so comfortable with the people around you.”

Two spaces of homogeneity are raised; racial homogeneity in residences and within discipline clusters. Students of the same or similar courses find it comfortable to interact with each other as their timetables, lecture venues, and daily activities occur within similar spaces and times. Familiarity and then relationships begin to manifest from these fluid encounters. The ease with which these associations form contributes to students’ sense of belonging within their school or programme cluster. However, this could also be seen as restrictive concerning their potential becoming, especially when occasions to engage with opposing ideologies and social groupings are limited to their discipline. The above student’s indifference to moving out of his comfort space resulted from his discipline’s location on campus, in a remote space, and the ample facilities provided in this building. As he noted, “there is no need for us to go anywhere else; our space is there, we can relax, we can do our work, and it’s more conducive in the studio we got wifi, laptop”.

A student’s reaction to an image of three female students of the same race sitting on the grass outside the main building on campus is a contrasting interpretation of sameness on campus. “[W]ith the diversity ... here ... at our university, you get to meet new people, and you get to make new friends.” The extent of potential relationships available on campus contributes to diversity. The emphasis on “*new*” speaks to students being open to engaging with unfamiliar persons and the potential of these encounters leading to lasting relationships. The student’s understanding of diversity includes ethnicity, culture and nationality and is not limited to race, gender or school-specific groupings. He claimed that,

“[W]e have international students as they bring along their different cultures. We have our very own cultures. So it is that diverse, and if you get too exposed to such, you learn to become tolerant and to appreciate the diversity of these universities. Yes, the university is definitely ‘Inspiring Greatness!’”

The student articulated how cultural diversity is exposed within the university space. He further proclaims that his engagement with students of various cultures taught him to broaden his mind and be tolerant of others. He ends our discussion on this topic by reiterating the university’s

motto “Inspiring Greatness!” thus acknowledging its influence on his becoming.

Becoming for students is both self-realisation and a realisation through recognition of difference. The possibility of interacting with people unlike oneself could take place in residential accommodations and leisure spaces on campus; however, this proved limited on this particular campus.

BECOMING – MOBILITY THROUGH OR OUT OF HE

Becoming is a process in which students navigate the formation of their identity or identities as they progress through and out of HE. A student clearly expressed the process of becoming a student of HE:

“For me, it was a milestone to be actually invited to become part of such an international society [referring to the Golden Key Society] ... And from there I became a house committee member and joined clubs and societies and all ... And actually have that confidence and that initiative to go after my dreams and goals.”

Membership of the Golden Key Society was a pivotal turning point in this student’s HE journey, plotting a path for him to become a leader, which he enthusiastically embraced. The confidence gained through this acknowledgement will extend beyond his current leadership roles to support realising his dreams and goals for the future.

This is an example of a student proficiently moving through the system and taking advantage of its offering. Compared to another student who exemplified becoming as a journey of moving out of HE. By naming himself an entrepreneur, he was signalling that he did not define or confine himself to being a student or align himself with his particular discipline. I was intrigued by his identification as an entrepreneur and questioned him about how HE might contribute to supporting students for the future world of work. He retorted,

“[E]ven though the formal education like you said [referring to the researcher] the formal one ... like the lecturers ... is not doing a lot ... to teach us to ... whatever we want to become. Could be ... um ... an entrepreneur. Especially I think a lot of people should be encouraged to start our own businesses and stuff. Especially here in South Africa.”

South Africa’s statistics of 31 per cent joblessness among graduates under 24 years of age (Bangani 2019) is the glaring reality many students will face when they exit university. Preparing themselves within the university for the world beyond the university, even if this falls outside their current disciplinary or epistemic boundaries, seems like good common sense. However, this student is drawing our attention to the perception of the university as hardening

disciplinary boundaries and not connecting students to employment or becoming self-employed.

These responses illustrate becoming and the formal syllabus's influence on becoming in relation to the working world. In both examples, the curriculum was the instigator of change but was not solely responsible for their becoming. The one student's academic accomplishments qualified him to access certain privileges to allow his becoming. Performing well in academics catalysed his attitude and perception of himself, which had a consequential chain reaction on his academic and non-academic road map through the university. The other student's becoming was negated by his formal education not contributing to his desire to become an entrepreneur. Whilst the formally recognised pathway failed him, he succeeded in creating his own route by looking somewhere else for support in his becoming. He found this support within the institution's resources, namely the human resources he sought on campus and the World Wide Web.

BECOMING – CHOOSING FRIENDS CAREFULLY

Having friends on campus has been shown as important for belonging; what follows is a description of how choosing the right friends is vital for becoming. A female student suggested that students could choose two diverging routes based on the relationships generated at university. She named these paths "the church" and "partying". The former, she notes, keeps you "grounded ... so that you can focus" on your becoming; the latter directs you away from your academics; "lose yourself in it".

The partying route meant losing a sense of who she was and no longer being able to navigate clearly through HE to achieve her goals. In contrast, the church route kept her firmly on the path with an end goal or purpose in sight. The church route was her ultimate path. However, her Christian upbringing did not inform the natural course [the church] for her to follow upon entering HE. She explains how when she got to university, "things got out of the way because of the life". As a consequence of "new friends that influence you, that are living a different lifestyle that you are used to back home. So you adapt yourself to that [new] life, and you lose yourself in it."

New friendships made on campus are not always constructive. A student altered her way of life to suit the new companionship and immersed herself in this new life, excluding her previous identity and the aspirations she had desired. It took two years for her to realise that this kind of existence was not constructive and that her academics suffered because of this lifestyle. She notes, "[a]fter my first year. No 2014 was a bit better. 2015 was a mess and 2016 I realised this is not for me in my academic life and then I went back."

Another student refers to two kinds of people on campus, the good and the bad. “Good” people have the same determination and motivation, and students must actively seek them out. He identified people he wanted to engage with in his lecture groups and struck up conversations with them to see how they would interact with him.

The two students deliberately selected with whom they wanted to associate and could “share[d] life experiences on how to face those life experiences” and reach unknown heights. As noted, “Yah, I am looking for someone to challenge me ... and ... to the limits. So I can explore new potentials that even I was not aware of it.” Each of these students chose friends for clearly defined purposes. The student following the *church* path was looking for friendships that could support, mentor and guide her on how best to navigate this path and remain on it. The second student was confidently on his path, and he knew where he was going and how to get there. He carefully curated his friendships to ensure he surpassed others on that path. Hence, he purposefully sought out “good” company that would push him to exceed further than his known abilities.

Constructive relationships foster students’ academic becoming and sense of belonging on campus. To put it briefly, becoming is about selecting the right friends, and belonging is about having friends.

CONCLUSION: BELONGING TO BECOME – BECOMING TO BELONG

The students’ responses illustrate that HE’s role in smoothing the transition from high school to university [belonging] is just as significant as enabling their growth out of university [becoming] to the working world.

A recognition of the fragility of a student’s transition from high school to HE arises from discussions on the theme of *Belonging and Becoming*. Large and alienating classes on campus contribute to some students losing their sense of identity, whilst the homogeneity of university environments, particularly in the residences, means that students are engaging with others in the same position and with the same experiences as themselves.

What students wish to become is crystallised in the HE setting. This realisation comes through their interactions with peers, an emerging sense of self, and a growing understanding of the significance of their academic choices. A further recognition is that students within the HE space must concurrently fathom how to fit in and move through the system.

This article illuminates the intricate entanglement of *Becoming and Belonging* in advancing the student’s academic and non-academic self in the space of HE. The feeling of belonging helps support students staying in HE to become skilled and, after that, mobilised into the professional world to become independent, knowing adults. In the journey of moving

through HE [becoming], students' aspirations to develop both their academic and non-academic selves become visible. Therefore, HE's role in developing the whole student [academic and non-academic] becomes apparent and necessary.

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