

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

# **Social class and the experience of University education**

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A narrative Inquiry

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## Declaration

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Philosophy, in the Post-Graduate Programme in Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Nicolas Jean-Francois RAGODOO, declare that

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2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
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Nicolas Jean-Francois RAGODOO



29<sup>th</sup> November 2022

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**Date: 29/11/2022**

## ABSTRACT

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Access to and success by students from a range of backgrounds is often considered as a barometer of the democratic health of higher education institutions. As in many other African contexts (Asamoah, 2015; British Council, 2014; Lourens & Fourie-Malherbe, 2017), perceptions that, as part of the education system, higher education should enact a social justice agenda by being a gateway to better job opportunities have persisted in Mauritius. However, the extant literature reveals that a number of structural and cultural factors within the system and in the workplace impede automatic conversion of access to university into tangible changes for students who live in challenging family contexts. This study advances the debate by proposing an alternative outlook on university education through the eyes of students from different social classes, probing their pre-university trajectories as well as their actual experiences, and their outlook on the future. Anchored in the critical paradigm, it adopts a theoretical framework built on the sociological lens of Bourdieu's reproductive theory and the social justice lens of Sen's capability approach. In order to collect first-hand accounts of the reality of university students, the life history approach was adopted, with the application of narrative inquiry methodology.

Through the juxtaposition of the theoretical lenses of Bourdieu and Sen, this work offers new insights into the role of the university at societal level. It analyses how university education, instead of acting as an equaliser across social classes, and an elevator of students from poor families, in fact pre-determines their life chances, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of the established social hierarchy. The study emphasises the key role that organic intellectuals are expected to play in rethinking and overhauling the current educational system.

**Keywords:** *Social class, higher education, social justice, trajectories, life history*

## **DEDICATION**

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*To my mother Janegge and my late father Cyril. I hope that this achievement will complete the dream you had for me all these many years ago as you struggled to give me the best education you could.*

*To my wonderful wife, friend and soul-mate Ursula. Thank you for your love, your unflinching support and your patience all through.*

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## *PROLOGUE*

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This study was an opportunity for me to investigate a topic that intrigues me, and which has not received the academic attention it deserves: How do students from different social classes experience university education, and how do the structures, processes and practices, as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude, influence their experience of university education?

Whilst broadening access to university education, and reducing the costs and other hurdles associated with it, are not inherently negative with regard to pursuing equity across social classes, this does not automatically mean that these steps are sufficient to fight and win the battle against marginalisation and exclusion of students from lower social classes. It does not necessarily mean that everyone approaches and experiences university education in the same way or that everyone has an equal opportunity to develop their full potential through such education.

In order to probe the experience of university education across social classes, it is essential to understand students' pre-university trajectory as well as their actual experiences of university education, and their outlook on the future, analysing how the nature of the university experience differs across social classes. Reflecting on my own educational trajectory, a number of questions came to mind: To what extent does our pre-university trajectory influence our experience of university education? What is the impact of our social class on the way we live the university experience? How do the university structures, processes and practices, as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude influence the experience of students from different social classes, and their outlook on the future? These are some of the fundamental questions I aimed to investigate.

What takes place in our universities is an indicator of the level of social justice and equity that our society adheres to. In the Mauritian setting, higher education plays an even more important function as it is portrayed as a leveler in the social justice discourse, and this is appropriated by politicians at national level. It is therefore important to investigate the

extent to which our ubiquitous university education system actually offers the potential for equity in a class-centric society like Mauritius. By questioning and re-thinking our university education model, we can contribute to the establishment of a higher education system that will offer our children a better chance, irrespective of the social class they come from. This is the challenging task I set myself....



# ***CHAPTER 1:***

## ***SETTING THE SCENE***

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### **Introduction**

This chapter sets out the rationale for the study and situates it in the Mauritian setting and its educational context. It highlights the study's aim and objectives, and maps the higher education landscape in Mauritius, relating it to the historical evolution of issues of access and equity.

### **Orientation to this chapter**

Section 1 delimits the focus of the study and establishes its rationale, aim and objectives. Section 2 outlines the centrality of higher education in the era of the knowledge economy. Section 3 explores the Mauritian higher education policy orientation and historical issues of access. Section 4 analyses the researcher's higher education trajectory and his interest in the experience of university education across social classes. Section 5 establishes the link between access to university education across social classes and the nature and quality of the experience of university education.

### **1.1 Rationale, aim and objectives**

#### **1.1.1 Why study the experience of University education from a social class perspective?**

Quantitatively, Mauritius is doing well in terms of university education, with a gross tertiary enrolment rate (GTER) of 46.4% in 2018 (TEC, 2019). The Mauritian authorities have been consistent in their investment in university education and have, over the years, taken a number of steps to make it more accessible to students from the lower social classes. This culminated in the decision to grant free tertiary education for courses at undergraduate level to full-time and part-time students from January 2019 (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2019a). However, to gain deeper

insight into students' actual experiences across social classes, it is essential to go beyond figures and statistics and focus on what they go through. The notion of university experience has been studied from different vantage points, such as gender (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009), international students (Byrne, 2017; Smith, 2020), pedagogy (Bell et al., 2009), curriculum (Darnell & Fung, 2017), and preparation to enter the world of work (Ali & Jalal, 2018). The novelty of the current study is that it analyses the experience of students through a social justice lens, aiming to contribute to the academic debate on equity across social classes in the higher education field.

### **1.1.2 Identifying the gap in the Literature**

While it can be argued that substantial progress has been made over the years in terms of enrolment in the Mauritian higher education setting, it is important to examine the reality that confronts students from different backgrounds. The social and ethnic divisions that characterise Mauritian society influence how education is experienced. Despite many efforts in this regard, and the official discourse claiming that the educational model is fair to all (UNESCO National Commission Country Report, 2022), the Mauritian educational model can be considered as a reflection of the inequalities and injustices that prevail across society (Mariaye, 2007). The assumption that increased access automatically leads to more equality and fairness can be dangerous if educational policies are devised based on these imprecise or even erroneous assumptions. The current study is therefore significant at various levels.

Past studies that focused on individual narratives (Trahar, 2009; Buddel, 2014; Pierce, 2017; Iloh, 2021) have not substantively influenced the shape of higher education as symbolised by the survival of the dominant Oxbridge model, the formal system of higher education adopted by Oxford and Cambridge, which supports the social and academic dimensions of higher education designed for the elite (Attridge, 2021). The Oxbridge model also symbolises the perpetuation of class-based disparities through higher education (Warikoo, 2018). By focusing on students' experience from a social class perspective, this study addresses a gap in the literature in terms of identifying the characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as specific elements of students' pre-dispositions and aptitude, which influence the educational experience of students from different social classes. Its findings

will assist policy makers to formulate measures to bring about greater social justice and equity in the higher education setting.

Growing demand for university studies, the substantial share of the education budget allocated to it, and high expectations of its outcomes justify the need for a deeper understanding of the experience of university education among students of different social classes. This study provides an alternative outlook on university education through the eyes of students from different social classes, rather than being based on the assumption that all students experience university education in the same way. By approaching university education from a social justice vantage point, it contributes to the debate by establishing a more inclusive model of higher education that caters for the needs of those at the lowest level of the social hierarchy.

Whilst quantitative reports on universities' achievements in terms of enrollment and output provide an overall picture of the situation, the complementary narrative approach, despite its numerous limits and flaws, allows participants to tell their own stories with their own voice. This brings depth to the debate, giving a voice to the voiceless and taking into account the complexities of class identity. Overall, therefore, this study contributes to the debate on equity and social justice at university level by probing an alternative experience of university education which is richer and deeper. It does so by factoring in the social class element in the university education equation.

### **1.1.3 Research objectives and critical questions**

The objectives of the study were to:

- *Analyse how students from different social classes experience university education*
- *Identify how the value-added extracted from the experience of university education differs across social classes*
- *Probe the factors shaping the processes, structure and practices in place as well as the personal pre-dispositions and aptitude influencing the experience of university education, and how they operate.*

Based on the set objectives, the research questions were:

1. What are the university education experiences of students from different social classes in Mauritian universities?
2. How do Mauritian university processes, structures and practices, as well as individual students' pre-disposition and aptitudes, contest or maintain social class differences?
3. Why do characteristics of Mauritian university processes, structures and practices, as well as the personal pre-dispositions and aptitudes of students from different social classes, influence their university education experiences in the way they do?

## **1.2 The Mauritian higher education policy orientation and historical issues of access**

Given that the colonisation and settlement patterns of Mauritius led to a distinct rendering of the notion of class, there is a need to trace the country's historical settlement pattern in order to obtain a full picture of the origins of social divisions. This section examines the perpetuation of social divisions in Mauritian society across the economic, political and social landscapes.

### **1.2.1 Historical settlement patterns and the origins of social divisions**

The Mauritian population is composed of people whose ancestors came from different parts of the world. This culturally diverse population as well as its class-based divisions originate from the country's complex settlement history. Discovered by the Arabs, then the Portuguese, Mauritius was first settled in 1598 by the Dutch. However, rats, monkeys, cyclones, droughts and pests prompted them to leave in 1710 (Addisson & Hazareesing, 1984). Claimed by the French in 1715 and named Ile de France, it was only in 1735 when the French Indian Company appointed Bertrand Francois Mahe De Labourdonnais as Governor of the island that a large scale settlement and development process was initiated (McAleer, 2017). Labourdonnais launched various ambitious development projects, and for this purpose increased the importation of slaves from eastern Africa and Madagascar. He also brought artisans and slaves from Indian towns and from other French trading stations in India to build the imposing forts, hospitals, warehouses, buildings and roads, many of which

survive in parts of Port Louis today (Alpers, 1970). Slave labour was also used to develop the sugarcane plantations and industries owned by the French community (North-Coombes, 1997).

Invaded and taken over by the British in 1810 because of its strategic position on the shipping route to India, the island nonetheless maintained its French laws, customs and traditions (Campbell, 1981). Indeed, generous capitulation terms were agreed upon as the British wanted to keep the French settlers, who possessed the technical know-how required for cane cultivation, on the island. Although the slave trade was outlawed by the British in 1807, it continued unfettered (Allen, 2001). It was only in February 1835 that the 68 613 registered slaves on the island were freed, some after an apprenticeship period on the plantations (Richards, 2012). The slaves left the plantations and took up residence in unpopulated coastal areas. In need of an alternative source of compliant labour, the French planters turned their eyes to the Indian sub-continent that had an unlimited supply of cheap and docile labour. Indian workers were imported on five-year contracts, mainly from economically downtrodden areas such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and also from Gujarat and Calcutta (Peerthum, 2017). Muslims, primarily drawn from the Gangetic plain of northern India as well as western India also came to Mauritius as indentured laborers. Smaller numbers of Tamil people came from Madras and Marathis from Mumbai (Peerthum, 2017). The island's complex settlement history is also marked by the arrival of Chinese settlers from the 1830s to 1840. Leaving behind the depressed economic conditions into which China sank during that period, most sought commercial opportunities in the Indian Ocean region. They settled on the island and set up shops and other businesses, mainly in Port Louis, but also in some rural areas. Today, the Sino-Mauritian community, which forms a 2% minority, is still mainly engaged in business activities, running shops, supermarkets, restaurants and manufacturing units across the island (Guccini & Zhang, 2021).

The complex history and settlement pattern described above explains the origins of the Mauritian population and shows that it is composed of people from various parts of the world. While the country is often cited as a model of pacific co-existence, its overall economic and social development, as well as the evolution of its educational landscape, has inevitably

been influenced by this complex population formation, composition and structure. Mauritian society remains characterized by persistent divisions in terms of social class and socio-economic status, as well as along ethnic and caste lines (Nave, 2001).

With a total population of 1 236 196 in year 2022, as compared to 1 263 888 in year 2021 (statisticsmauritius, 2023), Mauritius experienced a decrease in its population (-2692). In fact, the country has joined the league of countries with negative population growth as from 2020. The average household size, which stood at 3.5 in 2021, also went down to 3.3 in 2022 (Statisticsmauritius, 2023). In terms of religious belief, the Pew Research Centre (2022) points out that 56.4% of the population follows Hinduism, 25.8% Christianity and 16.7% Islam. During the recent decades, the country has experienced a progressive shift from traditional and low skills sectors (mainly agriculture and manufacturing) to services (mainly financial services and real estate). This has led to a sharp rise in the demand for an educated workforce. In parallel, the country has also experienced significant progress in terms of the proportion of the population having been enrolled for university education. The figures have more than double during the last 10 years (from 3.8% in 2011 to 8.8 % in 2022) (Statisticsmauritius, 2023). The overall literacy rate, which is already high, went up from 90.1% to 91.9% during the same period (Statisticsmauritius, 2023). Whilst the monthly median income of employees stood at Rs 16,000 (US\$355) in 2020, 47.8% of the employees were still earning Rs 15,000 (US\$333) or less per month. 50% of employees earned between Rs 15,000 (US\$333) and Rs 75,000 (US\$1666) whilst only 2.2% of the employees were earning Rs 75,000 (US\$ 1666) or more (Statisticsmauritius, 2020).

The different clusters of the population have to navigate this Mauritian reality. Whilst some are able to make the most of these divisions, others find themselves at a disadvantage and are engaged in a constant struggle. These divisions cut across the different spheres of Mauritian society, including the economy, politics, and welfare policies, as well as the field of education, which is the central focus of this study.

### **1.2.2 Economy: the good, the bad and the ugly**

In the past few decades, Mauritius has recorded consistent economic growth despite being far from major world markets. It has successfully moved from a small and isolated mono crop

economy (sugarcane) to a diversified one based on tourism, manufacturing, financial services and Information and Communication Technology (ICT), thereby creating jobs and raising income levels (Tandrayen-Ragoobur & Kasseeah, 2018). From a low-income, agriculturally-based economy with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of US\$ 1 092 in 1978, the country progressed significantly to reach US\$10 579 in 2018 (Trading economics, 2020). It is now amongst the upper-middle income countries and aspires to reach the high-income countries' threshold by 2030. The country's economy is often used as an example at international level and is referred to as the 'Mauritian miracle'.

The Mauritian success story can be attributed to a number of courageous social and economic measures that have been applied over the years by successive governments since independence in 1968. The international context has been favourable, and trade agreements with Europe and the United States have assisted in maintaining stable export receipts as well as fostering long term economic growth (Sannasse et al., 2014). However, strong belief in education as the key to economic development and social cohesion, and massive investment in education for all, have been decisive in preparing the Mauritian labour force and providing the intellectual capacity needed to sustain the country's development trajectory. A conducive social climate has also been established and sustained over time.

It is, however, essential to go beyond this idealised picture of the Mauritian economic miracle. Despite the country's impressive achievements, the economy remains stratified along class and ethnic lines (Suntoo & Chitoo, 2012; Couacaud, 2016). The business sector is still in the hands of the Franco-Mauritian elite, who have successfully re-invested the capital amassed over decades from the proceeds of sugarcane in the other main economic sectors (tourism, services, finance) (Salverda, 2007). There is an affluent middle class composed of those who have been able to take advantage of economic development, and those occupying strategic positions in the public service and business sector (Tandrayen-Ragoobur & Kasseeah, 2018). In parallel, a segment of the population still finds it difficult to access property, lives in poor quality housing and struggles on a daily basis to access basic necessities (World Bank, 2019). It is clear that all Mauritians do not have the same life chances (Morabito et al., 2016). Divisions across society impede active participation of all in the economy, and severely constrain the life chances of those at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy. These class divisions need to be taken into account when devising economic and

social policies. Class-based divisions are at the heart of this study that analysed experiences of university education across social classes. The Mauritian economic model contributes to the perpetuation of the class-based inequalities (World Bank, 2018) which are reflected in the education system in general (Deenmamode, 2016), and in higher education (Mariaye & Samuel, 2018).

### **1.2.3 Politics: stability through division**

Since its independence, Mauritius has experienced a very stable political climate, with free and fair multiparty democratic elections organised every five years, based on universal suffrage for citizens above the age of 18. The country's post-independence Constitution separates the legislature, executive and judiciary and guarantees protection of citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms (Bertelsmann Stiftung [BTI], 2022).

However, despite peaceful changes of power and shifting coalitions in different elections, divisions along ethnic and even caste lines are central to the Mauritian political system. Indeed, the country's 20 constituencies (which each elect three representatives to parliament) were established by the Trustam-eve Commission of 1958 to ensure proportional representation of the different ethnic groups and castes (Mathur, 1997). Moreover, the choice of candidates for elections, the composition of the cabinet, the choice of the prime minister, and the composition of the front bench of government are all made along these ethnic and caste lines (Ragodoo, 1998). Whilst this model has ensured political stability and representation of the different ethnic groups and castes over time, it has also perpetuated divisions across Mauritian society. It can thus be said that the Mauritian political system is based on a clientelistic model, which Stone (1983, p 7) defines as "personal loyalty to individual actors who have or are perceived to have a high capability to allocate divisible material or social benefits, as well as invisible sectoral, class and communal benefits".

On a positive note, even if the country has not made substantial progress in terms of nation building, successive governments have all worked towards the country's economic development. They have also gradually improved social welfare and the stability of its vital institutions. Special attention has been paid to the democratisation of access to education and there has been on-going investment in education based on the belief that it ultimately

acts as an equaliser, providing students from different social classes with improved life chances. This study went beyond this idealised picture of education to consider the reality on the ground with regard to the link between social class and the experience of university education.

**1.2.4 The evolution of the Mauritian social welfare system**

Mauritius has an established welfare system that is considered to be amongst the most comprehensive in the world (Stiglitz, 2011; Phaahla, 2014). Indeed, few countries provide such an extensive range of social benefits. Table 1.1 presents a summary of the main components of the Mauritian social welfare system whose origins lie in British colonial rule. Since independence in 1968, successive governments have contributed to the gradual consolidation of the welfare state. This process is on-going; three recent examples of the comprehensive social measures implemented include: (I) A 45% increase in the universal pensions paid to the elderly, widows and people with disabilities as from December 2019 (Prime Minister’s Office - PMO cabinet decisions, 2019); (ii) Free tertiary education in all public institutions (for both full-time and part-time students) as from January 2019 (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2019a); and (iii) Free textbooks for primary and lower secondary school students (from Grades 1 to 9) as from January 2020 (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2019b).

<b>Key elements of the Mauritian comprehensive welfare model</b>
Universal pensions for people aged 60 and above as well as for widows, people with disabilities and for socially vulnerable groups.
Free public health care system with an extensive network of hospitals and local health centres across the island. The services include surgery as well as medication. Overseas treatment is also funded by the state for patients who do not have the means, if the treatment is not available locally.
Free education at all levels (from pre-primary to tertiary). Education is compulsory up to the age of 16.
A comprehensive social net to protect the poor, including state subsidies on a number of basic products such as rice, flour and LPG gas (Bertelsmann Stiftung BTI Country Report, 2018).

An extensive array of social protection mechanisms complementing the pensions, benefits and subsidies.
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*Table 1.1: Key elements of the Mauritian comprehensive welfare model (Sources: Phaahla, 2014; UNDESA, 2021; BTI Mauritius Country Report, 2022)*

The message that these social measures convey is that the state cares about its citizens and is doing its level best to improve their living conditions. However, in reflecting on the Mauritian welfare model and its evolution over time, it is pertinent to ask why Mauritians are benefitting from an ever-growing and expanding ‘generosity’ on the part of the state. Is something hidden behind these comprehensive benefits? Focusing on the globally-acclaimed Mauritian free education system, for instance, is it reflective of genuine commitment on the part of decision-makers to give everyone an equal chance, or is it, in a subtle way, contributing to a replication of the system by perpetuating the status quo and legitimating a system that, on the surface, seems to be providing an equal chance to one and all, but in reality is unfair and inequitable? Investigating how social class stereotyping in the educational system contribute to maintain inequality, Durante & Fiske (2017) highlight how the culture of the dominant group shapes educational institutions. Academic performance is treated as the outcome of individual abilities rather than the result of differential access to pivotal resources. Jury et al. (2017), on their part, highlight how students with low socio-economic status (SES) have fewer opportunities to succeed in University contexts compared to students with high SES. While it focuses on higher education, this study contributes to the broader debate on welfare policies and how they can contribute to a perpetuation of class-based divisions.

### **1.2.5 Reflections on the centrality of social class in the Mauritian higher education setting**

Based on this review of the Mauritian development trajectory, it can be argued that class-based differences are deeply rooted in the country’s social fabric. The economic, political and social arenas have all been crafted in line with the composition and structure of the country’s population. These divisions have been perpetuated over time, and are still very pertinent in the Mauritian setting. However, there is a tendency to either ignore them in official discourse and policies, or to legitimise them through a discourse based on fairness and equality of

opportunity. In the higher education setting, the process of democratising access to university education is officially portrayed as a comprehensive move towards equality. Debates about class-based divisions in the Mauritian educational setting and their influence on same are thus rare. This topic has also not received the scholarly attention it deserves. The current study contributes to this debate by probing (i) the pre-university trajectory of students and its influence on the experience of university education; (ii) the actual experience of university education across social classes (iii) the ways in which class-based divisions are being legitimated and perpetuated through the university structures, processes and practices, and students' pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence their experience of university education across social classes.

## **1.3 The Mauritian Educational Landscape**

### **1.3.1 Broadening access to education**

In recent decades, successive governments have strengthened and extended the country's policy of making education accessible to all. Based on the school enrollment statistics for Mauritius, significant progress has been made in terms of enhancing access to education. From 2014 to 2019, the country's primary Gross Enrollment Ratio for children aged five to ten averaged 99%. During the same period, the primary education pupil teacher ratio stood at 22.8, whilst the proportion of pupils starting Grade 1 and reaching Grade 6 was 96.7% (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). At secondary level, the Gross Enrollment Ratio averaged 90% from 2014 to 2019, with an impressive gender parity index of 1.07. The average pass rate for the Cambridge School Certificate (CSC) and the Higher School Certificate (HSC) stood at 71.7% and 75%, respectively during the same period, whilst the teacher pupil ratio at secondary level stood at 13 (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2019). There is also a parallel 'extended programme' for those who are unable to cope with the mainstream programme. At tertiary level, the Gross Enrollment Rate averaged 47.2% from 2014 to 2018 (Tertiary Education Commission, 2019). Mauritius allocated an average of 10.9% of total government expenditure to education, training and research from 2014 to 2019. (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2019).

These impressive statistics result from all stakeholders' unflinching belief in the value of education and on-going investment in it over two centuries. There has been a gradual and

consistent move to make education more accessible to the lower social classes, even if class-based divisions persist in the Mauritian educational landscape. This class-based model of education is discussed in more detail the following section.

### 1.3.2 The historical evolution of the Mauritian class-based model of education

The Mauritian education system is based on the British model given that the country was a former British Colony. It consists of 4 cycles: the pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary. Education is free and compulsory till the age of 16 years. The secondary educational cursus, however, is split between the lower secondary (3 years) and the upper secondary (4 years). The Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examinations, taken by students aged 10-11 years at the end of the primary cycle has been replaced by the Primary School Achievement Certificate (PSAC) as from year 2017, with the aim of relieving the pressure on both parents and students. The PSAC examinations, with still determine access either to elite schools or regional ones had a pass rate of 78% in Year 2021 (Ministry of education, 2021). The distribution of students across public, private (aided) and private (unaided) institutions is as follows:

	STATE	PRIVATE (AIDED)	PRIVATE (UNAIDED)
<b>Primary</b>			
No. of schools	221	53	45
Total enrollment	52830	18862	12437
<b>Secondary</b>			
No. of schools	69	85	24
Total enrollment	44986	51010	6726

*Table 1.2 Primary and Secondary education: No. of institutions and enrolment figures*

Source: Ministry of education, 2021

The State also offers technical education for 6171 students in 11 centres. At Tertiary level, 28252 students were enrolled in Publicly Funded institutions whilst 14336 students were studying in private tertiary institutions (Ministry of Education, 2021)

In order to have a clear picture of the Mauritian educational sector and the substantial influence of social class, it is important to consider the evolution of the country's educational landscape, tracing the gradual shift from an elitist model to a universal one, and analysing how the different social classes have experienced this shift.

Under Dutch rule, there was insignificant development of education. During the French period, education was reserved for the children of the ruling elite and was inaccessible to the general population (ADEA, 2011). When the British took over in 1810, the French 'Lycée' was renamed the Royal College and English became the official medium of instruction even though the then Governor Robert Farquhar sought to promote bilingual, bi-cultural education (Tirvassen, 2017). The educational landscape changed very quickly under British colonial rule. Democratisation of access to education was initiated in 1815, when a free primary school was established by Reverend Jean Lebrun, an apostle from the London Missionary Society. The school was open to children of free men (sic) of colour (Bissoondoyal, 1978). This was the first real opportunity for people of colour to access education (MIE, 2018). The response was very positive, and this measure was supported by Governor Farquhar. Other schools were established in different parts of the island, prompting the British colonial government to establish government primary schools from 1823 (MIE, 2018). After slavery was abolished in 1835, the British Government made grants available for the opening of schools for emancipated slaves (Goordyal, 1969). British missionaries came to Mauritius to help with same. In 1846, the Loreto nuns set up the first high school for girls, commonly known as 'Loreto Convent' in Port Louis. This was followed by 'Loreto Convents' in other parts of the island (Kelly, 1947). The massive arrival of Indian immigrants significantly impacted the demography of the island, and there was a need to also provide them with education. The Catholic Church gradually started to devote more attention to the education of the lower classes. The Indian immigrants made their own efforts to provide education which imparted their values and culture by setting up their own schools known as 'baitkas' and 'madrassahs' (Ballgobin & Reddy, 2013). By 1882, 47 government primary schools and 57 grant-in aid schools were operational across the island (Ramdoyal, 1977).

Interest in education grew over the decades. The process gained momentum in the 1930s when the newly formed Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) under the leadership of Dr Maurice Cure started pressing for the right to vote to be granted to the masses (Smith-Simmons, 1982). However, the then Governor of Mauritius, Wilfrid Jackson, resisted, arguing that it would not be reasonable to grant universal adult suffrage “among a population containing so large an uneducated element” (Seekings, 2011, p. 6). The 1940s were characterised by the fight for political emancipation and increased pressure for same by elected members of the MLP in the Legislative Council (Frankel, 2010). From 1948 eligibility to vote was determined by a simple literacy test, resulting in massive rise in enrollment at primary school level. The colonial government had to extend educational infrastructure to cope with growing demand (Parsuramen, 2001). The Education Act of 1957 outlawed discrimination on the basis of race and religion in accessing education (Mohadeb, 2003). Public schools were established across the island, with grants also allocated for the establishment of schools. However, these institutions had to be open to all, irrespective of social class, race or religion (Dukhira, 2002).

Following independence in 1968, Mauritius invested heavily in education to cater for rising demand. Fifteen state secondary schools were built from 1968 to 1981, with the University of Mauritius, the Mauritius Institute of Education and the Mauritius College of the Air and the Mahatma Gandhi Institute also established (Parsuramen, 2001).

In 1977 the government decided to provide free secondary education (MIE, 2018) and the Education Act was amended in 2005 to make education compulsory up to the age of 16. Free transport for all students, including those attending full-time university courses, was introduced in the same year (UNICEF, 2006). From 2015 fees for the CSC and HSC examinations were waived and they are paid by the state (Government Programme, 2015). In January 2019, free education was extended to public tertiary institutions (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2019a), whilst children in Grades 1 to 9 have received free textbooks since January 2020 (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2019b).

Table 1.3 summarises the key milestones in broadening access to education, with a time-line of the major educational policies in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>MILESTONE</b>
1925	College of Agriculture established (UoM, 2020)
1948	Literacy test for right to vote (Parsuramen, 2001).
1965	Establishment of the University of Mauritius (UoM, 2020)
1970	Mahatma Gandhi Institute established (MGI, 2020)
1971	The Mauritius College of the Air set up (Educational Directory, 2020)
1973	Creation of the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE, 2018)
1977	Free secondary education (The development of Education: National Report of Mauritius, 2008)
2005	Free transport for students (UNICEF, 2006)
2005	Compulsory education up to the age of 16 (UNICEF, 2006)
2006	All state secondary schools to offer classes up to Form VI (A-level) (The development of Education: National Report of Mauritius, 2008)
2015	CSC & HSC fees paid by the state (Government Programme, 2015 - 2019)
2019	Free tertiary education (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2019a)
2020	Free text-books for Grade 1 to 9 students (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2019b)

*Table 1.3: Time-Line of main educational policies in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*

It is widely assumed that broadening access to education will enable students from the lower social classes to take advantage of same and climb the social ladder. However, despite the significant progress portrayed above, it would be over-simplistic to automatically assume that the path to social justice and equity is a linear one through education. Indeed, whilst this

is a regular feature of official discourse and common rhetoric among those in power, it is not necessarily being fully realised on the ground. It is therefore essential to analyse how it actually takes place and how the class element influences the way students experience education. The review of the country's historical development path and the evolution of its education system in previous sections calls for further probing to establish the real picture of the role of the Mauritian education system in terms of social justice and equity. The insights from this review are discussed in the following section.

#### **1.4 The connection between development, economic growth, social justice and the Mauritian education system**

On the one hand, a review of Mauritius' history, as well as its economic, political and social development, signals a class-centric society concealed by a facade of unity and harmony. On the other, the overall educational trajectory portrays a system that has achieved significant progress, moving from an elitist model to one that is accessible to all. The mainstream Mauritian educational model is perceived as being ubiquitous, enabling all citizens to access education, and providing an equal chance for success. In over-emphasising equality, however, the potential for equity through education is diluted, as no special consideration is given to those who require and deserve more support and attention in order to fully develop their capabilities. While the official discourse and policy is that every Mauritian child should be treated the same, the reality on the ground is much more complicated. Not only is equity not given priority, but the Mauritian education system is in fact composed of class-based parallel streams of education co-existing alongside the mainstream system. However, this situation generally goes unnoticed and unquestioned, and over time, has been internalised and legitimated.

At primary school level, children from wealthy families generally register for a private, fee-paying education system where they do not experience the competition faced by mainstream students for admission to secondary level. Children from a wealthy background have the option of enrolling in French schools (petit Lycées) or English-medium schools (PYP). At secondary level they enroll in Lycées, or a private English medium school where they study for the French BAC, or the International Baccalaureate (IB), respectively. These schools' substantial entrance fees and monthly fees act as barriers to entry, reserving access for

children from the upper social classes. The distance that children have to travel daily, as well as the level of cultural and social capital required, act as further deterrents to students from lower social classes.

Children from a lower-middle class and working class background have little option but to register for the free mainstream primary education. They attend state-owned primary schools, or those managed by the Roman Catholic Education Authority. They sit for the PSAC examinations (final primary education examinations), and are allocated a seat in either a State Secondary School, or in a confessional school depending on their academic performance and choice. There are also some 77 grant-aided Private Secondary Schools within the mainstream educational system. These schools do not charge fees, and cannot be compared to the private (fee-paying) schools established for the upper social classes. However, both fall under the purview of the Private Secondary Education Authority (PSEA). Whilst children in mainstream secondary schools sit for the CSC and HSC, respectively, those from the social elite who are enrolled in private fee paying schools sit for the BAC or IB. There are 20 non-aided secondary schools, mainly meant for the elite, on the official PSEA list.

The foundations of the Mauritian educational system therefore rest on an overt and official class-based division, creating a specific learning space for the elite, with access to this space denied to the majority of students through different barriers to entry. Those who are unable to afford the fees charged by these schools enroll in the mainstream education system. Furthermore, within the mainstream system itself, there a covert selection process that generally results in children from poorer backgrounds attending sub-standard primary schools and then being confined to 'extended programmes' streams and ultimately either dropping out of school early or opting for vocational education. Only a minority of children from working class backgrounds are able to reach university. Children from middle-class and upper-class families find it less difficult to navigate secondary education and ultimately make their way to tertiary level. They are able to pay for private tuition, which makes a significant contribution to success at secondary level. In the Mauritian context, private tuition generally refers to 'after school hours' coaching that takes place outside the school environment, most commonly at the teacher's home, or in a classroom rented by the teacher. Private tuitions generally takes the form of group lessons, even if one to one coaching is becoming

increasingly trendy amongst students coming from the upper social classes, and who can afford it. This is generally not the case for children from lower social classes. The pathway to university education is therefore not linear and easily accessible to all as is generally asserted in official discourse. Each Mauritian child does not have an equal opportunity to develop his/ her capabilities. This establishes the rationale behind this study that sought to identify the characteristics of the processes and structures as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence the way students from different social classes experience university education. The following section outlines the university setting in Mauritius.

### 1.5 University Education in Mauritius

Total enrolment at tertiary level in Mauritius reached a peak of 50 608 in 2014 but declined thereafter by an average 1.3% per annum (TEC, 2019). Overseas enrolment, which stood at 11 099 in 2015, dropped by an average of 9% each year to reach 8 200 in 2018. A total of 47 398 students were pursuing tertiary studies in 2018 (TEC, 2019). Of these, 8 200 were studying overseas, 22 155 were enrolled in Publicly Funded Institutions (PFI) and 17 043 were studying in Private Post-Secondary Educational Institutions (PSEI) (TEC, 2019). This can be depicted schematically as follows:

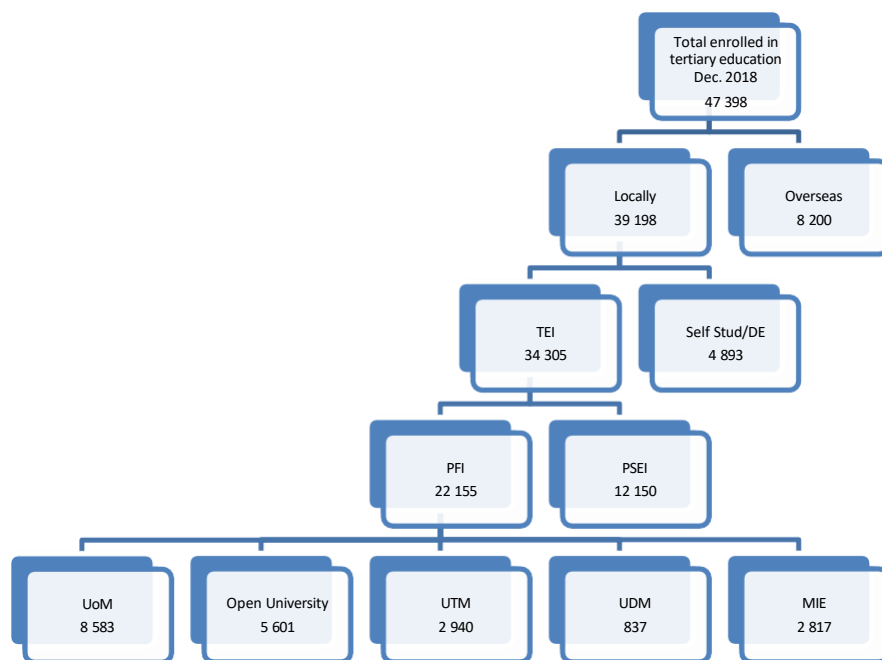


Figure 1.1: Tertiary enrollment in Mauritius (adapted from TEC, 2019)

The GTER which indicates Mauritians' level of participation in tertiary education stood at 46.4% in 2018 (TEC, 2019). This figure represents the total number of Mauritian students enrolled for higher studies (in Mauritius or abroad) as a percentage of the 20-24 age group. In 2018, 95% of the students enrolled in a tertiary programme were from Mauritius, whilst 2 380 were international students (TEC, 2019). The GTER for Mauritius is amongst the best in Africa and is very reasonable in comparison with international benchmarks (See Table 1.3).

<b>Country</b>	<b>GTER %</b>	<b>YEAR</b>
SINGAPORE	84.8	2017
UK	60%	2017
ALGERIA	51.4	2018
MAURITIUS	46.4	2018
BOTSWANA	24.9	2017
SOUTH AFRICA	22.4	2018
SEYCHELLES	17.1	2018

*Table 1.4: GTER of selected countries  
(Source: adapted from Knoema World Data Atlas, 2020)*

The evolution of the Mauritian tertiary sector denotes growing interest in higher education over the years, and is portrayed as a provider of enhanced opportunities for all. It is strongly believed that one can achieve one's objectives more easily through university education. It is also generally believed that such education enhances equity and social justice by empowering those at the lower level of the social hierarchy through the acquisition of qualifications that will ultimately help them to climb the social ladder.

In parallel, it is also important to outline the fact that the level of unemployment amongst the youth in general, and amongst graduates as well remains high in the Mauritian setting. Youth unemployment (aged <25 years) constituted 27.7% of the total number of unemployed in 2021 (26.1% in 2020). Graduates without an employment constituted 21% of the total number of unemployed for the year 2021 (Statisticsmauritius, 2021).

This study investigated the actual experience of students on the ground to determine whether university education acts as an equaliser across the different social classes or is contributing to the replication of a system that perpetuates the status quo in the higher education setting, and the wider society.

## **1.6 My higher education trajectory, and interest in the experience of university education across social classes**

In order to understand my interest in the experience of university education across social classes, I reflect on my academic path, which cannot be dissociated from my social background.

### **1.6.1 The early days....**

Coming from a working class background and living in a rural area, my primary education must have been under a divine light, as only four students from my school were amongst the 2 000 boys and 2 000 girls listed for admission to a 'good' secondary school. In those days, it was very difficult for children from rural areas, and those from poor backgrounds, to make it through the primary education cycle. The Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examinations, taken after having completed six years of primary education, constituted a major hurdle.

Having secured admission to a 'good' secondary school, I realised very early on that, in terms of financial resources, I was not up to scratch. The majority of students in the confessional secondary school I was admitted to came from wealthy families. They had new books, all the school material and stationery they needed, and they came to school by car. They wore branded shoes and had a lot of pocket money to spend during lunch time. I struggled and got used to coping with the basics even if it was at times hard to accept this unequal situation and the feeling of being inferior to others.

Even worse was the profound sense of injustice that I felt in the initial weeks of joining secondary education. Indeed, whilst I was admitted to this secondary school based on my performance in the CPE, students from my class started to move to other schools. Every day, new students took up the places vacated by those who left. I could not move to another school as my parents did not have the right contacts, and did not even know how to proceed. When

things settled down after a few months, only three students in my class were from the initial cohort. All the others moved to better schools and were replaced by others from schools that enrolled students with poorer CPE grades.

I struggled through my secondary education, completing my SC and HSC with reasonable grades, even though my parents could not afford private tuition. On receiving my HSC results, I was offered a position as a replacement teacher at my former school. This was a wonderful, eye-opening experience and thanks to this first encounter, I discovered what I wanted to do in life: to become an educator.

### **1.6.2 My experience of university education**

Travelling abroad for further studies was clearly out of reach. I therefore had no option other than the University of Mauritius (UoM) which did not charge tuition fees. On joining the UoM in September 1994, I met those who would become my life-time friends. It did not matter that we came from different social backgrounds, and were on different academic tracks. We were also studying for different reasons; some were studying to ultimately secure a job in the public service, while others aspired to join the private sector, to travel abroad for postgraduate studies, or join their family business on completion of their studies.

In class, we could not and did not question what was taught, as the academics were very traditional in their approach. We were in a system that resembled Freire's banking model (1968), with academics as subjects, and students as passive objects. We were the containers into which the lecturers transferred their knowledge. However, we all managed to succeed and graduate.

### **1.6.3 Reflections on my academic trajectory**

Reflecting on my educational path, it is clear to me that university education has been **THE** determining factor in my life. It has helped me to improve my living conditions and to move up the social ladder. It has also broadened my outlook on the world. As an academic today, I can clearly and proudly say that I am a product of the Mauritian free education model. I would not have made it if my parents had had to pay for my education. However, I also feel that I was lucky throughout my academic journey. This was not the case for all those in my primary school cohort, and even those who were in my class for the SC and HSC examinations

at secondary level. Students who were more brilliant ended up in lower level occupations. Reflecting on this, I realise that what made a real difference was that I was able to undertake university education. My educational achievements in general, and my experience of university education in particular, contributed significantly to my current social position. However, it could easily have been otherwise. At numerous points in my educational trajectory, I came to a crossroads and could have decided to leave the educational path for a job that would have been very helpful to my family. I was tempted but, luckily, resisted. I realised that what one achieves academically might not only be based on one's intelligence and willingness to study; it also depends on one's academic trajectory and how it has been shaped.

There is therefore a reality on the ground that students confront, and it is not necessarily the same across social classes. Whilst some are easily able to make it, others face a number of hurdles. There are also those who give up the fight, and others who are lured by immediate gratification. Institutional structures, processes and practices can have a positive or negative influence on that process as can students' pre-dispositions and aptitude. It is therefore essential to include these factors in the educational equation.

#### **1.6.4 Focusing on social class and the experience of university education**

Whilst lecturing in Sociology at the UoM, I started to silently question how the students in my lecture room, coming from different social classes, experience university education. Through my interaction with students, and following my election as the Chairperson of the UoM Students' Financial Assistance Committee in 2014, I am regularly in contact with the harsh reality of students who are struggling for their university education. Despite all the facilities and support granted to them, they face many difficulties, and are learning the hard way. In contrast, there are those who seem to be cruising through, with all the material and emotional support required to succeed.

Reflecting on my own educational trajectory, a number of questions come to mind: To what extent does one's pre-university trajectory influence one's experience of university education? What is the impact of one's social class on the way one lives the university experience? Who decides what is taught at university and why? How do we interpret and

apply what we learn? Do we merely contribute to the reproduction of existing social patterns or are we made to question them? How do the university structures, processes and practices, as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude influence the experience of students from different social classes, and their outlook on the future? These are the key questions that this study investigated.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter established the rationale, aim and objectives of the study, and painted a picture of a class-centric Mauritian society concealed behind a facade of harmony and peaceful cohabitation. It traced the evolution of the Mauritian educational system in general as well as the higher education sector, highlighting the centrality of social class in the educational setting, and signaling how students' experience of education is heavily influenced by their social background, even if this has been internalised and generally goes unnoticed.

## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

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#### **Introduction**

Chapter 1 established the aims and objectives of the study and presented background information so as to anchor the study in the context in which it was conducted. It also showed that social class has always been omnipresent in all spheres of Mauritian society, including the higher education context. The rationale for the study was also outlined as well as the critical research questions.

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the relevant literature in order to position the study in the current debate on social class and the experience of higher education. The gap the study sought to fill is also established, namely, how university structures, processes and practices, and students' pre-dispositions and aptitude impact on the experience of university across social classes.

#### **Orientation to this Chapter**

The chapter reviews the literature pertaining to the key areas investigated in this study. Section 1 conceptualises and contextualises **social class**, while Section 2 reviews studies on the notion of **university experience across social classes** from different vantage points. In Section 3 the African reality and the Mauritian setting are outlined and the novelty of the current study is discussed.

#### **Section 1: Conceptualising and contextualising social class**

##### **2.1 The Social Class debate - Back to the basics**

As seen in Chapter 1, Mauritius' developmental path and the evolution of its educational landscape were closely linked to struggles along class lines over time. The centrality of social

class in the development of the island in general, and in the educational field in particular, was also outlined. While the concept of class is highly contested, and its usefulness in society is at times questioned, this study was based on the belief that social class permeates all spheres of individuals' lives as well as social systems. In order to fully understand the on-going debate on the significance and pertinence of social class, it is essential to examine classical and contemporary analyses of this concept.

### **2.1.1 Classical approaches to social class: Marx and Weber**

As far back as the ancient Greeks, the 'few' and the 'many' were applied as a measure of division within the social order. Plato and Aristotle both established functional classes based on the contribution of each category to society. Marx and Engels (1848) conducted extensive research on social classes, considering society as being composed of people coming from three categories: The capitalist class, which is composed of the owners and controllers of the means of production; the middle class, which includes managers, professionals and middle officers of the state apparatus; and the working class, which refers to the great majority of workers who work for the capitalist class in return for a salary. The Marxist perspective considers class divisions as the most important source of social conflict:

*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx, 1848, p. 1)*

Weber's analysis of class is somewhat similar to Marx's views:

*It is the most elemental economic fact that the way in which the disposition over material property is distributed among a plurality of people, meeting competitively in the market for the purpose of exchange, in itself creates specific life chances. (Weber 1924, p. 927)*

However, for Weber, life chances are distributed according to the resources that individuals bring to the market. He posited that these resources could take different forms. Over and above the difference between owners and non-owners of property, an individual's situation can be influenced by skills and other assets which have a value in the context of the market. Weber introduced power and status as important elements in determining a person's position in society, over and above material possessions.

### **2.1.2 Bourdieu's perspective on social class**

Influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu adopts a less structural approach than Marx and Weber in analysing the ways in which society is reproduced and how the dominant class retains its position. Bourdieu's (1987) analysis of social class starts with the commonly asked question of whether classes are a social construct, or exist in reality. This question has been the source of political debates and social movements for centuries. Structuralists and constructivists' different stances regarding the existence of social classes are at the roots of divisions in the political and social arena. On the one hand, realists point out that it is empirically possible to determine the profile of various social classes and even to count the members of specific classes. On the other, there are those who believe that classes are mere constructs of scientists as in the real world it is impossible to identify clear-cut boundaries separating different groupings.

Bourdieu (1987) applies the structuralist and constructivist approach to sociology to explain that the existence and pertinence of social class in sociological debate cannot be reduced to a simple 'either / or' choice based on common-sense arguments. For Bourdieu, even if these two approaches are generally seen as being fundamentally opposed to each other, structuralism and constructivism are in fact in 'false opposition'. Whereas structuralists classify social agents as things (and not as ideologies), constructivists consider agents as being actively engaged in the construction of social reality. For Bourdieu, however, social agents are both classified and classifiers, but they classify according to their position within classifications. Thus, Bourdieu asserts that the 'point of view' (*or perspective*) adopted can be a partial, 'subjective' vision (subjective moment) whilst also being a view taken from an objective social space (objectivist moment). As such, instead of limiting himself to common-

sense arguments regarding these two seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints, Bourdieu states that it is possible to question the existence of classes as homogeneous sets of economically and socially differentiated individuals objectively constituted into social groups, whilst, based on the principle of economic and social differentiation, adhering to the belief that ‘spaces of differences’ do exist.

### 2.1.3 Contemporary social classifications

Goldthorpe’s class schema is amongst the most popular contemporary categorical measures of social class and it has been widely applied in research on social stratification, occupational mobility and educational attainment (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). The validity of the schema was tested by Evans in 1992 who was generally supportive of it (Evans, 1992). The British National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS – SEC) of 2001 builds on Goldthorpe’s initial schema (Rose & Pevalin, 2003). For the purposes of the current study, a comparative table (Table 2.1) comprising of the initial Goldthorpe schema as well as the NS-SEC socio economic classification, has been transposed to the Mauritian context.

From the merged table, it can be seen that, irrespective of the terminologies used, broad socio-economic categories emerge that contribute to establishing a hierarchical structure across society.

<b>Goldthorpe schema (1992)</b>	<b>NS-SEC (2001)</b>	<b>Common descriptive term in Mauritius</b>
Professional, administrative and managerial employees, higher grade	Higher managerial and professional occupations	<i>Gran patron / Big Boss/ Gran Misie / Direkter, Gran bourzwa</i>
Professional, administrative and managerial employees, lower grade; technicians, higher grade	Lower managerial and professional occupations	<i>Patron / Misie / Manager/ Bourzwa, Boss</i>

Routine non-manual employees, higher grade	Intermediate occupations	<i>Ofisie, Klark</i>
Small employers and self-employed workers	Employers in small organisations, own account workers	<i>Antrepreneur</i>
Supervisors of manual workers; technicians, lower grade	Lower supervisory and lower technical occupations	<i>Sef/ Sipervizer/ Foreman</i>
Skilled manual workers	Semi-routine occupations	<i>Travayer kalifie</i>
Routine non-manual workers, lower grade	Routine occupations	<i>Travayer</i>
Semi- and unskilled manual workers		<i>Manev, helper, asistan</i>

*Table 2.1: Merging Goldthorpe's schema, the NS-SEC and the Mauritian terminology*

Revisiting and contextualising Bourdieu's works on social class, Savage et al. (2013) express the view that classes have changed shape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are of the opinion that there are more than the three traditional social classes in present-day society, adding that the boundaries between them are not sharp, but rather take the form of gradual transitions and gradations. Drawing extensively on Bourdieu's work, they assert that a three-dimensional approach that takes economic influences as well as social and cultural dimensions into account is the best way to group or classify people. Based on an extensive online survey run by the BBC, as well as representative social surveys and interviews, Savage et al. (2013) identify seven common clusters of economic, social and cultural capital that differentiate groups of people from others. These are as follows:

- An 'elite', which is composed of the top 6% in terms of income and cultural and social capital;
- An established middle class, with moderate economic, cultural and social capital;
- A technical middle class, reasonably well off but with very limited social capital;

- New affluent workers, reasonably well off but reporting only limited cultural engagements;
- A traditional working class with limited economic, social and cultural capital, although with more than the precariat;
- Emerging service workers, with limited economic capital but moderate cultural capital;
- The precariat, who are in low paid and insecure work and supported by benefits, with little or no savings.

Goldthorpe et al. (1992), Evans (1992), and Savage et al.'s (2013) works are examples of leading contemporary studies that aim to re-establish the pertinence and relevance of the concept of social class in social discourse and analysis, despite the criticism leveled against it. From their perspective, social classes have not disappeared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but have changed shape.

Having reviewed the classical and contemporary grounding of social class, the following section probes further to reflect on its pertinence and relevance today.

## **2.2 Reflections on the pertinence and relevance of the concept of social class today**

As noted in the previous section, there is on-going debate on the relevance and usefulness of class analysis in the modern sociological setting. On the one hand are those who question its relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, Pahl (1989, p. 710) asserts that “class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work for sociology”. Fox (2019) goes even further to state that sociologists should stop talking about social class, considering it as “meaningless and empirically unhelpful”. On the other hand, proponents of class analysis such as Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992), Olin Wright (1997) and Evans (2000) consider the promise of class analysis as being far from exhausted and make the case for its relevance. From their perspective, writing off social classes is not an option as it remains relevant and pertinent in the quest for equity and social justice. Savage et al. (2013) support Bourdieu’s view that the

distinctions between the classes are not necessarily in the form of clear-cut boundaries, but rather take the form of gradual transitions and gradations.

The present study adheres to Bourdieu's (1997) and Savage's (2013) outlook on social classes, which can take the form of gradations, instead of clear-cut lines of demarcations between the classes. The researcher believes that the debate about social classes and its influence on life experiences need to be brought to the forefront in order to tackle the issue of equity and social justice in an effective way. By rethinking and putting into question the established social structures, those who are at the lower levels of the social hierarchy can be provided with a better opportunity to climb the social ladder.

### **2.3 Contextualising social classes in the university education setting**

It is important to delimit the working definition of social class that was applied for the purposes of this study. It should be noted that the study took a broad approach to social classes so as to ensure that the experiences of university education across 'extended' social classes were captured and highlighted. For this purpose, the prevailing sub-categories of social classes were placed in three broad workable groupings. Despite the controversy surrounding the theory of class, there is general agreement on the characteristics of the generic social classes in modern capitalist societies. The **upper class** has been distinguished by the possession of largely inherited wealth and as those in control of the means of production; the **middle class** includes the middle and upper levels of administrative workers, those engaged in technical and professional occupations, supervisors and managers, and self-employed workers such as small-scale shopkeepers, businesspeople, and farmers; and the **working class** mainly consists of manual labourers and semiskilled or unskilled workers, often in service industries, who earn moderate or low wages and have little access to inherited wealth; There is also a substratum of permanently jobless and underemployed workers termed the "**underclass**." However, in order to better capture the broad class differences, the current study focuses on three broad, workable categories as follows:

- The Upper Class/ Elite
- The Middle Class
- The Working Class / The Underclass

It is important to note that whilst it focused on social classes, this study did not subscribe to the Marxian conception that social class inevitably leads to the revolutionary transformation of society (Cohen et al., 1986). Rather, it considered social classes as being heavily influenced by the history and development processes that a society experiences; they are therefore dependent on contextual elements as well as their development trajectory (Strasser & Randall, 1981). As such, the ways social classes co-exist, and the role played by different institutions in that process, need to be considered in a context and at a specific point in time. They cannot be generalised.

Along the same line of thought, the established idea of exploitation and automatic antagonism between the working class and the ruling class is called into question. Indeed, the advantage of one class is not always to the detriment of others (Llorente, 2013). Instead, social classes can be based on compromises, with classes collaborating with each other, and working towards the establishment of a society that is built on fairness and equity (UNESCO, 2021). As such, rather than being replicated and perpetuated, class inequalities can lead to growing investment which is conducive to improved welfare. Analysing the experience of university education across social classes thus offers an opportunity to examine how students consider their relationship with other students who are from different social classes, and the direction in which they see Mauritian society moving, as well as university education's contribution in this regard.

Furthermore, rather than adopting Goldthorpe & Marshall's (1992) outlook regarding the pre-formatted conception of members of the same social class automatically developing shared consciousness and engaging in collective class-based action, this study approached social classes with an open mind with the possibility that members of different social classes could overcome the traditional issue of class interests (Savage, 2013).

What can be deduced from the theoretical groundings of social class and its evolution over time? It can safely be said that social classes are complex, constantly evolving, and are context specific. It is therefore essential to be fully aware of these evolutions and complexities when undertaking research on the issue of social classes. The current study questions the university education structures, processes and practices, situating them within the country's colonial history as well as inequalities associated with capitalism and

neoliberalism. It emphasises the omnipresence of the influence of social class in the socio-economic development of Mauritius from colonial times to date. It underlines the influence of class-based divisions in the different spheres of Mauritian society in the course of its evolution, focusing on their pertinence in higher education.

## **SECTION 2: The experience of University education across social classes**

### **2.4 Linking social class to the nature and quality of the experience of university education**

In contrast to conceptions of human beings as a means of economic growth or social stability, Nobel Prize-winning economist and political philosopher Amartya Sen emphasises the need to evaluate freedoms for people to make decisions they value, and to work to remove obstacles to those freedoms. Sen (1974) refers to our ability to undertake (doings) and the kind of person we are able to be (beings) as capabilities. His *capability approach*, therefore, emphasises the real freedom that people have to achieve their potential and doings. In other words, people's capabilities need to be expanded. This calls for a context where all the means required to achieve that 'doing' or 'being' are made available. Sen makes an important distinction between capabilities and functionings (Sen, 1980). Functionings refers to achieved outcomes whilst capabilities are about the potential to achieve these functionings. Thus, whilst capability is the opportunity to achieve, functioning refers to the actual outcome. Focussing solely on outcomes only provides a partial picture of how people from different backgrounds are achieving the outcome. As such, from a social justice and equality perspective, it is essential to go beyond the seemingly equitable outcomes of students, and analyse their trajectory as well as their real, lived university experience.

In "Equality of what", Sen (1979) compares two people who have access to the same set of resources, but one person is disabled, and the other is able-bodied. Even if the same resources are available to both, Sen notes that the disabled person is unequal in terms of what he/she can do or be with his/her resources compared to the physically able person. In addition, the disabled person will have to spend more of the resources available to him/her in order to perform the task. As a result, he/she will have fewer resources left in order to pursue his/her main life objectives. The able-bodied person can devote all his/her resources

to achieving his/her goals. Sen, therefore asserts that, in order to evaluate people's well-being, we need to not only consider the amount of resources they have at their disposal, but also what they are able to do and be with those resources.

Sen (2006) adds that what is required is not a theory that describes a utopian ideal; rather, theorising is necessary to make comparisons of injustice, and to guide us towards a less unjust society. Education, according to Sen (1991), is a basic capability that influences the development and growth of other capabilities. It fulfills an *instrumental social role* in terms of dialogues, debates and critiques. It also plays an *instrumental process role* in expanding our social network and an *empowering and distributive role* of organising and uniting those who feel excluded or disadvantaged. It has *redistributive effects* between social groups as well as *interpersonal effects* in terms of the ability of those who have benefited from education to help others and accompany them on their journey. Thus, Sen refers to education as an unqualified good for human capability expansion and freedom. A growing body of literature on the implications of the capability approach in the educational field is gradually emerging (Maddox, 2008; Gibbs, 2013; Dalkilic, Maryam & Vadeboncoeur, 2016; Egdell, V., Robertson, 2021).

Building on Sen's theory and transposing it to the educational field, Walker and Unterhalter (2007), who have been at the forefront in conceptualising social justice within education, posit that, from a social justice perspective, the evaluation process in the educational field needs to be based on people's capabilities rather than financial considerations, academic qualifications or educational resources. Given growing concern with regard to social inequality in education, the capability approach is a valuable vantage point to explore key issues such as fairness in distribution of valued capabilities through education, as well as an opportunity to convert resources into capabilities (Robeyns & Byskov, 2021).

In the Mauritian setting, official discourse and rhetoric generally point to achievements in terms of curriculum, teaching, administration and learning resources geared towards enhancing educational qualifications and capacity building. This study, however, took the alternative route of leveraging for greater social justice in the higher educational setting in terms of equalised human capabilities. For this reason, it focused on the pre-university trajectory of students from different social classes, as well as their actual experience of

university education and their outlook on the future. The ultimate aim was to identify the characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well pre-dispositions and aptitude that impact on one's ability to develop one's full potential, thereby influencing one's *capability*.

## **2.5 Contemporary educational theories**

In contrast to traditional educational philosophies that either focus on inculcating everlasting and enduring truths (perennialism), or on essential knowledge and skills, as well as academic rigour (essentialism), contemporary educational theories emphasise the crucial role that education plays in reconstructing and changing society, and in shaping the future. One of the main objectives of the current study was to determine whether the participants' experiences indicate that universities pursue a social reconstructionist/ progressive/ social justice agenda, and how this is understood and enacted. The broad contemporary educational philosophies are briefly outlined as follows:

### **Reconstructionism**

The notion of social reconstructionist education was based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century belief in the power of education to change society. These philosophies emerged on the early 1900s as countries addressed the social disruption caused by World War I. However, it was only in the 1940s that Theodore Brameld first used the term 'reconstructionism' to express the need to rethink the educational system after World War II (Kai, 1994). This philosophy holds that society can be reconstructed through complete control of education, with the objective of changing society to conform with the basic ideals of the government in power, or to create a utopian society. While this met with considerable skepticism over time, it is still widely believed that education can influence individuals and society. Hence, the growth of universities, as well as the massification of education, and the focus on educating disadvantaged people. For social reconstructionists, education is the key to helping people to understand their shortcomings and create societies based on justice for all. They therefore aim to identify the ills that need to be addressed to create healthy societies, and fight social issues such as poverty, inequality and racism.

## **Progressive/ social justice education**

Given that disturbing opportunity gaps persist in educational systems across the world, there is a need for a progressive reformation in order to achieve equity. This calls for attention to be paid to both the instruction students receive as well as the conditions they require inside and outside the classroom and lecture room in order to succeed. At primary and secondary level, there is a need to build a conducive framework to ensure that all students, including the most disadvantaged, have access to high quality education, as well as equitable access to resources. It is also essential to ensure that secondary institutions prepare students for university education, and ultimately a career. This calls for reflection on how the university is influencing society, or whether this progressive approach that aims to address income inequality and eliminate discrimination is making any tangible difference on the ground. Caplan (2018) highlights that increasing income inequality and more stringent university admission policies mean that students from higher-income backgrounds are much more likely to secure a place at a top university, leading to the emergence of an academic aristocracy. Whilst universities are assumed to be progressive and present themselves as such, there is a need to investigate whether they are perpetuating the status quo and contributing towards the maintenance of social divisions.

## **Social justice in higher education**

For the purpose of this research, a working definition of social justice was developed based on the work of Keddie (2012), Fraser (1995), and Young (1997). Social justice can be viewed as a process as well as a goal to achieve a fairer society which involves actions guided by the principles of redistributive justice, recognitive justice and representational justice. Redistributive justice is the most long-standing principle of social justice, involving the allocation of material or human resources towards those who by circumstance have less (Rawls, 1971). Policies such as the waiving of tuition fees in public universities, for instance, fall under this category. Recognitive justice, on the other hand, involves recognition and respect for cultural and class-based difference. Students failure to perceive patterns of academic functioning with which they are acquainted in the higher educational field, for instance, can reveal an absence of recognitive social justice. *Representational* justice involves equitable representation and political voice (Fraser, 1995; Keddie, 2012; Young, 1997). From

the above, it can be seen that in order to achieve greater social justice there is a need to address it in different ways, ideally aiming to meet all three principles.

Critical theorists strongly believe that systems need to be changed in order to overcome oppression and create a better society for all. For instance, Freire was very critical of traditional pedagogy and was of the opinion that traditional education was dehumanising students. He stated that it was based on the banking concept of education where students are required to 'rote-learn' without grasping concepts or mastering their actual meaning. They are therefore mere 'containers' which are 'filled' by teachers. In this model, students passively receive knowledge and are treated as objects, with the teachers making 'deposits' to their 'banks'.

*The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. (Freire, 1970, p. 54)*

Freire adds that knowledge and culture are in a constant process of evaluation. Humans experience on-going transformations, which Freire refers to as the process of becoming. Given that we are historical beings entailed in the process of becoming, no one can claim to know. He thus proposes an alternative pedagogy based on 'problem-posing'. Under this model, education is seen as a democratic and dialogical process which will ultimately lead to liberation as students are empowered to critically evaluate their reality. For Randall (2019), the discourse is about creating teaching and learning environments that support all students equitably without regard to race and ethnicity, gender identity, religion, or learning potential. The focus is on diversity, inclusion, equity, multiculturalism, sustainability and civic engagement. In contrast, it is essential to investigate whether the university eco-system is perpetuating the influence of social classes individually, culturally and systemically. Strong (2007) points out that higher education provides resources that give power and legitimacy to the middle and upper class. This power further divides social classes as it takes the form of political influence, financial control and cultural supremacy. For Gatto (2003) this inequality needs to be traced back to the structuring of the educational system, which is generally presented as being objective and fair.

## **2.6 The notion of university experience across social classes from different vantage points**

Global tertiary education enrollment grew steadily from 68.3 million students in 1990 to 99.9 million in the year 2000, 181.5 million in 2010 and 254.8 million in 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). Despite global demographic trends denoting a declining youth population and lower fertility rates, tertiary enrollment is still expected to reach 377.4 million students in 2030 and 594.1 million in 2040 (UNESCO, 2018). Willingness to enroll in post-secondary education is driven by its perceived positive outcomes in terms of becoming more employable and more likely to receive higher wages. University education's contribution at individual and societal levels and the quest for same is well documented. However, this study goes beyond statistics and the glossy image of university education to probe the actual experience of university students across social classes, which has been previously analysed through different vantage points. Contemporary studies that are pertinent and relevant to the study are critically examined in this section.

### **2.6.1 Reviewing the notion of university experience across social classes in the contemporary setting**

This section reviews studies on the pathway to access university education (2.4.1.1), the process of navigating university life (2.4.1.2) and the transformative agenda in terms of outcomes (2.4.1.3), linking them to the current study and highlighting their pertinence and relevance.

#### **2.6.1.1 ACCESS: The pathway to university**

Reflecting on the need to democratise access to higher education in the South African context, Morrow (1994) distinguishes between formal access (institutional access) and epistemological access (access to the goods distributed by the institution), arguing that more open access to university education need to be coupled with epistemological access. This involves 'learning how to become a successful participant in an academe practice' (Morrow, 2000, p.77). For this to happen, however, there is a need for a major pedagogical as well as curricular overhaul.

In a paper entitled 'Social Class: Still an Elephant in the Classroom', Raey (2016) notes that, in the British university landscape, the rise in university intake does not necessarily mean that the class issue is being solved. Even if it is true that there are more opportunities in terms of access for children from a working class background, there is a need to go beyond accessibility to understand what it really means on the ground, and what the real outcome is. Over-focusing on access to university education can lead to another major issue: increased differentiation amongst universities based on students' class background. In the Mauritian context, students have the possibility of studying abroad, but this is clearly not accessible to all. Thus, for the majority of students eligible for a university place, the choice is between enrolling in a public university, which is free, and a private one, where they will have to pay full tuition fees. For the purpose of this study, there is a need to analyse the extent to which the choice of university education is perceived as being class-based, and the specific elements that influence one's choice in terms of the university and the specific courses one opts for.

Research by the Higher Education Statistics Agency in Britain shows that, despite the efforts made over the years to provide more opportunities for university education across social classes, the percentage of students from poor backgrounds attending Cambridge University fell from 12.4% to 10.2% between 2005 and 2016 (HESA, 2016). The UCAS statistics (2019) also confirmed a widening gap between rich and poor in accessing the best British universities. The report noted that upper class students were 15 times more likely to be enrolled in the best universities than those from poor social backgrounds. This raises the question of whether broader access to university education in Mauritius is actually promoting greater opportunities for social mobility on the ground. There is also a need to analyse whether students across social classes are self-excluding themselves from specific institutions, and the reasons for this. It is also important to examine the impact at organisational level to determine whether particular institutions are perceived as being exclusively reserved for specific social classes.

Trow (2007) defines the massification of higher education based on the level of participation in higher education across countries. Trow (2007) differentiates higher education systems as follows:

- **Elite system:** Less than 15% of the 18 to 23 age cohort participates in higher education. Access is restricted to either talented or rich students (or both). The system's objective is to educate the elite that will eventually lead the country.
- **Mass system:** Up to 50% of the 18 to 23 age cohort participates in higher education. Access to education is perceived as a right for those who meet the educational threshold. The role of higher education is to transmit a broad range of skills and knowledge to the population.
- **Universal system:** More than 50% of the 18 to 23 age cohort participates in higher education. Access to higher education is an obligation for the middle and upper class. The system aims to prepare the entire population to adapt to social and technological change.

Trow's work highlights that higher education fulfills a role allocation function within society. However, the way these roles are allocated depends on the system that the country supports at a specific point in time. Trow does not consider the influence of social class on the experience of higher education, and does not reflect on how the adoption of such systems impacts the established structure. Building on Trow's analysis, this study analysed the social class/higher education relationship by probing the way it interacts with structures, processes and practices, as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude, and on its ability to adopt a transformative agenda, thereby leading to equity and social justice. In addition, Trow adopts a positive outlook on movement from an elite system to a universal one. Increased enrollment is regarded as a sign of progress. An increase in the number of institutions is also regarded as positive, and is seen as reflecting the level of investment in higher education. The current study adopted a neutral approach to investigate the impact of the massification of education on the ground. It thus probed the actual experiences of university education of students across social classes.

Calderon's (2018) extensive review of the global phenomenon of massification of higher education provides a detailed account of higher education trends at global level, and across different regions. His primary aim was to establish time-series with the date students enrolled in higher education, thereby providing an historical lens to understand the unprecedented expansion of higher education. Calderon also aimed to trigger debate among academics and decision-makers on the policy responses required in higher education, given the shifts that national systems of higher education are likely to experience.

Calderon identified the following primary challenges in the field of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa:

- (i) **Financing higher education.** Funding to support the growth of higher education is perceived as a major issue.
- (ii) **Access to education.** Meeting demand for higher education that has resulted from increased completion rates in secondary education.
- (iii) **Quality of education.** The need to ensure that students receive the appropriate level of higher education.
- (iv) **Institutional capacity.** The need to set up the necessary logistics to accommodate growing demand for places in higher education institutions.

Calderon expects the sub-Saharan African region to experience strong growth in university enrollment in coming years. Mauritius can be said to occupy a privileged situation in the region, given that it is doing very well in terms of the main challenges identified by Calderon. However, there remains a need to probe the social impact of higher education on the ground, and the way students across social classes experience higher education in terms of social justice and equity.

The following issues raised by Calderon are of interest for the purpose of the current study:

- (a) The public sector approach to higher education as opposed to private higher education providers. Calderon notes that leaving higher education to the mercy of the open market can lead to a situation where demand is unmet if policy makers go by market logic. Given that public and private universities co-exist in Mauritius, it is

important to analyse how this dual model impacts on students' choice prior to joining university, as well as their experience of university education.

Calderon also raises the issue of online courses and innovative forms of delivery. The author notes that these emerging providers are applying new technologies so as to maintain their activities, which otherwise would not be economically viable. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the shift from class-based learning to online courses. Calderon also highlights the growing role played by gender, culture, and ethnicity in higher education, leading to more targeted efforts by providers.

In his concluding reflections, Calderon highlights that massification has significant implications for the future:

*This paper has drawn a picture of the continued massification of higher education and has described the shifts that we are witnessing globally. The nature and intensity of such shifts will have profound implications in the way higher education is planned, delivered, funded and quality assured across the globe. In particular decision makers need to recognise the critical role education plays in addressing issues of inequality, social disadvantage and removing barriers for preserving social cohesiveness at this time of global uncertainty and rapid technological transformation.... The transition from "mass" to "universal" systems of higher education means that the majority of the population in every country feels entitled to (or at least contemplate the aspiration to) participate in higher education. While the opportunities for access are provided (often in the form of scholarships and alternative forms of entry) for many students, on-going academic and financial support is often missing, and are key to higher completion rates... ...The appetite for enrolments in higher education will remain as strong as foreshadowed to the extent that students are able to complete their education, graduates are able to realise their career expectations as well as graduates maintain a wage premium in the labor market and are upwardly mobile.*

(Calderon, 2018, p. 28)

Calderon's writing denotes that he clearly realises the magnitude of the task ahead in terms of linking higher education with social expectations, and with a transformative agenda. However, he does not analyse whether the right things are being done on the ground, and whether we are really moving in the right direction with regard to equity and social justice through higher education. Indeed, Calderon's study is silent on social classes and how they influence the experience of higher education. Building on his work, the current study probed the possibility of higher education being guided by a transformative agenda. It aimed to uncover the hurdles along the way, as well as highlight the opportunities that the system currently offers, so as to identify the transformative potential of university education in the Mauritian setting.

Based on longitudinal studies in Israel in 1972, 1982 and 1992, Alon (2009) notes that evidence from all three cohorts confirms that high school graduates from low socio-economic strata are at a marked disadvantage in terms of access to post-secondary education. He identifies the elements that are responsible for these class-based divisions:

*The twin mechanisms, exclusion and adaptation... link class hierarchy to a highly stratified postsecondary system in an allegedly meritocratic environment. Intra- and inter-cohort comparisons reveal that while the class divide regarding enrollment and access to selective postsecondary schooling is ubiquitous, it declines when competition for slots in higher education is low and expands during periods of high competition. In such a regime of effectively expanding inequality (EEI), a greater emphasis on a certain selection criterion (like test scores) in admission decisions—required to sort the influx of applicants—is bolstered by class-based polarization vis-à-vis this particular criterion.*

(Alon, 2009, p. 732)

Mauritius has adopted a hybrid model consisting of free higher educational institutions funded by the state and fee-paying private universities. The official discourse is that students can choose between the two systems. On the ground, however, the options might not be as open as they first seem. A number of considerations, driven by the established structures, processes and practices, as well as pre-dispositions and aptitude, are taken into account in determining access to public and private universities. Alon's comprehensive study is directly

relevant to the Mauritian setting, where, concealed under a façade of an educational system providing an equal chance for all, wealthy families are in fact able to afford the best teachers for private tuitions, so that their children obtain good grades and secure a place at the university of their choice. They also have the financial ability to ensure that their children access fee-paying institutions. In contrast, students from poorer social backgrounds struggle to obtain the grades required to access university education. They are not competing on an equal footing. The primary focus of the current study is to analyse the experiences of university students across social classes so as to identify the ‘mechanisms’ that are in place to perpetuate the social class divide in the Mauritian setting.

#### 2.6.1.2 PROCESS of navigating university life

Armstrong and Hamilton (2015) employed an ethnographic and longitudinal approach to study the trajectory of 53 students in a large public North American university. Renowned across the world as centres of excellence, North American universities have, at the same time, been involved in a constant struggle for social justice and equality. Indeed, university-based mobilisation of students was highly instrumental in supporting social change throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century across the US. Despite the substantial progress made in terms of social justice in the North American higher education context, much remains to be done with regard to the way students across social classes experience higher education. Based on their comprehensive data collection process, which was carried out over five years and involved more than 200 interviews, Armstrong and Hamilton provide an insider view of how students from different class backgrounds make their way through their studies once they access higher education. They expose how, amongst the different pathways available to university students, the attractive and well-resourced ‘party pathway’ is rooted in the Greek system and supported by administrative staff of the university. The university administration establishes the organisational infrastructure around the party pathway, as well as the necessary resources. Even the university’s academic requirements are established according to the social calendar of the party pathway and its Greek calendar.

Armstrong and Hamilton note, however, that the university system does not offer the same opportunities to all students opting for the ‘party pathway’. The intrinsic mechanisms in place mean that it is more favourable to affluent and well-connected students in terms of

their academic and social experiences. Coming from well-educated families, and having the financial means, affluent students who choose the 'party pathway' benefit from sound advice and academic support. They are able to complete their studies whilst making the most of their time at university, and have the necessary connections to secure a good job after their studies. In contrast, students from poor family backgrounds who find it hard to pay their tuition fees, are left out of social activities. They have a completely different experience of university life, struggling through their studies and at times even considering dropping out. They end up in under-paid employment that does not even need a degree and do not have the necessary connections to secure a good job. Despite having completed university education, they do not make any progress in terms of social mobility and socio-economic status. They are not able to acquire the social skills, physical styles, or cultural traits that would better prepare them to access the labour market.

Over and above the issue of accessing university education, the current study considered the pertinent issue of affordability of education highlighted by Armstrong and Hamilton. It analysed how students cope with the costs involved, and investigated the need to review universities' funding strategies. In the Mauritian context, public universities do not charge tuition fees, whilst students opting for private universities need to meet the full costs. What are the implications of this hybrid model with regard to social justice and equity? The study probed how students across social classes experience the learning process as well as life on campus, looking at the role played by academics and the university administration in this regard. Finally, it analysed students' perceptions of their educational outcomes and their future career expectations, and the extent to which this is influenced by their university experience.

Coming from a disadvantaged background himself, and having made his way through the higher education maze and its inherent hurdles, Jack (2019) provides a fresh outlook on the issue of diversity and inclusion in elite universities in the US. Jack asserts that when a student from a disadvantaged background manages to secure a place in an elite university in the US Ivy league, this does not mean that he/she has won the battle. He notes that students from poor backgrounds struggle once they join the campus, thereby making a clear distinction between 'admission' and 'acceptance', and pointing out that even if affirmative action is

taken by elite US universities to ensure that students from lower social classes are allocated more places, students from different social backgrounds are not necessarily provided with the same opportunities to succeed once they are on campus.

The main factors identified by Jack (2019, p. 17) to explain the perpetuation of these wide differences in the experience of university education across social classes are:

- The fact that students come from completely different environments and have different cultural capital.
- The insensitive policies adopted by private universities.
- The fact that faculty members and the administration ignore the widely different experiences that students go through and bring with them to university.

Worse still, even universities which are conscious of these shortcomings and formulate policies to review access for children from lower social classes are unable to achieve their goals in terms of equality. As such, Jack concludes that, rather than closing the wealth gap, the prevailing culture in elite universities further excludes students from poor backgrounds, treating them as aliens. For Jack, there are deeply rooted social, cultural and economic differences in the university setting that need to be addressed and his study focuses on solutions to ensure that disadvantaged students have a better educational experience. Jack is conscious that processes and structures need to be re-visited so as to assist disadvantaged students who access elite universities. However, whilst he focuses on the 'experimental core of college life' that takes place between admission and graduation, the current study went beyond this to consider the pre-university elements as well as broader social structures, processes and practices that need to be addressed in order to bridge the gap between the different social classes and promote interaction across them on an equal footing. Furthermore, whilst Jack's research is based on interviews with 103 undergraduate students and two years of observation, the current study aimed to deepen and thicken our level of understanding with regard to how the structures, processes and practices operate. For this reason, a life-history methodology was employed in order to generate thick, rich evidence.

A number of pertinent questions need to be asked in the Mauritian context in order to understand how the structures, processes and practices impact established structural inequalities. How do Mauritian universities recruit students? Are there separate feeder

schools for private universities and public universities? How do these feeder schools operate and how are they changing over time? How are mainstream public schools and private fee-paying schools contributing to replicate the status quo? Answering these questions will enable a better understanding of how established structures, processes and practices are operating in order to replicate the social hierarchy despite the perception of enhanced access and the myth of meritocracy. What needs to be done to achieve true diversity? For Jack, there is a need for students, academics and the university administration to establish the right environment for each student to have the same chances of succeeding. At present, the university environment is shaped by the wealthy, and therefore disadvantages the poor. The structures, processes and practices thus serve the interests of the wealthy. In addition, Jack notes that the hidden curriculum, which is well documented at school level, also operates at university. The poor thus lack the requirements to meet social expectations. It is therefore essential to ensure that the elements of the hidden curriculum that are prejudicial to the poorer section of the population are eliminated so that a more conducive atmosphere to learn is established for all. Furthermore, whilst it is relatively easy for students from the upper social classes to establish and maintain connections with academics, this is much more difficult for students from poor backgrounds.

Jack also raises the issue of the insensitivity displayed by the university authorities. There is a need to ensure that the administration is aware of potential tensions amongst students from different social classes on campus. The common perception that university administration is doing low-income students a favour by admitting them also needs to be reviewed.

For Jack, it is also important to review policies and guidelines in relation to enrollment procedures, as well as other practical elements such as availability of food, and part-time jobs. It is essential to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not find themselves perpetuating common stereotypes where they accept and internalise their inferior position.

While all these factors are important, Jack (2019) proposes operational level solutions to an issue which might be more deeply rooted. It is thus essential to go beyond university policies and practices to identify the root causes of the injustices experienced by university students.

Soria and Bultmann (2014) investigated the experiences of self-identified working class students in the US. They found that social class was an indicator of college access and attendance whilst the percentage of students who had completed their university degree varied significantly across social classes. These differences in completion rates inevitably impacted social mobility, whilst perpetuating economic inequalities. Drawing on Rubin et al. (2014), the authors based their study on self-reported affinity with one of the five social classes. (LC, WC, MC, U-MC & UC). This was customised for the purpose of the current study.

Lynch and O’Riordan (2016) conducted extensive interviews with low-income working class students, as well as community workers, teachers and school principals to examine the barriers experienced by such students in terms of access and success in higher education. The study examined inequality from a sociological perspective, starting with the structuralist theory, but also drawing on Boudon’s (1974) rational choice theory and resistance theories. Based on their extensive data collection exercise, they concluded that economic, cultural and educational barriers interact to prevent students from succeeding and that the state plays a key role in creating and maintaining inequalities.

Stebbleton et al. (2013) found that working class students generally struggle to find peers who share their background and life-stories in the university setting. Working class students’ experience of higher education is an under-researched area and is not necessarily part of the official discourse at university level. However, by not addressing these issues, we run the risk of perpetuating class inequalities and tensions. Thus, it was important to reflect on the pattern of group formation upon joining private and public universities in the Mauritian context and whether it is influenced by class-based considerations.

The above review points to increased documentation of the ingrained disparities experienced by university students across social classes and the fact that universities participate in their maintenance. However, the current study focused on the transformative potential of higher education. It aimed to identify and remove the barriers that prevent a humanist vision of education, which would equip individuals and society with the tools of rationality and enlightenment. The challenge was to understand how these disparities have permeated the structures, processes and practices, which are silently contributing to the perpetuation of the status quo, with the ultimate purpose of positively influencing decision-

making at policy level.

### 2.6.1.3 OUTCOMES: The transformative agenda

In 'Higher education, social class and social mobility: The degree generation', Bathmaker et al. (2016) re-visit a common assumption of policy-makers that broadening access to higher education automatically leads to more fairness and enhances social mobility. The Mauritian authorities have embraced this assumption, with growing emphasis being placed on a 'knowledge based economy', and how it is likely to create jobs for all. Indeed, increasing the number of graduates in the labour market inevitably influences the way organisations operate, as well as how they select and hire employees. Being fully conscious of this situation, students from different social classes who aspire to higher education, might not be approaching university education in the same way, with those from higher social classes able to be more strategic in their approach as they have different options. This is not the case for students from lower social classes whose choice is generally limited to local public institutions.

Analysing the British model, Bathmaker et al. (2016) assert that, rather than promoting social justice, public funding policies on university education can play the opposite role, given that those who have the means are able to secure a place for their children in elite institutions. While education is free in public universities in Mauritius, members of the upper social classes still opt for private universities for their children. Is this because private universities offer a different experience of university education? Does this lead to a positional advantage in higher education as well as in the job recruitment process? Is there a feeling that students who come from specific social classes run the risk of being like 'a fish out of water' if they do not make the right choice in pursuing higher education? How do those who come from poorer background adjust to this competitive model? These are key questions that need to be investigated.

The literature establishes a clear relationship between higher education and enhanced employment opportunities (HESA, 2015) as well as higher earnings (Khan, 2012). There has been massive investment of public funds in university education in Mauritius and this is constantly increasing. More and more children from poorer backgrounds are making their way to university. This is, in itself, an achievement. However, complacency should be

avoided. The question is whether the country is obtaining value for the money invested in university education. Is the Mauritian model of university education promoting social justice, or is it contributing to maintenance of the status quo through the reproduction of the ruling elite? These are essential questions that were directly relevant to the current study that focused on the need for greater social justice and equity.

Friedman and Laurison (2019) contribute to the debate on class-based differences by analysing access to elite professions and class-based salary gaps in the UK. They applied a mixed method approach and referred extensively to the British Labour Force (BLF) survey which has included questions on class origins since 2014. The BLF is composed of a representative sample of approximately 108 000 people. Friedman and Louison found significant class-based gaps in access to elite professions, and little indication of any narrowing:

*Our results demonstrate that people from working-class background, women, Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi people, and those with disabilities are all substantially under-represented. Or, to put it another way, these jobs remain the bastion of the privileged. (2019, p. 44)*

The gap is also significant in relation to class-based differences in salaries:

*In contemporary Britain it quite literally pays to be privileged. Even when individuals from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering the country's elite occupations they go on to earn, on average, 16% less than colleagues from more privileged backgrounds. And more significantly, this class pay gap is not explained away by conventional indicators of 'merit'. A substantial gap remains even when we take into account a person's educational credentials, the hours they work and their level of training and experience. (2019, p. 209)*

Over and above the fact that they identify significant class-based gaps in terms of access to employment and salaries, Friedman and Louison also question the way key higher education institutions function in British society and underline the fact that there is a need to further probe established structures, processes and practices as these are not necessarily leading to more fairness with regard to higher educational achievement:

*When even institutions like Oxford and Cambridge, widely championed as the ultimate meritocratic sorting houses, do not wash away the advantages of class background... this surely constitutes a stark rejoinder to even the most strident believers in Britain's meritocracy. The class pay gap, in other words, reveals a powerful and previously unobserved axis of inequality that clearly demands urgent attention. (p. 209)*

In line with Friedman and Laurison's conclusions, the current study focused on the specific elements of university structures, processes and practices that influence the educational experience of students from different social classes, an area that has not received sufficient scholarly attention.

For Gegel et al. (2015), one of the main contemporary challenges of university education is to promote accessibility and the quality of education across social classes. It is well established that the knowledge and skills acquired in the process of university education make a significant contribution to social success. However, the value attached to education is not consistent across social levels. Education's impact on social mobility can, therefore, be positive, neutral, or negative. The question is whether university education is being turned into an institution that perpetuates and replicates inequalities? Is the function of university education as a social elevator gradually being neutralised? What is the current situation in the Mauritian setting?

### **2.6.2 Reflections on access, process and outcomes**

As noted above, the experience of university education is not based on choice, but seems to be deeply rooted within the organisation and reflects a social reality that reproduces the same pattern over time, favouring those who are well-off to the detriment of those at the lower end of the social hierarchy. The current study aimed to compare the situation in public universities in Mauritius that offer free tuition with that in private universities, which are fee paying and geared towards the upper social classes. This enabled reflection on the experience of students from different social backgrounds, as well as the extent to which there is a feeling that university structures favour some students, and make their lives easy, whilst others have to earn their degrees the hard way.

### **Section 3: The African reality, the Mauritian context and the novelty of the current study**

#### **2.7 The African reality**

Bank, Cloete and Schalkwyk (2018) note that, in recent years, the debate on university transformation in South Africa has been marked by student protests calling for the decolonisation of higher education and free education. They raise pertinent questions regarding the role played by universities at societal level. According to Bank, Cloete and Schalkwyk, there is a need to re-think the university in terms of its contribution to development, as for too long, the debate has centred around equity (particularly access and affordability), historical legacies (such as apartheid and colonialism), and the shape and structure of the higher education system.

Munro and Samuels (2015) observe that the post-apartheid South-African higher education system has followed the international trend of massification and promoting social justice through higher education. It has focused on broadening access and ensuring that increasing numbers of students enter the system and succeed. While substantial progress has made in terms of access to higher education in South Africa in recent decades, Munro and Samuels (2015) highlight that it remains characterised by low throughput, poor academic achievement, and high levels of student failure. Furthermore, there is a high concentration of failure and drop-out amongst African students, which is associated with the poor quality of schooling in most African communities. As a result, African students are at an academic disadvantage and are underprepared for university education. Nonetheless, Munro and Samuels (2015) are of the view that exceptional academic results can be achieved amongst students from relatively disadvantaged and underprepared educational backgrounds. Instead of following the crowd and considering the causes of failure and drop out, they opt for the alternative route of exploring how African students can achieve exceptional results despite the hurdles they confront. In line with Munro and Samuel's (2015) belief that one should not give in to fatalism, the current study focused on how a critical turn can be taken in the higher education setting. This can be achieved by identifying the characteristics of the processes and structures as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence

the experiences of university education across social classes, and how such education operates to replicate and perpetuate the established social hierarchy.

Dhunpath and Subbaya (2018) share the view that, despite considerable effort and investment, only marginal progress has been made in enhancing success rates. They support Munro and Samuel's (2018) view that everyone does not have the same experience of higher education:

*Access, success and completion rates continue to be racially skewed, with completion rates of White students being on average 50% higher than that of the majority Black African rates. The net result of the disparities in access and success is that under 5% of African and coloured youth are succeeding in any form of higher education. (2018, p. 86)*

Dhunpath and Subbaya add that this situation is “largely because student failure has been pathologized as a function of student deficits rather than a consequence of systemic dysfunction” (2018, p. 85).

## **2.8 The reproduction of the social order in the Mauritian setting**

Public universities in Mauritius have actively supported the state's policy of producing at least one graduate per family. Massive investment has also been made by private universities in the country. The massification of higher education has, so far, not received the academic attention it deserves. It is broadly perceived as a unique tool to empower the disadvantaged and is presented as such. However, based on an extensive review of the recent literature on the link between social class and university education, and how the social order is being reproduced through higher education, it is essential to probe further in order to understand how the structures, processes and practices, as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude impact on students' experience of higher education, and their influence on the social hierarchy. The following section discusses the social justice lens that was employed in this study to examine the experience of university education.

## **2.9 Novelty of the present study: Social justice lens**

From the review of the literature in the previous section, it is clear that the implications of social class in the university setting have been extensively studied. Considerable attention has also been paid to the way students across social classes experience university education from different vantage points. The novelty of the current study is that it analysed the experience of university education from a social justice perspective. It was interested in analysing how social class conditions and influences the nature of the university experience. It thus focused on the characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude, which influence their experience of university education. The theoretical framework developed for that purpose is discussed in detail in the following chapter.

### **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter focused on the concept of social class, and drew on the contemporary literature to analyse experiences of university education across social classes from different vantage points. It also probed the African reality with regard to the influence of social class in higher education, and introduced the novelty of the study in terms of analysing the experience of university education from a social justice perspective.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

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#### **Introduction**

Chapter I set the scene for the study and Chapter 2 reviewed the relevant literature in line with its aim and objectives. This chapter presents the lens employed to analyse the data. It situates the study in the critical theoretical landscape, elaborating on the application of Bourdieu's theory on social class and Sen's capability approach as a dual theoretical lens, and presents the theoretical framework developed for the study.

#### **Overview**

This chapter explains the theoretical framework applied for the study. Section 1 elaborates on the theoretical grounding of the research, and section 2 critically examines Bourdieu's theory on social class and Sen's capability approach. Section 3 elaborates on the specific elements of Bourdieu and Sen's theories that were applied to constitute the dual theoretical lens for the study.

#### **3.1 Theoretical roots**

Reconciling the need to offer quality education and pursue greater social justice and equity is a real challenge for universities across the world. The current study focused on university students' experiences so as to broaden understanding of what has been achieved and what remains to be done to achieve this dual objective. This section elaborates on the theoretical grounding of the research.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the major theoretical contributions made to this field, including the works of Dewey, Marx and Gramsci as well as critical theories of gender, race, class and society.

For Dewey, the very existence of a democratic society rests on education. Everyone should have access to education for democracy to work, and education is the key to democracy, leading to the formation of good citizens and the establishment of a good society. As such, Deweyan radical pragmatism is based on a project of democratising and reconstructing education in order to achieve greater social justice and progressive transformation as well as inform pedagogy and practice.

Marx's criticism of political economy was primarily aimed at overcoming the limitations and oppressive features of established institutions. Writing from a Marxist approach, Gramsci (1971) also criticised the ways that Italian education and culture reproduced bourgeois ideologies. More recently, Reitz (2000) highlighted how the existing education system contributes to the reproduction of the current model of oppression and domination. Reitz called for counter-institutions and pedagogy to promote social development and citizens' holistic development.

The contributions made by the structuralist approach through the work of Giddens (1984) Althusser (1972) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) on the role of education in reproducing class inequalities, which are highly relevant from a Marxist perspective also need to be acknowledged. From a functionalist perspective, Davis and Moore (1945) and Parsons (1961) analysed education's role-allocation function. Whilst functionalists consider inequality as being normal, inevitable, necessary and even functional, the Marxist perspective considers it as being an injustice towards those at the lower level of the social hierarchy. From a Neo-Marxist perspective, Bernstein (1977) examines the crucial role played by cultural capital with regard to inequality in education.

While these theoretical approaches' influence on this study is acknowledged, it is, however, broadly based on the critical theory and it ultimately aimed to develop a model of university education that has a liberating influence, promoting a good quality of life across a fair and pleasant society. This can be achieved by shaping and forming fully developed human beings and citizens equipped with the necessary knowledge and values to contribute to the creation of a better society which satisfies the needs and abilities of all.

The study reflects the characteristics of the critical theory established by Guba and Lincoln (1988) and Mertens (2015) given that:

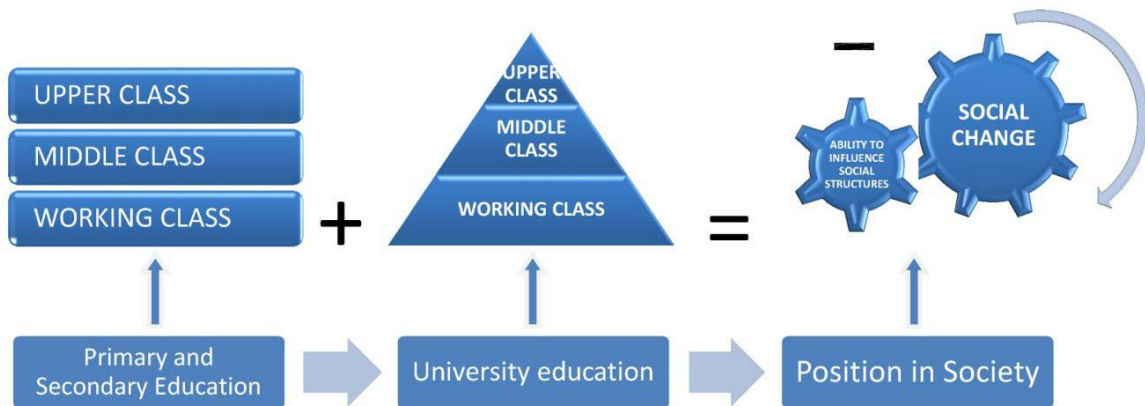
- It is concerned with power relations within social structures and an examination of the conditions that university students experience, based on social positioning.
- The central focus is to uncover agency, which is hidden by social practices, ultimately leading to liberation and emancipation.
- There is conscious recognition of the consequences of privileging versions of reality. For this reason, the researcher gives a voice to the voiceless, and studies the experiences of students across different social classes.
- Given the epistemological positioning of the researcher (explained above) it is clear that there is a deliberate effort to promote human rights, equity and social justice, and to address issues of power, oppression and trust in society.
- There is high reliance on 'praxis', which in simple terms can be defined as education that challenges power relations and leads to transformative actions.

In this respect, the study's contribution is two-fold: (I) it merges the sociological perspective of Bourdieu on social class and Sen's capability approach which focuses on social justice, to probe the university setting and analyse the experiences of students from different social classes. In this respect, its theoretical contribution is a cross-sectional outlook on what students go through. (ii) At the philosophical level, it offers new insight into the characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as elements of students' pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence the impact of university education on the social hierarchy and social mobility.

### **3.2 Initial reflections**

My initial reflection with regard to the study can be presented schematically as follows (Figure 3.1):

Figure 3.1: Initial reflections



The experience of primary and secondary school across social classes is represented through a square: It cannot be changed as it is located in the past. However, the experience of university education can be impacted upon, as it refers to the current experiences of university students. Together, the past and current experience have the potential to impact the outlook on the future and ability to influence the social structures as well the pre-dispositions and aptitude of the student (through the students' social position). Ultimately it can contribute to social change.

This study applied Bourdieu's broad perspective on social class, and approached this research with a continuum outlook regarding class groupings, rather than adopting definitive positions. It recognised the move towards the embourgeoisement of the working class in Mauritius, with a growing desire for members of the lower social classes to climb the social ladder through hard work and growing investment in higher education. In parallel, there is a homogenisation discourse that proposes that all members of Mauritian society will gradually share the same values and have the same outlook on life, ultimately leading all to be on an equal footing and have the same life chances. However, instead of questioning the significance of social classes, this study adopted Bourdieu (1997) and Savage's (2015) standpoint that social distinctions can take the form of gradations, rather than clear-cut boundaries. Nonetheless, their pertinence and relevance to the equity and social justice debate, and the fight for a better chance for those who are struggling, cannot be underplayed.

The study therefore built on Bourdieu's perspective and adopted a view of social classes which might not be composed of homogenous groupings, yet have clear spaces of differences. Broad bands in terms of social groupings (Upper, Middle and Working Classes) rather than multiple sub-divisions were employed given that the study's aim was to capture the characteristics of the processes and structures as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude that operate at university level and to analyse how these impact on students from different social classes.

Whilst Bourdieu considers the factors leading to social reproduction and a perpetuation of class divisions, Sen's capability approach offers a more optimistic outlook on people's transformative potential. He asserts that, by adopting the right approach, a person's ability to undertake valuable acts and to change his/her future can be enhanced. Sen focuses on the need to establish an environment that is conducive to empowerment and transformation, rather than concentrating our efforts and resources on quantitative outputs.

The current study analysed the experiences of university students, highlighting the obstacles they face, as well as the educational drivers, but also opportunities to extend their knowledge, and to achieve greater social justice. It thus adopted Bourdieu's social reproduction theory and Sen's capability approach as a dual theoretical lens. This is discussed in the following section.

### **3.3 Theoretical grounding: Bourdieu and Sen**

Research on education often builds on many different research interests. This study focused on the link between social class, higher education and social justice. It aimed to identify the characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence how university students from different social classes experience university education. It adhered to the concept of eclecticism, believing strongly that joining parts of specific theories will lead to deeper level analysis, and ultimately to a 'new whole'. For Tellings (2001, p. 277), integration of theories is particularly useful in scientific disciplines that are "directed not only at theorizing but also towards action, such as education". According to Tellings (2001), there are four different mechanisms by which eclecticism

can be achieved through the integration of theories: theory reduction, synthesis, horizontal addition, and vertical addition. For the purpose of the current study, Bourdieu's theory on social class and Sen's capability approach were applied as a dual lens and were horizontally added in order to gain deeper insight into how students from different social classes experience university education on the ground. The specific elements of the theories of Bourdieu and Sen that were relevant for this work and were applied to construct the theoretical framework are discussed in sections 3.3.1 to 3.3.4.

### **3.3.1 Bourdieu's analysis of social class**

Bourdieu provides an established and well-anchored starting point to conceptualise how students from different social classes experience university education. His theory of social reproduction (1977a) analyses how social structures, processes and practices set up and maintain social reproduction, thereby perpetuating a society that is stratified across class lines. For Bourdieu (1973, 1977a, 1986, 1990), even if economic factors play an important role in the social reproduction process, one of the key instruments of social reproduction is acceptance and the perpetuation of social inequalities through the reproduction of the dominant classes' culture. Bourdieu highlights that the education system makes a significant contribution to legitimation and acceptance of the established social structures and class divisions in society, given that it is the upper classes' values and principles that are applied and upheld at institutional level.

Bourdieu is routinely included in lists of leading class theorists (Weininger, 2003). He contributes to the sociological debate through a unique approach to class relations. Bourdieu's thinking revolves around the concept of habitus, which is defined as a socially constructed system of dispositions that orients "thoughts, perceptions, experiences and actions" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 55). In an endeavour to rethink Max Weber's contrast between class and status in terms of a distinction between the economic and the symbolic, Bourdieu (1986) asserts that the analysis of social classes has both an economic and symbolic dimension, and that class analysis therefore overlaps between economic and symbolic relations. Bourdieu rejects the need for social classes to be clearly demarcated from one another. Instead of restricting his analysis to the opposing viewpoints of those who consider

social classes as being constituted as objective reality, and those who view classes as being mere theoretical artefacts based on arbitrarily drawing lines between otherwise undifferentiated continuums, Bourdieu (1987, p. 3), points out that:

*it is possible to deny the existence of classes as homogeneous sets of economically and socially differentiated individuals objectively constituted into groups, and to assert at the same time the existence of a space of differences based on a principle of economic and social differentiation. In order to do so, one needs only to take up the relational or structural mode of thinking characteristic of modern mathematics and physics, which identifies the real not with substances but with relationships.*

For him, these boundaries need to be understood in terms of social practices rather than theoretical or even political considerations. Bourdieu (1987) conceives of the social world as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main facets of differentiation observed in a given social space. These refer to the form of capital which determines the structure of the space by conferring strength, power, and wealth on those who hold it.

By adopting a notion of class structure that encompasses the entirety of the occupational division of labour, Bourdieu is not restricted and limited by the 'owners' vs 'workers' duality. In fact, his model covers all the middle-class occupations, the professions, and public administration, as well as intellectuals and those engaged in cultural production and the arts. For Bourdieu, one's position in the occupational division of labour is thus determined by the distribution of capital, which Bourdieu regards as "the set of actually usable resources and powers" (1984, p. 114). He underlines the fact that capital exists in multiple forms, making an important distinction between economic, cultural, and social capital as determinants of social class:

*A general science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognised as economic must endeavour to grasp capital, that 'energy of social physics'... in all of its different forms... I have shown*

*that capital presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely, economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.*

(Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 118-9)

Bourdieu defines social capital as *“the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”* (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119).

For its part, cultural capital refers to the ways in which people use cultural knowledge to undergird their place in the hierarchy in establishing and retaining their social position. It comprises of a person’s social assets (education, intellect, style of speech, clothing, etc.) that promote social mobility in a stratified society. For Bourdieu, two social agencies, the family and the school, are mainly responsible for inculcating cultural capital. Social reproduction is maintained through the education system as it favours students from high status backgrounds, given that, according to Bourdieu, evaluation of students is carried out from a dominant culture’s standpoint.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital can be attained through different means: it can be embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1986). The embodiment of cultural capital is learned and cultivated over time; it can also be acquired in an unconscious way through one’s upbringing and interaction with people in their immediate surroundings as one grows up. Lareau and Horvat (1999) point out that in term of educational achievements, students from higher social classes tend to be in a more favourable position to perform well academically given that they receive more support and guidance from the community in which they are raised.

Cultural capital occurs in an objectified state when it is *“objectified in material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc”* (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 246). In this objectified form, it influences one’s social class given that people *“compete for placement in the social hierarchy through acquisition”* of capital (Holt, 1998, p. 4).

Bourdieu refers to cultural capital in its institutionalised form as being primarily “in the form of academic qualifications” ((Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247) as individuals apply their intellectual capabilities (acquired in the form of embodied cultural capital) and advance through the educational system. These become institutionalised in the form of a “legally guaranteed qualification” such as university diplomas and degrees. Bridge (2006) highlights that institutionalised cultural capital tends to be higher amongst the middle-class and upper class as they are “able to reproduce institutional cultural capital through ‘good’ schooling for their children” (Bridge, 2006, p. 1967). In this institutionalised state, cultural capital can be converted into economic capital, given that it provides access to high profile occupations to which considerable economic rewards are attached.

### **3.3.2 Bourdieu as a theoretical lens**

Having studied French society since the 1960s, Bourdieu was primarily interested in formulating an integrated theoretical and methodological approach that would deal effectively with dichotomies such as subjective/ objective, material / symbolic, structure/ agency and freedom / necessity in social theory. He also showed deep interest in understanding the practical logic of everyday life so as to better address power relations and contributed to the development of a reflexive sociology. Bourdieu has left a wealth of theoretical concepts as a sociological legacy, which are a solid starting point for researchers exploring social class issues in several related academic disciplines. Bourdieu saw the task of sociology as uncovering “the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe, as well as the ‘mechanisms’ which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 7). For him, individuals occupying similar positions in the social space are subject to similar conditions and conditioning and as a result develop similar attitudes, motives and expectations. The current study applied Bourdieu’s perspective in order to identify the mechanisms that perpetuate the status quo in the university arena through the experiences of university students. His theoretical contributions laid the foundation for the study’s theoretical framework. The key elements of Bourdieu’s theory that were applied to develop a theoretical framework are outlined below.

## Habitus

Bourdieu uses the term habitus to explain patterns of behaviour among people from different social backgrounds. While these might seem pre-established by social structures, Bourdieu emphasises individuals' own agency. Habitus refers to individuals' internalisation of social structures and history. It is composed of a set of innate pre-dispositions that mirror established social structures, whilst also influencing one's perception of the world as well as one's actions. Bourdieu explains it as follows:

*The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (1990, p. 53)*

Bourdieu distinguishes between primary habitus, which tends to have deeper roots as it is learnt during childhood, and secondary habitus, which is generally acquired upon joining employment. For Bourdieu, ways of behaving which have been learnt at a young age become almost natural. They function below the level of consciousness and language, and cannot be controlled by introspective scrutiny or by one's own will.

In the context of the current study, the habitus can be seen as an embodied mechanism that enables university students to respond to the situations that they face. It is also a set of dispositions merged with past experiences, which influence perceptions, appreciation and actions whilst making possible completion of a range of tasks.

*It literally moulds the body and becomes second nature ... operating in a way that is pre-conscious and hence not readily amenable to conscious reflection and modification."* (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 95).

For Bourdieu, even if an individual moves from his/ her initial class background, he/ she will still retain subtle aspects such as his/her accent, mannerisms and behaviours and will unconsciously display same. This also leads individuals to behave in a way that more or less

replicates the same structures. However, even if the habitus shapes and produces patterns of behaviours, it does not determine them. There is flexibility of practice which allows for permutations across the social hierarchy.

*Experientially, we often feel we are free agents, yet base everyday decisions on assumptions about the predictable character, behaviour and attitudes of others. Sociologically, social practices are characterized by regularities... Bourdieu asks how social structure and individual agency can be reconciled. (Maton, 2014, p. 48)*

In recent years, the ways in which schools themselves contribute to social stratification have been the subject of a growing body of research. Institutional habitus refers to the process through which schools (collectively) think, perceive and impact their students' progress. It is based on the shared beliefs of teachers within one institution with regard to the nature of students, education and educational institutions themselves. Whilst individual habitus is conditioned by the structures of the environment in which it originates, institutional habitus is conditioned by the sociocultural milieu in which a school is located (Kolluri, 2019).

## **Field**

Although the habitus heavily influences people's behaviour in society, Bourdieu points out that it cannot be viewed in isolation given that actions take place in physical and social space. As such, tensions between perspectives of the self and of the environment lead individuals to behave differently. Bourdieu was concerned with stratification and domination in society and applies the French word 'champs' to denote the field, which can refer to an area of land, a battlefield, and a field of knowledge. Bourdieu considers the field as:

*a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.*

(Bourdieu 1998b, pp. 40-41)

For Bourdieu, reality is a social construct. What is real is relational and people define themselves and the world around them by marking the differences between observed phenomena. To exist is to exist socially and in relation to others. Advanced societies, according to Bourdieu, have developed through a process of differentiation into semi-autonomous and increasingly specialised fields of action. He refers to these spheres as 'fields', highlighting that power relations within and between them structure human behaviour. It is therefore important to study the power relations people take part in in order to understand their behaviour. Bourdieu (2005, p. 30) views the field as follows:

*A field is a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they will take with respect to the field, these position-taking being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field.*

The positions that agents occupy within the field carry with them specific dispositions that influence the way agents take decisions and act. Bourdieu highlights the key role played by the habitus in this process. Within the field, the habitus acts as

*a structuring structure which organises practices and the perception of practices for agents: personal history, preferences and dispositions placed in the context of the surrounding social reality form a structure that, to a certain extent, pre-determine that individual's potential courses of action.*

In the higher education setting, one's social and educational background, upbringing, access to reading material and a conducive learning environment all form part of the structure and determine the behaviour of the agent in the field.

Over and above the influence of the habitus on the field, Bourdieu also highlights the role played by the doxa, which refers to the universe of tacit presuppositions that organise action within the field. In the same way as the habitus guides one's conduct, the rules have a limiting influence on the potential course of action for the agent in the field. It is important to note, however, that agents in the same field are not compelled to adopt a particular line of conduct. They will tend to share a set of rules (common doxa) as far as they agree that the game is

worth playing. They therefore abide by the rules. However, Bourdieu points out that agents do not always agree with the rules of the game. They occupy positions aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field. Agents who take a position aiming at transforming the relations try to change the rules of the game to their own benefit. Those who try to maintain the status quo of the doxa would disagree and this will result in a struggle. In this struggle, agents make use of their power (or capital) so as to impose their way of doing things.

Bourdieu's field theory has been (justly) criticized for being artificial, linear and redundant. This approach reduces social life in the field to a variety of capital: Economic, social and cultural. Thus, social life is being driven by the single logic of capital (O'Hara, 2000). Another criticism leveled against Bourdieu's field theory is that its theoretical tools are easy to metaphorize, thereby leading to both an exaggeration or an underestimation of their applicability and value (Greenfell, 2009). From Bourdieu's perspective, therefore, a pessimistic view of the world is projected, not because everything is pre-determined, but because social processes seem to resist attempts to change their course and their practical logic. The competitive nature of relations between individuals and groups within networks is also ignored.

In spite of these criticisms, however, what is of interest for the purpose of the current study is deepening one's reflection and building on Bourdieu's seminal contribution. Whereas Bourdieu views agents as having the potential to take a position aiming at transforming the relations and therefore attempting to change the rules of the game, this study aimed to reflect on Bourdieu's contribution by analysing the higher education field and examining whether students as agents sharing the same social space are in a position to have a decisive impact on pre-determined relations and to re-visit the rules of the game. It is important to examine their level of consciousness of their position within the field as well as societal expectations based on their enrollment in higher education. Are students willing to disrupt the established reality? Are they in a position to do so? Is the field promoting an environment that is conducive to greater fairness and equality? These are the key issues that the study focused on. Thus, Bourdieu's field theory does not represent a static model with a priori determined confines, but offers a mode of analysis to construct an 'object' of knowledge beyond what is

visible to common sense (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 128).

It is important to point out, however, that Bourdieu applies the field as a tool to explore and analyse, rather than to represent a formal system. He is interested in people's ability to perceive the forces at work that influence their socialisation, as well as the possibility of changing their situation, and (even better) having an impact on the social structure. In order to study the field, there is a need to consider the allocation of power and the struggles within the field; the position occupied by agents and institutions; and the agents' habitus. In the higher education setting, how do students consider the interactions within the field? How do the structures, processes and practices impact on same? Do students feel that they can impact their situation and, ultimately, the social structure? Are they conscious of the strained relationships and the domination that emerges from the field?

## **Capital**

Bourdieu borrowed the term 'capital' from the economic sphere to use it as a tool to better understand the social order. For Bourdieu, whether or not an individual possess the different forms of capital plays an important role in determining his/her educational experiences and access to opportunities:

*Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242)*

Whilst **economic capital** is generally straightforward as it refers directly to money and material wealth, and **social capital** refers to social relations that increase one's ability to advance one's interests, **cultural capital** pertains to the skills and knowledge which an individual can draw on to give him/her an advantage in social life. Cultural capital can exist in three forms:

- In the embodied state, referring to long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body;
- in the objectified state, referring to possession of cultural goods such as books, pictures and computers;
- in an institutionalised form, referring to a set of competencies which have been evaluated and confirmed by an official body with the legal authority to do so. In the university setting, this **institutionalisation** takes the form of educational credentials (Bourdieu, 1986). The academic qualification granted confers institutional recognition of the cultural capital possessed, and this can be converted into economic capital through its value in the labour market.

**Hereditability:** According to Bourdieu, one of the most important characteristics of cultural capital is its hereditability. Whereas the transfer of economic capital across generations is tangible, cultural capital makes a significant contribution to the reproduction of the social hierarchy across generations, and this goes unnoticed. It therefore contributes substantially to the reproduction of the distribution of individuals across class locations over generations, since “the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 245).

It is therefore important to analyse how the different cultural capital of university students from different social classes influences the way they approach university education, how they experience same, and whether they are unconsciously reproducing the social structure. Alternatively, they could be actively engaged in bringing about change.

### 3.3.3 Sen’s Capability approach as theoretical lens

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics Amartya Sen is deeply involved in identifying, explaining, and fighting the forces of global inequality (Walter & Unterhalter, 2007). One of his main areas of research focuses on how human beings should be evaluated. The capability approach, which is based on his views on evaluation, equality, freedom and rights, originates from his research and his 1970s lectures (Sen, 1980). Sen views a capability as “*a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; (it) represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be*” (Sen 1993, p 30). Capabilities, therefore,

refer to "*the freedoms (people) actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value*" (Sen, 1992, p. 81). It consists of opportunities to accomplish what a person attaches importance to. For Dreze and Sen (1995), the notion of capability "*is essentially one of freedom - the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead*". For instance, students who have completed their secondary education aspire to complete university education, to become university graduates, and occupy high level positions in the workplace.

Sen is critical of theories that assess human well-being in terms of material wealth, standards of living, and equal opportunities. Instead, he proposes an alternative approach for the distribution of resources, which focuses on the real needs and aspirations of each and every individual rather than concentrating on broad economic and social outcomes that are pre-set at national or even international level. What is important for Sen is to equalise capabilities, rather than equalising resources. The implication, however, is that people should be provided with the opportunity to develop their full potential. In this respect, there is a need to remove the obstacles preventing them from making decisions that they value. For Sen, individuals are the primary objects of moral concern (Brighouse & Swift, 2003) and their actions are evaluated based on their impact at individual level.

In focusing on capabilities, policy-makers need to evaluate the conditions that enable individuals to decide according to their fields of interest. Even though the contexts in which these decisions are taken are clearly different, the capability approach is sensitive to human diversity and complex social relations, being geared towards equity through enhanced capabilities, rather than equality of opportunities and /or outcomes. Sen (1980) puts the issue of equality in the limelight by asking the core question, 'equality of what?' given that egalitarian approaches need to focus on equality of something. In the educational field, Brighouse (2000) and Ball (2003) both propose that the focus is on the provision of equivalent learning opportunities.

Walker and Unterhalter's (2007) research on social justice in education underlines that, in evaluating educational policies in relation to social justice and equity, people's capabilities, rather than financial issues, educational resources, or outputs in terms of qualifications are the primary consideration. Whilst resources constitute the means to human well-being, they cannot be regarded as intrinsic ends. The key elements of Sen's capability approach that

were applied for the purpose of the current study are as follows:

### **Capabilities and functionings**

Sen (1980) makes an important distinction between capabilities and functionings. Whilst functionings refer to achieved outcomes, capabilities refer to the opportunity to achieve such functionings. While students who have completed their secondary education are generally perceived as having similar functionings (e.g., in terms of reading ability and their focus on higher education goals), Sen points out that their capability sets might be very different, given that they experienced different primary and secondary educational trajectories. In focusing on functionings and neglecting capabilities, a pertinent question that needs to be asked is whether educational institutions are ultimately contributing to the reproduction patterns of inequality across society by considering every student to be on par, whilst, in reality, there are wide disparities in their pre-university trajectory, as well as their family and social backgrounds?

The current study probed functionings and capabilities by analysing how students from different backgrounds, and with different educational trajectories, reach different levels of functionings which impact their choice of subject, as well as their choice of university and, ultimately, their entire university experience. It focused on the specific characteristics of 'functionings' and how they impact the university experience across social classes, leading to the replication of a stratified model within the higher education field despite the fact that the selection process is presented by the public authorities as being fair to all. The study also highlights the characteristics of capabilities across social classes, examining the extent to which students are provided with opportunities to accomplish what they attach importance to, and whether these are real/ substantive or pseudo-opportunities.

### **Agency and freedoms**

Over and above capabilities and functionings, the study focused on two other key concepts that emerge from Sen's theory: agency and freedoms. Sen views agency as people's active involvement in shaping their life based on objectives that they consider important, rather than merely following instructions on the direction one needs to embrace with regard to the goals to be achieved. By reflecting on their own life, individuals are able to freely decide

about their future, but they also have the leeway to work in cooperation with others. For Sen, education needs to provide students with the opportunity to be the agents of their own learning, rather than being mere recipients of others' agency. Applying agency in one's educational path is important for individual freedom and for the empowerment of students, providing them with the opportunity to challenge the established link between social class and educational outcomes.

Whilst Sen underlines the potential for agency to be a game-changer, he also recognises that people are not all on an equal footing, and that their choices are influenced by the structures of opportunity which are available to them. Sen refers to real freedom as having all the required means to achieve what one aspires to do and be. Therefore, real freedom is not only having the option of doing something, but having a substantial opportunity to accomplish it. In the educational field, unequal circumstances impact on students' access to resources and opportunities, leading to unequal chances and unequal capacities to choose. Nussbaum (2000) highlights that people's subjective preferences and choices are heavily influenced and framed by society and public policy. Social and economic inequalities "affect the inner lives of people: what they hope for, what they love, what they fear, as well as what they are able to do" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 31). Having internalised that the structure of opportunities available across social classes is different, individuals adapt their preferences accordingly and validate their status within society, even if they are fully conscious that it inevitably impacts on their aspirations and hopes for the future. However, calibrating one's outlook on the future based on one's reality and context inevitably has an impact on one's agency and well-being. As far as disadvantaged groups are concerned, they are denied opportunities and resources. Sen presents their situation as follows:

*Our mental reactions to what we actually got and what we can sensibly accept to get involve compromises with a harsh reality. The destitute thrown into beggary, the vulnerable landless laborer precariously surviving at the end of subsistence, the overworked domestic servant working round the clock, the subdued and subjugated housewife reconciled to her role and her fate, all tend to come to terms with their respective predicaments.*

(Sen, 1985, p. 15)

Hall (2019) applies the Sen-Bourdieu analytical framework to analyse inequality and social justice in the educational field. Drawing from Sen's capability approach, Hall (2019) emphasises the need to go beyond learners' achievements, focusing instead on their freedoms to achieve, and the value they attach to these freedoms. Hall uses Bourdieu's theories to highlight how schools contribute to continuing injustices and inequalities in realising one's aspirations. Hall's Sen-Bourdieu conceptual model presents an alternative to quantitative measures of educational resources, school enrollment and educational achievements. It underlines the complex inter-linkages between learners and the formal educational systems within which they are situated. It highlights three spaces in which inequalities manifest themselves within the educational setting: In terms of ***accessing education***; in the ***experience of education***; and in terms of ***outcomes*** linked to one's educational credentials.

The current study built on Hall's Sen-Bourdieu framework in order to gain a deeper understanding of the way institutional structures, processes and practices, as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude impact on their experience of university education. However, it took Hall's framework beyond the theoretical level, applying it to the higher education context in Mauritius through the life histories of students in public and private universities. The novelty of this study is that it analyses the experiences of university students from different social backgrounds so as to better understand the influence of social classes on the experience of university education. It also provides a holistic picture of the university experience by probing students' pre-university trajectories, as well as their actual experiences and their outlook on the future. The study also contributes to research in the higher education field by focusing on the characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as specific elements of students' pre-dispositions and aptitude, and how they pre-determine the impact of university education in terms of social hierarchy and social mobility. The ultimate aim was to better understand how one's experience of university education can act as an empowering or a limiting agent, depending on one's position in the social hierarchy.

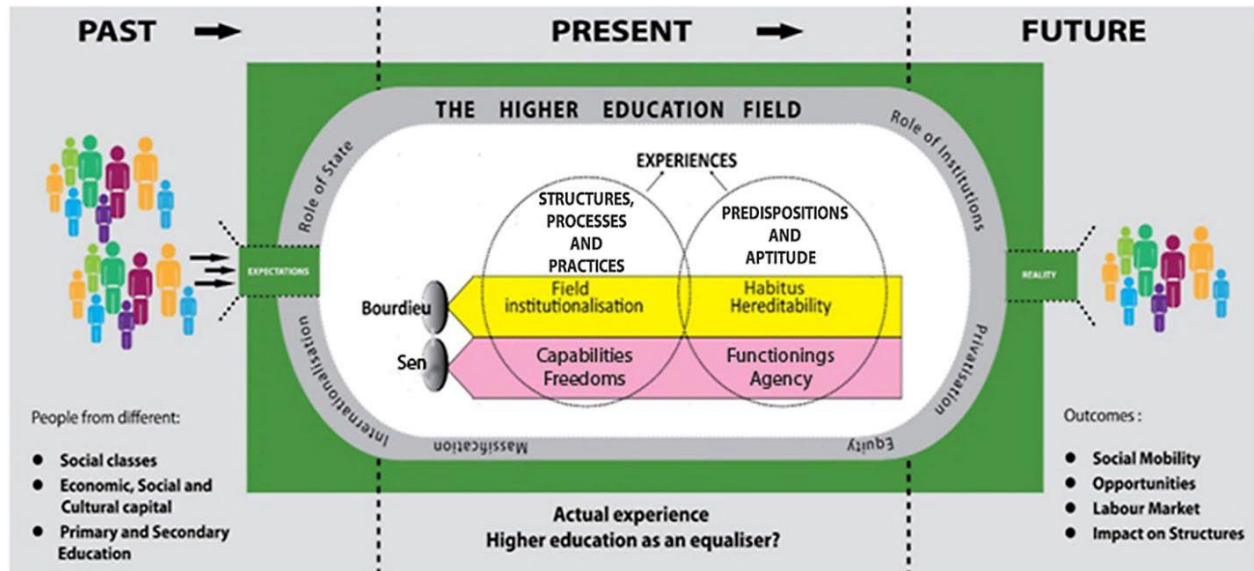
Horizontally adding Sen's capability approach and Bourdieu's outlook on the perpetuation of inequalities in the educational field thus provides a much broader outlook on the

educational experience than quantitative evaluations. It takes into account the freedoms available to students in order to achieve their goals, as well as the hurdles that they face. The theoretical framework devised for the current study is presented in the following section.

### 3.4 Theoretical framework

The conceptual framework developed for this study is presented schematically in Figure 3.2. It denotes how students initially join university after having followed a specific educational path through **primary and secondary education**. They come from different **social backgrounds** with distinct levels of **economic, social and cultural capital**. Once they complete their secondary education with the required final year results and their choice of a tertiary institution is crystalised, students join the university **arena** with **sets of expectations** regarding the way the educational experience is to take place, and how the university processes and structures, as well as pre-dispositions and aptitude will impact on their future. The official discourse is generally that of **higher education as an equaliser**.

Figure 3.2: Conceptual framework



However, the **contemporary context** in which they join university is also important, as there is on-going debate at international as well as at local level regarding the role of universities, and their influence on society and the social hierarchy. As noted previously, this study combined the lens of Bourdieu's theory and Sen's theory in order to probe the experiences that students go through, analysing how the established processes and

structures as well as the students' pre-dispositions and aptitude influence their experience of university education. Whilst initially building on the work of Bourdieu and Sen, it aimed to contribute to the field of research in higher education by uncovering the characteristics of the processes and structures as well as the specific elements of the students' pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence their university experience across social classes.

In order to achieve its objectives, the study applied Bourdieu's outlook on processes and structures by focusing on the **institutionalisation of cultural capital**, referring to how the legitimisation of competencies through academic credentials operates in the Mauritian setting. It also considered **the field**, where the struggle for power takes place. Bourdieu's outlook on institutionalisation was super-imposed on Sen's outlook on **capabilities**, as the opportunity to achieve one's higher educational goals. In addition, Bourdieu's concept of the field was analysed in conjunction with Sen's perception of **freedoms** in terms of having all the required means to achieve what one aspires to do and be, turning students into transformative beings.

Students' pre-dispositions and aptitudes were also analysed through Bourdieu's outlook on **habitus**, which refers to the internalisation of social structures, and the **heredity of cultural capital**, pertaining to how the same social patterns are reproduced across generations. Bourdieu's outlook was superimposed on Sen's views on **functionings**, in terms of what a person is able to achieve through his/her pre-dispositions and aptitude, and **agency**, which Sen views as people's active involvement in shaping their own lives and their ability to freely decide about their future.

By analysing the structures, processes and practices as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude across the dual lens of Bourdieu and Sen, the study gathered rich and thick data on the educational trajectory of students from different social classes, and how the structures, processes and practices, as well as their pre-dispositions and aptitude influence their current educational experience, and their outlook on the future. The methodology employed in the data production process is explained in detail in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter anchored the study in the critical paradigm, and presented the ontology, epistemology and theoretical roots of the research. It delimited the working definition of social class that was applied for the purpose of the study. More importantly, it established the theoretical groundings of the study and presented its theoretical framework that was built on a dual lens: Bourdieu's reproductive theory and Sen's capability approach. The ultimate aim of the theoretical framework developed was to uncover the characteristics of the processes and structures, as well as the elements of the students' pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence students' experience of university education across social classes, and contribute to the perpetuation of class-based divisions across society.

## **CHAPTER 4:**

### ***Research Methodology***

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#### **Introduction**

Chapter 3 presented the study's theoretical framework. It situated the research in critical theory and elaborated on Bourdieu's theory of social class as a sociological lens and Sen's capability approach as a human development lens. This chapter presents the methodology employed to generate and analyse the data pertaining to the experiences of university education across social class.

#### **Orientation to this chapter**

Section 1 justifies the use of narrative inquiry and the application of the life history methodology. Section 2 outlines the data production steps and processes. Section 3 considers reliability and validity issues and Section 4 focuses on the significance of the study, and ethical considerations as well as the limitations and problems encountered.

#### **4.1 Research Paradigm**

##### **4.1.1 Anchoring the study in the Critical paradigm**

Researchers approach a topic with paradigmatic beliefs that heavily influence the direction of the research. A paradigm can be defined as a philosophical orientation. It is the "set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed" (Kuhn, 1962). In the field of educational research, the term paradigm is used to describe a researcher's 'worldview' (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), which refers to the abstract beliefs and principles that influence a researcher's outlook on the world and his/ her interpretation of what is happening. In this respect, a paradigm is a conceptual lens that guides the method employed and how the information gathered is examined. Paradigms play a crucial role in research as they set out the beliefs that determine the specific areas of research the researcher will prioritise, and how the research will be

approached. The way the research is devised, and the approach taken, inevitably influence each step of the research process, including the choice of methods and the way meaning is constructed.

This study on students' experience of university education across social classes was located in the critical paradigm. This paradigm is primarily concerned with the power relations within social structures. It is interested in empowerment and the removal of oppressive structures. Historically, it is linked to three leading critical theorists of the Frankfurt School: Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse whose work is a critical response to the works of Marx, Kant, Hegel and Weber. They were the pioneers in applying empirical research techniques to test and refine the propositions made by the Marxist tradition. For Horkheimer (1982, p. 244), what characterises the critical theory is that

*it seeks human emancipation to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.*

The critical approach challenges the established structures that replicate and perpetuate unequal relations within society. Its ultimate objective is to understand the present reality so as to confront social oppression and advance social justice. As such, the critical paradigm is suited to studies that aim to give voice to the voiceless, or less powerful. Analysing the experiences of university students from different social classes clearly fits within this type of research as, in the Mauritian context, there is a need to analyse the gap between official discourse with regard to university education, and the reality on the ground. Whilst university education is assumed to be an equaliser, are educational institutions in fact moving in the opposite direction? Is access to universities becoming increasingly segmented across social classes? How do the structures, processes and practices, as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude influence the experience of university education? These were the key issues addressed by this study. Given that it was concerned with equity and social justice issues, it blended perfectly with the critical approach.

### **4.1.2 Ontology**

Ontology, or how a researcher views the world and reality, is a critical aspect of any research. The assumptions that a researcher makes about the nature of the world, and what is real, have direct bearing on the orientation that a study will take. The outlook on the nature of the world and reality can be very broad. It ranges from realism, which is the belief that there is a single truth, to relativism, which holds that there are many versions of the truth and, depending on the perspective from which we are looking at it, the truth actually changes.

Given that it was concerned with oppression, social justice and equity, this study adhered to historical realism, strongly believing that reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, ethnic and gender values, which crystallise over time (Guba & Lincoln, 2011). It was based on narrative inquiries of students originating from different social classes, and applied the life-history approach, as it was interested in exploring how students' experiences of university education are influenced by their social background. It aimed to uncover the characteristics of the institutional structures, as well students' pre-dispositions, and how these contribute to the perpetuation of the established social hierarchy. However, it has to be pointed out that, the present study focuses on the social classes, aiming at identifying the mechanisms through which the social hierarchy is being perpetuated through the higher educational structures. It does not, therefore, cover the complex ethnic composition of the Mauritian social fabric and how these impact upon one's educational experience. The ethnic factor needs to be analysed in a study on its own.

### **4.1.3 Epistemology**

The way individuals perceive the world inevitably influences how they go about knowing more about it. Epistemology refers to the philosophical study of the origins of knowledge. The sources of knowledge that researchers draw on heavily influence how they proceed in uncovering knowledge in the field. Epistemology refers to the best approach to investigate the world and its reality. There are broad distinctions between epistemological positions. For instance, in a modified dualist/ objectivist approach, knowledge about a phenomenon is obtained through rigorous measurements and observations carried out in an objective way, with minimal influence of the research process (Lincoln et al., 2018). The current study

adhered to the subjectivist / transactional epistemological position, based on the belief that the production of knowledge cannot be isolated and sealed off from prior information and experiences (Lincoln et al., 2018). In this approach, both the researcher and the participants contribute their experiences and knowledge for the co-construction of new knowledge. Therefore, knowledge cannot be assumed to be objective and value free (Lincoln et al., 2018).

In the prologue, the researcher shared his experience of the education process and university education. His positionality as a researcher from a working class background was clearly established, as well as the belief that researchers do not enter the field in a completely neutral way. The researcher also acknowledges his vertical positionality (being a full time academic in a public university) and its impact on the interaction with the participants. Co-construction of knowledge, through the educational and career path of the researcher, and the experience of the participants was expected to generate greater clarity with regard to the way the established structures, as well as students' pre-dispositions impact on the social hierarchy. However, instead of adopting the academic standpoint, the researcher interacted with the participants from a PhD student vantage point in order to minimize the influence of this vertical (academic-student) positionality. By adopting a PhD student's standpoint, the researcher was able to interact with the participants on an equal footing, establish rapport and build trust. He was in a better position to gather their true experience of the university structures.

## **4.2 Research design**

### **4.2.1: The choice of Life history research**

Given that this study focused on the experience of university education from a social class perspective, there was a need to collect first-hand accounts of the reality of university students. The life-history approach was used to document the lives of the participants prior to joining university, as well as their current experience of university education and their outlook on the future. Jones (1983, p. 147) notes that, "life histories examine and analyse the subjective experience of individuals and their construction of the social world". Samuel (2015, p. 12) highlights the importance of accessing first-hand subjective experience where one's social, cultural, historical, biographical and contextual biographies are not tampered with:

*The complexity rather than the reduction to single truths is explored in the process of life history research. Usually the life history research chooses multiple case studies of different/ similar participants to make a theoretical argumentation. It aims to generate with its participants' retrospective accounts of the past, yet providing insightful interpretation of how individuals make sense of their present and their future. The act of writing the narrative life history project itself is imbued with the process of restoring, healing and re-interpreting through dialogical interaction between the researcher and the researched.*

In this respect, life histories examine an extended period of time and draw on participants' detailed, rich lived experiences. As such, this study focused on where the participants come from; how they made it to university; their initial expectations of same; how they adapted to the university culture; how they are coping with their studies, and how satisfied they are with same; the difficulties and constraints they face, their negative and positive experiences before and on accessing university; how class impacts university processes and structures; how they perceive their future and what they foresee university education contributing to same.

Through the life history approach, the researcher was also able to capture the educational trajectories and coping strategies adopted by the participants as they come across changing conditions and situational contexts. Furthermore, whilst providing first-hand insights and valorising ordinary lives, this approach enables the researcher to adopt a detached position so as to critically examine broader structural and macroscopic elements and their influences on the phenomenon under study (Fine & Weis, 2005).

*Life stories puts one's life as a whole, one's lived experience, into story form.*  
(Clandinin, 2007, p. 233)

*I am also interested in having the person tell his or her story from the vantage point that allows the individual to see his or her life as a whole, to see it subjectively across time as it all fits together, or as it seems discontinuous, or both. It is, after all, this subjective perspective that tells us what we are looking for in all our research efforts.* (Atkinson, 2002, p. 124)

Interest in life history / life story research in the social sciences has grown exponentially in recent years (Roberts, 2002). The popularity of this research method, which focuses on the collection and interpretation of personal histories or testimonies, points to growing reluctance on the part of researchers in the social sciences to rely solely on survey-based studies.

It is important at this stage to make a distinction between the 'life story' and 'life history'. Roberts (2002) broadly distinguishes between the two as follows: whilst the story is the narrated story by the author/teller, the life history is the later interpretive, presentational work of the researcher. For Atkinson (1998), a life story refers to "the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another... A life story is a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects." However, it is clear that this distinction is difficult to sustain in reality as the interviewer inevitably impacts on the process from the very outset. For the purpose of the current study, the life history approach was applied as it is linked to narrative inquiries aiming at deeper understanding of the experience of participants. The role of the researcher is to examine the information collected, taking into account crucial ethical, moral and cultural considerations. The researcher interprets and communicates what has been collected in the interview process. Through a deep analysis of life histories one can determine the circumstances under which individual agency and structural conditions meet and interact, and how changes occur. Life histories can be an empowering form of social research, as they give a platform to voices which are excluded from other forms of research. However, the reflection on personal and social life that this method presents is not unmediated, but is communicated to a given audience by the researcher who collected the material (Riessman, 1993).

This study followed Atkinson's (2002) three-stage process of life story interviewing:

- The pre-interview stage: preparing for the interview, and understanding how the interview is going to be beneficial.
- The interview process: Guiding a person through the telling of his / her life story whilst recording same.

- The post-interview process: transcribing and interpreting the material collected through the interview.

Whilst the life history approach subsumes several methodological techniques and types of data, including case studies, interviews, and the use of documents (letters, diaries, archival records), this study applied the narrative inquiry methodology, recording the lived experiences of the participants from their perspective and ordering them into a chronological narrative. This methodology can be considered as the most suitable way to uncover and discover more deeply the complex and multi-layered experiences of individuals, focusing as it does on the study of 'lived experience'- that is lives and how they are lived (James, 2018). It is indeed essential to broaden our qualitative knowledge of individuals' experience of university education from a social class perspective so as to improve and revisit our approach to such education. This exercise provided thick narratives in terms of the participants' trajectory and experience that are used in the analysis presented in the following chapters. It has to be pointed out that the data-collection exercise quite complex, given the number of participants (6) and the fact that three interviews of 1 ½ hours had to be completed. Even if the exercise was carefully planned, it still depended on the availability of the participants. However, the participants showed a high level of commitment and actively participated in the data-gathering exercise. The established schedule only required minor re-adjustments and these were easily dealt with. The iterative nature of data collection for life history did not constitute any major hurdle for the present study, as the participants were full time students and did not have a busy schedule. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and were transcribed. The transcript of their audio recording was made available to them to ensure that it is a faithful transcription of their views. This exercise was completed smoothly, as the participants were satisfied with the transcription, and did not request any re-working.

#### **4.2.2 Dimensions of narrative research**

Clandinin and Connelly (2007) identify the key dimensions of narrative study, as well as the form narrative research takes. Narrative enquiry explains experiences through the dimensions of temporality, sociality and spatiality. The narrative is based on these dimensions, which, in turn, impact on the narrative. There is also a need to take into account

the inter-connectedness between these dimensions. For the purpose of this study, these dimensions provided an exploratory structure for narratives surrounding the experience of university education from a social class perspective. This can be understood as follows:

#### 4.2.2.1 Temporality

Human beings make sense of the world around them through stories and this is an on-going process. Even if these stories (or narratives) are generally based on experience from the past, the way they are reported is influenced by similar experiences over time. Thus, temporality accounts for the social changes that take place over time. The way things were lived at a specific point in time and the way that these are viewed through the retrospective method might be different. In this study, the students reflected on what they went through and whether this had an impact on the outcome of their studies. They also reflected on how they lived it then. Indeed, when looking at narratives experienced in the past, social changes emerge and things are not necessarily considered from the same perspective anymore.

#### 4.2.2.2 Sociality

Our life story is a central element of who we are and the image we have of ourselves. Our experiences exist through the stories we have lived over time. Even if these have not been written or related, they exist and form part of our experience that influences the way we think and the way we take decisions in the future. However, the way we relate our story is influenced by the audience. In relating or listening to a narrative, people go through a process of constructing and reconstructing their identity as well as their social network. In this study, it was essential to listen to those who are able to relate their own experiences and provide their own narrative. This provided them with the opportunity to emphasise what is important to them and thus offered valuable insight into ways to address the issues raised at the level of university education, whether in terms of access, the process, or upon completion of one's university studies.

#### 4.2.2.3 Spatiality

The environment in which a person lived an experience and the culture of the organisation within which it took place impact on the experience. The participants' definition and appreciation of their environment therefore influenced the way in which the organisational

context within which an experience took place was narrated. For this study, which took place in a university setting, the way the university culture was perceived by the participants inevitably impacted their experiences of university education. Their interpretation of university education was influenced by their past experiences, and how university education is defined in their social and cultural context. However, their actual experience also impacted on their perceptions of same.

It is clear that these three dimensions are inter-connected. Whilst spatiality refers to where an experience was lived, temporality considers when it took place, and sociality looks at who were involved and why this experience was lived in this way.

### **4.3 The different steps in the study**

#### **4.3.1: Administrative issues**

The study was carried out amongst students enrolled in a full-time undergraduate programme at the two main public and two main private universities in Mauritius. These four institutions all offer full-time, campus-based university education.

Prior to gathering data, approval was sought and obtained from the four universities. An information sheet and consent to participate in the research were also drawn up (see Appendix 3). The participants were assured of the confidential nature of the research as well as the voluntary nature of participation. They were also informed of the academic nature of this work and how the information provided will be saved and ultimately destroyed as per the protocol set by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Ethics Committee. They were informed that the transcript of their audio recording would be made available to them to ensure that it is a faithful transcription of their views. They were provided with the contact details of the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Administration so that they could contact it in case of any query regarding the research.

#### **4.3.2 Identifying the participants**

Based on official computations from Statistics Mauritius (2020), and the 2017 Household Budget Survey (HBS) an initial attempt was made to identify broad categories applicable to the Mauritian context. However, so as to be able to apply the life-history methodology fully

within the time frame, the five categories initially identified were grouped into the three broad, workable clusters in Table 4.1.

<b>Initial Categories</b>	<b>Clusters</b>
Upper Class	Upper Class
Upper Middle Class	Middle Class
Lower Middle Class	
Working Class	Working Class
Lower Class	

*Table 4.1: Social Class clusters*

This exercise was carried out for ease of comparison to ensure that the social groupings were broadly (rather than narrowly) demarcated. In order to determine the broad social class of the students who were willing to participate in the study, Adler et al.'s (2000) widely used MacArthur scale of Subjective Social Status (McArthur SSS) was initially applied. Through this exercise, the students were able to present graphically where they stood on the social ladder. However, this initial (subjective) exercise was cross-checked through the objective Socio-Economic Status (SES) classification, in which information about several properties that are considered critical for social class, such as parents' occupation, level of education and income, were collected and weighted in order to arrive at an objective classification of social class. These are widely used by the public authorities to arrive at official statistics. Given that only three broad social bands were applied for the purpose of this study in order to delimit one's social class, the identification exercise was relatively easy and straightforward. The objective SES exercise confirmed the initial subjective self-identification exercise. Following the completion of this dual classification exercise, two students were selected from each of the three social class clusters (see Table 4.1) to participate in the study.

Three in-depth one-on-one interviews of 1.5 hours each (Riessman, 2008) were planned for each participant so as to gain a comprehensive understanding of their past, their present situation, and their outlook on the future. A total of six participants were interviewed. Whilst

this is on the 'high side' given the qualitative nature of this work, it was essential to include participants from the three main social class clusters (*Upper Class; Middle Class; Working Class*) so as to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experience of university education among students of these different social classes. Instead of one participant from each social class (which should have been enough), two were interviewed. Even if they had commonalities (given their similar class profile), this catered for variations in terms of personal and family circumstances and educational history and therefore enriched the data collected for analysis. The researcher spent five months in the data-generating process in the field.

### **4.3.3: Data production**

#### 4.3.3.1 Design of tools

A loosely-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was designed to address the pre-set objectives by topic. In contrast to structured interview questionnaires, the participants were granted much freedom and leeway, generating rich narrative data. Once trust and good rapport were established by explaining the purely academic nature of this study and guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity, they were free to discuss the topic at their own pace, on their own terms, using their own expressions. The students were also very interested in the research as they were conscious that it focused on an area which has not received sufficient scholarly attention in the Mauritian context.

The first interview took a retrospective view of the participants' path and their educational trajectory. The second focused on their current situation and experiences, whilst the third interview considered their views regarding their future. As such, this study captures the past and the present, whilst also considering the participants' expectations and outlook on the future. The interviews were carried out in Creole, French and English, based on the language the student is more comfortable in. They were transcribed and either translated or kept verbatim so as to maintain originality and authenticity. The transcripts were analysed thematically, identifying recurrent patterns and emerging differences across the different social classes. During a life story interview, what a participant relates to the researcher is what he or she feels are the most important parts of his or her life. As such, even if it is a subjective interpretation of a lived experience, it is essential for the researcher to ensure that

the story is kept in the words and the voice of the person telling it. The life story narratives collected in the interviews were thus transcribed in such a way that the essence of what a person went through is reflected in the written version. However, as a validity check and in order to enable the participants to review the transcripts and make changes, the transcript was given to the participant. In order to compare the life histories, they are presented sequentially: educational experience prior to joining university; actual experience of university education; and future outlook and aspirations.

#### 4.3.3.2: Ensuring trustworthiness

Qualitative research is criticised by positivists for its lack of trustworthiness. As such it is essential for qualitative researchers to not only be aware of this issue, but also to become familiar with ways of addressing same. There are a number of frameworks to ensure that qualitative research is carried out in a rigorous manner. Guba (1981) underlines the importance of four elements in order to ensure trustworthiness:

- (a) **Credibility:** This entails presenting a true picture of the phenomenon under study and ensuring that the findings are congruent with reality. It can be achieved by adopting a well-established method of inquiry. This study applied the well-documented life story approach following the Atkinson model. Credibility was ensured through the development of early familiarity with the culture of the participating universities. The researcher's background, qualifications and experience were an important factor in this process.
- (b) **Transferability:** Refers to the provision of sufficient detail for readers to be familiar with the context of the study and decide whether it could be replicated in their own situation. In this study, this was achieved by providing a thick description of the phenomenon under investigation and by clearly delimiting the boundaries of the research by clarifying the number of organisations participating, the profiles of the participants (e.g., social class), the number of participants, the data collection method and the time period.
- (c) **Dependability:** Entails the creation of optimal conditions for a future investigation to repeat the study (even if does not necessarily obtain the same results). This was achieved by providing an in-depth explanation of the research design and

implementation as well as data collection. Another valuable tool in this regard is the reflective appraisal evaluating the effectiveness of the process of inquiry.

(d) Confirmability: There is a need to take the necessary steps to demonstrate that the findings emerged from the data and not through the researcher's predispositions and inclinations. This was achieved by providing reflective commentaries, as well as a detailed description of the methodology, enabling the reader to trace the course of the research step by step. It also took the form of schematic presentations.

By applying these principles, the researcher ensured that his work is of high quality, and is replicable and trustworthy.

#### **4.4 Pertinence of the study**

- By adopting the life history approach and applying the narrative inquiry methodology to focus on social class and the experience of university education, this study contributes to the literature on equity and social justice in university education. Indeed, the depth of the study helps to uncover critical areas in the university education system that have not received sufficient scholarly attention.
- Growing demand for university studies also justifies the need for a deeper understanding of the experience of university education among students of different social classes. The study provides an alternative outlook on university education through the eyes of students from different social classes.
- The study is also helpful to university administrators. Instead of adopting a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, university decision-makers need to be conscious that the experience of university education among students from different social classes might not be the same. This needs to be taken into account in formulating policies.

This study makes a significant contribution to the debate on equity and social justice at university level by giving a voice to the voiceless. Whilst quantitative reports on universities' achievements in terms of enrollment and output provide an overall picture of the situation, the life story approach offers an alternative outlook on the experience of university education by bringing the element of social class into the equation.

## **4.5 Ethical considerations**

Given that narrative research is based on people's lived experience (Ezzy, 1998; Moen, 2006), narrative researchers need to take all the necessary steps to ensure that the privacy and dignity of those whose lives are being studied are preserved and honoured. The ethical considerations taken into account in conducting this study are outlined below.

### **Establishing an explicit and implicit contract**

Prior to data collection, the participants were fully briefed on the nature of the study, and its aim and objectives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). They were also duly informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. The participants incurred no costs, nor were they offered any financial incentives/remuneration for their participation. All these issues were clearly outlined in an information sheet and the participants were also requested to sign an informed consent form (See Appendix 3).

Over and above this explicit contract between the researcher and the participants, it was also essential to establish an implicit contract, given that the degree of rapport and trust heavily influences the level of openness and self-disclosure that participants engage in (Lieblich, 2006). This is gradually built by showing respect and compassion, as well as being empathic, non-judgmental, concerned, tolerant, and emotionally responsive (Josselson, 2007). The participants were also encouraged to relate what they felt comfortable to talk about.

### **Anonymity and confidentiality**

In order to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, the participating institutions and all participants were assigned codes and pseudonyms which are used to refer to them during the discussion and the dissemination of the results. The participants were also informed that all data collected will be for the sole use of the researcher and that the written and audio material may be consulted by the supervisor and external moderator upon request. It was highlighted that these parties are bound by confidentiality clauses at their respective institutions.

## **Validation of narratives**

After transcription and prior to analysing the data, participants had an opportunity to go through the data collected and were once again informed of the option of withdrawing from the research at any point (as per the letter of consent). However, they were very enthusiastic about the research and were even willing to forego anonymity if this would add value to the work. They had to be convinced that, as their contribution would be only used for academic purposes, their names and other personal information would not have any significant implications in term of the analysis.

## **Unwanted disclosure and data storage**

In order to ensure that no unwanted disclosure was included in the transcripts, the participants were informed about the start and end of the interview, and the recording was limited to the interview session. Once the interview sessions were over, participants had the opportunity to reflect on the exercise, and were asked whether there was any issue they wanted to raise, or any information that they did not want to include in the transcript. They were also reassured that the data will be stored safely and eventually discarded as per UKZN policy. This is also included in the UKZN ethical clearance documents.

## **4.6 Profile of Participants**

Based on the initial classification carried out in public and private universities, six students from three social class clusters were selected to participate in the study (See section 4.3.2). The profiles of the participants are based on data collected in Parts I to III of the life history schedule (See Appendix 4).

### **[PARTICIPANT 1: AN: Working class student living in a pocket of poverty](#)**

#### **Background**

AN is a young man of 21, enrolled in a BSc (Hons) Social Work programme in a public university. He lives in Cité Sainte Catherine, a poverty-stricken area of Saint-Pierre, a village in the district of Moka. Sainte Catherine is a public housing community consisting of 68 houses that were built in 1960 following a cyclone that destroyed many houses across the

island. During this period, the same type of unit was built for people in need in many regions of Mauritius with the financial support of the European Development Community (EDC). Sainte Catherine is on the official list of 'pockets of poverty' identified by the public authorities. Through its empowerment agency, the National Empowerment Foundation, the state has been assisting poverty-stricken families in Sainte Catherine to improve their living conditions. The business sector is also actively involved through corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects. Non-governmental organisations involved in poverty alleviation are also active in Ste Catherine.

### **Socio-economic situation**

AN has lived in Ste Catherine since his birth, with his father, mother and elder brother. He is currently in Year II at a public university. His grandparents initially settled in Ste Catherine when the public housing unit was built in 1960 and the family has not moved. AN's father works as a messenger in a private company. He studied up to form V. His mother is a part-time house maid who studied up to Form III. Their monthly (combined) family income is approximately Rs 17 000. AN's father also works as a helper on building sites on weekends to earn additional income. The family is clearly surviving on the basics and is on the margins of poverty.

### **Participant 2: NJ - Brilliant student from a working class background**

#### **Background**

NJ is 22 years old and lives in Providence, Quartier Militaire. She is enrolled in a BSc (Hons) Sociology programme in a public university. She is part of a modified extended family, with uncles and aunts living in the same yard, but different households. This plot of land was bought by her grandparents, who worked on a sugar estate. Each of their four children built their own house. NJ lives with her mother, father and younger sister. Providence is a small village in which people mainly work in agriculture, in manual occupations in the sugar industry, or in textile factories. While there may be families that are facing difficult financial situations in Providence, this is not apparent to the outsider. It is a poverty that is concealed and people suffer in silence. They are trying by all means to face their difficult situation, but are not willing to talk about it, and do not want others to know about their reality. NJ's family

has always struggled. However, despite her background, she excelled at primary school and was admitted to the best secondary institution on the island.

### **Socio-economic situation**

NJ's father is a mason. However, he only works when his services are required and does not have a regular income. Her mother works as a cleaner in a shopping mall. Both only completed their primary education. Before, only her father was working. However, NJ's mother had no alternative but to find a job so as to meet rising expenses when the two children started to attend secondary school. Her father suffers from ill-health. They live in a small two-bedroom house which they own. It used to be made of iron sheets, but with a lot of sacrifices, they were able to add two rooms made of concrete. They gradually improved their living conditions through hard work. NJ said that the family has always struggled to meet monthly expenses and has no savings. While the extended family helps from time to time, her parents only turn to them as a last resort.

### **[Participant 3: SJ: Lower middle class student from Britannia studying at a public university](#)**

#### **Background Information**

SJ is 22 years old and is enrolled for a BSc (Hons) in Communication in a public university. He lives at Camp Berthaud in Britannia, in the south of the island. He is the only child. His father works as a bell-loader driver at Britannia sugar estate and his mother is a housewife. His grandparents also live in the southern region. SJ's family has traditionally been linked to the Britannia sugar estate as his grandfather also worked on the estate. When he retired after 42 years of service, in line with established practice, he received a plot of land. With the grandparents' permission, SJ's parents managed to take a loan and to build their house on the plot. This is a major achievement, and they are very proud of owning their property, even if they are still paying off the loan. They now look forward to a better future for their only son.

### **Socio-economic situation**

SJ describes his family situation as stable and their financial situation as being just above the minimum threshold to live decently. While they are not rich, SJ said that his parents always did their level best to provide him with everything he needed during his school days. They still cater for all his needs, even if SJ also takes on part-time jobs when the opportunity arises. While his parents only completed primary education, they do not want SJ to feel inferior to his classmates. Building their own home has given the family more stability and they are able to plan for the future.

### **Participant 4: KL – Upper middle class student studying at a private university**

#### **Background**

KL is 23 years old and is enrolled in Year II of a BSc (Hons) in Psychology at a private university. She lives with her parents in the south of the island at Riche-en-Eau. Her father is a supervisor on a sugar estate, and the family is provided with a house on the estate. Her mother is a housewife. Both parents cut short their secondary education and have not undertaken any post-secondary studies.

#### **Socio-economic situation**

KL rates her family's financial situation as 'average', given that the whole family relies on her father's salary. While her father is a supervisor, he is not part of the management of the company. KL works part time on Fridays to earn pocket money. The family is able to live quite comfortably, but is unable to do save much.

### **Participant 5: ZK: 2<sup>nd</sup>-year student in a private university: making it against all odds**

#### **Background information**

ZK is from a well-off family that lives in a nice area of Rose-Hill, one of the main towns in Mauritius. He is 21 and is enrolled in the second year of a 'BTS Gestion' (which equates to a degree in Management) in a private university. Both his father and mother come from a literate, cultured background. His father is a well-known literary figure who has not only published many poems and books, but has also received numerous international awards for his writing and contribution to French literature. His father also heads a number of

successful businesses, mainly in real estate. His mother is pursuing a career in management, and is currently the head of the distribution department of an international beverages company. ZK is an only child who suffered from anxiety and followed a special programme for students with special needs throughout primary and secondary school. He managed to overcome these difficulties and to make his way to university.

### **Socio-economic situation**

While ZK is from a wealthy background, he prefers to see himself as 'normal' as he does not like to be in the limelight. He is conscious that his family is financially comfortable and he enjoys a good quality of life, but he prefers to work hard in a discrete way in humility, as these are the values his parents taught him. As he is the only child, he is aware that he will join the family business one day and will later take over its running. Indeed, he is preparing himself for this and this is one of the main reasons he has opted for the management track at university. ZK enjoys a comfortable standard of living, and his parents are very caring and even quite possessive. This partly explains why he did not study abroad like most of the students in his cohort. For ZK, his family's situation is the result of all the efforts of the family over time. It has been achieved through hard work and perseverance.

### **[Participant 6: MF: 20-year-old private university student from an upper class background](#)**

#### **Background**

MF is 20 years old, and is presently in Year II of a BSc (Hons) in a Psychological Sciences programme in a private university. She lives with her parents in the exclusive residential area of old Quatre-Bornes, an upmarket area of Mauritius. She is an only child and her father is a director of his own company, while her mother is a bank manager. Her parents were among the best achievers in Mauritius at the end of their primary and secondary schooling and were among the top 25 students in the Economic Stream for the HSC examinations. Her father even ranked first in accounting in Mauritius. After their HSC, they both completed a BSc (Hons) in Economics at the University of Mauritius. Her mother was ranked first in the Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities, and was awarded a scholarship to complete postgraduate studies in the UK. Both parents completed an MSc in Economics at the University of

Nottingham. MF was taught from a very early age to organise her learning. She has followed in her parents' footsteps, enjoys reading and has a natural curiosity to understand the way things work. She is also very committed to her studies, and has thus far performed exceptionally well.

### **Socio-economic situation**

MF's family is financially very comfortable. Indeed, she reports that her father and mother are both from well-off families who were traditionally involved in the wholesale sector. MF is conscious that she lives very comfortably. She has her own room and a separate study as well as all the facilities required to work comfortably. All her needs are taken care of by two full-time maids and a driver drops her at university every day, and brings her home. She was also chauffeur-driven when she was in school. MF has never travelled by bus and would not know how to do so on her own. She has visited many countries with her parents. MF could have studied abroad, but is studying in Mauritius because her parents did not want her to be on her own in another country.

## **4.7 Categorisation in extended social classes**

The study purposely took a broad approach to social classes so as to ensure that the experiences of university education across those 'extended' social classes were captured and highlighted. For this reason, sub-categories of social classes were organised into three broad workable groupings: Upper Class (UC), Middle Class (MC) and Working Class (WC). Based on the above profile of the participants, it can safely be said that the preliminary profiling exercise using both subjective and objective social class measurement (see section 4.2.2) was effective, as it enabled the identification of participants from the three extended social classes that this study focused on.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter set out the methodology employed to conduct this study. It discussed the use of narrative inquiry and the application of life history as well as the steps in the data production process, and issues of validity and reliability. The study's significance, ethical considerations, the problems encountered and the limitations of the research were also outlined, as well as the profiles of the respondents.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **FINDINGS (DESCRIPTIVE)**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 4 focused on the methodology employed to conduct this study. It explained the choice of narrative inquiry and the life history approach and set out the steps followed in the data collection process and the measures taken to ensure that the data collected is valid and reliable and that ethical protocols were respected. This chapter describes the participants' educational experiences, depicting the key aspects of each of their unique educational trajectories from primary education to their current university experience. It also portrays their outlook on the future.

#### **ORIENTATION**

This chapter presents each participant's experience of education. Section 1 outlines their primary and secondary educational trajectories, Section 2 their pre-university experience and Section 3 their initial steps into, and actual encounter with university education. Section 4 outlines their outlook on the future.

#### **5.1 Primary and Secondary educational trajectories**

This section focuses on the preliminary socialisation that the participants went through prior to joining university. It highlights how their experience at primary and secondary level later impacted their decision to pursue higher education.

#### **PARTICIPANT 1: AN**

AN started his educational trajectory the hard way. However, his initial encounter with failure led to enhanced determination and resilience that have helped him to overcome hurdles along the way. In the face of adversity, AN developed a will to succeed based on his conception of his abilities.

***I was an average student in general. I did CPE twice. I managed to get through at the second attempt. At the first attempt, it did not go well. I failed...I had health issues...I did not manage to catch up...then I realised that I will have to do my level best, given that my elder brother has managed to pass. Even if I was not in good health, I worked hard and went through.***

On completing his CPE at the second attempt, AN attended a regional secondary school that mainly enrolls students from his locality as well as those from nearby villages. His teachers' support was critical in his pathway to university education. They even helped the students during their lunch break. However, AN recalls that the choice of subjects was very limited and he had to move to another secondary institution to complete his HSC.

He is also thankful for the sacrifices and effort made by his parents. They worked long hours to pay for his educational expenses and private tuition. He strongly believes that if he had had the means, he would have performed much better and noted that students who could not afford private tuition did not perform as well as he did.

***There were some students who were taking tuitions with the best teachers in the region...we could not afford that.... our school teachers were charging only ½ price for us for tuition... As for those who were not taking private tuitions, they could hardly cope...***

AN recalls that while, in general, teachers did their level best to help, there were a few with preconceived ideas about students from a working class background who lived in pockets of poverty. This inevitably impacted negatively on teacher-student interaction. However, it did not have any impact on him, as he was resolute and determined.

***In general, the teachers were treating all of us equally...even if there were one or two of them who would criticise us...there was a French teacher, for instance, who would speak against children from my locality, and would blame them for disturbing the class and not attending school. For her, we were disrupting the teaching process and ... therefore preventing the others from following the class.... however, these were mere generalisations from teachers having stereotypical views about children from my locality...***

Thus, through his experience in primary and secondary school, AN developed the ability to face and overcome adversity. Despite his financial difficulties and health issues, stereotypes, and all the other difficulties that came his way, AN never gave up. This pre-disposition has helped him through. He claims he was aware that the structures, processes and practices were against him, but this did not deter him.

## **PARTICIPANT 2: NJ**

NJ's primary and secondary schooling experience is completely different from AN's trajectory. She completed her primary schooling with flying colours despite her poor socio-economic background, and was admitted to the best secondary school in Mauritius after the CPE examinations. This was an exceptional performance for the rural primary school she attended. However, she said that she was not surprised as she expected very good results:

*I was a very bright student at primary level... most of the time I was first in class or second, with A + and As. I never had a B. The teachers gave the brilliant students a lot more attention... I realised it was not fair, but I remained quiet, because I was benefiting from it... The teachers knew that I was doing well, and they were confident that I would bring good grades at CPE level... They supported me throughout...*

The confidence that NJ developed at an early age has helped her through the adverse situation she endured during her secondary school years, and to make it to university. On her admission to the best girls' school in Mauritius, NJ immediately faced a culture shock. She realised that she did not have the right profile for this school. She took time to adapt to the new environment, which was characterised by fierce competition. In addition, the books, the school uniform and all the material were expensive. NJ realised that it was a school meant for the rich:

*I had to adapt to college culture...it's more of a star school as you know .....there were a lot of students who came from wealthy families.....and it was not at all the case for me....so there was this competitive culture... there was fierce competition in the school... and there were so [much] ... stuff to buy... which cost a lot.*

NJ realised that, despite being academically gifted, she lacked the financial resources to compete with other students. They were much better off, and things were therefore much

easier for them. Still, she coped well with her studies during her early secondary years. However, when it came to choosing subjects at SC and HSC level, there was no one to guide her. Her classmates' parents were all well-educated and had high ranking occupations. She felt lonely, struggled to adapt, and had to take all the decisions by herself. The choices made at secondary level inevitably impact one's academic performance and experience of higher education. NJ's subject combination (and hence her options for higher education and career orientation) was driven by financial considerations. She deliberately opted for subjects she could manage without private tuition, and those which did not require expensive material and books.

*As there was no one to guide me... to tell me what to do... I changed courses several times... I did science subjects in form 4, and then Arts, Food and nutrition, and then as HSC level I did English, Maths and Sociology... in fact I didn't really know what to do in my life... there was no one to guide me... I completely changed courses several times. For me, since my family did not have the means, I had to take into consideration the cost of my studies I had to choose the streams and subjects that cost less...*

NJ recalls that the teachers were not very supportive:

*Teachers take everything for granted in the sense that, if you are a girl from XXX (this school), so it is assumed that you know everything, and that you are going to take private tuition ... so they do not invest as much... they won't put as much of their energy into the class ... they will just put an example on the board ... so go work on your own, and if you have any questions, come and ask... because they know everyone takes tuition... In fact, I could not take all the tuition. I was not taking math tuition, for instance. As a result, I was not ok in math, I got 9. So, I had to take tuition, and was then able to change the 9 into a 3.*

NJ is convinced that if she had received the proper guidance at secondary level, her results would have been much better. However, no one in her social circle could advise her properly. She did not benefit from any of the facilities, support, and attention her classmates received. She regards the system that favours those who have the means as very unfair as the odds are stacked against those who cannot afford this high-cost ecosystem, even if they are academically talented.

***If I was ok financially, I would have had more people around me, teachers to guide me, and I would have been better supervised. But in my case, everything was pre-established and imposed on me.***

What does this imply? Whilst the authorities are focusing on broadening access to university education, competition for the best places might in fact be rigged at primary and secondary level, given that those who have the means are able to afford the best tuition and benefit from all the facilities in order to obtain the best results and thereby access the courses which are most in demand at the leading universities. Thus, initial sifting along class lines occurs at secondary level. The structures, processes and practices operate even prior to university admission.

### **PARTICIPANT 3: SJ**

SJ attended the public primary school in his area, and has good memories of those days. He notes that private tuition was very helpful in successfully completing his primary education.

***In order to get good results, there is a need to take private tuition. Those who do not take private tuition lag behind. During private tuition, the teacher works seriously and explains everything well...***

SJ did well in the CPE exams and was admitted to a 'good' state secondary school. However, he reports that he struggled on his own as his parents were not well educated, and therefore could not guide him academically. He relied on private tuition to improve his performance. SJ's educational track towards university education is characterised by hasty and shallow decision making, which (luckily) worked well for him. It could easily have been otherwise. For instance, in Form IV, SJ opted for the literature track simply because he liked the media. He did not receive any guidance from teachers or anyone else regarding his choice of subjects. Most of the children in his class had well-educated parents who guided them on their choice of subjects and the career to which they aspired. This was not the case for him. He took decisions without really knowing where this would lead him. However, he was determined to succeed, as he knew this would mean a lot to his parents who were cutting back on other expenses to pay for his tuition. His father even took a part-time job:

*My dad's salary was not enough, and he therefore had to take a part-time job to meet our expenses... My parents have always been doing their level best for me, even if they have not been to school so much. However, if my parents were rich, maybe I would not have taken my studies seriously.... I have been compelled to focus on my studies, as I used it as a lever to climb further up....*

Whilst it is generally believed that students make it to university after carefully choosing their field of study at an early stage and receiving appropriate advice and guidance, SJ reports that in his case, there was not much deep thinking with regard to his choice of subjects.

*Nobody helped me or influenced me...I decided on my own...I was given my second choice, in fact, as my first choice was English. I chose this course as it has some similarities with the subjects I did at school: history, geography and literature. When I attended the open day, they told me about the course content, and that it would be so difficult...In any case, it was the only course I was qualified to apply...*

However, this initial decision has a bearing on one's university trajectory at a later stage, and, to a large extent, determines one's future career orientation.

#### **PARTICIPANT 4: KL**

KL's journey to university education is an atypical one. She experienced both the private and public schooling culture and, at the end of her secondary schooling, worked for two years before deciding to embark on university education.

KL completed her primary education in a private (fee-paying) school. She performed well and was amongst the best students in her class. However, even though she reports that primary school was a good experience, she points out that the private school she attended was not really meant for the elite.

*Yes...but what you need to know is that my primary school, even if it was a private school... it was not the best private school... it was not like... let's say the Lycée labourdonnais, or L'école du Centre... it was a bit... let's say... a private school meant for the middle class... it was not at all meant for the elite... neither the academic elite... nor the financial elite...*

## Secondary education

At the end of her primary education, KL sat for the CPE examinations and started her secondary education in the same school where she completed primary school. However, the academic level was not good given that all the students left for other schools after their CPE. KL's parents took the decision to transfer her to a Curepipe confessional college. She started her second year of secondary education there and she reports that it was a completely different experience:

*At X (her new school), it was nice, but a bit complicated because... precisely I came from a school where there were much less students... so it was a bit like a family... and then I came to this school where there were really many students... and where there are people from different... where everyone is different... different cultures, different academic levels... different social ranks... different everything... and so it was a bit of a shock ..... honestly... I know it might sound strange, but it was a bit of a cultural shock... But I'm not saying that in a superior way or what ... it's just that at first I had a hard time adjusting...*

As a result of difficulties in integrating into her new school, KL reports that her results were not as good as before, although she passed all her subjects. With regard to her choice of subjects at secondary school level, KL reports that it was based on her school performance. She opted for generic subjects such as Business Studies and Accounting, which could be helpful in the future as she was not yet clear on what she wanted to do after her studies. She decided on her subjects on her own, and was not influenced by anyone.

Reflecting on her academic trajectory, KL is very clear: Things would not have been the same if she were from the upper social class. She would have attended an elite school, and would also have started her university education earlier. She also underlines the fact that her family background had an impact on the way she looked at things:

*Definitely...I think that if I had another social background.... let's say if I was from the upper class, I think that I would have been in a better school.... I would have been at lycee Labourdonnais, l'ecole du centre, or Le Bocage...I would also have started my studies earlier.... However, since I am from the middle class, and my parents aren't academically high achievers themselves, I never had the influence that I can do anything... like... undertake major studies and everything. Another*

*thing, I would have started my studies earlier, and I would have potentially not studied in Mauritius. ...without looking down on the universities in Mauritius.*

KL's trajectory towards university education denotes a rather unclear objective. In fact, she did not know what she wanted to do. It took her two years to finally realise that she wanted to study psychology. This reflects a lack of guidance and mentoring. Her parents could not advise and guide her, as they did not attend university. This lack of guidance culminated in initial reticence to attend university after completing her secondary education.

## **PARTICIPANT 5: ZK**

Despite the difficulties he experienced during his primary and early secondary years, ZK followed a linear academic path, given that his parents opted for the French education system for their son. ZK's trajectory shows how an informed choice made by parents can ultimately have a significant impact on one's university experience.

He joined the 'Petit Lycee' when he was three years old and completed his pre-primary and primary education at the 'Ecole du Centre', an elite French-medium school that mainly enrolls children from the upper classes.

*At the very outset, I did not follow the normal track. I followed the French programme... I started in Pre-Primary at three years old, and completed my primary education, then my secondary education until I completed my final year and was awarded my Baccalaureate*

However, ZK reports that in the course of his primary education, he was unable to cope with the normal stream as he was feeling anxious and troubled. He was therefore placed in a special '*programme insertion scolaire*' (school integration programme) designed for students facing difficulties in their studies. This helped him to fight his anxiety and he reports that things gradually started to improve:

*My education at primary level was quite tedious and I encountered some difficulties, in the form of anxiety and stress etc. I therefore followed a dedicated programme meant for those in need of help and support. Gradually, I started to build my self-confidence and thanks to this programme, I have been able to overcome my difficulties. With regard to the support received, I can say that I was well surrounded by teachers and everyone...they ...provided me with all their help*

***and support so that I could follow a normal schooling trajectory and reach where I am presently.***

For ZK, things could easily have turned out otherwise had he not been following the French schooling system. He believes that the programme is unique to this system:

***This programme is unique to French schools. I am not aware of any such programme in any other institution.***

He also reports that his parents played a key role in helping him to overcome his anxiety. They were very supportive and did not put pressure on him with regard to his education. They accompanied him in his progression, but things were done at his own pace, and things worked out little by little. ZK followed this special programme throughout his primary school years and moved to secondary education.

***My parents supported me all through, and I am thankful for their help ... and above all, they did not really put pressure on me ... because if they had put pressure on me, they knew I would not be able to progress.... they let me do [things] at my own pace, manage myself, then I was able to get there little by little... It was quite long... quite laborious... but it was effective...it's thanks to my efforts that I was able to reach where I am presently...***

For his secondary education, ZK attended the 'Lycee des mascareignes'. In the first two to three years, he was still monitored by the teachers. However, as his grades improved and he was even amongst the five best students in his class, the decision was taken to move him from the 'programme d'insertion scolaire' to the mainstream programme.

***When I moved to secondary education, the teachers found that I had overcome this anxiety... that I had almost no problem anymore...but they wanted me to do a temporary follow-up...so I had this follow-up for two to three years, and then when they saw that my grades were improving and that I was in the top five of the class, they decided to get me out of this school integration system...***

At secondary level, ZK met students from other local institutions and even from abroad. He was therefore able to make many new friends and has pleasant memories of these years.

ZK is fully conscious of how privileged he was in terms of his academic trajectory to university. He realises that one's experience of primary and secondary education is linked to

one's social class and that, in his case, being registered in a French fee-paying school was salutary:

*I was wondering, by the way... it should be noted that at the very beginning I had difficulties... if I had gone [the] normal course, I would not have had the support that I had in primary school and everything... I would not have had this... if I did not have this support. I would never have been able to move to the secondary level, and undertake university studies... I am really lucky for having been in such an institution... and to be supervised by teachers who have done everything so that I can continue my studies... and here is the result today...*

ZK's educational trajectory clearly shows that his parents were well-advised to enroll him in a fee-paying French-medium school, and the decisive influence this decision had on his pathway to university. He admires the French schooling system as he believes that he would never have made it to university without the special attention he received at school.

As he completed his final year of secondary school, ZK was awarded his baccalaureate. He was definitely on his way to university.

## **PARTICIPANT 6: MF**

MF's primary and secondary educational path reflects the powerful influence of economic, social and cultural forces on the academic trajectory of students from the upper classes. Her smooth and linear progress towards university education reflects a quasi-perfect juxtaposition of financial resources, access to the appropriate social network, well-educated parents and extensive cultural capital.

MF attended a private primary school in Quatre Bornes and enjoyed the time she spent there, given that the teachers did their very best not only academically, but also in motivating the children to develop all their skills and aptitudes. She also reports that the teacher-pupil ratio was very low, and that, as a result, students received a lot of attention.

*There was a healthy competition between the students, which led them to perform even better and achieve academic goals set. They were also constantly interacting with the teachers, who were generally recruited amongst those who have excelled in public primary school and who join the private schooling system after their retirement from the public service. They had an excellent track record in terms of*

***the performance of their students at primary level, and have a wide experience in teaching and interacting with primary students. In fact, they knew how to encourage them to perform at their best.***

She adds that over and above the teaching at school, she also attended private tuition, like all her classmates, and was also closely monitored by her mother at home:

***My mum was constantly by my side. It was as if we were going for the exams together. She knew all the books by heart. She wanted me to be at my best for exams. She was as stressed as me. She organised my revision schedule and everything... and even brought me to museums and historical places mentioned in the history/ geography text-books.***

MF worked on past examination papers at home, and had a time-table for her home-work and revision. She obtained excellent grades at the end of her primary schooling and, as a result was offered a place in one of the best public secondary schools in Mauritius. However, she points out that there was a major gap between her experience of primary education in a private school and that at secondary level:

***From an average of 20 students at primary level, I found myself in a class of 35 students. In addition, whereas my primary education was in a mixed schooling environment, I had to attend a girls' only school at secondary level. It was quite difficult for me to adapt to this new situation.***

Still, MF took her studies very seriously and had all the support from her parents. Her mother supported her academically whilst her father provided her with all the material and equipment she needed for her studies. As she did not know which track to choose in Form IV, MF took both Science and Economics subjects so as to have more time to decide on the subject she wanted to specialise in at a later stage. However, the school atmosphere was completely different from primary school:

***My parents encouraged me to go for both streams so that I can decide which career I want to follow, based on the results I got. I was good in both tracks. The atmosphere was very difficult as compared to primary school, as it was very competitive, and everyone was trying to do better and would not be willing to help. The teachers were also not as committed as in the primary setting as they had many students to oversee. The personal attention received was thus much less. However, this was compensated through private tuition.***

She notes that the individual attention received in private tuition was of tremendous help and that this is what really makes a difference at this level:

***Without private tuition, I do not know whether I would have been able to make it. I had some eight private [sessions] weekly at School Certificate level and seven private ... weekly at HSC level. I even had a tuition session starting at 8pm and ending at 1030 pm. I had another teacher who had his own laboratory for practical sessions at his place. He was having two cohorts for tuitions simultaneously. He hires two persons to control the traffic in front of his house. However, I was being coached by the best teachers on the island. Even if the rates were much above the average rates charged for tuition generally, money was not really an issue. Even if I had to travel long distances to attend ... tuition, this was not really a problem as a driver would bring me there, wait for me and then bring me back. Else my parents would pick me up. I also had one-to-one coaching, which was even more costly. However, what mattered most was that I perform well at the SC and HSC examinations.***

All went well and MF obtained excellent grades in both her School Certificate and HSC examinations.

Having access to all the facilities required, and coming from an educated family background helped her to outperform her classmates during her secondary school years. MF points out that:

***I was able to meet my every want and need .....I was not very demanding, but...yes... we were financially comfortable...In secondary school I knew that I was financially much better off than my classmates...***

She also recognises that most of her friends during her secondary school years did not take as many private tuition sessions as her. This impacted on their performance.

***They could not afford it. Their parents did not have enough money to provide them with all that private tuition. The best teachers cost even more.***

Reflecting on how her academic performance is linked to her privileged situation, MF was initially hesitant, but then realised it could have been otherwise if she was living in a different environment:

*No... not exactly.... (moment of hesitation) Yes, it depends...because....it does not apply for everyone...my grades would still be the same... it's not because of my social background that I have... I achieved the goals that I wanted to. I learn for it... but ...yes ... may be If I was in a less comfortable environment, I would not be able to study...or if there were plenty of children around, and I had to look after them as my dad and mum are working...it wouldn't be the same for me...*

MF reports that some teachers were not totally neutral, even if she did not personally benefit from such privileges:

*They would devote less time to children from poorer social backgrounds and have less interaction with them. On the other hand, they were very accommodating and helpful to those who came from a wealthy background, or those whose parents were in influential positions or well connected. It was the same for the administrative staff as well. However, I ... never personally benefitted from any form of privilege from either teachers or the school administration.*

MF's trajectory provides clear evidence of the privileged access upper class students enjoy to private schools, carefully selected teachers for extra tuition, and the support of educated parents, as well as all the facilities required to make their educational journey towards university education as pleasant and enjoyable as possible.

## **5.2 The pathway to University**

### **5.2.1 Choice of university, field of study, and application process**

Whilst the rhetoric of broadening access to university education is increasingly diffused, and growing emphasis is placed by the public education authorities on the equalising role that university plays once access is secured, it is important to reflect on how students from different social classes approach university education in reality. This section focuses on the factors impacting the participants' choice of university and field of study, as well as how they dealt with the application process.

#### **PARTICIPANT 1: AN**

For AN, obtaining a place at university is like a dream come true as very few people from the poverty-stricken area he lives in have ever made it to university.

***It has always been a dream for me to join the university...I have always said to myself that after my HSC, I will continue my studies.... I did not want to stop at secondary level...***

Budget wise, AN did not have many options in terms of university education as only one institution offered degree courses without charging any tuition fees. There was only an administrative fee and it can be considered as being affordable. This was not the case for other universities, which had higher charges. (Free higher education was only implemented from January 2019). AN also has a relative who successfully made it through the same university; thus, it was a natural choice. He saw how his relatives, who were also from a poor background, were able to secure a good job and climb the social ladder after completing their university education. He thus developed a strong preference for this public university, which he considers as one of the leading higher education institutions in Mauritius:

***Even if I did have the choice, I would not go anywhere else...as I had my cousins who studied here and succeeded in life...they were living in the same locality as me...why to go somewhere else, and pay more, when the academic level is good here. I don't see any university as being better than this one in Mauritius. And, above all, it is free...***

### **Choice of subject**

His choice of subject at university was motivated by a social worker who is very involved at community level. His personal involvement in social projects in the local community also influenced this choice. He is also prompt to admit that, based on his HSC results, this was a more reasonable decision:

***I liked Social Work at secondary level...I had a teacher who always taught us sociology well, and I was very much interested in the subject.... ...I want to do social leadership and become a trainer and mentor in this field as I was in contact with a mentor who was active in our locality. I was inspired by his work, both at the office and on the ground. I want to follow his path...***

### **Application process**

AN recalls that the application procedures were very tedious, as he did not have a computer to file an online application. He remembers how he was helped by a relative to complete the

online application form, as he did not know how to do it. Upon receiving his letter of offer, he was overjoyed, as was his entire family. It was the beginning of a new adventure.

*When I was offered a seat on the Social Work programme, I was really very happy as I was waiting for this letter from the University. I got my letter late, two weeks after the university has resumed....*

## **PARTICIPANT 2: NJ**

### **Choice of University**

NJ did not want to go to university despite her excellent results on completion of her secondary education. She wanted to take up employment so as to support her parents financially as they had been struggling for too long. All her school friends were proceeding abroad for further studies, but she was fully conscious that this would not be the case for her.

*Given my family situation, I was not able to undertake studies abroad. And even to join this university too, it was a struggle. At XXX college, students start their application for foreign universities very early on. The parents of my class mates could afford to pay for their studies. But it was not the case for me. I was sad, and even a little jealous. But studying abroad is only for those who are well-off. So I was resigned to finding a job to help my family. Coming from a working class family, and since my parents only had the minimum wages, we buy everything for a month and we do not have any savings as such. I did not want to go to university because we couldn't afford it. I told mum that I'm not going to university, that I'm going to look for a job and all ... but when I finished my HSC it was difficult to get a job. And then there is the university enrollment. Mom told me that I had to go to university.... she borrowed money from her employers because she absolutely wanted me to go to university. I finally accepted.*

### **Choice of subject**

NJ chose her course at university based on her HSC results. She obtained an A+ in Sociology and therefore opted for it. Again, she lacked proper guidance as she had excellent SC and HSC results and could easily have secured a place in any of the university's flagship programmes.

*I opted for sociology at university level because it was one of my main subjects at school. At school I did sociology because it would cost less in terms of tuition etc... I had an A+ in sociology, and was ranked among the best students at national level.*

*But I didn't know that I could opt for another course at the university... I thought I was not going to have any other course... I could have opted for programmes that are more in demand, but I didn't know how it worked ... and no one guided me ...I didn't have the proper guidance ... it was once at university, looking back, that I realised that I could have applied for other courses which would have been much better, career-wise.*

### **Application process**

For NJ the application process was relatively simple and straight-forward. Given her excellent results in the HSC exams, she was offered her first choice. However, it was difficult to find even the administrative fees that had to be paid upon registration:

*As for the university application, I didn't really have a choice: either I go to a public university, or I go to work. No one influenced me in the application process. Anyway, there was no one to guide me. No one around me had done it before. I completed the application on my own and it was quite simple, clear and straightforward. As soon as I got my letter of offer, the first thing I saw was that there was a deadline to pay the fees..... there was Rs 22 000 to pay. It was a huge amount for us, but mom told me not to worry as we were going to look for the money ... and she borrowed money from her employer to pay for the university.*

## **PARTICIPANT 3: SJ**

### **Choice of University**

Like NJ, studying abroad was not an option for SJ as his parents are still repaying their housing loan. He was also aware that a private university would be very costly. His only option, therefore, was to enroll for a course in a local public university. In was a natural choice. In fact, SJ reports that he made his way to university by sheer coincidence. He did not have anything in mind, and was just trying to see whether he could apply for a course, as there was an open day. It all happened by itself. There was no planning, and he did not seek any advice from anyone:

*It was impossible for me to undertake studies abroad, or to attend a private university as I did not have the means. My dad is already [paying back] a housing loan and it would therefore be impossible to take another loan. I don't have the means. No one guided me. I just came over by chance during the open day to find whether I would be eligible for any programme, and I ended up here.*

### **Choice of subject**

SJ explains that he opted for a communication programme only because he liked journalism, and he had the minimum requirements to apply for this programme:

*No one influenced me... I decided on my own. I got my second choice in fact. My first option was English.... I wanted to be a journalist.... It was in line with subjects I did at secondary level: history, geography, literature...When I came for here for the open day, they explained to me how the programme was... In fact, I did not have many options...*

### **Application process**

SJ reported that the application process was very difficult for him, as everything was online, and he did not have a computer at home:

*The application process was quite tedious as everything was online, and I did not have a computer or internet facilities at my place...I had to go to a relative's place to fill it in. However, upon reaching there, we realise that we would be needing all the documentations to be able to fill it in... so I had to go back to my place (which was very far away) to pick up the documents and come back. It was tiring, and costly too...The relative who helped me was working in the computer field, and had all the required equipment, such as a scanner and all...*

Ultimately, however, everything went well and SJ was allocated a place in the Communication cohort. It was a great achievement for him and his family and he was delighted. His parents were very proud of him, as was his extended family.

*I was the first grandchild to attend University, whether from my mother's side or my father's side. The whole family was proud of this. I felt that it was a decisive milestone in my life. It was a great achievement for the whole family and for myself...*

## **PARTICIPANT 4: KL**

### **Choice of subject**

KL's path to University is atypical as she initially did not plan to pursue higher education. In fact, after completing secondary education, she did not know what to do. She started working

in the tourism and hospitality sector, and changed jobs a number of times. After two years, she started to ponder on her purpose in life. She realised that she wanted to be in a position to help others and decided to study psychology.

*After my HSC, it was not at all in my plans to study... because I did not have the means to study ... so I started to work ... and I also did not know what I wanted to do ... therefore I worked in a restaurant where I took care of everything... then I worked in a business hotel as an assistant for two years... then I worked in another hotel... and in the end, I ended up understanding what I wanted to study: Psychology I then took a loan to start my studies in psychology.*

### **Choice of University**

KL reports that she took a loan to finance her studies. Her choice of a private university whilst the psychology course is offered free of charge by public universities was based on information she received through friends and social media that the Psychology programmes offered by public universities might not be internationally recognised. As such, it would be problematic to study for a Master's degree so as to become a registered psychologist.

*I chose to study in a private university as I knew that they were offering a degree in Psychology. I did not choose public universities in Mauritius, because I came across feedback that their degrees in psychology were not necessarily recognised in foreign countries. There are no masters in Psychology in Mauritius ... to then go on to complete a master's degree in psychology abroad, it is not sure that the degree from Mauritius will be recognised. So, I was doubtful ... but it must be said that I didn't try to enquire and to find out more either...*

### **Application Process**

KL says that once she decided to register for the programme, everything went smoothly and relatively quickly. She was offered a place, and did not have to go through a foundation course as she met the university criteria:

*The application process was very smooth; I signed in, I registered, sent my documents and my certificates, and they replied ... a few weeks later to inform me that I fulfilled the credentials and would be able to register for the programme... I was registered directly to the degree programme...I did not have any foundation course to follow.*

## **PARTICIPANT 5: ZK**

### **Choice of University**

Having successfully completed his secondary education, ZK initiated the process to seek admission to a private university in Mauritius as his parents were not willing to send him abroad for further studies. ZK says that his interest was initially triggered during a visit organised by the school. He was also advised by relatives and friends. Above all, however, he wanted to pursue his studies in a French institution:

*In fact, at the very beginning I did not really know where to go in Mauritius ... There are friends of my mother who advised me to enroll at this university ... and I had also seen during the visits to university fairs that xxx (this institution) issued international diplomas. This is what immediately flashed me... and afterwards, there were friends who advised me to enroll for the programme... I chose this university because, first of all, it is a French establishment. I would therefore continue on a French programme, and also because at the beginning I did not feel at ease to go to study abroad ... The establishment is recognised for its diplomas that are recognised internationally ... that's why I was interested ... and in addition it allowed me to stay in the French system ... I did not want to join a university with another education system because I did not want to lose the pace... After that, I intend to pursue a degree in ACCA... In fact, I did not want to lose track...*

### **Choice of subject**

Despite his tedious primary and secondary educational path, ZK has very clear objectives in mind, is focused on these, and is confident that he will be able to achieve his goals:

*I was at the Lycée and then I join the XXXX university directly...I have chosen the Management stream as ... this will prepare me to take over the family business, which is in the real estate sector...and, at the same time, to be able to exercise my favourite profession, which is accountancy.... it is my one of my main hobbies...*

### **Application process**

The application process was quite demanding, and involved different processes, including drafting a motivational letter, an interview and an essay. ZK believes that his determination to succeed, and focusing on his objectives, were factors in being offered a place:

*You must first present a CV and a motivational letter, just as if you are applying for a job...I was requested to write a letter to explain why I wanted to study at this university...the diploma I am enrolled in presently is a professional diploma ... you therefore need to have the pre-required aptitude to be able to do it ... as I intend to take over the family business, I think this helped in awarding me a seat .... After having submitted your CV and cover letter, you are invited for an interview, a general culture test and a 500-word essay. It is the normal process for this type of university. You have to go through an interview and all...This is to have a better picture of the student's profile.*

## **PARTICIPANT 6: MF**

### **Choice of University and programme**

Upon completion of her secondary education, MF's parents wanted her to study in Mauritius so that they could continue to take care of her, but also because they were reluctant to send her abroad for further studies. Above all, they were worried about her comfort, safety and security:

*My parents are very concerned about my security. They do not want to take any risk. Studying in a foreign country has been ruled out by my parents a long time back. It is also because of practical reasons too. Here, they will be able to take care of everything. In fact, I have never even travelled by bus on my own. I never cook anything or do any housekeeping. They think that I will not be able to manage in a foreign country. I know they are overprotective. But at the same time, I have to respect their decision as they always do their level best for me.*

MF therefore had to consider courses available locally. She opted for an undergraduate programme in Psychological sciences at a private university:

*I have always been passionate about psychology, and therefore opted almost naturally for this programme. My parents did not oppose her choice. In fact, they encouraged me to choose a discipline that I like.*

### **Application Process**

MF did not encounter any difficulty in proceeding with the application. Everything was well organised:

*All the details about documents needed were very clear and straight forward. There were friendly counselors to assist through the process, and even a 'future student centre' to guide prospective students and provide us with all the guidance required. Really...I can say that the university has a very smooth application process, where you are guided step by step. I was allocated a seat fairly quickly too...it was really nice and effective.*

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE PATHWAY TO UNIVERSITY**

What emerges from the above analysis of the participants' pathway to university education is that a number of factors influence the decision to access such education. The analysis clearly shows that, in terms of advice with regard to the choices to be made, and the way these crucial choices are eventually made, there are clear differences across social classes. Given that ZK and MF have educated parents who attended university, there seems to be a linear and unquestioned progression towards university for second-generation university goers. There is a clear sense of direction. However, the participants from the lower and middle classes tended to approach university education in an erratic way, and lacked clarity and focus. Thus, first-generation university goers have a completely different experience. In addition, whilst NJ and KL spent a lot of time reflecting on the opportunity cost of accessing university education, this was not the case for the participants from the upper classes. It is also important to point out that even amongst participants within the same social background, there are nuances in the way they approached university education. This underlines the uniqueness of one's pathway to university education, and directly contradicts the discourse that suggests legitimate competition for university places solely based on one's ability and educational performance, and sanitised from one's context.

### **5.3 Present University Experience**

#### **5.3.1 Expectations, initial steps, and reality**

Once they secure a place at university, what are the expectations of students from different social backgrounds with regard to higher education? How do they depict their first encounter with the university setting, and to what extent was it in line with their initial

expectations? This section depicts the participants' expectations, their initial steps on the university campus, and the way they experienced the reality of higher education.

## **PARTICIPANT 1: AN**

### **Expectations**

AN's initial expectations upon joining University were quite high. He was eager to broaden his knowledge, meet people, and face the new challenges. He was extremely motivated:

*For me, the university was as if another world.... where we have new friends, meet new people, and it would be different.... we have always been hearing about the university...we watch the graduation ceremony on the news, where the students explain what they have achieved... and we always say: why not us? Now that I have been able to secure a seat, I expect to graduate as well, just as the others...*

### **Initial days on campus**

His first days were challenging as he did not know much about university life. The transition from college to university was gradual. He attended all his lectures and realised that the learning process was completely different from secondary school. He had to prepare notes and PowerPoint presentations for some modules, which was problematic as he did not have a laptop:

*I did not have a laptop, I had to go to my relatives' place to have the notes, to work on PowerPoint. I had a statistics module which required a laptop in order to follow in class.*

Even if academically, it was initially tedious, AN did not face any adaptation issues with regard to the class and fellow students:

*It was very easy to adapt to the class...I did not have much difficulty to make new friends and all...in my class, everyone was ok, and we are all friends... ..this university is composed of people from different horizons and from different social classes...We can all have access to university and we can all feel at ease...*

### **The reality of University education**

AN has mixed feelings about his initial encounter with university education, and whether his expectations have been fulfilled:

*It's a mixed feeling...there are things that are exactly as I thought it would be...for instance the interaction with the academics...and the fact that the studies would not only be academic, but will be like an eye opener...all this was really as I thought it would be...However, what I did not expect was the fact that you need to strive on your own. The academics are not here to guide us in each and every step.... they just drop you in the sea and you need to swim...I thought that the lecturer would help us and accompany us all through...*

Despite his difficult financial situation AN is determined to work hard, strongly believing that a degree is a passport to a good job later on:

*I worked hard during the first year, and got 3 Bs and 1 A. My results were encouraging me to go further, as I realised that I had the potential. My family was very supportive as well.*

He gradually developed critical thinking and problem-solving skills which were helpful for his assignments and written exams. At the end of the academic year, his CPA stood at 67.3%. He was well on his way to the second academic year.

## **PARTICIPANT 2: NJ**

### **Expectations**

Being confident that she is a very good student and determined to succeed, NJ knew from the very beginning that she would be able to make a huge difference through education.

*Given my family background, I want to work hard to be able to succeed... I was extremely motivated since the very beginning... what motivates me is that I have been through difficult situations... I have been through so many struggles in my life... I need to get out of these struggles ... and I should attain something The university is a big world, and it is a great chance for me to be a part of it. It is one of the ways through which I am going to get a job and I will not only get through it, but also shine... because I know I am smart and ... I have the capacity to work and to succeed...and make things better for my family.*

### **Initial steps**

NJ has taken her studies very seriously from Day 1. However, joining university has also been a very pleasant experience as it is completely different from the secondary school she

attended which was characterised by cut-throat competition and primarily composed of upper class students:

*Everything changes once I joined University. I adapted myself very quickly to the university, and I am able to cope with my studies. At secondary level, the students are more from upper class families, or upper middle class, but at university I am with students who share more or less the same economic background as me. So the pressure is immediately less at the university. This is one of the good things about joining this university.*

## **Reality**

Even if NJ's dream of studying abroad did not materialise, joining a public university in Mauritius has been a pleasant surprise. The university is more relaxed, and the rules are less strict than she expected; her class mates are very friendly, and they share notes and work in groups. As a result of her good HSC results, she was able to secure a scholarship, and this has helped her to cope with her studies, and provided her with some pocket money. She feels much more comfortable.

*The fact that I was in XXX college.... generally, XXX students go abroad for their studies. And I found myself in a public university in Mauritius.... I am sorry for saying that, but XXX was of a distinctive class ..... I wanted to leave, go to study outside, and not find myself here in this public university in Mauritius. But I had no choice. Ideally, I would have been studying abroad. But I had to resign myself to staying in Mauritius. I thought studying in Mauritius was not going to be so pleasant... but I was wrong. I can say that it has been a very good experience as from the first day.*

## **PARTICIPANT 3: SJ**

### **Outlook on University prior to joining**

SJ initially had high expectations of university education as he was the first child in the family to be admitted to university. He was under the impression that there would be strict rules and rigorous procedures, with many assessments and grading, but that there would also be activities and fun and that he would have to strike a balance between the two. He realised that he would have to work hard and succeed so as to make his parents proud of him:

*Before having a seat at University, I was watching university life in movies...in Indian movies and all...I thought university would be composed of hard work and fun...I already decided that I would have to strike a balance between the two so as to be able to bring good results...as my parents are investing in me, and I need to bring results...I cannot let them down.*

### **Initial steps**

SJ reports that when he initially joined the university, he did not know anyone in class. He started to categorise the different students based on the way they dress, their mobile phones and laptops, the way they talk, and the way they act. However, over time these differences became blurred within the classroom setting and friendships started to develop across social classes. They started to merge as a group.

### **Expectations and reality**

Once he joined the university, SJ realised that it was not at all what he expected. Students are treated as adults by the lecturers and there is a lot of self-learning:

*What I saw in movies, and what I experienced in reality is completely different...for example...in Indian movies, we see people singing and dancing in the cafeteria...I thought it would be the same...the way to dress ... is different...With regard to studies, I thought that there would be discipline, just as in schools, with regular reports.... however, when I joined university, it was different... I did not realise that I was no more a school kid... it was when I was in class that academics make us realise that we are now adults and that we are no more in secondary schools... I then realised that I have grown up.*

## **PARTICIPANT 4: KL**

### **Aspirations prior to joining University**

KL has a very clear goal: to become a registered psychologist. Prior to joining the university, she was confident that she would achieve this. However, she was fully aware that she would have to work hard. KL says that she expected a busy time-table with lectures and regular meetings with academics. She also believed that students would be able to decide how to organise themselves:

*Since I want to become either a clinical, counseling, or educational psychologist, I had in mind that this first degree would give me a solid foundation, and prepare me for a Master's degree. I was confident that I had made the right choice, as the degree was delivered by an English university, and therefore had international recognition. I also thought we were going to have lots of classes, and interactions with the lecturers. At the same time, I was going to make lots of friends. I was extremely motivated for this new stage in my life ... it was like the beginning of a new adventure...*

## **Initial steps**

Upon joining the university, KL realised that university life would not be what she initially expected. Still, she was able to adapt to her new environment very quickly:

*From the first week, I realised that it was more complicated than what I had imagined ... like we have to be on time in class...we should not use our phone ... we should not do this, we should not do that... like a bit of a high school vibe, even being at university. But on the other hand, I have to say that in the classroom, the vibe was very good right away We adapted very quickly, in fact.*

## **Reality**

Over time, KL realised that university rules and regulations are stricter than she expected, even if there is a lot of autonomy to study. The university is characterised by academic stress, with deadlines that must be respected, and a heavy workload. Furthermore, students have to find their way by themselves and to establish a balance, as there is a lot of self-learning. KL thought that there would be more courses and interaction with academics. However, this has not been the case so far, and she only attends university twice a week:

*In terms of student life, I thought it was going to be a little more ... not necessarily relaxing ... but I thought that university life was going to be a little more ... yes we are very autonomous, but I didn't think we would be so much under pressure.... but otherwise it is ok, but it must be emphasised that I have a lot of stress with regard to my studies... I put a lot of pressure on myself... because I want to succeed, and the workload is quite heavy, and I did not expect it to be as stressful as this....*

*I also expected that we were going to have more lectures... I did not know that there would be so much work to be done on our own... I did not expect to have so few hours per week...I am unable to tell you how many hours we do per module,*

*but ... for example, I only go to university twice a week ... for each module, we meet the lecturer once a week for a two to three-hour session, and that's it.*

## **PARTICIPANT 5: ZK**

ZK was very confident that university education would lay the foundation for a fruitful future career, preparing him to join the labour market and take up the challenges that prevail in the work environment. He expected the programme to provide him with the necessary knowledge and exposure to be able to deliver in a managerial position:

*I was determined to work hard, as I have always been doing before. I was confident that I had made the right choice at the level of the institution.... The objective of the course is to integrate you directly into working life... into the world of work... therefore, it is to have strong foundations ... Upon completion of the degree, I was confident that I was going to have a solid background in the world of management...*

### **Initial steps**

ZK recalls that things were not exactly as he initially thought they would be. He faced some difficulties with regards to modules and adaptation to the new environment, but things ultimately became better:

*As I first walked in the class, I saw that we were mixed with part-time students (who are already working in companies). Immediately, I told myself that it was going to be very competitive. In fact, ... the part-timers already had three, four or five years of work experience while I was entering directly into the university system ...it was therefore very competitive... but then, over time we developed friendship ties, and now everything is much better. Now we get along perfectly....*

### **Reality**

ZK reports that over time, his educational experience at university improved. In terms of teaching and learning, for instance, he points out that lecturers adopt a very professional attitude, and it is completely different from his school years:

*In terms of education, it's just perfect... the academics guide us well, are attentive to the students and everything... except that in fact I thought that the lecturers at the university were going to be like the teachers I knew in high school... but it was really*

*different because it was more serious and everything... it was not at all what I had heard before entering the university....*

*I can't really say that I have struggled so far. I learned a lot of things to integrate myself into professional life and everything... I was able to know the basics... It's true that at the beginning I encountered a lot of difficulty because there are subjects that I did not want to study... human resources and all, for instance... but after ... we put it into practice, when we participate, and when we develop an interest, things become normal afterwards.*

## **PARTICIPANT 6: MF**

### **ASPIRATIONS**

MF was really looking forward to University studies and had high expectations:

*I was excited to join this institution as I knew that I would be meeting new friends and will also be exposed to broader knowledge. I expected the university to be an institution of excellence, preparing students for the world of work, and to become professionals in their field. For me, it would be a stepping stone for further studies, as I do not want to stop here. I want to complete my postgraduate studies, just like my parents. I hope that they will agree that I move abroad for my Master's degree.*

### **INITIAL STEPS**

Upon joining the university, things were not necessarily as MF expected. She immediately perceived that she was not from the main catchment area for this private university. Indeed, the majority of students were from the private, fee-paying schooling system:

*My parents decided to send me to a public secondary school as they wanted me to remain connected with the reality in Mauritius, and not to live in a bubble. However, upon joining the University, I strongly felt that I was different to those coming from fee-paying schools, especially those coming from the Lycees (the French-medium schools). Still, I met a few friends who were either from the same school or from the same tuition groups. We hung out together. After a few weeks, I gradually adapted myself to the new environment and started to join new groups of friends.*

### **Reality**

MF reports that, over time, she has become increasingly at ease on campus. She has done well academically and is satisfied with the level of support and assistance provided:

*The university does everything to accommodate the students and to make their experience of university education more pleasant. Students' requests are promptly attended to. There is a perception that the university can even slightly bend the rules so as to get the students through any hurdles that might come across. ... It is a university where students receive all the attention... and where they are pampered... They get everything they need to study in an optimal environment.*

However, MF is fully conscious that this university is meant for students from a wealthy background:

*The university is deeply rooted in the upper-class culture, and students who are not from an upper class background have no choice but to adapt. Lecturers and the university administration treat students from different social classes in a uniform way, assuming that all students are able to commit themselves fully to their studies and do not have any other family, health, financial or social issues to deal with. However, this is not always the case in reality.*

### 5.3.2 Academic Experience

A core component of university experiences is mediated by the nature of lecture-room interactions. This section probes the participants' experiences of the way academics organise their lectures in terms of educational content, as well as their appreciation of the lecturer-student relationship.

AN characterises his relationship with academic staff as positive due to lecturers' perceived accessibility:

*I thought there would be a gap between us and the lecturers...that we would be at two different levels...and that we would only have to listen...I thought they would not be accessible...however, this was not at all the case...in fact it was the exact opposite...the lecturers are always accessible...and give equal attention to everyone...except for one or two academics who are always busy and do not have time for us ...but it is the case only for one or two...*

NJ notes that some faculty's approach to relating to students reveals how university structures create one-way vertical relationships characterised by power and authority:

*They are very helpful in general. Over time the relationship improved, but with one or two it became worse. These lecturers come to class just to deliver the*

*readings. There is no real guidance. They don't really listen to us or try to accommodate our needs. At times, they impose things on us. They do not give you the opportunity to explore and to discover. But I just abide. Because it is clear that the university structure is stronger than the demands of the students. However, these are exceptions. In general, lecturers are very understanding in their approach.*

In terms of educational content, NJ does not question whether it is contributing to the replication of the system and the perpetuation of social stratification. She is also not concerned about the ability to develop one's potential and creative thinking through university education. She is fully conscious that as a university student, the bulk of the workload rests on her shoulders. She does her level best, and the competition prevailing in class motivates her to do even better:

*When it comes to my studies, I give the best of myself. I think it's like that for everyone. It depends on the person. If the person wants to work, he'll [sic] do it, but if he doesn't want to, he won't. The problem is that the structure is going to impose itself somewhere, but as a working class student I know that I have to work and give the best of myself. There is a soft competition in the classroom. Well, it's not as rough as at secondary school level, but it motivates me to work. The content is already decided, because there is a programme document, with the modules to be completed, and the credits as well.... We cannot change much because the module's content is already pre-established and fully explained in the programme document... it's stupid and a waste of time trying to question this...*

**SJ** has also developed the ability to work on his own and tries as far as possible to provide original work for assignments. Even if he is not always right in his approach, he considers it as a learning curve:

*Since Year 1, I do everything by myself...even if I do receive some help from lecturers. However, my friends are helped by senior students...For instance, when I first received an assignment, I did not know what it meant...however, I had to do everything on my own, whilst my friends are being helped by seniors...However, I did not feel inferior as I feel that I am improving on my own...I can't take the work of others and just add a small part and then pretend that it is mine...I always try to bring in my perspective...if it is good, I am happy. If it isn't I will learn how to make it better next time.... I have adopted this approach since the beginning.*

His outlook on lecturers is different from what he initially expected. He thought that they would be very formal and strict, and that they would closely monitor what students are doing, like in secondary school. However, lecturers have a different approach as they do not treat students as teenagers, but as adults. By doing so, they transfer the responsibility for studying onto students. SJ reports that, over time, he has been able to develop a good working relationship with academics and he now feels more comfortable.

SJ is of the opinion that academics are in a better position to bring about change in the institutional setting than students, as they are members of the different committees. Their voice is more powerful than the students' voice.

**KL** has a different outlook on the way the lectures are conducted. While she does not have any personal negative experience to report, she notes that there is a general feeling that lecturers are not very accessible, and do not devote enough time to students. She expected more from them, given that she is paying a large amount for this course:

*Sincerely.... the lecturers...it is a sensitive issue as we had some problems with them...not personally...but I have seen my classmates and students from other classes having some issues with the lecturers....I have the impression that our lecturers do not really have enough time ...Given the fees we are paying, I expected the lecturers to be more accessible and more devoted toward the students. However, we should not put everyone in the same basket ... we also have very good lecturers, but I have the impression that they have a huge workload. So it's hard for them to be able to handle everything...this is my impression.*

KL reveals that, whilst relationships are cordial, lecturers' accessibility which is critical to promote students' transition to autonomy is constrained by the realities of the system. She appears to be aware of how university practices, such as lecturers' workloads impact their ability to support students.

However, ZK and MF share very positive accounts of their university experience thus far. **ZK** is happy with the academic level of the programme, and believes he has made the right choice:

*I always looked for a university that offered international degrees, because I might be going overseas later on. So it was important for me to have this degree as it will give me access to jobs in different countries ... in France, in Dubai and all... I would have more openings ... while if I had opted for a local public university, I would have been limited in my choices ... because in fact, having a French state diploma is well recognised in international organisations, as it represents an edge in the world of work.*

ZK appears to accept any difficulties he encounters in his higher education trajectory, if it can be compensated by the prospect of earning a degree of international standing which would give him an edge in terms of his future career path.

MF underlines the fact that academics are up to date, and always refers to the latest developments in the field. They make full use of innovative teaching techniques such as cross-over teaching, smart boards, and flipped classroom techniques. However, they are still subject-centred rather than engaging in a broader reflection on the philosophy of education:

*Innovative technological tools are used in class and academics are connected to the developments in the field. Students are encouraged to discover things by themselves. The lecturers are also very attentive to the students' queries and concerns and do their level best to help. However, the lecturers tend to focus on the specialised subjects, and do not cover broader philosophical thinking with regard to education, and with regard to the social structure. They do not seem to have time for this either. They are more 'syllabus oriented'...*

Thus, lecturers do not digress from the educational content and focus on the syllabus. It seems that learning is limited to the formal, didactic approach, a business-like approach of communicating content and not really broadening perspectives. Is university education then an extension of the patterns of relationships in secondary schools that are solely oriented around the transmission of content?

## **REFLECTIONS**

### **Expectations of autonomy**

The above accounts suggest that students from the lower classes (AN, NJ and SJ) were not well-prepared to join the university setting. They find it difficult to move from the culture of dependence that characterises secondary school to the autonomy and maturity expected at

university level. As they struggle to adapt to cope with their studies in this new learning environment, it is obvious that possibilities for transforming the existing structures (in terms of pre-set rules and regulations, the curriculum, and administrative processes), as well as pre-set expectations regarding university studies are not located within these students. The participants from the upper social classes enrolled in private universities (KL, ZK & MF) also noted that their encounter with the university setting is completely different from what they expected.

However, from their account of their academic experiences, it can be noted that the students are all very much dependent on academics and focused on the curriculum. In this respect, there is a need to re-visit expectations with regard to the move from dependence to autonomy that is supposed to take place within the university setting, given that the actual structures might be contributing to the perpetuation of the status quo rather than inculcating a thirst for change within students.

Reflecting on the experiences shared by the participants, it appears that the massification project is causing a diluted understanding of what the university experience can and should offer. It seems to perpetuate understanding of higher education as instrumental in credentialing future human resources in terms of content and skills rather than creating conditions for academics to pay attention to other aspects of university learning such as critical citizenry. The performance-based system destroys the very essence of education: intellectual pursuit, imagination, free expression and critical thinking. Hyslop-Margison and Thayer (2009:97) underline the fact that *'a program for citizenship and democratic education must be embedded within a transformative framework that view democratic citizenship and society as fluid, dynamic and flexible in character'*. In that respect, there is a need to question the role of academics, and whether they are limited in their conception of the role of university education. This is discussed in the final chapter (See sections 8. 3.3 and 8.3.4).

### **5.3.3 Administration, rules, and procedures**

AN is quite critical of the way the university administration operates. He is of the opinion that the staff does not seem to be in touch with the reality of those who are in need and that they are not doing their job properly:

*The administration is at times ineffective and takes too much time to take decisions... For example, bus passes are given to students one month after University starts... This should be planned beforehand...not everyone has the means....at times the Student Union tries to put some pressure to change things....*

*but it does not always work... In fact, there is a gap between the students and the administration as everything has to go through the programme coordinator, and students are therefore denied access to the administration directly... At times, we just don't know how people of the administration think...they took the decision to have the graduation ceremony on the football pitch...can you imagine? After three years of sacrifice and hard work, asking students to go on the football pitch for this special day? Shouldn't we pay tribute to the students and recognise their efforts in an appropriate way? At times the administration takes decisions that are difficult to understand...*

The administration does not appear to be sensitive to the financial realities of students as exemplified by the delay in issuing bus passes that allow students to travel free of charge on public transport. They seem to be distant from students' university experience and operate in a bureaucratic manner, rather than adopting a more humane approach.

NJ has a more pragmatic approach to administrative issues. She reports that she has minimal interaction with the university administration and has no idea how it works. Furthermore, she is not interested in spending time on trying to challenge or change anything. She blindly accepts everything, and remains focused on her ultimate aim of receiving her degree:

*I adapted very quickly, and I follow the rules very carefully. By the way for me it was a total liberation because in school there was so much pressure. Here there is much less pressure. In fact, all the rules are correct and are fair to one and all. I don't think there is much to change. The system is established, and it's still like that. The university administration operates according to established procedures, and we cannot really change anything. We just follow. Even though it seems to me that there are things that shouldn't have been this way, ... I know that there is nothing I can do. In fact, I don't really pay attention to the rules. I just comply with everything, so as not to be in trouble. And I think that is the case for the vast majority of students. They will not try to change the system which is already established. It's imposed on us and we will just follow like sheep. It cannot be changed. We leave it as is.*

**SJ** feels that university rules and regulations don't really affect him, as he just goes with the flow and abides by all the deadlines. He is also very pessimistic with regard to the Student Union's ability to change the established procedures:

*I have never read any rule of the university... (laughs) I do what I need to do. I just follow everything and do not cross the boundaries... If there is a need to do something, I just do it...if there is a form to fill, I just fill it...I will not bother to check what it is about, and why it is there...I just fill it...I abide by the procedures...in the administrative block, I just go to collect my bus pass, and that's it... Well, it might be possible to change the rules and all, as in the university students are the majority, whilst it is managed only by a group of people.... Students can ask for facilities that they think should be there, but which are not available...some students [stand] ...as candidates for the Student Union elections to try to improve things.... but they are not generally able to change things...everything remains as it is...*

**KL**

Apart from her initial interaction with the university administration for application purposes, KL reports that she did not have to deal with any administrative issues as everything seems to be well established:

*I've never had any problem with the administration. And anyway, I attend university, then go back home, do my assignments.... what happens around doesn't really interest me... I don't really have a sense of belonging to the university.*

KL has mixed feelings regarding university students' ability to change the way the university functions:

*Well...in fact ...I am going to say that we could possibly...but for me, that does not interest me, sincerely speaking... but then I think that other students, if they have ideas and all, if it's not too serious, I think they can put it in place... But I don't think they will be able to make any big changes either... but that it's my opinion... and you have to know that I am not very involved in the university ... With regard to the university's funds, and how they are allocated, for example, I don't think the students can influence the way it's carried out ...*

She believes that even if students could influence the way the university functions to some extent, they cannot really challenge its established rules and regulations. The structures, processes and practices are quite rigid and cannot be easily influenced by students. Personally, she is not interested in changing anything, as she is not involved in university life

as such. She points out that, in any case, students are unable to influence how the university allocates available resources. Indeed, students might not want to confront the university's structures, processes and practices as this can work against them in terms of their grades and in future encounters with the university administration. While a few students might be willing to voice their concerns, the majority do not want to swim against the tide:

*I think it's decided in England, and that the Mauritian campus is only following the pre-established plans... The Mauritian students have no say... we just abide... The students are engaged, they join groups... but with regard to issues pertaining to the management of the university, they are afraid I think... There are things that they do not agree with, that they want to change... but I think that the majority of the students are afraid to speak up.... they are afraid that this will impact on their 'grades'... that it will reflect on the treatment they will have at university... I have the impression that they prefer to remain quiet... But the lecturers, unlike the students, can change things... we had situations where we had to change the hours, change the time-table, or move a deadline... If it's us who ask, it's not done right away... but when it's the lecturers who have to make changes according to what suits them best, things go better and are done faster...*

KL is of the opinion that lecturers are in a better position to influence the established university procedures. However, they cannot go beyond a certain level. She believes that academics have a better chance than students of changing operational issues such as amending a time-table, or extending the deadline for submission of an assignment. However, KL believes that all the important decisions are taken at higher level, with some even imposed on the Mauritian branch as it has to follow guidelines from the main campus in England. With regard to the higher order decisions, KL believes that even the academics in Mauritius cannot do otherwise than to follow the pre-established procedures and guidelines.

ZK has a different outlook on the way the university operates. He reports that there are established communication channels between students and the administration, and that these operate effectively. Nonetheless, he is realistic regarding students' ability to influence established procedures and structures:

*In fact, in each class, we have delegates... we have class representatives... and they note what the students want to change within the institution. They feed the information back to the administration. For example, if we have problems with the exams and all, the delegates talk to each other and then provide the information about what the students do not agree with, and then there is a decision which is taken by the administration. So they can influence the administration up to a certain level.... However, when it comes to decisions more important to the university, the delegates have very little influence. They can only intervene in everyday life on campus, but not really in relation to university structures, and established procedures.*

For MF the university administration operates like a business entity, concealed behind a facade of genuine concern with educational excellence:

*At the end of the day, the university needs to balance its accounts and it has to derive a surplus from its activities. It is just like any other business. However, the university administration has to adopt a soft approach and be attentive to the needs of the students. ... just as businesses operating in the hospitality sector, or medical care... show compassion and empathy, but are ultimately driven by business considerations...they have a business model and stick to it. However, I can say that they always do their level best to assist and to help whenever required.*

### 5.3.4 Finance

For AN, there was clearly no alternative but to study at a public university. Even if no tuition fees were charged, but only administrative expenses, AN still found the amount to be paid substantial.

*My parents and I thought over that well, and we found that, as compared to what has to be paid in other universities, it is much more accessible here.... Travelling abroad to study is clearly far beyond our means, and impossible.... Even the small amount that we need to pay here, it is still difficult for us to get the required amount...*

NJ also underlines the cost of the administrative fees as well as the additional expenses involved in attending university:

***First of all, we don't have the necessary materials. I come from the working class. You need to have a laptop. I didn't have Wi-Fi at home. As I entered university, my mum had to take the steps to have Wi-Fi installed. I didn't have a laptop for my SC or even for my HSC. But as soon as I joined the university, I had to change my mobile phone, and I had to buy a laptop... these were additional expenses. The main problem at the university is the fees that you have to pay. My Mum had to borrow to pay... now, if there were the full tuition fees to pay, there is no way I would have made it to university.***

SJ points out that whilst finance acts as a hurdle for some, it is not a concern for others. As such, students do not have the same experience of university education:

***Not all students have the same experience of university education...as those who are rich, they come by car, they follow their class, and then they go back to their car and drive away without any interaction with others...they feel superior...For the middle class students and those who are poor, it is not the same. The way the students grow up is different... Here you need to pay for everything...if you need a duplicate for a receipt, you need to pay Rs50.00...if you need a testimonial, you need to pay.... Now if you have a resit, or if you do not register properly for the exams, you have to pay even more...***

Given that she had to take a loan to pay for her studies, KL cannot afford to fail:

***I don't know how the others think, but I know that I can't 'afford' to repeat a year ... I can't afford it ... I'm too old ... in my opinion ...to repeat and all. So really yes... knowing that I can't afford to fail motivates me to do my best....and also the fact that getting good results might grant me access to a university where there is a lot of competition, and where it is not as expensive... Knowing that I can't afford to go wrong motivates me to put the odds on my side by doing things well.***

***I think that those who have less means do their level best. As for those who can afford it, they are not necessarily afraid ... If they have to repeat a year, 'daddy' will pay... even if they do not have the best results, they still have the means to go to the best universities for their masters ...that's how it is. It is ok as they don't have to go to universities where there is a lot of competition and where it doesn't cost as much...Also, even if they don't succeed with a First Class and all, those who belong to the upper social class have more connections and are more likely to have a job in the field of their choice ...***

For ZK and MF, finance was not an issue. Indeed, by studying at a private university in Mauritius, they are saving their parents money as the alternative would have been to register at a foreign university, with all the cost implications. ZK hoped to study in France but this did not materialise, not because

he did not have the means, but because he did not feel ready to go, and his parents were not very willing to let him go on his own. MF points out that had her parents been agreeable, she would have studied in Canada:

***If I had the choice, I would have gone to Toronto, where my best friends are studying. However, they are spending some Rs 2.5 - 3 m each year, whereas here my studies are costing only Rs 200 000 - 300, 000. My parents are planning to buy a car for me as gift for my birthday. My studies here are costing them much, much less.***

### **5.3.5 Social Experiences**

As far as peer groups are concerned, AN says that he has been able to relate to his classmates and over time, he has developed close friendships with what he terms his 'inner circle'. He is now very much at ease on campus. Even if they are part of the same social class, students do not come to university with the same pre-disposition. AN points out that each develops their own set of coping strategies so as to complete their studies and adapt to the university structures, processes and practices, as well as its culture:

***It was ok...it was easy for me to adapt...I didn't have any difficulty to have new friends. In fact, there is a pleasant atmosphere in class... There are one or two students who try to show off because they are wealthy...but when they do this, it motivates me even more to work harder and to do even better academically.... What I can see is that students coming from poor families, or middle class families tend to put in more effort when they see others trying to show off.... However, they are not all the same...; in fact, each student experiences university differently... Those coming from poor social backgrounds ...join university with the objective of making progress and to succeed. However, there are others who come to university just because they like the subject.... they will complete the degree, but they have other things on their mind...for them this degree is a first step only...they will study further.... So, there are those who come with a plan, and those who come only to get the degree to be able to get a job. If they want to study more, they will have to work first, save some money, and then proceed for further studies...***

NJ has also been able to settle quite well and has a group of friends with whom she completes group works assigned by the lecturers.

***I have a small group of really sweet friends. We usually work together when there are assignments and group work. We share all our notes. Well, it's also true that there are divisions in the classroom. It is in relation to their social class. But I have a good group of friends. I can communicate, and share with them. I can also count on them.***

SJ's experience with friends has been more laborious as he realised that he would have to live in a high-cost ecosystem. However, he reports that overall, it has been a pleasant experience:

***It was not an easy task to integrate a group of friends...as whenever they were planning something for lunch, for instance, I had to find an excuse as I would not be able to afford that expense.... However, I can say that I have a nice group of friends. I am in a class with a good atmosphere in fact. I have always heard about divisions in other classes.... but this has, so far, not been the case in my class. We all support each other and help each other.***

KL says that the classroom experience has so far been a very pleasant one:

***It's great, I like to talk with everyone.... I feel like everyone is my friend... irrespective of which social class they come from... By the way, I don't even know which social class they come from are... There is no problem at all... everyone is mixed... everyone is together... and we help each other.***

KL considers the cultural diversity of the university population as something worth experiencing as it creates a very pleasant atmosphere:

***My best experience of university is when there are cultural days, as there is really a diversity of cultures at university and I love it... I think that's really my favorite thing about university... the diversity, and the activities that we have when there is a Cultural Day... I really love it.***

ZK reports that, after some initial (and normal) 'teething' issues, he settled well in class. He found it difficult to integrate with a cohort of people from different horizons, but ultimately things improved:

***With the arrival of the Malagasy, the Comorians and all, it was really a cultural diversity, and also with the students coming from English medium schools as well. In fact, at first it was hard for me to get used to it, because we came from different backgrounds...and we didn't have the same culture...but over time, it developed positively ...***

MF also initially encountered some difficulties given that she came from a public secondary school whilst the majority of students were from the fee-paying French medium school. However, the differences were quickly set aside, and MF is now well-settled in terms of friendship:

*There was an initial cultural difference and language difference, given that we came from different schools with different cultures. However, we now regularly meet up and organise activities and outings... We help each other, share our notes and work together without any difficulty. We do not see the differences any more.... It is true that we do not think the same way all the time, but we know each other and therefore accommodate each other...*

### 5.3.6 Campus experience

AN reports that attending university has deeply impacted his vision of the way society is organised and functions, as well as his outlook on life:

*The university has changed my outlook on things.... Before I used to be more judgmental.... For instance, I come from the working class myself, but I used to think that the working class students at times do not put enough effort...they are not willing to...and they therefore stay where they are.... However, I have now realised that there are many hurdles that prevent some students from making progress.... they get access to education.... but do they have the same facilities as others?*

NJ shares AN's view that university helps one to have a clearer picture of the inequalities in society:

*Even before, I already knew that society is not at all equal. Being a brilliant student, I haven't had the chance to make the most of my intelligence, of my capabilities. I knew that there are these inequalities in society. My outlook hasn't really changed. It is up to me to work well and succeed. Society remains the same, it does not change at all. On the contrary, by joining university, my vision of injustice has in fact been strengthened.*

SJ has also developed a positive outlook on life and is of the opinion that the experience of university education has impacted his orientation to it:

*Since I joined the university, my outlook on life has changed...I used to look at things negatively....now I have come to understand that there are different ways through which you can look at society...Let us look at poverty for instance...even if you are poor, but if you have the drive and motivation, you can overcome the hurdles...University students can opt to follow others blindly, but they can also be creative and innovative...The university can also help and encourage students who have brilliant ideas and support them in implementing them... however, this seems nice at theoretical level only...it never materialises in practice.*

As far as the university structures are concerned, and the leeway granted with regard to students' outlook on things, KL points out that, whilst the university encourages students to be innovative and creative, what is ultimately rewarded is answering questions the way they are expected to. While this seems like an antithesis, this is the dilemma that students face. In this context, the overwhelming majority of students comply with directives and do not venture outside the established parameters as this is too risky:

***I don't think the university necessarily 'formats' us... but I have the impression that we are made to understand that studies are important, that we must succeed, and that we must always do more... we must work harder ... We must also think critically, to think out of the box and all... but on the other hand... for example for the assignments, we must absolutely do it as we are told to, and we need to stick to it... we need to go strictly by the guidelines...this seems paradoxical, but this is how it is...***

ZK has a different outlook on how the university structures operate. He perceives it as an institution that encourages students to think creatively. Thus, instead of reproducing the same model, students are coached to transform and re-visit it:

***My university stream encourages students to take risks, not to hesitate, not to impose limits and all ... In the BTS, the stream I am presently following, there are many students who want to start their own business and all ... As such the university encourages us to have a 'business plan' and all ... and also to have notions of management, and inculcates in us that in life you have to take risks to get there.***

For MF, even if the university encourages students to think outside the box, they are not taught to question existing realities and 'truths', but rather to learn about them and apply them. MF is also pessimistic with regard to the possibility of universities influencing society and having a real impact on the social stratification that characterises it.

***The university does not prepare students to question the system or to radically change it. Rather, it is results-oriented, and prepares students for the labour market, and not to question the established structures of society. Students do not have enough time to devote to philosophical questions or fighting for more equity. They have assignments to complete and exams to take. We learn just to go through the university examinations process and not to question it.***

## 5.4 Outlook on the future

AN

AN regards his graduation as the next major milestone in his life. He then plans to join the world of work so as to save money for his Master's degree:

***First of all, I need to look for a job, then I will save to undertake my postgraduate studies in the field I wish to join: social leadership.***

He is clear in his mind, however, that not all students have the same life chances. Those who have the right contacts have better chances of securing a good job:

***I know, however, that some students will have a job more easily, whilst others will have to struggle...even in my class presently, with regard to modules we are completing, there are students who already have in mind how these modules will help them to find a job in a specific field, given that they have the contacts needed, and therefore it will be easier for them to have a job as they complete the course.***

He believes that whilst the university opens up opportunities for students, it also prepares them for the job market. It moulds them based on their future career orientation. Overall, AN is pessimistic about students' ability to change things in the future in order to bring about more equity and fairness in the higher education system. Indeed, for AN, even if the situation is not ideal, the current higher education model provides fair opportunities to all:

***Things that need to change to bring more equity? I do not really think that we need to change anything, given that a lot has already been done in terms of accessibility and free education...***

NJ

NJ also plans to look for a job as soon as she completes her studies. Like AN, she is quite pessimistic about her job prospects:

***I will have to look for a job. It's my top priority. However, even if I complete my studies, I know that I will always have to struggle. Because it does not end here. I remain a working class girl and it will therefore be hard for me to find a job, even if I brilliantly complete my studies.***

Nevertheless, she is thankful for the opportunities that university education has provided in terms of broadening her vision of life and opening up new possibilities:

***I know that there will be more opportunities in the future. The university is a gateway to achieve more. It is going to make me become better. My outlook on life has been broadened. But I know that students coming from higher social classes have more opportunities to have a job, even if I am more intelligent academically and more qualified. The university is an institution that you enter and you leave with a degree. There is not much in terms of creativity.***

**SJ**

SJ is unable to project himself into the future. For the time being, he is still struggling:

***Nothing has changed so far in my life...as I don't have any guidance...I need to do everything on my own...I will share something with you: I worked as street hawker during December holidays so as to have some pocket money to pay for expenses when I attend university, like photocopies and printing expenses...so I do not have to ask my parents...I managed to buy my mobile phone as well...However, we need to ensure that we do not get caught by the police, else we have to pay a fine and all our products are taken away.***

He is not sure how things will work out for him in the future and is quite pessimistic, given recruitment practices:

***I can have an opportunity in the future, but I can be unlucky as well. Nowadays, you need a referral to have a job.... you need to know the right person. Only then can you have a job. Certificates do not have the same importance as before. Now everything is based on recommendations...not everyone has the same opportunity.... When recruiting for a job, only two out of 100 people will be from poorer social backgrounds...and even these two, it is ... just window dressing....***

**KL**

KL wants to enroll for a Masters' degree in psychology that will allow her to register as a psychologist. She has not yet decided on her field of specialisation and is considering clinical, educational or counseling psychology. For her, enrolling for a university degree is one of the best decisions she has made even if she realises that it is not an easy task. Initially, she was not aware of how hard it would be. However, she is now very conscious that with an academic qualification, she has a better chance of finding a job in her field of interest. Having the right qualification is particularly important in the field of psychology, as it is impossible

to find a job without the appropriate academic qualifications. She is a bit apprehensive about the Master's degree as she is worried about whether she has the academic level required to complete it. The most important hurdle for her, however, remains the financial implications.

Despite these hurdles, it is clear that, in her case, university education has completely changed her outlook on the future. She now has the chance to make her dream of becoming a registered psychologist come true. She will have to work hard and be strong as there will be many more hurdles along the way. However, university education has given her hope and enabled her to dream, and she is thankful for that.

## **ZK**

ZK reports that, since entering university he has gradually become more confident about the future. He believes that this will enable him to perform even better in his studies, achieve better grades, and ultimately engage in what he wants to do in life:

***Upon reaching the university, I ...started to build more self-confidence. As such, I am now better prepared to go even further...I can even set up my own business and all.... In fact, I did not face any major difficulty so far across my university trajectory. Thanks to the mentoring and the support that I have received, I am confident that I shall not have any difficulty in entering the world of work, or to set up my own business. After my degree, I will have gathered strong competencies in order to build my own future.***

ZK regards the university as an institution that encourages students to think out of the box and to develop their creativity rather than one that decides everything on behalf of students and reproduces the system. He is thankful to the teachers and academics who have helped him and believes he is well on track to succeed academically and in life in general.

## **MF**

MF has mixed feelings regarding the future. On the one hand, she is confident that, after her undergraduate degree, she will be able to undertake a postgraduate degree and eventually become a practicing clinical psychologist. She is of the opinion that the university has also helped her to become more mature and assertive. On the other hand, she is of the view that, in the Mauritian context, one needs to have the right contacts to secure a good job. As such, those who are part of the upper social classes will always find their way, even if it is to the

detriment of brilliant students from lower social backgrounds. She does not think that the university has changed her outlook on society; rather, it has confirmed it:

***Life is very unfair, and that's a reality. We don't have the same life chances...but students from poorer backgrounds can make it to the top through hard work. However, it is relatively easier for those who have the means.***

MF is also fully aware that not all students experience university education in the same way, given that one's social class influences one's path, even to the extent of determining which university one attends. She is also rather pessimistic about the possibility of changing things as the structures are perceived as being much more powerful than individuals, even if there is a will to change.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter examined the participants' primary and secondary educational trajectories as well as their pathways to university. It also analysed their present university experience with regard to academic, administrative, financial and social aspects, as well as their outlook on the future. The following chapter interprets the findings by juxtaposing them with contemporary worldviews and perspectives.

## **CHAPTER 6:**

### ***Analysis (Evaluative)***

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#### **Introduction**

Chapter 5 probed the participants' educational trajectories, depicting their primary and secondary educational experiences, their pre-university pathways and present university experiences as well as their outlook on the future.

This chapter interprets the findings that emerge from the study. It refers to the theoretical concepts and ideas, which are illustrated through the participants' experiences. Furthermore, it highlights the recurring concepts and themes, identifying the similarities and differences across social classes as well as the nuances between participants. It juxtaposes these with contemporary worldviews and perspectives on the experience of university education across social classes, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the on-going debate on the way students across social classes experience university education.

#### **Orientation**

Section 1 analyses the participants' pre-university trajectories, and Section 2 focuses on the omnipresence of social class in the educational pathway at university level. Section 3 probes present experience of university education, whilst Section 4 reflects on the role of university education at societal level, focusing on the need to re-think the university education system in order to deal effectively with the elements contributing to the perpetuation of differences in terms of educational experiences across social classes.

#### **Section 1 - Pre-University Trajectories: Similarities, differences and nuances across social classes**

##### **6.1: Primary and secondary education as initial filters**

Studies investigating students' access to university (Trow, 2006; Alon, 2014; Raey, 2016; Calderon, 2018; Bathmaker et al., 2016) as well as those focusing on the process that

students go through upon their admission (Stebbleton, 2013; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015; Lynch & O’Riordon, 2016; Jack, 2019) do not give the pre-university experience the academic attention it deserves. It would be wrong, however, to underestimate the impact of the pre-university trajectories of students from different social classes, and to assume that everything is decided upon only after accessing university education. Students’ experience of primary and secondary education in terms of persistence, and success (or failure) shapes how they envisage and approach university education, as well as their expectations with regard to such education.

The main elements that influenced the participants’ pre-university trajectories, and which have played a significant role in their progress towards university education are thus outlined in this section (section 6.1). Sen’s concept of agency is applied (6.1.1), as well as Bourdieu’s outlook on economic, social and cultural capital, the heritability of cultural capital (6.1.2), and the struggles that take place within the ‘field’ (6.1.3). The experiences of the participants who come from different social classes are thus examined through the dual lens of Bourdieu and Sen.

### **6.1.1 Resilience and attachment to education during pre-university years**

The resilience demonstrated by all the participants under the different life circumstances they faced at an early stage in their educational path, and how they weathered adversity on their pathway to university education, is one of the striking elements of their respective stories. Whilst AN failed his first attempt at the CPE, he did not give up, passing the second time round and completing his secondary education despite the hurdles along the way. NJ lived on the margins of poverty, but achieved excellent grades and completed her secondary education. She remained composed and determined in a hostile environment. SJ took a philosophical view of his relative lack of resources, arguing that had he been better off, he might have attached less importance to his studies. KL had to move from private to public schooling and was still able to cope with her studies and achieve good grades despite the completely different school environment. ZK followed special needs education to deal with his anxiety issues, and was able to make it through. MF remained focused on her studies and

achieved excellent results despite her parents' busy schedules and not having the pressure of competing for a place in a public university.

Thus, irrespective of social class and their future career plans, all the participants showed commitment and determination. They all displayed an active sense of agency, which Sen describes as people's continuous involvement in shaping their own lives and the extent to which they are the agents of their own learning (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). This sense of agency became visible through the critical decisions that the participants took when they were at a crossroads or had to face difficult situations. There was no difference in terms of commitment across social classes. For Sen, people's well-being should not be equated to the amount of resources they have at their disposal, but what they are able to do and be with the resources available to them (Sen, 1980). In this respect, Sen (1991) views education as an unqualified good for human capability expansion and freedom. Irrespective of their social background, the participants report that they were able to reach where they are at present because they were consistent in the effort they invested in their homework, taking private tuition, preparing notes and revising. They did not give up despite the challenges they encountered throughout their educational trajectory.

What can be deduced from this active involvement is that the value attached to education, as well as resilience and determination in the face of adversity, are key elements that helped the participants from lower social classes to overcome the contingencies of life and make it to university. However, their agency was crystalised through opportunities provided to them to challenge the established link between social class and educational outcomes upon reaching the university doors. Based on extensive longitudinal studies, Alon (2014) asserts that high school graduates from low socio-economic strata have to face the twin mechanisms of exclusion and adaptation and are, as a result, at a marked disadvantage in terms of accessing and pursuing post-secondary education, even if the postsecondary system is presented as being meritocratic. In the students' narratives, those mechanisms become apparent in their decisions regarding the post-secondary institutions that they sought admission to. There is a gap between appearance and the reality with regard to access to university education, as well as in terms of the students' actual experiences. This is illustrated in sections 6.6 and 6.7. Whilst Section 6.6 focuses on the participants' initial

encounter with the reality of university life, Section 6.7 examines the academic, administrative, financial, and social challenges they had to face. Both sections highlight the gap between the participants' initial perceptions and what they actually faced on the ground.

### **6.1.2 Investing in education**

From the students' stories, it seems that, for all participants, their parents' inputs were crucial in achieving the results required to access university education. However, whilst those from lower social classes had to rely on the limited resources they had at their disposal, those who are better off were able to make the most of their privileged position. Bourdieu distinguishes between economic capital (material assets that are immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights [Bourdieu 1986, p. 242]), social capital (membership of a durable network that advances one's interests [Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119]) and cultural capital (symbolic elements that one acquires through being part of a particular social class such as skills, mannerisms and academic credentials [Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977]).

What emerges from the current study is that investment in education plays a crucial role in shaping the educational pathway of students across social classes. Its influence can be felt in several aspects of the participants' pre-university experience. In terms of private tuition, for instance, AN reports that he had to rely on tuition from school teachers as their fees were much lower than the normal tuition fees. NJ initially paid the price for not taking tuition in additional mathematics. She failed miserably, with a Grade 9 (on the University of Cambridge School Certificate examinations the scale ranges from 1 [highest] to 9 [lowest]). However, at the second attempt, she had no choice but to take private tuition, and was able to achieve Grade 3. In contrast, MF reports that she paid twice the market rate for five-star tuition, and was coached by the best teachers on the island that made full use of modern technologies such as projectors and e-copies of notes, as well as personal laboratories for practicals. She reports that she had tuition in eight subjects at SC level and seven at HSC level. It is important to point out that the Mauritian primary and secondary educational landscape is heavily influenced by a shadow education system, where private tuition occupies a prominent position. Bray (2007) observes that, given its size and nature, private tutoring has important

implications for the educational system as a whole, and these cannot be ignored by education policies. The advantage provided by additional coaching, represented here by private tuition, is a form of economic capital whose effects in the form of better educational performance are carried through to higher education, enabling those who can secure this advantage to gain privileged access to such education. The build-up of economic capital pre-university significantly shapes the university trajectory. Furthermore, early access to economic capital in the form of private tuition may unlock the door to other forms of capital.

Additional hidden costs associated with primary and secondary schooling, such as uniforms, school bags and other expenses have to be met by parents. Whilst these might seem negligible for well-off families, they represent a significant cost for families such as AN's and NJ's who struggled to make ends meet. Where two or more children are studying at the same time in a family, the situation becomes even more difficult to manage. Students from a disadvantaged background have to make even more effort as they lack the economic and social capital to be on par with those who are better off.

Irrespective of their social class, the participants, as well as their parents realised very early on that there is a need to invest financially as well as emotionally, and intellectually in the education of their children if they want them to succeed. For instance, NJ's mother did not spare any effort to finance her studies, and was very involved and supportive throughout. Such financial and emotional involvement on the part of their parents was also the case for AN, MF and ZK. However, the economic, social and cultural capital at their disposal is clearly not the same, and this inevitably impacts the lengths to which parents can go in terms of investment in their children's education, and whether they will be able to make it to university. At policy level, Raey (2016) underlines the fact that focusing on increasing university intake does not necessarily mean that the class issue is resolved. Whilst more working class students are fulfilling the minimum requirements to enroll in a university programme, there is growing class-based differentiation in terms of the university that they can access. The UCAS report (2019) supports this view, pointing to the widening of the gap between social classes in terms of places allocated in the leading British universities. Increased access is leading to increased differentiation across universities along class lines. Billingham (2018) highlights that, whilst higher education can serve as an important vehicle

for social mobility, this depends on the extent to which the context provides access, retention, and work opportunities for graduates of dissimilar origins. With regard to the current study, the participants from the lower social classes report that they had no other choice than to follow a pre-determined path, being fully aware of the universities that they could consider, and those which they could not access, as these are meant for upper class students. One of the most pertinent elements in the Mauritian higher education context is the ability to finance one's university education, or having to rely on free public universities. While the education offered by the country's public universities is not necessarily of lower quality, enrollment in public or private institutions does impact one's higher educational exposure, as well as one's overall higher education experience and future aspirations.

### **6.1.3 Key role of parents**

Attaching importance to education is not necessarily a value that students develop on their own (Lara & Saracosti, 2019). This section considers the study's findings in light of Bourdieu's views on the heritability of cultural capital, which concerns the replication of social patterns across generations. Bourdieu's work highlights the crucial role played by the education field in reproducing the social hierarchy through the transmission of cultural codes that privilege the ruling class and are legitimated through academic credentials. Based on an extensive mapping of educational achievement in the Mauritian context, Mariaye (2007) underlines the fact that, over and above the 'traditional' involvement of parents through coaching and monitoring, teaching skills and values that prepare children for the world of school and work, as well as the establishment of strong discipline, are key elements that influence children's attitudes to making an effort, as well as their ability to work on their own and to take initiative. Mariaye found that:

*low educational achievement of parents was not necessarily a barrier to achievement of the children. The home lifestyle defined in terms of discipline and belief in hard work and the worth given to education could also make up for formal educational achievement.*  
(2007, p. ix)

In line with Mariaye's findings (2007), all the participants in the current study acknowledge the crucial role played by their parents in developing an attachment to their studies from

their primary school years. The parents of AN, NJ, SL and KL all appear to have remained committed to ensuring their children's educational success by providing the required material resources as well as establishing a conducive environment for learning, and setting sound parameters in terms of attitude, dedication, and discipline, even though they were not themselves educationally successful. ZK and MF reported that, even though their parents were busy with their professional responsibilities, they benefitted from their guidance and support throughout their educational journey. Parents' unconditional support and commitment were thus instrumental in the participants' educational achievements.

Savage et al.'s (2013) analysis of the prevalence of social classes in contemporary British society differentiates between the elite, the middle class, and the lower class, primarily in terms of their access to economic, social and cultural capital, thereby re-establishing the pertinence and significance of social classes across the country. Analysing the Mauritian educational setting, Mariaye (2007) distinguishes between the upper class, the upper middle, the lower middle and the working class. Further probing of the participants' stories revealed that those whose parents were educated and aware of the success brought about as a result of education benefitted significantly from this privileged situation. MF and ZK both report that their parents made the right decisions for them in terms of their choice of school, but also followed their academic progress all the way through. This was not the case for KL, who attended a private school that offered an education that proved to be not up to standard when she reached secondary school. SJ, NJ and AN did not benefit from this significant edge of having educated parents, even though their parents attached much importance to their children's education. Thus, an educated family background accelerated MK and ZK's educational progress, while the other participants had to put in more effort in order to get through. Caplan (2013) warns against the worsening of inequality, given that universities are increasingly applying stringent admission policies, leading to the emergence of an academic aristocracy. What emerges from the experiences of the participants, is that the pathway to university education for second-generation university goers (MF and ZK) is completely different from that of first-generation university goers (AN, NJ, SK and KL). MF and ZK seem to follow a 'natural' and straightforward trajectory with minimal obstacles along the way, as everything seems to be well-planned and even pre-decided. This is visible

in terms of their choice of educational institution, the combination of subjects and their future career orientation. For the first-generation university goers (AN, NJ, SK and KL) the overall pre-university experience is characterised by numerous uncertainties. In terms of the choice of subjects, for instance, they were all hesitant and unsure about the direction they wanted to take, or where they will end up. They seemed to lack confidence and were on slippery ground. They did not have a sense of direction in terms of their career plans. This implies that it is important for policy makers to take into account the factors contributing to the reproduction of the social hierarchy across generations, and to reflect on the barriers and accelerators of inter-generational mobility in the higher education field (Torche, 2018).

#### **6.1.4 Guidance, strategic choice, and social capital**

This section discusses the importance of sound advice and guidance in structuring and pursuing one's educational trajectory in a consistent and unobstructed way. It demonstrates the significant role played by social capital, which Bourdieu (1992) defines as the resources available to those with access to an established network of more or less institutionalised relationships. Social capital can be viewed in terms of the ability to advance one's interests by relying on one's network and connections (Martikke, 2017).

AN reports that he had to change school at secondary level as his combination of subjects was not available. NJ opted for subjects which would cost less in terms of private tuition and had to change her combination of subjects a number of times. SJ and KL both chose their field of studies without any sense of direction. In contrast, MF and ZK were very strategic in their approach. MF opted for both science and economics at SC and HSC level in order to keep her university options open. ZK had already decided the course he wanted to follow at university and therefore opted for subjects in line with this choice.

AN, NJ, SJ and KL's erratic pre-university path reflects a lack of informed guidance. They all report that they made their decision on their own. However, MF and ZK benefitted from the fact that their parents are literate and that they had a network of family members or members of their social circle who act

as a repository of knowledge, and could therefore guide them. Belliveau et al. (1996, p. 1576) view social capital as "an individual's personal network and elite institutional

affiliations”, whilst Burt (1992, p. 9) points out that it is composed of “friends, colleagues, and more general contacts through whom you receive opportunities to use your financial and human capital”. The participants’ experiences underline the key role played by social capital in determining one’s pre-university pathway. A lack of guidance and social capital can prevent even the most well-performing student from accessing university education, if he/she does not take the right decisions in terms of subject combinations at an early stage of his/her educational trajectory. In the Mauritian context, admission to public universities is based on a rigid system of subject combinations which determine eligibility. Knowledge of these criteria (which determine access) is dependent upon students being properly channeled and scoring a baseline grade in a combination of subjects. Thus, poor choices and limited awareness of the stakes at the end of the secondary school cycle can ruin one’s chances of opting for the desired programme, or making a more informed choice in terms of the university programme to opt for. While none of the participants reports that they were influenced by peers in their choice of academic track, there remains a risk that one’s choices are influenced by irrational considerations which can influence students if they lack clear and informed guidelines from those in their immediate environment.

It can thus be argued that there is a range of personal and circumstantial barriers to accessing university education, and that one’s social class plays an important role in this respect. Whilst the choices that one makes in primary and secondary education are not always regarded as significant in terms of accessing university education, the participants’ experiences reveal that these choices are crucial, highlighting the role played by social capital in this quasi-invisible channeling and pre-selection process.

#### **6.1.5 Choice of schools and teachers’ approach**

Whilst parents generally opt for the most practical option with regard to the choice of schools for their children (Altrichter et al., 2011; Jacobs, 2011), primary and secondary schooling can act as initial filters with regard to those who pursue university education. Schools shape one’s social environment, which can either enrich or impoverish one’s social circles (Tapia-Fonllem, 2020), with implications for access to critical knowledge to prepare students for university education. The differential nature of schools influences students’ expectations and

access to knowledge as well as their choices. These will eventually shape their future educational decisions as well as opportunities.

Bourdieu (1985) views the 'field' as a structured social space consisting of arenas where the struggle for the preservation or transformation of power relations and the structuring of behaviour take place. The primary and secondary school were powerful structuring forces in the participants' relationship with learning and education in general through the kind of approach teachers adopted. Educational background as well as upbringing influence an agent's behaviour. The participants had very different trajectories in terms of primary and secondary schooling. AN completed his primary education on the second attempt and was only able to secure admission to a regional secondary school primarily meant for students from a disadvantaged background. He reports that some teachers had stereotyped views of disadvantaged students, even if this was not generalised. NJ reports that her teachers at secondary school were not very helpful given that it was generally assumed that, students attending a star secondary school took private tuition and were closely monitored and coached by their parents. Moreover, being intelligent, it was also assumed that they could work on their own. SJ considers himself as the 'normal one', having been through the local public primary school system and then admitted to a state secondary school meant for students with 'average' abilities. KL's parents opted for private schooling, but she was not enrolled in a school meant for the financial elite. ZK is thankful that his parents enrolled him in the French schooling system, given the level of dedication and support he received through the school integration programme as he faced anxiety and stress issues during his primary and secondary school years. MF cruised through her primary schooling as she attended a private school which hired highly experienced and dedicated teachers who were able to optimise students' learning.

These findings highlight the key role played by the participants' primary and secondary educational experiences in determining the future educational paths. Therefore, the primary and secondary schooling trajectory cannot be considered separately from the university experience, as the school acts as a powerful antecedent to access and success at university level. It contributes to (or impedes) the initial steps towards the reconstructionist/progressivist/ social justice aim of education. Those who come from schools with a lower

tertiary enrolment rate, such as AN and SJ, have already struggled against the odds. Students who made it despite a disabling school environment could have had access to support systems or personal drive. University entry and the higher education trajectory could be self-authored and self-driven, but this is not enough. The set of factors which shapes the 'road to university' is unique in each case, but each indicates how class plays out.

Based on the above analysis, it is clear that the experience of university education does not rely solely on what happens once a student gains admission to university. The pre-university trajectory is highly influenced by a number of elements that channel students well before they are admitted. Based on this initial selection, educational trajectories as well as career paths are thus pre-decided and pre-set. Bourdieu (1972) underlines the importance of 'doxa' which refers to agreement that the game taking place within the arena is worth playing. Based on Bourdieu's concept, it is essential to analyse how participants across social classes use their access to capital to improve their educational path, and whether they are in a position to re-visit the rules of the game. Thus, in order to study the field, there is a need to study the allocation of power and the struggles taking place within the field. From the narratives gathered, the participants' naivety with regard to the way university structures operate, those admitted to public universities' admiration for 'the state's generosity' and the privileged feeling experienced by those enrolled in private universities all contribute to silently reproducing the system, and therefore perpetuate the status quo. This is discussed in more detail in the following chapter (see section 7.2).

## **Section 2 - The Omni-presence of social class across the higher educational pathway**

### **6.2: Social class and the decision to undertake university education**

This section probes Sen's concept of agency, analysing how it applies to the participants' experiences across social classes. In his capability approach, Sen distinguishes between well-being and agency, and then sub-divides each of these two principal categories by applying the variables of achievement and freedom (Gangas, 2016). Well-being is examined in terms of well-being achievements (functionings) and well-being freedoms (capabilities) (Sen, 1993). However, agency is often overlooked (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). Sen refers to agency

achievement as the processes by which people make decisions about what they aim to pursue in terms of valued goals, whilst agency freedom is viewed as the “freedom to achieve whatever the person, as responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve” (Sen, 1985a, p. 204). Crocker and Robeyns (2010) build on Sen’s work to outline the four main, irreducible elements of his agency. These are: (i) self-determination (the ability to act otherwise); (ii) reason orientation and deliberation (critical scrutiny); (iii) action (performing or having a role); and (iv) impact on the world (people’s ability to help themselves and to influence the world).

The narratives show that the participants from the lower social classes did not give up. They struggled through and eventually overcame the systemic structures which generally prevent students from lower social classes from exercising agency through an absence of choice. They were determined to succeed, make the right decisions, and to achieve the objectives they set themselves. They did not capitulate despite financial difficulties. These participants exemplify Sen’s (1999) concept of agency, which emphasises the need for individuals to be in a position to shape their own destiny and have the ability to decide on the key elements of their lives. AN points out that studying at university was in his mind since his early days of secondary school. He remained focused on this objective. Having witnessed his cousins moving out of poverty through university education, he was determined to take the same route despite the hurdles in his path. His decision to apply for a place in a public university was primarily based on financial considerations, given that it would be impossible for his family to afford the fees of a private university. His only alternative would be to forego university education and opt for immediate gratification by contributing to the family budget. He opted for the university route. Although she also comes from a disadvantaged family background, NJ was initially not keen to enroll in university as her dream was to study abroad like her classmates. However, she was conscious that that this would not be possible, given her family situation. NJ therefore initially decided to take up employment after completing secondary school so as to help her family out of poverty. She was fully aware that, given her family’s financial situation, it would not be possible to pay the fees of public universities, even if they were heavily subsidised by the state. Upon her mother’s insistence, NJ eventually decided to lower her aspirations and apply for a place in a local public

university. That single influence changed her trajectory. For his part, SJ applied for admission to a public university after attending its open day. He also attended other open days and did not know which university to choose. He was also conscious of his family's budgetary constraints, and that private universities were beyond his reach. SJ's university enrollment can be considered as sheer coincidence. KL was not initially interested in enrolling in university. She reports that she received no guidance on university education, nor did she experience any pressure to do so. Given that she did not really know what she wanted to do, she joined the world of work. Only after having worked for two years did she realise that she wanted to study at university. The fact that she worked and saved money gave her the agentic ability to control her own goals and destiny. She opted for a private university as she heard that public universities' offerings of the course she was interested in were not internationally recognised. Even though this meant that she would have to pay the full fees, KL stood by her decision as her plan is to pursue postgraduate studies abroad after having completed her undergraduate programme.

The participants from the upper social classes were also very determined to follow their educational pathway in order to achieve their career objectives, even if they had to face some impediments along the way. ZK initially hoped to attend university in France like the majority of his school friends. However, his parents were reluctant to let him go on his own, given the difficulties he encountered during his primary and early secondary schooling. He therefore opted for a private university in Mauritius. His interest in this university was triggered by an informative visit to the campus organised by his school. He also asked for advice from his parents and social circle, who highly recommended this institution. His decision was based on the fact that he wanted to complete an internationally recognised diploma that would allow him to pursue the career plan that he had in mind. He also wanted to continue with a programme taught in French, as he attended a French medium school. ZK is very ambitious, and he felt that this institution would provide him with the necessary tools to reach his aim in life. His choice was therefore based on deep reflection and was a rational move given his educational trajectory. He was in control of what he wanted to achieve and had concrete objectives. Similarly, MF wanted to study abroad, but her parents were not willing to let her be on her own in a foreign country. Her decision to apply for a place in a

private university was primarily motivated by the availability of the programme she wanted to follow: psychology. Her parents encouraged her to choose any programme she was interested in, and they were pleased with her choice. From Sen's (1999) perspective, both ZK and MF had agency achievement, which refers to the ability to decide according to one's own values and life objectives, as well as agency freedom, which refers to the power to act and to be effective.

Based on the above, the participants from different social classes do not seem to undertake university education in a standardised way and are not driven by the same factors. Those from the upper classes have a choice with regard to the university they want to attend, and take decisions which are rational and well thought out. Their decisions are also based on the specific course they want to undertake, as well as their future career orientation. The stories of the participants from the lower social classes reflect a lack of choice, and decisions that are either taken with a sense of urgency, or are dominated by financial considerations. For AN, NJ and SJ, the only option other than applying to a public university was to forego university education and to join the world of work. Not only is their choice of higher education institution limited, but their field of study is determined by their secondary school track as well as their performance. Lower class parents' inability to guide their children or have a say in their decisions also contribute to the replication of patterns of social division through education, whereby children from lower classes are channeled to public universities and those from better-off families opt for private institutions. However, the participants did not capitulate in the face of the systemic structures that confronted them; they were able to put in the required effort and make the move to secure a place in a public university. They were thus agentic within the restricted space in which they could evolve.

The Mauritian state has made substantial effort to ensure that more places are made available in post-secondary institutions. However, while a greater number of places for undergraduate programmes means that students have more choice, at the same time, this is leading to increased differentiation across social classes. A growing number of private universities offer an array of programmes in the Mauritian context. Given the fees that they charge, they primarily cater for the upper social classes and those who seek to identify with this social category, while students from the lower social classes are channeled to public

universities. The HESA (2016) report noted that, in the British context, there is a decline in the percentage of students from poor backgrounds accessing elite universities. This calls into question Calderon's (2018) optimism regarding the critical role of higher education in transforming society by expanding access. There is therefore a need to go beyond Calderon's work to focus on the impact of social classes in the expansion of higher education, thereby identifying the mechanisms that perpetuate the class divide across society (Alon, 2014).

In the Mauritian setting, while there is an illusion of openness, given that applications are open to all, and universities offer wide range of courses, private institutions practice a form of covert social closure, which rests on three core pillars:

1. Fees: This is the main hurdle for students from lower social classes. These institutions are not accessible to those from poor backgrounds. They are clearly out of bounds for AN, NJ, and SJ. Even KL, who comes from a middle class background, had to take a loan to be able to enroll for a course in a private university.
2. Traditional / preferred feeders: the campus is dominated by students from fee-paying secondary institutions (mainly from French medium schools). As a result, those who did not attend these schools do not feel comfortable. This is the case for MF who reports that she initially struggled to adapt to the university as she attended a public school.
3. Organisational culture: Privileging students from private secondary institutions leads to the adoption of an organisational culture that aligns with the requirements of the upper social classes, and is deeply rooted in their culture. This is reflected in the language used on campus, and the way of life, as well as the establishment of a high-cost ecosystem where students need to have the financial means to adapt to the culture prevalent on campus. This ecosystem is characterised by high-end laptops and other electronic devices as well as students' lifestyle and trendy way of dressing. Those who cannot afford this will obviously find it difficult to adapt. MF, who comes from a wealthy background, realises that the institution's culture makes it difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to even consider studying there.

These hurdles lead to self-exclusion where students from the lower social classes opt for an environment where they would be more comfortable and which would lead to less financial strain. The prohibitive fees and cultural gap meant that that AN, NJ and SJ did not consider private universities. However, this was a natural choice for ZK and MF. Private universities are therefore not accessible to students from lower social classes and are primarily designed for those from the upper social classes.

Sen emphasises the need for individuals and groups to be actively involved in the decision-making process to “effectively shape their own destiny and help each other,” (Sen 1999, p. 11), and be “active participant[s] in change, rather than ... passive and docile recipient[s] of instructions or of dispensed assistance” (Sen, 1999, p. 281). However, the analysis suggests that whether students are active agents with the right pre-disposition and aptitude to shape their own destiny, help others and fight for social justice, or passive and docile recipients of instructions, is heavily dependent on their educational trajectory and their social class. What emerges from the narratives is that there are many aspects that have been pre-decided even before students reach the door of the university, which are determined by the participants’ social background. Section 7.4 probes Sen’s outlook on agency and Bourdieu’s analysis of heritability in more detail to reflect on the myth of the university as an equaliser, underlining how social class impacts university students’ ability to fight for themselves and the world.

### **6.3 Choice of field of study**

Whilst the previous section focused on agency, this section emphasises Sen’s concept of freedoms. For Sen, freedoms involve two aspects: the process aspect, which refers to the ability to act on behalf of what matters (agency) and the opportunity aspect, which is the real opportunity to achieve valued functionings, selected from among various desirable possibilities (capabilities) (Alkire, 2015). The concept of freedom focuses on empowerment of people to help themselves and on the need for individuals to be actors of their own progress. It is essential to expand the range of opportunities available to people.

Bathmaker (2016) revisits policy-makers’ assumption that broadening access to higher education is one of the best instruments to fight social inequalities and enhance social

mobility. She notes that upper class students are much more strategic in their choice of subjects, whilst those from the working class generally have limited options. The current study's findings are in line with those of Bathmaker as they show that the upper class participants tend to make calculated decisions whilst those from the lower class go with the flow and do not give deep consideration to the impact of their decisions on their future career, which will determine their future earnings. For instance, AN's decision to enroll for social work was motivated by the social projects he has been involved at local community level. He reports that he was impressed by the involvement of a social worker who has been active in his locality. However, he was also prompt to point out that, based on his HSC results, he did not have many other options. A lack of guidance, as well as naivety on her part, led NJ to apply for Sociology. She achieved excellent results at SC and HSC level but still opted for a programme that is much less in demand, and which has fewer prospects in the job market, whilst she could have easily secured a place in other courses that are in high demand, and more promising in terms of career and remuneration. She explains that she opted for sociology as she liked the subject, and had achieved excellent grades in this subject at HSC level. She did not take into account the long-term prospects. SJ applied for courses for which he was eligible based on advice received during the open day. He reported that he did not have a clear plan for the future in terms of his career. KL also did not know what she wanted to do and it took her two years to realise that she wanted to study psychology.

These findings show that AN, NJ, SJ and KL did not have a clear sense of direction with regard to their university studies. Instead, they made decisions based on their perceived abilities and their academic track record at secondary school. This reflects the lack of a long-term target in terms of further studies and career prospects.

ZK's choice of programme was much more rational and linear. His decision to study 'Gestion' (Management) was based on his future career orientation, his willingness to take over the family business at a later stage, and his love for accounting. MF opted for psychology as she had always been passionate about it. Both of these participants were clear in their mind about what they want to achieve and where they see themselves in the future.

The differences in the way the participants decided on their field of study, and the fact that those from the upper social classes opted for fee-paying institutions whilst their chosen

programmes were available free of charge in public institutions, call for reflection on the rationale behind these decisions. Bathmaker (2016) warns against the consequences of an ‘aristocracy of talents’ that would prevent students from the lower social classes from entering top professions despite having completed university, whilst those who have the means are able to secure places in the best universities and embark on promising careers in leading organisations. The participants from the upper classes opted for private universities as they felt that this would offer the most conducive experience in terms of academic content, teaching approach, and international exposure. They also believe that this would give them a positional advantage compared to students from public universities (Sullivan et al., 2018). They are ready and willing to pay for this as they strongly believe that it makes a major difference career-wise (Ryan et al., 2014), and in terms of the prevalent culture (Kitsawad, 2013).

From this vantage point, it can be argued the state’s massive injection of funds to boost access to university education does not necessarily lead to more social justice, given that a ruling elite is still being reproduced through private universities whilst the lower social classes have no choice but to apply for courses available to them in public institutions (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2022). At the end of the day, this massive supply of graduates serves the interests of the economy and those who control it, as universities produce an educated labour force that is willing to work for average salaries. University graduates are now taking jobs designed for secondary school leavers, whilst the average graduate salary has decreased (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020). However, members of the elite draw on their contacts and networks to secure the best positions, without confronting the competition for employment that the lower social classes have to endure.

In the process of enhancing access to disadvantaged social classes, it is vital that the freedom granted is not a “‘paper’ freedom” (Alkire, 2015). It must offer real possibilities. However, it is also important to ensure that more choices are not being offered without giving due consideration to the quality of the available options, as well as how suited they are to people’s aspirations and values. Sen states that, *“sometimes more freedom of choice can*

*bemuse and befuddle, and make one's life more wretched*" (Sen, 1992, p. 59). In the Mauritian context, there is a need to ensure that there is genuine empowerment through higher education, and not a mere replication of the social hierarchy.

#### **6.4 The influence of cultural capital on the application and selection process**

For Bourdieu, cultural capital, which plays a crucial role in one's educational achievement, can be attained through different means. It can be embodied (cultivated through one's upbringing and interaction), objectified (taking the form of material objects and media), and institutionalised (in the form of legally granted qualifications which can be converted into economic capital through access to high profile occupations) (Bourdieu, 1986) (See Section 3.3.1).

The participants from lower social classes reported that they encountered two major hurdles in applying to university: the lack of logistics to apply online, and payment of administrative fees. Whilst it is generally assumed that everyone has access to computers and to the internet, AN, NJ and SJ all report that they had to seek help from relatives so as to be able to complete the online application as they did not own a computer. The administrative fee, which constitutes less than 10% of what a student would normally pay for a course if it were not heavily subsidised by the state, still represented a hurdle for those coming from the lower social classes. This sum, which amounted to Rs 22,000 annually in the case of NJ, was a source of stress as she was conscious that her parents did not have the required amount. AN and SJ also report that it was a considerable amount for their parents to raise. Whilst students such as AN and SJ had to make a nominal annual contribution of Rs 22,000 up until 2020, it is important to point out that the Mauritian government took the decision to reduce this amount to Rs 10, 000 annually for full-time programmes as from January 2020 (Mohee & Durbarry, 2021) in yet another step towards removing the material and financial barriers to accessing university education.

For KL and MF, the application process for private universities was much more pleasant and straight-forward. KL reports that she is under the impression that university education is turning into a business, granting access based on the ability to pay rather than on educational

achievements. MF was appreciative of the support and guidance received from the 'future student centre'.

ZK's experience of the application process was completely different. Because he applied for a French-medium programme, he had to undergo an interview, write a letter of motivation and take a general knowledge test. This process requires students to convince the panel of their determination to study and their motivation. These elements are not taken into consideration in online application modes, which are based on computer-generated lists. Irrespective of their social background, however, all the participants reported that they felt a sense of pride and accomplishment in being able to secure a place at a university.

What can be deduced from the students' experience of the application process? The participants' views reveal that, over time, there has been commodification and commercialisation of higher education (Yang, 2006; Methula, 2017), which signify a further shift from the social justice role that is expected of university education. Those who have the means are offered VIP service and find themselves in an elitist model, whilst those from a disadvantaged background have to struggle to secure a place in public universities despite the fact that public university education is heavily subsidised by the state.

Hall (2012) highlights the crucial role university education plays in the quest for social justice, given that the commodification of education is rapidly gaining momentum. However, being granted a place at university does not mean that the battle has been won. While access can help to break the cycle of marginalisation, Hall warns that it can also act as a gatekeeper to maintain the established order of inequality. In the Mauritian context, private universities apply social closure rules and selection standards to filter out students who do not fit the profile they desire. This constitutes a double selection exercise that maintains an 'ability based elite' within a 'socio-economic' elite, whilst also entrenching their position as providers of selective, high quality higher education, and distinguishing themselves from other higher education providers (Börjesson & Broady, 2016).

The participants from the lower social classes are under the (false) impression that they are now well on track in terms of overcoming social injustice and climbing the social ladder. However, McPherson (2013) highlights that university education involves a process of

sorting, selecting, and ranking, with neo-liberal policies turning education into a business. For McPherson, universities have moved from autonomous centres to commercial purveyors of learning services. Once they access university education, students are not transformed into engaged citizens with broad capabilities and diverse values, but rather into passive consumers of educational services. In order to change this system, the university must play a transformational role. However, this is a challenging task, given the need to completely revisit the foundations of the higher education system in order to identify the root causes of the replication of the social structure though embodied, objectified and institutionalised cultural capital.

## **6.5 Expectations**

For AN, university education was like a dream come true, and he hopes to gain access to a world that is completely different from what he has experienced thus far. NJ also has high expectations that university education will make a huge difference. She was highly motivated to excel in her studies so as to ultimately obtain a good job and be in a position to improve her family's life. SJ expected strict rules, and rigorous procedures, as well as fun and entertainment. He reports that he felt that he had a duty towards his parents and wanted to make them proud.

KL was focused on finding her way so as to become a registered psychologist, and knew that hard work lay ahead. She was unsure that she would be able to cope with the teaching standards. She expected a busy time table with lectures as well as meeting with academics. However, she also believed that there would be some leeway so that students could organise themselves. ZK was focused on his career, and was confident of laying the foundation for a successful journey upon joining the labour market. He expected the university to prepare him for managerial positions and for the challenges of the work environment. MF was expecting to complete her studies brilliantly and to undertake postgraduate studies abroad.

The participants from the lower social classes thus had high expectations that university education was going to change their lives in terms of social mobility and career expectations, and also have a positive impact on the lives of their loved ones. For them, university education would mean a giant leap in terms of their career and improving their position in

the social hierarchy. There is a class tax on participants from lower social classes as it constitutes an additional burden on account of the fact that there is more pressure to succeed. These participants felt a sense of achievement upon joining university, and are thankful to their parents. Accessing university is an accomplishment on its own, given their primary and secondary educational path. The narratives of the students from the higher social class reflect that the deliberate and conscious planning which characterised their school journey persists at university where the fine-tuning continues. In contrast, the students from lower classes faced uncertainties and were unable to really plan a complete trajectory. This partial view of their university and post-university life could result in sub-optimal decision making. Friedman and Laurison (2020) point out that significant class gaps in terms of access to elite professions still prevail in the UK, with such professions remaining the bastion of the privileged. In the Mauritian setting, while university students have high expectations, this does not mean that they will experience university education in the same way, and have equal life chances in the future. Friedman and Louison also identify significant salary disparities in the UK, pointing out that working class employees earn 16% less than their colleagues from more privileged backgrounds. There is therefore a clear gap between reality on the ground, and the optimistic outlook shared by students upon joining university, in terms of greater social justice.

Dhunpath and Subbaya (2018) note that massive investment in university education in South Africa has only led to marginal improvements in success rates. The experience of higher education across social classes is clearly not the same. Dhunpath and Subbaya highlight the need to focus on systemic dysfunction in terms of infrastructure, teaching facilities, staffing and, most importantly, the curriculum that result in these different experiences, rather than focusing on students' deficits. The findings of the current study also reveal systemic dysfunctions in the Mauritian higher education sector despite significant state investment to offer free public university education (Mohamedbhai, 2019). While official rhetoric would have it that this offers an equal chance to all (Mohee & Durbarry, 2021), on the ground, the situation tends to be completely different. Massification of university education is leading to even greater differentiation and inequality in terms of access, completion and outcomes. In theory, higher education institutions are focusing on

the delivery of academic qualifications, and ensuring that these are converted into economic capital by facilitating access to high profile occupations. However, students from the upper and middle class are in a better position to access high profile occupations, given their accumulated institutionalised cultural capital.

### **Section 3: The present experience of university education**

#### **6.6 First encounters with the reality of university life**

This section focuses on discovering university life and the expectations, adjustments and disruptions that the participants faced at the initial stage.

The participants report that their first encounter with the university was not what they expected. AN points out that the initial days were really challenging as he did not have a laptop, and did not know how to complete online registration for modules. He had mixed feelings due to those initial hurdles. However, he was determined to succeed, and tried his best to adapt to the new environment. At the end of the first semester, AN was pleased with his examination results, and this encouraged him to do even better. NJ reported that she took her studies very seriously from day one. She had two pleasant surprises upon joining university: it was far less stressful than her secondary school, and she was granted a scholarship, based on her performance in her final school examinations. For SJ, things were initially quite complicated as he found it difficult to make new friends. The fact that he had to study on his own made things worse as he did not have anyone to guide him in adjusting and acclimatising to university life. KL and ZK both report that they did not expect university to be so much hard work and stress. They also did not expect the university rules to be so strict. They had difficulty in adapting to the competitive environment, but were pleasantly surprised by the lecturers' professional approach. MF reported that the university was not at all what she expected as it was dominated by students from French medium private schools, and she felt that they imposed their upper class culture across the university. She realised that it was a university meant for the wealthy, given the high-cost ecosystem, the traditional links with private secondary school feeders, and the organisational culture

These reflections suggest that the participants initially found it difficult to adapt to the university setting, given that they realised that higher education carries hidden costs, and that there is a large gap between the secondary school environment and university. However, over time, they all managed to settle in their new environment, and report that eventually, they developed a positive feeling about their university experience. In any event, they had few other options given that they are unable to influence the established structures; they thus have to 'adapt or perish'.

Bourdieu views society as being composed of various social and institutional arenas in which people express their dispositions, and where they compete for different kinds of capital (Gaventa, 2003). There are different fields with sets of relationships that are experienced differently by people from different class backgrounds, resulting in tensions and contradictions. In the educational field, students' cultural dispositions influence the way they connect with the institution and how they view themselves in the higher education setting, as they are located at different points of the social structure. This initial acclimatisation period is related to different aspects of university life, where students need to learn new codes and adopt new behaviours. They need to adapt to the administrative structure, the discipline imposed by autonomy, and the support system, as well as establish new relationships with peers and staff. Such acclimatisation is not experienced in the same way across social classes.

Cloete et al. (2017) call for caution to be exercised with regard to the free education discourse, as its benefits can be offset by a number of negative outcomes. Instead of blindly following the popular demand for free higher education, Cloete et al. highlight the issues that it generates in terms of the quality of education offered, the inefficiency of the undergraduate system, its disconnection from the needs of labour markets, and its difficulty in generating and sustaining innovation and creativity. Having struggled through, and finally secured a place in an elite university in the US, Jack (2019) warns against the feel of having achieved something great once access is gained to a top university. There is still a long way to go, and many struggles to face once admission is secured. Jack distinguishes between admission and acceptance, pointing out that the opportunity to access university education does not mean that one will automatically succeed as a number of factors impact on one's university

experience.

For Bathmaker (2016), the commodification of education causes universities to focus on the service they provide and they operate in consumer satisfaction mode. Indeed, Bathmaker asserts that customer service can even take precedence over academic content. Entangled in marketing strategies, universities seek to present the best possible profile, but in doing so, they are moving away from their social role of overcoming persistent inequalities across social classes. In the Mauritian setting, competition among private universities, as well as between private and public ones, is resulting in increased focus on the superficial, rather than the essential. Programmes are being customised so as to be customer friendly, with students accompanied step by step until they graduate rather than ensuring that they fully understand the complexities, and question the injustices of society. By missing the essential, and concentrating on the superficial elements, Mauritian universities are contributing to the perpetuation of inequalities and social divisions. Their job-oriented philosophy does not produce university graduates who can critically appraise the shortcomings of the current system and the need for the university to establish a transformative agenda. What emerges from the current study is that, irrespective of their social class, the participants are focused on their future career. However, this anticipatory socialisation into the expectations of university life serves the higher classes more, given that they have privileged access to embodied, objectified and institutional forms of cultural capital.

### **6.7: Upon Admission to University: the map is not the territory**

Section 1 analysed the participants' pre-university experiences whilst Section 2 focused on their pathway to university education. This section examines their actual experience of university education. Given that they were in their second year at university, the participants were able to share in clearer and more precise terms their actual experience of university education. Whilst they all reported that they initially had high expectations, wide gaps are identified between what they expected, and their initial impressions of university life. This section therefore analyses the participants' academic experiences, their interactions with

the administration, financial issues, and their social experiences and outlook on the campus atmosphere. Based on these experiences, it analyses the extent to which universities have a social reconstructionist / progressive / social justice agenda and how this is understood and enacted.

### **6.7.1 Academic experiences and the implications of broadening access to university education**

According to AN and NJ, the lectures are pitched at a suitable level, and the lecturers are generally accessible and supportive. Up-to-date reference material is provided, mainly in the form of hand-outs. NJ reports that she pays a lot of attention to what is covered in class, as the examination questions will be based on these topics. For SJ, the academic experience in the university setting is completely different from secondary education, given that students are expected to engage in self-learning, and are treated as adults by lecturers. Responsibility for their studies therefore rests on students' shoulders. SJ reports that he has adjusted well to this new experience, and is now able to work on his own. KL feels that the lecturers are not accessible, and that, given the substantial amount she is paying in fees, she should receive more attention. In contrast, ZK reports that he has, so far, experienced a very good standard of education, and that he appreciates the international exposure that the programme offers, as well as the up-to-date reference material. MF concurs with ZK with regard to the use of up-to-date technologies and material. Thus, the participants from the lower classes tend to be fully satisfied with their initial university experience and willingly take full responsibility for their future success or failure. They are grateful to the system for having granted them a free university place, and that they do not have to pay too much. They are in a donor and recipient relationship. However, the participants from the upper social classes are more demanding in terms of support and lecturers' accessibility, as well as the need for state-of-the-art technological support as they are paying high fees. They are in a service-provider-customer relationship. Their private school background also contributes to their high expectations and demands, as they are used to the higher level of services offered by fee-paying private institutions.

The participants' outlook on the transformative aim of education is a key element. For Trow (2006), university education fulfills the important function of role allocation. By opening access to students from lower social classes, Trow is optimistic about the outcome of the massification process, expecting that students from the lower levels of the social hierarchy will successfully complete their university education, secure good jobs, and ultimately climb the social ladder. However, none of the participants in this study perceived the university in its present context as being conducive to fundamental change, whether in terms of revisiting the curriculum, emphasising broader educational philosophy, questioning the established academic structures, or influencing the social hierarchy. For instance, NJ perceives that everything is decided beforehand. She notes that students devote their attention and energy to learning the content of the different modules, which is pre-established. Students neither have the time, nor the necessary impetus to reflect on the role of education, and how it replicates social patterns. This is also not a subject of discussion in the lecture room or any other university forum. What is considered more important is to master the pre-established topics that are to be examined, and to meet deadlines for assignments and other course work in order to successfully complete the course. NJ's outlook is shared by the other participants. MF depicts a picture of university education as being subject-centred rather than focusing on broader educational philosophy. The academic content is not to be challenged. What emerges, therefore, is an educational system where the ability to develop one's potential and one's ability to be creative is not necessarily rewarding. Students therefore have no other option but to go with the flow, and not to question the established academic structures. Given that they focus on the core learning components, they are more concerned with issues such as the proximity of academics and how supportive they are, as well as the use of technology-driven methods of teaching, and international recognition of their degree. While these issues are important, they dilute the central issue of the transformative impact of higher education. The potential of university education to influence the social hierarchy is not a priority; indeed, it is not on the agenda in the university setting. The students' understanding of capability is in terms of functionings. They are unable to see the transformative potential of university education. Massification and commodification of higher education have led to a narrow understanding of freedom and choice, as their outlook on capability is restricted to career skills development. The curriculum of higher education institutions is directed by

formal knowledge in the subject area. It is a continuation of the elitist academic system which characterises secondary education, with its focus on content and content-related skills. This limits their functionings.

Whilst the pertinence of Trow's analysis in relation to the transformative potential of university education and the extent to which this is being achieved is acknowledged, the study's findings do not support Trow's views in relation to the impact of the massification of education. Trow (2006) considers the movement from an elite system to a universal one as automatically being a sign of progress. What emerges from the experiences shared by the participants, is that university structures are not addressing the key issue of transforming the system, advancing equity and positively influencing the social hierarchy. They are therefore perpetuating the system while giving the (false) impression that these issues are being addressed through broadening access to higher education.

Signaling the need to move beyond physical or formal access, Morrow (2007, p. 186) highlights the need to focus on epistemological access in the South African context:

*There are many dimensions to the kinds of deprivation suffered under Apartheid, but one stands out in this context. Apartheid Education generated and perpetuated cycles of epistemological deprivation, that is, it deprived many learners in our country of a fair opportunity to gain access to the kind of knowledge that is supposed to be distributed in formal schooling.*

What emerges from Morrow's pioneering work is that formal access to universities does not mean that students have full and equal access to knowledge. There is a need to focus on meaningful access, which implies revisiting the epistemological and ontological content of what students learn and what lecturers teach.

Building on Morrow's work, Maringe & De Wit (2016) highlight the need to move from the skills- and qualifications-driven model of higher education to focus on meaningful knowledge and research. Maringe & De Wit propose a framework of transformation to move towards epistemological access while acknowledging that there are numerous barriers in the transformation pathway. The academy's inertia in prioritising research over teaching is highlighted by Maringe as an example of the challenges to a complete overhaul of the

established system. Whilst epistemological access has gained momentum in the South African context (Muller, 2014), this study reveals that it seems completely invisible in Mauritius. Worse still, there is consensus amongst the participants that the focus is not on meaningful knowledge, but on the academic content driven by economic imperatives. Public and private universities seem to have united their efforts to focus on career-orientation and practical knowledge with the aim of joining the labour market. The current study shows that, in the Mauritian setting, epistemological access is not only invisible, but is suffering from deliberate erasure as a result of the complacent system put in place by public and private universities in order to perpetuate a class-based model of higher education.

Altbach (2010) notes that numerous factors contribute to a radical shift in higher education at the global level, including mass access, the changing relationship between the university and the state, and the advent of new technologies. Whilst it is initially difficult to reconcile enhanced access with greater inequality, Altbach points out that mass access has led to a broadening of the gap in terms of the quality of education offered by public universities, as well as different infrastructure and facilities compared to what is offered by elite institutions. Altbach links mass higher education with lower quality and high drop-out rates. It would thus be wrong to assume that massification of university education is a panacea in terms of enhanced social justice in the higher education field. There is a need to probe the higher educational process further, as well as the transformative potential of massified higher education. The participants' experiences point to distinctions in terms of expectations of public and private universities. However, those from lower social classes tend to be more appreciative of the 'opportunity' granted to them in accessing the university. They are under the impression that university education will enlighten them and open the doors to high profile occupations and ultimately higher levels in the social hierarchy. Whilst building high expectations in terms of its enlightening role, in reality, university education is likely contributing to a replication of the established social structures through the processes of '**pseudo-illumination**' and '**shallow-mirroring**', which are discussed in sections 8.4.1 and 8.4.2 respectively.

## **6.7.2 University administration and the functions of University education at societal Level**

### **6.7.2.1 The role of the university administration**

There is overall consensus amongst the participants that the administration of both public and private universities is cut off from the reality of students on the ground. AN is highly critical of the administration as he believes that they do not perform the necessary follow-up with regard to administrative issues and do not recognise the effort that students are putting in. He refers to a recent decision to hold the graduation ceremony on the football pitch (instead of the university auditorium) as an example of the administration's failure to acknowledge the meaning of completing a university degree and the effort it entails. AN also points out that there is a gap between the administration and the students, and that academics act as intermediaries. This view is shared by NJ, who reports only minimal interaction between students and the university administration. For NJ, the administration merely refers to the office where students collect their passes to benefit from free public transport. NJ says out that she always complies with the university procedures without question. SJ adopts the same philosophy, reporting that he has never paid any attention to university rules, blindly abiding by all decisions and procedures. He is also skeptical about the Student Union's ability to influence university procedures. KL reports that her interaction with the administration is limited to the application process. Given that everything is well-established, there is no real need for students to interact with the administration. She is not interested in changing the way the university functions, and believes that, even if some students are really committed to having a positive impact on the way the university functions, they are only able to influence lower order decisions, and cannot impact fundamental issues. In general, students merely abide by decisions taken in 'higher quarters' as they do not want to jeopardise their academic results and educational future whilst fighting for the common good.

Being in a French educational system, ZK reports a more structured communication channel between students and the administration through the 'delegue de classe' (class representatives); students' voices are therefore heard. Nonetheless, he shares KL's view that

student involvement is limited to lower order decisions. MF considers the university as a business endeavour concealed behind a facade of genuine concern for educational excellence. She feels that academics are doing their best to portray the university from its best angle and work hard to ensure that it is highly rated in terms of research output and teaching. However, the administrative arm is more interested in the returns generated by university operations, or by cost-saving strategies. Thus, achieving educational excellence is not necessarily a vocation, but can be a marketing tool to attract students. Sen (1987) notes that institutions focus on achieved outcomes (functionings), neglecting students' ability and potential to undertake activities (capabilities). Whilst outcomes indicate whether any progress is being achieved, they do not reveal the trajectories or lived/ real experiences of people from different social classes whilst pursuing their educational objectives. The above findings show that, firstly, irrespective of their class background, the participants have limited and restricted perceptions of the university administration and the scope of its influence. They perceive it as being responsible for the day-to-day running of the institution rather than in terms of its influence on pre-established structures, processes and practices. Jack (2019) points out that, while elite universities in the US have opened up in terms of accepting students from diverse backgrounds, far from being as generous as they might initially appear to be, they are, in fact 'hedging their bets' through selective recruitment policies. They recruit students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended boarding, day, and preparatory schools. These are well-established feeders for elite universities and the university administration is confident that these students will generally do well in their studies, given that they exhibit the same behaviour and level of understanding as those from higher social classes that attended the same schools. Jack refers to these students as the 'privileged poor'. In contrast, students from public schools, mainly located in depressed areas (referred to as the 'doubly-disadvantaged') who manage to access an elite university struggle as they do not have the same educational background. Jack reports that, at times, these students experience a culture shock upon accessing elite universities. The lives they bring with them, as well as their background, impact heavily on their chances of success.

Thus, students' habitus, in terms of the way they internalise structures, leads them to act in a pre-conscious way, and display 'natural behaviours' which not only determine their accent

and their mannerisms, but also the way they approach university education. KL did not have the necessary funding to enroll in a private university, but she obtained a loan instead of enrolling in a public institution. Coming from an upper middle class background, she held negative views on the courses offered by public universities. For ZK and MF, who come from an upper class background, enrolling in a private university was the natural choice. MF realised very early that the university she was enrolled in was meant for the rich. The participants from the lower classes had no option but to enroll in public universities. In the Mauritian setting, therefore, the university structures seem to be performing an effective sifting exercise which almost naturally channels students from different social classes to the university that they are meant to attend, based on their class background.

While free education can encourage more low-income students to aspire to university education, high-income students in the US still have an advantage as they have the resources to do better in entry-level examinations. Jack notes that it is much easier for the upper social classes to access elite universities and to make it through than the 'privileged poor' who studied in the feeder schools for elite universities, even if they have the cultural capital to find their way in the elite university environment. This is not the case for those who attended public schools in depressed areas, and who managed to access an elite university, the 'doubly disadvantaged'.

In addition, upon graduating with a degree from an elite university, students from upper social classes are able to use their contacts and network to find rewarding employment in line with their qualification. Jack observes that it is much more difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to do so as they lack connections. Jack (2019) highlights the limits of cultural capital, pointing out that "no matter what a student knows about Chopin and Beethoven, at the end of the month, they're still hungry".

Jack's recent findings are directly relevant to the current study. They affirm that social classes do not necessarily take the form of clear-cut boundaries, but rather manifest in gradual transitions and gradations. Jack's study distinguishes between the 'privileged poor' and the 'doubly disadvantaged' that both come from poor backgrounds. He highlights the

need to probe the university's structures, processes and practices and how they perpetuate social classes and injustices. This is the main focus of Chapter 7.

#### 6.7.2.2 Functions of university education at societal level

The study's findings highlight students' practical orientation towards the university administration. They also show that, despite the rhetoric, students generally have limited access to the decision-making spheres. The participants are also pessimistic about the Students' Union's ability to influence higher order decisions. Given that they are more interested in their academic performance, students are unwilling, or unable, to devote their time and energy to the common good. They are not prepared to risk their academic results and educational trajectory and prefer to comply with the pre-established policies. For instance, during the on-going Covid-19 pandemic, the overwhelming majority of students blindly accepted vaccination so as to be able to write their examinations.

NJ states that she is not willing to challenge or make any effort to change things. She simply complies as she is focused on her ultimate goal of having a university degree. Similarly, SJ reports that he ensures that he abides by all the university rules and regulations and is doubtful that the Students Union's will be able to change the rigid structures. While KL and ZK's outlook tends to be more positive in terms of students influencing university's structures and the decision-making process, this is confined to lower order decisions, with general consensus that students cannot interfere in higher order decision-making.

The participants' views highlight that, given that students are at university for a short time-span (three to four years), over-hauling the system is not a priority. They are under the impression that it is beyond their reach, and that it is too much to expect them to do so. If students are unwilling or unable to take on a transformative role, is it up to academics to assume this responsibility? In this respect, the philosophical reflections emerging from this study are discussed in the following chapter.

Neubauer and Tanaka (2011) state that, while the expansion of higher education initially led to growing diversification of institutions and programmes, it eventually resulted in a public-private sector divide, as private universities stepped in to offer programmes not available at

public institutions. This eventually leads to a stratified system, where the best institutions are reserved for the elite. Duro and Bellat (2012) acknowledge the benefits linked to expanded access to higher education, but note that a system that limits access to high quality institutions to the most affluent social classes, or to specific population groups, perpetuates inequality in the labour market, as well as the wider society.

MF realises that the fact that the administration of private universities is driven by business considerations has perpetuated the status quo despite presenting a facade of equality of opportunity in terms of access, success, and career prospects. There is a growing body of research on the role that students' pre-dispositions and aptitude play in this process (Sosu et al., 2018; Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter 2018; Reinders et al., 2020). The ingrained disparities that university students across social classes experience are being documented and the fact that universities participate in the system's maintenance is gradually being established. This study contributes to the debate by applying the dual lens of Bourdieu and Sen to identify the key characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as the individual pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence the experience of university education across social classes.

### **6.7.3 Finance**

Mortensen (2007) establishes a direct link between social class and access to university as well as completion rates in the US. Soria and Bultman (2014) highlight the impact of class-based inequalities on social mobility and on the perpetuation of economic inequality for students from working class backgrounds. Beyond access, students from low-income families have been found to experience higher drop-out rates and are less likely to enter the top professions, all other things being equal (Crawford et al., 2016).

Policy-makers across the world have adopted various combinations of policies on students' fees, as well as loans and grants in order to ensure equal opportunities, irrespective of social background, to access higher education (Ilie & Rose, 2016). In South Africa access to high education has been broadened through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Kapp & Bangeni, 2017), which provides financial support in the form of loans and grants to students from historically marginalised communities. Public policy interventions have

resulted in a significant increase in the number of working class students attending university in the country. However, Masutha (2021) points to high drop-out rates and low completion rates amongst such students.

In the Mauritian setting, the heavily subsidised university fees are regularly referred to by the authorities as an opportunity to access university and complete one's studies (Mohee & Durbarry, 2021). However, it is important to take into account the fact that financial considerations play an important role in determining one's educational trajectory from the beginning of one's education path. Recruitment and admission procedures and processes at primary and secondary levels are highly bureaucratised and function on the principle that children should be admitted to the school closest to their residence. This is not problematic in itself unless one considers that geographical class-based segregation or delineation serves to reinforce inequalities based on socio-economic circumstances. The upper social classes generally opt for private fee-paying primary and secondary schooling for their children. For instance, the participants from the upper classes (KL, ZK and MF) all came from private primary school feeders whilst AN, NJ and SJ were admitted to public schools in their respective localities. Nonetheless, the participants perceive this initial class compartmentalisation as normal. It is legitimated through a regionalisation rhetoric, presented as being fair to all and rarely challenged.

Following this initial segregation, legitimated through an official discourse of universal access to free education, other class-based elements heavily influence students' trajectory. Access to private tuition is a key factor in determining students' performance in primary and secondary education. This was clearly underlined by all the participants. Private tuition plays a significant role in the sifting process, with those benefitting from the most experienced tutors having a higher chance of achieving the best results. However, it comes at a price and is not accessible to everyone. Those from privileged backgrounds are able to make the most of private tuition, whilst those who do not have the means are left behind.

The concentration of socio-economic advantage or disadvantage due to the participants' place of residence is not necessarily challenged by attending university because of the stratified system which distinguishes between students from the upper classes (who are

channeled to private universities) and those from lower social classes who do not have the financial and cultural capital to seek access to those institutions. Private institutions can thus be regarded as reserved for the elite. The financial element plays an important role in choosing which university to apply for (Berg & Venis, 2020). Whilst students from the lower social classes are restricted to local public universities, those from the upper social classes have the option of studying locally in either the public or private sector, or studying abroad. These class-based differences are internalised by students, and generally go unnoticed. AN, NJ, and SJ's trajectory followed a pattern that was pre-determined by the limited availability of financial resources and they did not question this situation. In contrast, KL, ZK and MF's primary consideration was the choice of university and programme, with financial considerations not the primary issue.

Furthermore, the participants from the lower classes found it difficult to raise the annual administrative fees which amounted to some Rs 22,000 (US\$600). Given that this sum represents less than 5% of what would be charged if public universities were not heavily subsidised, it would generally be assumed that students would promptly and happily pay this amount, realising that such concessions are not available in most African countries or even across the world. However, AN and NJ recall that they struggled to raise this amount. Indeed, NJ initially decided not to attend university as she could not pay these administrative charges. Thus, even what seems to be a reasonable contribution to administrative fees can represent a hurdle, and act as a deterrent for students from lower social classes. Students are still being excluded from the system on financial grounds, and their voices are not being heard, while Mauritian policy makers proclaim that they are doing their level best to establish a higher education system that provides equal chances and the same opportunities for everyone. The blanket subsidy does not seem to be effective for those who are really in need, while those who are well off and could finance their studies benefit from it. There is therefore a need to reflect on the pertinence of maintaining the current blanket subsidy, and whether some form of targeted financing might be preferable.

Given that it is practically impossible for students from lower social classes to study abroad, and that local private universities are also out of reach these students tend to opt for the more accessible public system without giving much consideration to the ultimate outcome

in terms of their future career or postgraduate studies. There is a misconception that taking any university course will place one on an upward trajectory. Students from the upper classes have the luxury of choice, but they also have sufficient cultural capital to understand that, on its own, a university degree is not enough as the doors which different courses open provide radically different career opportunities. In addition, lower class students' limited access to social networks constrains their understanding of the cost of university. The range of collateral costs is not immediately or 'anticipatorily' visible to lower class students. For instance, NJ reports that, over and above the administrative fees, she had to meet hidden costs such as a laptop, monthly internet charges and a mobile phone. These constitute additional burdens on her parents' already strained budget. Thus, it is wrong to assume that heavily subsidising public university education is a remedy for social inequality. For students from the upper social classes, these additional expenses are not considered important, probably because their parents incurred them at secondary level, or they know that their parents will provide and they can concentrate on learning and achievement. It is a matter of conjecture how the added financial burden disadvantages lower class students who experience this responsibility as an additional tax. This should be viewed in conjunction with the lack of clarity on the possible return on their investment in the form of a post university career. The participants from the lower social classes seem to be focusing on completing their degree, and dealing with the hurdles that they will have to face along the way. In contrast, those from the upper social classes are focused on their career goals and perceive the university as a pathway to achieve their aspirations. They are not distracted by economic considerations, which are seamlessly taken care of.

AN, NJ and SJ's educational trajectories also highlight the role played by Mauritius' free and universal education system. These students were able to make their way to university as a result of the government's massive investment in education. Without the country's comprehensive welfare model, it is clear that many students would not have gained access. The fact that since January 2020, the administrative fees have been reduced to Rs10 000 (US\$ 300) also denotes the authorities' commitment to remove, as far as possible, the hurdles preventing students from the lower classes accessing university education. SJ rightly points out that one's financial situation heavily impacts one's experience of university education.

As a result, it also impacts one's commitment to one's studies. Thus, students from different social classes do not necessarily attend university for the same reasons, and do not have the same objectives in mind. Whilst AN, NJ, and SJ are focused on completing the course so as to obtain employment, KL, ZK and MF are already preparing for postgraduate studies.

It is important, at this stage to reflect on the situation of KL, who did not follow the path of AN, NJ and SJ and obtained a loan so as to be able to register for a course in a private university, strongly believing that the fact that the degree is internationally recognised will facilitate postgraduate studies, and her future career. Her decision seems odd given that she is struggling financially and could easily have registered for the same course in a public university. However, she realises that enrolling for this programme in a private university offers benefits that those in the public stream cannot access. Private university students are in fast-track mode. KL's situation is far from being an isolated one. Across the world, many parents from middle-class and upper class backgrounds opt for private schooling from primary school level, at times paying very high rates for their children's education. While such students are progressing along the same educational pathway, they are using a different vehicle from those coming from disadvantaged groups. Those who have the means to pay for their education can undertake postgraduate studies across the world and also find it easier to secure a job, given their network. Those such as AN and NJ who come from the lower social classes struggle on an on-going basis. ZK and MF note that they could have easily gone abroad for their studies, but are benefitting from the support of their parents, and the comfort of their own homes. They are therefore in a safe and conducive environment to complete their studies. This suggests that the participants form part of different class-based *social pods* (see Section 8.4.3). While they are moving in the same direction academically, they exist in tightly closed different compartments or social bandwagons without necessarily mingling with one another, and without necessarily having the same educational experience, or benefitting from the same level of service, support and assistance. Through the concept of hereditability, Bourdieu points out how educational institutions value cultural codes that contribute to the reproduction of the established social hierarchy, whilst those who do not have access to these codes are left behind. Bourdieu also underlines how the individual and

institutional habitus influence students' academic trajectories. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 (See Sections 7.3 and 7.4).

A recent report by the American Council of Education (2019) highlights the challenges confronting governments across the world in raising participation and attainment rates in higher education and extending access to previously under-served groups. Whilst the economic benefits linked to investment in higher education in terms of increasing the supply of qualified and skilled labour, and improved productivity and growth are well-established, the report also highlights the social benefits of enabling broader groups of people to access the opportunities offered by higher education, and the establishment of societies that are more socially inclusive. Over time, policy makers have formulated an array of interventions to promote equity in higher education. What emerges from the participants' stories, however, is that one's future experience of university education (and non-admission to university) is pre-determined during primary and secondary education. This study therefore highlights the importance of rethinking the financing model for education. It is crucial to reconsider the rhetoric that by providing free education, the issue of social justice in university education has been solved (Lomer, 2022). By focusing only on financing, the issue is only partially addressed, and it is too late to have a decisive impact. While a number of scholarships are provided for needy students who manage to secure a place at university, this is too late given that the majority of students from disadvantaged social groups are ejected from (or lured out of) the schooling system long before reaching the university doors. The scholarships are reactive mechanisms, as they only support students once they have secured a place. There is therefore a need to address the structural inequalities that are ingrained in the primary and secondary schooling model as this is where the class-based differences at university level originate.

Soria and Bultmann (2014) state that it is essential to take into account the impact of social class on one's experience of university education so as to address the class-based issues that students face. Upon accessing university, the participants from lower social classes were not sure of their future, as they were still dependent on their parents. The choice of deferring gratification for the prospect of a job with a better salary in the future has a cost that has to be borne now. AN and SJ's parents are still struggling to provide for all their needs. While NJ

managed to secure a scholarship, she reports that she is still very cautious about her expenses. ZK and MF did not confront these struggles, as their parents took care of everything and they could therefore approach their studies with greater confidence and serenity.

#### **6.7.4 Social experiences**

Based on a comprehensive review of how students from different social classes make their way through their studies once they access an elite university, Armstrong and Hamilton (2015), describe the way university structures accommodate students from an affluent background through intrinsic mechanisms pre-established for that purpose, supporting them to integrate the social networks established at the university and to make the most of their time on campus. However, students from lower social classes find it much more difficult to integrate these networks given that they struggle to pay tuition fees and meet related costs, and are therefore more at risk of social isolation. The university thus does not prepare all students equally, and Armstrong and Hamilton point out that it is contributing to the reproduction of entrenched socio-economic stratification rather than helping to overcome it. Armstrong and Hamilton (2015) propose a review of university structures, with an emphasis on the social function of universities, geared towards overcoming persistent inequalities across social classes. However, they add that elite universities are reluctant to review the established system as they do not want to alienate affluent families and aim to maintain their relationship with their traditional elite feeder schools as well as the prestige that accompanies their orientation.

While Armstrong and Hamilton do not take into consideration what happens before students access the university setting, the study highlights different experiences of university education across social classes. However, the participants in the current study claim that they did not encounter much difficulty in adapting to university, even though they experienced some initial adaptation issues. For instance, AN says that he was initially not at ease in class, but he gradually developed close links with a few classmates, who now form part of his inner circle. While a few students tend to look down on those from lower social classes, this motivates AN to do his level best academically. NJ also settled in well, and now

has a group of friends with whom she works on assignments, group work and revision. For SJ, the process was a bit more difficult; he recalls that he did not have the means to go out for lunch every day with his classmates and had to apply coping strategies so as to be part of the group. He has subsequently developed close links. KL is appreciative of the 'mixed group' of students at her university that makes for a culturally diverse atmosphere. ZK initially found it difficult to adapt given that there were students from English-medium schools in the class with their own culture. Similarly, MF's class was dominated by French-speaking students from private schools. However, these initial differences were quickly set aside, and she now has a pleasant working relationship with all those in her cohort.

Ayelew (2022) highlights the importance of students being socialised into both the social and academic context of universities. Social integration involves interpersonal relationships and support, as well as interaction with others and developing a sense of belonging to the university. Academic integration refers to one's academic performance and intellectual development. For Ayelew, one's social background inevitably influences the socialisation process in higher education. With regards to the current study, participants from lower social classes point out that they adapted quite easily to their peers, and that the clusters were generally composed of students from more or less the same background. They justify this class-based socialisation on economic grounds as they could not afford to participate in the high-cost ecosystems composed of students from middle class backgrounds. Cost implications were not relevant for students from private universities whose socialisation was based on cultural affinities such as language, and the secondary school feeders they came from. Bourdieu (1986) highlights that possession of capital that confers power enables the upper class to influence the functioning of a field, and to maintain control of its structures. Sen (1992) underlines the need to focus on equal capabilities across social classes, with substantive opportunities to achieve educational goals, and minimal structural barriers. Section 7.2 employs Bourdieu's field theory and Sen's analysis of capabilities to provide deep reflection on the power relations within the university system.

### **6.7.5 Life on campus**

Numerous studies note that students' experience of life on campus can have a significant impact on their adaptation to the university culture, and completion of their programme. It also has career implications and impacts one's overall orientation. Bizimana et al.'s (2020) research in Kenya, Rwanda and Ghana found that students' experiences have a significant impact on their willingness to undertake further studies, as well as involvement in university activities after graduation. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) point out that students' experiences and level of involvement on campus impact their educational aspirations as well as their commitment to their studies. Stubber (2011) highlights that students acquire valuable social and cultural capital through social networks on campus, ultimately boosting their academic performance. Hurst (2010) underlines the prevalence of middle-class values on campus, and the difficulties encountered by working class students in adapting to same.

While he himself comes from the working class, AN acknowledges that he initially thought that working-class students were less able (or less willing) to make an effort, and tend to take their studies lightly. However, he has come to realise that students from lower social classes face additional hurdles during their educational trajectory. They are not on an equal footing. For instance, AN notes that he has to rely on facilities such as the computer room, the library and internet/ printing facilities on campus, as he does not have such facilities at home. He is also not able to pay for online journals. Students from the upper social classes have ready access to all these resources. NJ says that her experience of university education confirmed her initial perceptions of social inequalities. Her views on injustice have been strengthened over time. For NJ, class-based differences are pre-established. She believes that the social hierarchy is not changing, and that it is up to students to make their way through the higher education system. SJ is of the view that students can move out of poverty through education if they develop a high level of intrinsic motivation. KL views the way universities operate as an antithesis, encouraging students to be independent, innovative and creative whilst rewarding compliance and those who stick to the guidelines. They encourage students to develop their own way of thinking, yet impose their values and outlook on them. ZK's experience of university education was more positive; he feels that the university encourages students to take risks and to think creatively. MF shares ZK's

views, but points out that, whilst students are encouraged to think out of the box, they are not taught to question existing realities and truths. Students learn about important social issues, and their theoretical groundings, but do not go further to challenge existing structures and established hierarchies.

Focusing on the experiences of university students in the South African context, Masutha and Naidoo (2021) underline the fact that working class students are not necessarily deficient when it comes to idealised cultural capital and the dispositions proposed by Bourdieu's reproduction theory (1993), but instead bring with them capital portfolios and dispositions which are not part of the 'currencies of capital' that universities are willing to recognise and work with. They therefore propose that Bourdieu's work be extended to inspire the transformation of higher education and suggest the need for comprehensive curriculum transformation and pedagogical renewal.

Building on the work of Masutha and Naidoo (2021), the current study focuses on the structures, processes and practices, as well as the pre-dispositions and aptitude that impede the establishment of a higher education model based on equity that grants a fair chance to all across social classes. It identifies the specific factors that hinder the transformation of higher education by applying the dual lens of Bourdieu and Sen (See section 7.5).

## **6.8 Social class in University education: Evidence of gradations**

Over and above this study's contribution to the body of knowledge on higher education, it also contributes to the debate on the pertinence of social class in this field. The participants' stories show that social class plays a central role in the experience of university education. It is omni-present in different spheres of university life, and its impact can be identified prior to entering the higher education setting, at primary and secondary school level. Comparing the participants' narratives promotes understanding of the impact of social class on the educational experience. These stories offer no evidence of a shift towards homogenisation of values (Hassi & Storti, 2012), whereby everyone will ultimately be on the same footing and have equal life chances. On the contrary, there are very clear differences and persistent gaps between the participants, and this impacts significantly on their educational trajectories, as well as their expectations of the future. To make matters more complicated,

whilst the gaps and differences across social classes seem to be quite direct, class differentiations are also marked by nuances and overlaps. Rather than being air-tight and rigid, the class boundaries between the participants are more accurately depicted as being in a liquid state, with shades and tones across the zone of convergence, rather than strict lines of demarcation between social classes. For instance, while AN and NJ are part of the working class, they are not amongst the poorest of the poor. They also hope to help their families to move up the social ladder once they complete their studies and secure a good job. They aspire to join the middle class even if they are currently living at the margins of poverty. SJ displays the characteristics of working class students whilst being part of the middle class as he has always struggled financially. KL is a member of the middle class, but had to apply for a loan to pay for her course and is unsure how she will finance the remainder of her studies. There thus seem to be nuances and subtleties in the different social categorisations, such as the underclass, the lower middle class, the middle-middle class, and the upper middle class. There are also distinctions in the upper social categories. ZK and MF are both from the upper class, but are not part of the ultra-rich families who control the Mauritian economy through ownership of conglomerates.

From this perspective, the current study is in line with Bourdieu's view that social classes do not necessarily take the form of demarcated categories, but can take that of gradual transitions and gradations (Bourdieu, 1986). Savage (2013) reached the same conclusion. Whilst the pertinence of social class in the higher education field is established, it manifests in a multi-faceted way, rather than along a standard and clearly demarcated line.

## **6.9 Cultural capital and resilience**

Another important dimension is the key role played by cultural capital in determining one's educational trajectory. The data reveal that participants from the upper class and those from lower social backgrounds have a completely different mindset with regard to enrollment and completion of university education. Their vision and ultimate objective are also different. The narratives show that cultural capital manifests in various forms, and impacts the way the participants approach university education. Examples of the manifestation of cultural

capital, and the ways in which it influences students' pre-university trajectory, as well as their experience of university education are outlined in sections 6.9.1 to 6.9.3 below.

### **6.9.1 Parents' Level of education**

The participants' outlook on education, and the way they approach university education are heavily influenced by their parents' level of education. MF's parents have been with her every step along the way of her educational trajectory. They have coached her and ensured that she has the best teachers for private tuition. Given that they are well-educated themselves, they are in a position to make sound choices and offer their child the best advice. They attach much importance to her education and clearly go out of their way to ensure that she studies in a serene environment where she has access to all the necessary material and non-material resources. MF's parents did not feel the need to impose any specific field of study once she completed her secondary education, as they wanted her to opt for a field she is passionate about.

For ZK, the choice of French-medium education is an indicator of the important role played by cultural capital. This reflects his parents' French educational background, and is also based on their financial position as French schools in Mauritius charge fees that are not affordable for families from lower social classes. KL's parents, who are from a middle class background, opted for a less costly private school instead of *Le Lycee Labourdonnais*, or *L'ecole du Centre*, which are considered the main French schools catering for the children of the financial elite on the island. It is clear that KL's educational trajectory would have been completely different had her parents decided to place her in a school meant for the financial elite. The fact that they did not complete secondary education meant that they did not take a well-informed decision. As a result, KL had to move to public schooling at the beginning of her secondary education. SJ, NJ and AN's parents also did not complete secondary education and as a result they did not provide their children with the necessary guidance or academic coaching.

This suggests that parents play a strategic role in positioning their children on the educational launch pad. Whilst those who fully understand the rules of the game make use of all the resources they have (financial, social, and cultural) to ensure that their children's

educational path is successful, those who are not fully conscious of the situation do not necessarily take the best decisions. Being educated themselves, and having been to university, upper class parents are in a better position to decide on their children's educational pathway.

### **6.9.2 Choice of subjects and field of study**

The participants' educational trajectories also reflect the consideration given to the choice of subjects at secondary level, as well as the choice of university and field of study. AN had to change school at secondary level so as to take the combination of subjects he wanted to study. He opted for social work at university as he was involved in social projects in his local community. In any event, his school-leaving results did not give him many options, and his financial situation restricted his choice of university. NJ changed subjects a number of times based on financial considerations, without having a career in mind. The fact that she had no one to guide her properly meant that she decided on her field of study at university in a rather emotional way rather than being more strategic in her approach. SJ also decided on his school subjects in a random way and lacked proper guidance. KL did not even consider university after completing her secondary education and her parents did not place any pressure on her to do so. In contrast, ZK's educational trajectory reflects a well-planned path and linear progression to university education. His choice of subjects at school and his field of study at university unfolded almost naturally. MF's decision on her choice of subjects was delayed, as she took both science and economics subjects at SC level. This is a strategic move that gave her time to decide on her choice of subjects at a later stage.

### **6.9.3 Adapting to the culture of the institution**

It is important to note that when the institutional culture and the student's cultural capital are aligned, he/she does not experience much difficulty in adapting. SJ and ZK did not meet with much difficulty in terms of adaptation during their school days, and upon joining university. SJ completed primary school, was admitted to a public secondary institution and then enrolled in a public university. ZK followed a linear path from a French medium school to a university programme taught in French.

NJ was unable to cope with the culture prevailing in the elite secondary institution she attended. There was a major dissonance between her cultural background and the culture of the institution that mainly enrolled students from the upper classes. NJ did not have access to the same level of cultural capital as her peers. This was a major hurdle throughout her secondary education. However, things change when she joined a public university as she found the organisational culture more accommodating of students coming from lower social backgrounds.

MF initially met with some difficulty upon joining a private university, as the organisational culture was more in line with the values of French-medium educational institutions, and the majority of students were from French fee-paying institutions. However, over time, she adapted, started to express herself in French, and established friendships with students who attended French-medium schools. Language is an important aspect of cultural affiliation and integration and it influences educational achievement. In an organisational setting dominated by a specific language, MF realised that she will not be able to integrate the institutional culture, or the social context (Ayelew, 2022) if she insists on expressing herself in English (even if she came from an English-medium school). KL faced a similar situation as she moved from a private secondary institution to a public one. She was accustomed to speaking French and had to adjust as the children in the public secondary schooling system generally speak Creole. However, she reports that upon joining the university, she was able to adapt herself to the organisational culture much more easily.

## **Section 4: Reflections on University education**

### **6.10 The role of university education at societal level**

Based on the analysis in the previous sections, it can be seen that students from different social classes approach university education differently, and that the value-added they derive from their educational experience is also not the same. There is thus a need to reflect on the role of university education in society. It is generally portrayed as an equaliser that provides those in need with the necessary skills and aptitude to make their way to the top. However, this study depicts a different reality, where students from different social classes are sifted across the primary and secondary education filters, and then oriented towards

different universities based on their academic credentials and financial considerations. Once students start the process of accessing university education, the university structures, processes and practices take over, perpetuating the social hierarchy by separating students across universities and in different fields. Students' expectations at the end of their academic journey are also different. The entire process is, however, legitimised through the illusion of equality of opportunity and of the provision of more places at university level.

## **6. 11 Rethinking the university education system**

In order to challenge this well-established and deeply-rooted system, it is essential that the very foundations of universities are revisited. Thus far, it can be seen that the participants are not in a position to make a positive impact on pre-established university structures. They are focused on their studies and therefore unable to devote time to fighting the system. Those at the lower levels of the social hierarchy also have to devise coping strategies so as to find their way through the maze of university structures. They are not in a position to question university procedures and structures, and therefore give their assent without asking critical questions and generally abide by all the rules. In this context, it would be over-optimistic to assume that students will be in a position to organise themselves and take on well-established university structures.

## **6.12 Invisible closure**

The current higher education model is based on a closed system, where students, despite having the impression of embarking on the same higher educational journey, are in fact engaging in an individual route towards their degree, with the aim of obtaining a qualification and ultimately securing a good job, or undertaking further studies. What generally goes unnoticed, however, is that, even if they go through the same university process, students from different social classes do not experience university education in the same way. Their aim of registering for a programme, the logistics and facilities at their disposal, their aspirations and motivation, and their aptitude and pre-dispositions are not the same. The higher education setting seems to be characterised by social closure, which can be defined as “a process of subordination whereby one group monopolizes advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it defines as

inferior and ineligible” (Murphy, 1988, p. 88). Max Weber hypothesised social closure as a way to conceptualise how power is derived from processes of exclusion (Murphy, 1988, p. 101; Weber 1922/1978, p. 638). Parkin (1979, p. 44) defined social closure as “the process by which social collectives seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles”. Through this process of invisible closure, students from the upper social classes are able to access the resources and privileges meant for them, whilst those from lower social classes are not eligible for these opportunities and advantages.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter analysed the similarities as well as the differences in the experience of university education across social classes. It also identified the nuances within social classes. The recurring concepts and themes were highlighted and the findings that emerged were juxtaposed with contemporary worldviews and perspectives. Through this exercise, the study contributes to the literature on the way social class influences the experience of university education. In order to bring more social justice and equity to the higher education field, it is essential to identify the characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as the pre-dispositions and aptitude of students themselves that lead to a perpetuation of the status quo. This is the subject of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 7:

### *Analysis (Theoretical)*

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

For Horace Mann (1796-1859), the world-renowned advocate for public education widely referred to as the father of American education, *“Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery”* (Mann, 1848, p. 669). Universal public education is still widely applied around the world and is perceived by policy makers as granting fair opportunities to all. Over time, however, a growing body of knowledge has explored how, instead of acting as an equaliser across social classes, and as an elevator for students from poor families, the educational system can in fact contribute to the perpetuation of class-based divisions and social inequalities. An extensive review of recent studies carried out from different vantage points in the higher education field was presented in Chapter 2. It highlighted that, whether in terms of accessing higher education, the actual process of experiencing university education, or in terms of outcomes upon completion, the equalising process is not automatic (See Chapter 2 Sections 2.4 to 2.6). In his analysis of social classes, Bourdieu (1986) refers to the field as an arena where struggles for the preservation or transformation of power relations, as well as the battle for the maintenance of the status quo or to change the rules and revisit the allocation of power, take place. Sen (1999) emphasises the need to focus on equalising capabilities by removing the obstacles that prevent people from reaching their full potential instead of focusing on equalising resources. He also highlights the need to focus on individuals’ real needs and aspirations rather than on economic and social outcomes as well as material wealth.

Chapter 6 probed the participants’ experiences of university education. It identified the class-based differences that originated in primary and secondary education, through the pre-university pathway, and upon joining the university. It highlighted the nuances across experiences, whilst signaling how equalising aspirations through university education might

in fact be flawed. By superimposing the sociological lens of Bourdieu and the human development lens of Sen, this chapter analyses the experiences from the field, based on the theoretical framework developed for the purpose of the study. Through this dual lens, the key characteristics of the structures, processes and practices, as well as the individual pre-dispositions and aptitude that influence the experience of university education across social classes are identified. The chapter depicts how these elements, which have not received sufficient academic attention, play a pivotal role in the reproduction of the established social order through the higher education system, and contribute to a perpetuation of the status quo.

## **ORIENTATION**

The first section of this chapter applies Bourdieu's outlook on the **institutionalisation of cultural capital**, and Sen's views on **freedoms** in order to analyse how, through established institutions, the structures, processes and practices influence students' experiences of university education, and in doing so, impact on the potential and influence of students from different social backgrounds. In Section 2, Bourdieu's **field theory** and Sen's analysis of **capabilities** are applied to examine how power relations impact on the students' experience of university. Section 3 focuses on Bourdieu's concept of **habitus**, and Sen's outlook on the key role of **functionings** to evaluate how students' pre-dispositions and aptitude across social classes impact on their university experiences. Section 4 considers Bourdieu's outlook on the **heredity of cultural capital across generations** as well as Sen's belief that the objective should be an education that focuses on **agency** with the ability to challenge power relationships. leading to transformative actions. Through this juxtaposition of Bourdieu and Sen's lenses, the study contributes to the debate on the influence of social class in the higher educational field by clearly identifying the characteristics of structures, processes and practices, as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude that impact on the experience of university education across social classes.

## A. BOURDIEU AND SEN ON STRUCTURES, PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

### **7.1 Bourdieu on Institutionalisation of cultural capital and Sen on Freedom: impacting students' potential and influence**

#### **7.1.1 Bourdieu and Institutionalisation**

Bourdieu explores the key role played by 'capital' in determining one's educational experiences and access to opportunities. Irrespective of the different forms that capital can take (**economic capital** - material wealth and financial possessions, **social capital** - social network and connections, **cultural capital** - skills and knowledge), Bourdieu points out that individuals from different social backgrounds make the most of what they have accumulated in terms of capital so as to consolidate and even enhance their positions in the social hierarchy. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the role of capital has been extensively applied in the educational field to denote the influence of social class on educational achievements. Academic credentials, which are legitimated and officialised, are then converted into economic capital through their value on the labour market.

#### **7.1.2 Sen's outlook on freedoms**

Sen's view on freedoms was initially inspired by the Rawlsian notion of justice (Rajapakse, 2016). For Rawls (1967), promoting justice implies providing people with equal access to resources to live as they wish. Rawls assumed that this will lead to equal opportunities for all. Sen's reflections, however, go further to focus on the extent of the freedom that a person actually has, rather than on the 'means of freedom' (Sen, 1992). From Sen's perspective, even if resources are important, they do not clearly indicate the freedoms that individuals enjoy in terms of their ability to do or be. In the higher education field, by focusing on individuals, and what they can achieve in their educational journey and beyond, the capability approach takes into account the social context that establishes the pre-conditions for individual freedoms. Sen believes that good education needs to focus on well-being in terms of the reach and scope of freedoms that people have reason to choose and value. From this perspective, therefore, real freedom is to have all the required means to achieve what one aspires to do and be, and to have substantial opportunities to accomplish it.

### **7.1.3 Reflections**

Whilst the rhetoric is that university education is an equaliser, and this sounds good in the public discourse, the works of Bourdieu and Sen, viewed cross-sectionally for the purpose of this study, highlight the influence of structures, processes and practices on the educational experience. Whilst for Bourdieu, the impact of economic, social and cultural capital on the experience of university education needs to be investigated, Sen emphasises that education models need to be re-designed so that students are provided with substantial opportunities to accomplish what they aspire to.

Reflecting on Bourdieu's outlook on the institutionalisation of cultural capital and Sen's views on freedoms, it can be deduced that both point in the same direction: There is a need for the education system to ensure that students' capabilities are fully developed, and that academic credentials are legitimated in a fair way. However, in order to achieve this, a number of structural elements and processes that impact on the education system and perpetuate the status quo need to be clearly identified in order to be dealt with effectively. The key elements that emerge from the narratives from the field with regard to the characteristics of these structural elements and processes are discussed in **subsections 7.1.3.1 to 7.1.3.5**

#### **7.1.3.1 The key role of accumulated economic, social and cultural capital**

An analysis of the life stories of the participants from different social classes reveals that, right from the beginning, their educational trajectories are influenced by the accumulated economic, social and cultural capital that they and their families possess. The case of ZK, who was experiencing anxiety during his primary schooling, is a good example of how, with the right support and assistance, one is able to overcome whatever hurdles that come one's way and eventually make it to university. If AN or NJ, who are both from a disadvantaged background, had to face such a situation during their primary or secondary school years, it is clear that the outcome would have been completely different. Without the appropriate support mechanisms, it is very difficult for students from the public stream to cope with emotional issues that impede their ability to learn. ZK is thankful for having been admitted to a school that offered such support, and strongly believes that he would never have been able to make it in the mainstream educational setting, where such support is lacking. MF

comes from a highly educated and wealthy family background, with all the facilities at her disposal. She had extra tuition in eight subjects at SC level and seven at HSC level, and has always been coached by the best teachers on the island, even benefitting from one-on-one tuition. She has a personal driver and all the necessary logistics. She is now amongst the best students in her cohort in a private university.

The cases of ZK and MF are clear examples of how access to university, and one's academic track and educational achievements, can be determined by one's relationship with capital. Their progress seems to be linear, irrespective of the hurdles along the way. However, for the students from lower classes, or even from a middle class background, progression is halted by blurred spaces where the students do not really know what direction to take. For instance, KL wasted two years trying to decide on her future before realising the importance of university studies. Due to her family's financial situation, NJ decided not to study abroad, even though her excellent results would have secured her a place in a leading international institution. As a result, she finds herself studying in a public university in Mauritius whilst her class mates, including those who completed their SC and HSC with poorer results, are enrolled in elite universities abroad. However, she reports that she feels comfortable with the culture of the public university. Her bad experience of being amongst students from an upper class background affected her outlook on university education, and her motivation to strive for the best. NJ seems to have internalised that the structure of opportunities available to her, and to students from the same social background, is limited.

#### 7.1.3.2 Universities replicate the same schemas

The narratives also revealed that, whether they are enrolled in public or private universities, there is consensus amongst the students that academics make little effort to bring students to a higher level of reflection so that they are able to critically examine their own reality and question the university structures as well as the established social hierarchy (Gordijn et al., 2018). Universities are focused on forming subject specialists rather than decision-makers who are empowered to question the established social structures (Maringe, 2006). There is little place for subjects such as philosophy, ethics, political science, literature and sociology, which develop students' critical thinking abilities, and their ability to go beyond achievements and focus on the freedom to achieve. Universities replicate the system without

really asking critical questions (Petersen, 2021). Academics are also perceived as being distant and not having enough time to interact with students in small groups. There is a lethargic atmosphere on campus, depicting the university as an institution which is frozen in time and difficult to change. Perceptions of the university as a bureaucratic institution reinforce students' belief that it would be a waste of time and energy to try to change things. This context, and the students' outlook on the future, is therefore influenced by the structure of opportunities available to them. As a result, they prefer to focus on their academic trajectories, aiming to achieve good grades so as to ultimately obtain a good job (Haas & Hadjar, 2020), rather than focusing on freedoms, and what they aspire to do and to be. This is exactly how those who are in favour of the status quo want things to be, and the current model therefore serves their interests.

#### 7.1.3.3 Ideology of fairness

In addition, an ideology of fairness is diffused to make students believe that the system is fair to all (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). For example, the computerised application process creates the impression that universities are giving all students a fair chance and that applicants are on an equal footing, with little human interference. They are also free to choose their areas of interest. Students themselves input all the required information online, and the system generates a list of qualified students listed according to a pre-established set of guidelines. The inequalities at primary and secondary school level are thus assumed to be neutralised through the university's pseudo-equitable access protocols. However, software cannot account for students' educational trajectories and experiences prior to joining higher education. In order to be on par in terms of academic performance at the end of the secondary educational cycle, some students have to face major hurdles along their way, whilst it is much easier and more linear for others. There is therefore a gap between universities' image and their actual policies on the ground.

On a more practical level, AN and SJ report the difficulties they faced in registering given that they did not have a computer at home and had to rely on friends and / or relatives to complete their application. The online application system is therefore not necessarily experienced the same way across social classes. Universities with middle class values tend to make assumptions which do not always accommodate the realities of the lower classes. In

contrast, students from the upper class report a five-star application and registration process in private universities, as the latter go out of their way to ease access. They have even set up 'future student centres' to guide prospective students step by step. Private universities also offer additional opportunities to prove oneself through a motivational letter as well as an interview and offer foundation courses for those who do not meet the general eligibility criteria. These are not general practice in public universities. Thus, unequal circumstances lead to unequal access to resources and opportunities as well unequal chances and capacity to make the right choice.

The false impression of fairness is reinforced by policies formulated by the public authorities to facilitate access to those at the lower level of the social hierarchy (Boliver et al., 2021). In the Mauritian context, for instance, free universal university programmes have been in place since 2019, as well as free public transport for university students. The state has also been involved in opening access to university education to an increasing number of students who otherwise would not have been eligible. This false generosity on the part of those in power serves its purpose well, given that students do not have any perception of injustices in the selection and enrollment process at university level. However, the massification of higher education is contributing to the creation of a hierarchy of higher education institutions, each catering for students from different class backgrounds. Instead of enhancing opportunities for those from poorer social backgrounds in order to climb the social ladder, massification is replicating and perpetuating social patterns (Noui, 2020), with those coming from elite universities having access to the top positions, whilst the public universities mainly act as feeders for the public service, and lower level occupations in private companies, or in civil society organisations. The participants' narratives clearly reflect this hierarchical model. Whilst AN, NJ and SJ do not really know where they will ultimately find a job, and even perceive jobs in the public service as being inaccessible. KL, ZK and MF have a clear vision of what they want to achieve in terms of a career path, and where they want to be after their studies. The implication is that, whilst students from the upper social classes are enrolling in private universities and are being prepared in a clinical way to access specific positions after their studies, those from the lower social classes are only receiving broad educational coaching from public universities that act as an extension of their secondary education, without any clear focus on their future career.

#### 7.1.3.4 Ideological positionality embedded in the university structures and pedagogy

This reflection illustrates that university education is contributing to the replication of social relations through the **ideological positionality embedded in its structures and pedagogy**. In a subtle way, Mauritian universities are ensuring that students across social classes are trained in a tailor-made way to occupy specific positions in society, thereby replicating existing social patterns. The system is not equipping students with the necessary knowledge and critical thinking to be in a position to transform the country's institutions and structures. Worse still, the replication of the social hierarchy through the education system is experienced in a uniform way across social classes and follows the same pattern, irrespective of whether it is in a public or private university setting. This legitimisation of academic credentials is a silent process given that the model of education in place accommodates same and is not taking any steps to inculcate the critical thinking required to question these structures, processes and practices.

#### 7.1.3.5 The influence of the embodied state and objectified state on the institutionalisation process

It is also important at this stage to reflect on Bourdieu's assumption that cultural capital simply co-exists in three different forms: in the **embodied state** (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body); the **objectified state** (possession of cultural goods); and in an **institutionalised form**, referring to set of competencies which have been evaluated and confirmed by an official body with the legal authority to approve and certify same. Bourdieu (1986) points out that, in the university setting, such institutionalisation takes the form of educational credentials. However, what emerges from the participants' experiences is that the long-lasting disparities of the mind and body (embodied state) and possession of cultural goods (objectified state) in fact **influence the competencies** that are to be evaluated and confirmed by the university (institutionalised state). Thus, this study contributes to the theoretical debate by putting forward the argument that, instead of merely taking different forms as asserted by Bourdieu, institutionalised cultural capital, in the form of educational credentials at university level, is in fact moulded by students' pre-dispositions and aptitude, as well as possession of cultural goods, given that these elements contribute to easing (or

complicating) their respective educational trajectories. From this perspective, universities are delivering academic credentials which do not reflect students' real potential and capacities, given that the set of competencies that are assessed are influenced by the accumulated economic, social and cultural capital that these students and their families possess, as well their educational experiences across the primary, secondary and, more importantly, university cycle.

## **7.2 The field, and enhancing capabilities: Rethinking the power relations**

In this section, Bourdieu's **field theory** and Sen's analysis of **capabilities** are superimposed as a dual theoretical lens to analyse how university students from different social classes interact with the established structures within the educational arena, and how this interaction impacts on their experiences of power relations within the university system.

### **7.2.1 Bourdieu: The field of power**

The competition and struggle that social actors engage in to accumulate, exchange, and monopolise different kinds of power resources (capitals) takes place within the arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge, or status that Bourdieu defines as fields of power. Through a process of differentiation, distinct spaces are instituted, and these are characterised by struggles between the dominant powers and the dominated ones. Bourdieu (1986) makes an important distinction between possession of capital and possession of capital that confers power over capital. The latter refers to control of the very structure of the field itself. In the educational arena, for instance, membership of the field of power is not defined by mere possession of academic credentials, but by one's ability to hold a position of power over capital, and therefore be in a position to influence the very functioning of a field (e.g., the higher education field) through the structures, processes and practices that reproduce the system and maintain the status quo. For Bourdieu, it is through this instrument of reproduction that positions of power are established. The dominant class tends to produce a '*corps*' constituted of agents with strong social affiliations, who ensure that the solidarity of the group is reinforced through habitus affinity as well as converging interests and alliances. From Bourdieu's outlook, therefore, the power relations within the higher education field, and their influence on the ultimate

outcome of higher education, might be much more far-reaching than what is generally assumed. A pertinent question is whether the higher education system in place participates in an organised and structured way in a broader plan of maintaining domination and perpetuating subservience of the lower social classes.

For Bourdieu, a perpetuation of the established structures, processes and practices takes place through the *doxa*, a term originally used by ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle to refer to an opinion, or point of view. From the ancient Greeks' perspective, the *doxa* is apparent knowledge. It is not an objective fact and does not provide absolute certainty. Plato goes further in arguing that the *doxa* constitutes deceptive knowledge based on imagination and faith, and is thus in opposition to *episteme*, which is knowledge that could be justified as truth. Plato refers to individuals who climb the social ladder and benefit from false knowledge as 'doxophores'. Bourdieu focuses on the natural attitude of the *doxa*, and how it arbitrarily influences the collective conscience (Myles, 2004). He regards the *doxa* as a mechanism of concealment which presents prevailing motivations and ideologies as being inherent to an activity, and therefore not subject to questioning. From Bourdieu's perspective, the *doxa* includes both a certain kind of knowledge, and the order that produces that knowledge (Bourdieu, 1977b). In the university setting, the experiences of the participants across social classes reveal how the university diffuses the *doxa*, which serves the interests of the upper social classes, contributing to the perpetuation of inequalities and social injustices in the university setting, and its implications for the wider society.

### **7.2.2 Sen: The need for capabilities**

Sen (1992, p. 44) considers education as one of 'a relatively small number' of crucial beings and doings that are centrally important to well-being. He refers to these as basic capabilities, which include the ability to be sheltered, nourished, educated and clothed (Sen, 1999: 20). For Sen, education contributes to improving the quality of life and the development as well as extension of human capabilities. However, Sen mainly approaches education in terms of learning and schooling, analysing how a lack of education can be detrimental to the individual. He thus emphasises basic, elementary education and the need to enhance literacy levels (Terzi, 2004). The current study applies Sen's lens to examine whether the higher

education field provides a conducive environment to enhance capabilities across social classes. Having experienced different primary and secondary educational trajectories, the capability set of university students might be very different upon joining university. The implication is that students might not be provided with substantive opportunities to accomplish what they attach importance to, given the structural barriers impeding the move towards greater equality and social justice in the higher education field.

### **7.2.3 Reflections on power relations within the higher educational space**

Bourdieu prompts us to analyse how university students and institutions share the social space, and whether there is a constant struggle over the allocation of power between the agents and the established structures. Bourdieu's perspective also leads us to consider whether the dominant class is able to set up and reproduce the '*corps*', with the establishment of an instrument for the reproduction of power relations.

For his part, Sen leads us to focus on educational institutions' contribution to the reproduction of the same pattern of inequality across social classes, based on the assumption that, upon joining university, all the students are on an equal footing. While Bourdieu and Sen write from different viewpoints, the two theoretical approaches converge in their quest to analyse how the social space is shared, how the established system of reproduction perpetuates domination of the ruling class, and the need for greater social justice and equity. By blending Bourdieu's sociological perspective and Sen's views on human development, we are in a position to analyse the power relations within the higher educational field from this original sociological/ human development vantage point. A number of possibilities emerge through the application of this dual sociological-human development lens. We are in a position to examine whether students in the higher educational setting are conscious of the power relations within this context, and how they perceive the influence of social class in the higher education field. We can also analyse the participants' outlook on the way the system reproduces itself, and the possibility of moving towards greater social justice and equity in this field. The elements below emerge out of the juxtaposition of Sen's and Bourdieu's views on power relations.

### 7.2.3.1 Naivety

From the narratives gathered for this study, an element of naivety emerges that is shared by participants across social classes. They are under the impression that the university structures are neutral and have been set for the benefit of all. They do not question the system and are unconscious of the fact that these institutions might be silently reproducing the systems and maintaining the status quo in the interests of the upper classes. This naivety might be the result of the academically-oriented model of education that is applied in the Mauritian setting. Indeed, the focus is on completing the syllabus, and it is exams-oriented, aimed at the formation of subject specialists, rather than providing substantive opportunities for students to focus on what they attach importance to, as asserted by Sen. In the higher education setting, everything is pre-decided, and students joining the university find themselves in a system that can be compared to an automated assembly line where different parts are gradually added as one moves towards the final product: a university graduate who has been fitted with the necessary elements and calibrated to function within the existing economic and social structure. However, whilst they have the required capacities, they lack the capability to fully develop their potential and to follow their aspirations in terms of what they want to do and be.

### 7.2.3.2 Admiration for the 'generosity of the state' and university structures

The participants from public universities adopt a posture of 'going with the flow', and not causing any disruption so as to complete their degree. They admire the 'generosity' of the state in waiving tuition fees and provision of free public transport for university students. The services offered, such as an internet connection, computer labs and printing services are also useful to them. They appreciate the fact that competition amongst students is not marked, and that financial support and scholarships are made available. They do not question the content of modules, and cannot recall any major perception of injustice or unfair treatment on the part of the university administration or in their interaction with academics. In fact, enrolling for a course in a public university is described as a 'natural choice' given that they do not have many other options. They tend to accept the university structures as they are, and the university rules and regulations do not really have any bearing on them,

given that they go with the flow, following all the guidelines and respecting all the procedures. They are focused on their ultimate aim of graduating so as to be able to secure a good job.

The participants from private universities also admire their university setting. They are happy with regard to their choice, as they are under the impression that their degree will have a greater chance of being recognised internationally. They do not have any issue with the administration as the application and admission process was fast and straightforward. They are under the impression that nothing much can be done by students to change things, given that even the module content is pre-set. In addition, even if the university encourages creativity and innovation, students tend to be more strategic in their approach as they are aware that they will ultimately be assessed according to pre-set guidelines. They are also very confident that once they complete their studies, they will get a job in their field of study and are therefore ready to abide by all the university guidelines so as to achieve their ultimate objective.

The participants enrolled in private universities also report a positive academic experience, given that the lecturers are of high calibre, are well connected within their field of expertise, and make use of modern technologies in their teaching. The modules are also of a high standard, and the student-administration communication system is well established. However, while these participants tend to portray an idyllic picture of their educational experience, they are conscious that the university does not prepare students to change the system, or even to question it. Rather, given that the courses offered are results-oriented, it is geared towards preparing students for further studies and their future career.

### 7.2.3.3 The elephant in the lecture room: institutions silently in control

Reflecting on the participants' experiences, it is clear that, irrespective of whether in the public or private university context, students are unable to see the bigger picture with regard to university education. Whilst they are under the impression that they decide on their moves, they are unaware that the structures are in control, with class-based selection that segregates students into public and private universities. They are unable to reconcile the public image of universities as neutral institutions engaged in broadening knowledge and

building capabilities and the power games behind the scenes. In the Mauritian context, universities share the higher educational space with little tension between them, given that the system is effectively performing the task it has been assigned: ensuring that students in public universities feel that the state cares for them and, preparing students from the upper social classes to take up leading roles in the private sector, and at strategic decision-making levels.

#### 7.2.3.4 Instrument of reproduction

It can be said that both the state and the private sector form part of the instrument of reproduction. Indeed, the public education system as a whole is involved in the reproduction of the system and the status quo. The social class element permeates the educational system at a very early stage and covertly segregates working class, middle class and upper class children as early as the pre-primary and primary school level. This continues through the secondary system and ultimately crystalises in the university setting. In addition, a parallel education system for the upper classes co-exists with the mainstream public education system. It is less in the limelight as it operates for a specific 'niche market'. It does not necessarily aim at attracting the attention of the masses, who are made to believe in the ideological myth of the education system as being meritocratic. This is diffused through the ideological state apparatus. The discretion of those private institutions, however, does not mean that they are not working to reinforce the solidarity of the group. MF relates how she encountered this imposing upper class culture upon joining university. ZK chose to study at a private university as he knew that he would be surrounded by friends from his elite French-medium school. Bourdieu's 'corps' is very much active and maintains strong affiliations. Indeed, this habitus affinity goes beyond the university setting and is upheld once students from the upper classes join the world of work.

#### 7.2.3.5 Reinforcing the walls instead of building bridges

Drawing from Bourdieu's field of power and Sen's capabilities, we come to realise that instead of building bridges, the public and private educational systems, and their respective agents, are ensuring that the gaps between the different social classes are upheld. The educational field is therefore reproducing the system. The upper class culture is predominant in the private university setting, whilst the middle class culture prevails in

public universities. Working class students are oppressed by the system, with no alternative but to adopt upper class or middle class values in order to fit in. The university is also turning the middle class and working class students into passive recipients of knowledge, and this is accentuated through the assistentialism of the state, with lower class students accepting their situation and following what they are told to do in silence. There is a need for a paradigm shift in order for universities to encourage the development of capabilities and embark on the process of revamping the current higher education model, and offering students the real opportunity to accomplish what they attach importance to. However, at this point in time, this seems to be a utopian vision.

## **B. BOURDIEU AND SEN ON INDIVIDUAL PREDISPOSITIONS AND APTITUDES**

### **7.3 The influence of habitus and functionings on the experience of university education**

#### **7.3.1 Bourdieu: Individual Habitus and institutional habitus**

Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be viewed as the 'essence of being' of an individual. It is composed of a person's pre-disposition to think and behave in a specific way, and to adhere to certain sets of beliefs and ideas. However, the habitus is conditioned by the socialisation process through the family, and peers as well as education (Scahill, 1993). Institutional habitus refers to how educational institutions, with their specific ethos and sets of rules and expectations, influence students' experience of education through the shared beliefs of their agents. Bourdieu's writings provide us with a starting point to reflect on the impact of the habitus on the pre-university experiences of the participants, and how these experiences ultimately influence their academic trajectories. In this respect, there is a need to go back to the student's childhood in order to understand what he/she went through, and how this influenced his/her experience of primary and secondary schooling. It is even more challenging to identify the influence of the habitus at university level, given that students themselves do not necessarily realise how it controls decisions pertaining to their studies, as it is camouflaged in such a way as to seem natural, and part of established social structures.

### **7.3.2 Sen on Functionings**

The capability approach focuses on well-being and development viewed in terms of people's capabilities to function, referring to effective opportunities to engage in the field of interest they want to pursue, and ultimately be who they want to be. These beings and doings, which Sen calls achieved functionings decide what kind of life the individual will lead. Functionings include key aspects of one's daily life such as working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community, being respected, and so forth. However, Sen makes an important distinction between functionings and capabilities. Whilst functionings refer to what has been achieved, capabilities are what is effectively possible. Thus, a person's functionings and his/her capability are closely related but distinct:

*A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead.*  
(Sen 1987, p. 36)

Whilst Sen emphasises the need to shift attention from functionings to capabilities, the current study probes further to analyse how, based on the capability approach, students accessing university education who are considered to be on par in terms of achieved functionings might in fact be facing different realities, even if they have all been able to meet the academic requirements to access university education. The way they take decisions regarding higher education might be influenced by their social backgrounds and their pre-university educational trajectory.

### **7.3.3 Analysing the University experiences of students through the dual lens of Sen and Bourdieu**

Whilst Bourdieu emphasises the conservative role of the habitus in replicating social relations, Sen points to the opportunity to undertake a complete overhaul of the system by focusing on capabilities rather than functionings. What emerges from the application of Bourdieu's sociological outlook and Sen's human development perspective is the need for

human beings to reflect on the established system and develop the ability to free themselves from their environment so as to set new standards. There is a need for a **rupture** of what is generally accepted in terms of social stratification within society, and what has over time become normal. Based on this dual lens, the study focuses on the following elements:

- A. It analyses whether university students from different social classes are of the opinion that everything is pre-determined, or believe that they have the pre-dispositions and aptitude to undertake high level reflections, aim to achieve their full potential, bring about changes to the existing system, and achieve eudaimonia.
- B. It studies whether public and private universities are providing students with the necessary knowledge and skills to develop their capabilities, or whether they are silenced by the dominant culture through the transmission of discourses that support its hegemony
- C. It focuses on whether students are pre-occupied with building a better tomorrow, and how their university experience influences the way they perceive the future.

Section 7.3.4 outlines some of the key elements that emerge from the superimposition of the dual lens.

#### **7.3.4 Elements emerging from the field**

An analysis of the relevant aspects of the participants' stories clearly reveals that, irrespective of their social background, their experience of university education is influenced by their habitus as well as their achieved functionings. Their positionality with regards to university education inevitably reflects this influence at different levels.

##### **7.3.4.1 The level of activation**

This study revisits Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Sen's outlook on functionings, given that they both lack clear demarcation in terms of the students' actual level of awareness, preparedness and readiness to undertake university education. In order to fill this gap, the concept of 'activation level' is introduced to refer to the ability of students from different social backgrounds with different pre-university educational trajectories to take informed decisions regarding their academic path, given that the choice of field of study, as well as of

university, and ultimately their entire university experience, is heavily influenced by their pre-university activation level. The study therefore focuses on the characteristics of the habitus and functionings, which are reflected in the students' level of activation, examining how these impact on the experience of university education across social classes and lead to the replication of the same patterns in the higher education field, and in the wider society.

#### 7.3.4.2 Pre-determined paths vs ability to have a positive impact: developing coping strategies

With regard to students' pre-dispositions and aptitude to engage in high level reflections in order to impact positively on the structures, what emerges from the stories of the participants is that the structures do not encourage attempts to influence the established hierarchy, being more inclined towards a perpetuation of the status quo. Nevertheless, participants from the lower social classes have been able to develop and apply **coping strategies** to make their way through the system.

Coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, they are able to develop and sustain the fighting spirit required to overcome the hurdles they have encountered throughout their educational path. Indeed, these adverse conditions tend to motivate them and enhance their determination to succeed. They are fighters and survivors. It is highly probable that their disadvantaged background has contributed to the figurative growth of a thick 'shell' that keeps them safe from criticism and adversity. Their determination to succeed led them all the way to university, where they are doing their level best to cope with tasks assigned to them, even if they are not in an ideal environment, with some reporting that they do not have the basics, such as the internet, or even a computer at home. Still, they neither complain, nor compare themselves with others. On the contrary, they are thankful for the support received along the way. They are not willing to give up and to let fatalism take over. They are on their way to improve their own reality and working towards a better future for themselves and their loved ones, in spite of the adverse, and at times even hostile environment.

For instance, some participants report that the institutional habitus at secondary school was designed for students from the upper social classes. They did not have the required financial, social and cultural resources to adapt to it, even if they were doing their level best. Being

different, however, does not necessarily mean being inferior. They managed to pass their examinations (some even with flying colours), but had to do it their way, not based on the school's pre-set expectations. In secondary schools primarily meant for the elite and the middle class, high-performing students generally cruised through, supported all the way by their family's financial, social and cultural capital. They took private tuition, and were helped by their well-educated parents. They also had the right connections. Students from a disadvantaged background were the odd ones out, as they did not have all these facilities. Still, they did not give up, being fully aware that only through education would they be able to improve their lives. They were also realistic and knew from the beginning that it was going to be hard. They were fully aware that they did not have the means, and would not be able to follow the 'normal' path of this elite school. They had to improvise coping strategies to find the way towards the light and in this process, they did not receive much support or consideration from teachers and the school. To them, they were transparent, negligible students, and they did not necessarily give much consideration to their future. They had to make it on their own. As a result, they are now more strategic in their approach to university education. They are focused on completing it so as to obtain a good job and are not interested in thinking about how to improve the system or how to enhance their capabilities. All that matters are achieved functionings, which will open the doors to job opportunities.

It is important to highlight that these participants from a poorer social background had to adapt to this 'hostile' pathway to university education. They devised coping strategies to face the challenging environment. The implication is that the educational system does not necessarily accommodate the needs of those from the poorer sections of society in terms of accessing university. Furthermore, securing access to university does not mean that their difficulties are over. Students from the lower social classes report that they still have to cope with the university setting where, in their opinion, everything is pre-decided and opportunities to influence the university's *modus operandi* are scarce. What is paradoxical to note, however, is that those coming from the upper social classes share the view that the educational system in general, and the university setting, is in full control of the educational experience. The institutional habitus determines the way it operates. Students do not have much leeway in their university education, given that everything is pre-set.

#### 7.3.4.3 Constrained by the institutional habitus of educational institutions

The participants seem to be operating in an environment that does not promote high levels of reflection and the establishment of strong links. Even if they are determined to make it through, they report that they are constrained by the institutional habitus, which includes the ethos, rules, and expectations of the educational institution. The fact that the parents of participants from poorer social classes do not have a high level of education is an additional burden. The participants from the upper classes encountered a completely different socialisation experience, and with a high level of pre-university activation, were better prepared to attend university. It is interesting to note, however, that students from upper social classes are fully aware of their privileged position and of their ability to access the best universities. They are able to see things more clearly, and even underline the dearth of incentives (as well as the inability) to engage in high level reflection, given that students are much more focusing on completing the academic tasks assigned to them.

#### 7.3.4.4 Fatalism vs the ability to achieve 'eudaimonia': the determination to succeed

Are the participants guided by fatalism and/or the will of God, or are they conscious of their ability to determine their own fate and thereby fulfill their full potential and achieve 'eudaimonia'? What all the participants have in common is strong determination to succeed. Even if the institutional habitus of the secondary institutions they attended did not necessarily promote equity, and even if their parents were not involved to an equal extent in their educational trajectory, they all share the value of hard work and perseverance. Whilst it is clear that the participants are not on par in terms of the academic support received from their parents, or in terms of their primary and secondary educational pathway, this did not significantly influence their commitment to their studies.

#### 7.3.4.5 Knowledge and skills for critical reflection vs silenced through hegemony: confessions of helplessness

Are universities providing students with the necessary knowledge and skills for critical reflection, or are they being silenced by the dominant culture through the transmission of discourses that support the hegemony of the ruling class? What role do the university administration and academics play in this process?

The participants from disadvantaged backgrounds have been able to develop the right attitude and skills to fight attempts to impose the dominant culture and viewpoints on students from lower social classes. They have also been able to find their way through the institutional habitus. Still, they are not fully conscious of the extent to which the higher education sector is driven by class-based considerations and segmentation; they are thankful for the opportunity to enroll in university, and their perceptions are blurred by the ideology of fairness. They are unable to realise that the higher education sector perpetuates the status quo by influencing the selection, training and role allocation functions of students who successfully complete secondary education. There is a hegemony of the upper class and a tendency to control the institutional habitus. The participants from disadvantaged backgrounds are of the opinion that these hegemonic tendencies start prior to university. They all point out that they had to devise coping strategies, given that they are more interested in making the most of the system rather than engaging in high level reflection on the role of university education.

The participants from privileged classes also report that, since they are focused on their academic responsibilities, students have little time to devote to critical thinking. They tend to be happy with their university experience, pointing out that university education has acted as an eye-opener, helping them to clearly identify their objectives and focus on achieving them. While they admire the private universities in which they are enrolled, the participants from the upper class are also critical of the fact that the university does not ask pertinent questions and does not seek answers to critical social issues such as inequality as it is focused on academic content rather than broadening students' capabilities and aptitude to take a philosophical view of the world and social issues.

As far as the students' pre-occupation with a better tomorrow is concerned, and how their university experience influences the way they perceive the future, there seems to be consensus among the participants that university education is invariably linked to a better tomorrow. All the participants have a positive outlook on the future and report that university education plays a significant role in that process. However, whilst students from the lower social classes are positive about the possibility of improving life for themselves and their families, they are not at all concerned with improving the system. For their part,

the upper class participants point out that students cannot be expected to change the system as they are too pre-occupied with their postgraduate educational plans and career goals to devote time to the philosophical aspects of education.

From the above, class-based divisions that seem to be initiated at primary education level, are extended in the secondary educational setting, and ultimately lead to a higher education system that is based on a biased model of education. In this context, where inequality starts at the very beginning of the educational trajectory and is extended to the different stages, it is difficult for the university to act as an equaliser. Rather, it is perpetuating the differences and segmentation of Mauritian society, but this is camouflaged under a structure of universal, free access to primary and secondary education and to public universities.

## **7.4 Bourdieu on Hereditability and Sen on Agency**

### **7.4.1 Bourdieu – Hereditability**

Bourdieu introduced the notion of cultural capital in the educational field as the mechanism through which social reproduction takes place. For Bourdieu, educational institutions value certain cultural codes and those who are exposed to these codes take advantage of the educational setting, thereby perpetuating social stratification. Those who do not have access to these codes are left behind. Schools and universities are therefore actively engaged in the reproduction and maintenance of the established social hierarchy. However, education also has the potential to redistribute social privileges and enhance fairness in society. Thus, Bourdieu is of the view that educational institutions play a crucial, on-going role in transmitting advantages across generations. According to him, one of the most important characteristics of cultural capital is its **hereditability**. Whereas the transfer of economic capital across generations is tangible, cultural capital makes a significant contribution to the reproduction of the social hierarchy across generations in an unnoticed way. It therefore impacts on the reproduction of the distribution of individuals across class locations over generations, given that “the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 245). Given that this study focuses on the reproduction of social privileges, Bourdieu’s notion of hereditability is pertinent in analysing the way class-based divisions are maintained through the higher educational field.

#### **7.4.2 Sen: Agency**

In order to understand human beings, whether individually or as part of society, it is important to focus on how they are living, and who and what control them. Through the concept of agency, Sen (1999, p. 11, 53, 281) highlights an “agent-oriented view” in which individuals and groups should take decisions about issues impacting on their lives. In this process, they “effectively shape their own destiny and help each other” (Sen 1999, p. 11) and are “active participant[s] in change, rather than ... passive and docile recipient[s] of instructions or of dispensed assistance” (Sen, 1999, p. 281). Sen believes that individuals have the possibility of committing themselves to causes that are above their own interests, and even at times against their own welfare:

*If ... individuals as social persons have broader values and objectives, including sympathy for others and commitment to ethical norms, then the promotion of social justice need not face unremitting opposition at every move. (Sen, 1990a, p. 54)*

Thus, people can focus on altruistic goals which will benefit a larger number of people, or even the wider society, rather than pursuing their own self-interest. In the university setting, it is important to analyse the extent to which participants across social classes are willing to sacrifice or forego their own goals for the greater good. This study analyses how the participants take decisions, and whether they are committed to fighting for greater social justice and equity in the higher educational field, even if it could be to the detriment of their own educational achievements.

#### **7.4.3 Heredity and agency**

How can Bourdieu’s analysis of the hereditability of cultural capital and Sen’s outlook on agency enlighten our analysis of the influence of social class on the experience of university education? Bourdieu’s work highlights the crucial role played by the educational field in reproducing the social hierarchy through the transmission of cultural codes that privilege the ruling class and are legitimated through academic credentials. In the context of the current study, this takes the form of a university degree, that is then crystalised through access to postgraduate studies and high-profile jobs. For his part, Sen highlights the creative potential of human beings, who have the possibility of changing the course of things by taking

the right decisions. The crucial element that emerges when we consider the participants' pre-dispositions and aptitude across this dual sociological-human development lens, is that whilst students can be passive in their approach and accept the system as it is, they can also be actively engaged in the process of building their own future. By analysing the experience of students across social classes, we are in a position to assess their perceptions as to whether university education is unconsciously (or silently) contributing to the reproduction of the established social hierarchy across generations in an unnoticed way, or whether it is engaged in the struggle for a more equitable redistribution of social privileges. We are also able to evaluate the state of mind of Mauritian university students across social classes, and whether they believe in their ability to determine their own future, or are under the impression that a false consciousness is diffused to provide an erroneous picture of reality. In addition, the study examines whether they consider that the power relationship can be challenged through education and whether they are enhancing their capabilities in order to have a decisive impact on the current system for the well-being of all, or passively accept the situation and only care about their immediate personal future.

#### **7.4.4 The myth of access to University as an equaliser**

Reflecting on the participants' educational trajectory and their experience of university education, we come to realise that the myth of access to university education as an equaliser needs to be reconsidered. Too many aspects have already been decided before students even reach the door of the university. Furthermore, which university will a student reach after all the struggles at primary and secondary level? Are university places fairly allocated? How do students experience the higher education process? How are the outcomes of the university experience determined? This experience cannot and must not be considered in a linear way and the impact of one's social class in this process cannot be underestimated.

The case of participants from disadvantaged backgrounds clearly shows that students do not start on par in their educational journey. As early as primary school, they are already at a disadvantage, as they are admitted to a school mainly meant for children from lower classes. This gap is extended during their secondary education, as they are generally admitted to a regional secondary school that enrolls those who have not been able to secure access to a state secondary or confessional school. Only in exceptional circumstances are lower class

students admitted to schools meant for the elite. Whilst these students are under the impression that they have achieved a major milestone by accessing university, their primary and secondary schooling experience limits their abilities. They are in a limit-situation (Freire, 1970) as there are so many things that they will never be able to achieve; indeed, they might not even know they exist. However, it is important to focus on whether theory will be able to overcome these shortcomings. The students seem to be happy at the public university they attend because the level of teaching has been adjusted to cater for students like them. Once they complete their degree, it is imperative that they have an equal opportunity to join the workforce or undertake further studies. The participants from lower social classes point out that they will not be able to pursue postgraduate studies as they do not have the means to do so. Whilst undergraduate studies are free in public universities, this is not the case for postgraduate qualifications. These students will thus have to join the labour market.

It is also important to reflect on the value that the university degree they are awarded has in the labour market. University education has now become a selective agency that classifies students based on their academic credentials (Colarelli, 1987). This selection, which was previously completed at the end of secondary schooling, is now being done at university level. Public universities are being transformed into 'safety-valve' mechanisms, enabling students from the lower social classes to access higher education, yet setting the limits within which these students are confined, and from which it is difficult to free oneself. Thus, whilst there is a semblance of fairness, the system is replicating and legitimising the social hierarchy.

These disadvantaged students have struggled to cope at all levels of their education. Their efforts are focused on getting through and they are under the impression that they are reaching new heights. However, this might not be the case. Unable to undertake postgraduate studies, the participants' options are limited: they can either apply for a job in the public service, or take up employment at entry level in the private sector. It is essential to reflect on where this degree will ultimately bring them. They do not have the right connections and network to forge their way through. However, their vision is blurred by an erroneous and misleading picture of reality, portraying the university as a neutral entity that treats all students equally and gives them an equal chance. Instead of illuminating the

students through their teaching, and hence empowering them to take key decisions, the university is acting as a selective agency that legitimises academic credentials achieved through unfair and biased access routes. Disadvantaged students cannot even think of fighting to improve the situation of others and for a more equitable distribution of social privileges when they are not fully conscious of the ways through which the university structures reproduce the existing social hierarchy across generations. Public universities are diffusing a false feeling of enlightenment. This pseudo-illumination contributes to a perpetuation of the status quo by making students believe that they will ultimately progress along the social hierarchy.

Within the university setting, there is no appropriate mechanism to appeal in situations where disadvantaged students feel that they are being penalised for technicalities. This is the reality of lower-class students that join the university. Their lack of cultural and social capital works against them and they accept such situations. The impression of fairness that the university portrays rests on very unfair and biased foundations. However, it goes unnoticed, given the image of equality and rectitude that the field of higher education displays. As they are unaware of its very existence, and under the impression that they are being given a fair chance, how can these students fight the oppressive structures? Because they are more concerned with improving their own reality, disadvantaged students passively accept things as they are. They are not interested in the fight for increased equity in the university setting. Whilst they are operating in an environment that seems free, they are in reality controlled by the university structures, and are confined to life-chances meant for students coming from lower social backgrounds.

Students in public universities generally consider university education as a mere continuation of their studies and these universities are not doing much to persuade them otherwise. Increasingly, public universities are being turned into teaching universities meant for the lower middle class and working class and they act as a selective agency. In this process, however, the whole structure is being customised to accommodate students' needs. This includes free transport and printing facilities, as well as computer labs and extensive financial assistance schemes for those unable to afford the reduced administrative fees. For their part, academics are being turned into teachers who are required to provide students

with notes and closely monitor their progress through module catalogues with extensive details on the topics to be covered over the weeks, as well as online student feedback and portfolios for each module. There is little space to encourage creativity and to develop the critical thinking required to question the educational system. The university is focused on training subject specialists rather than offering a broad education that will produce thinkers who are inspired to question the established structures. The culture of assistance contributes to the legitimization of the situation by making students believe that they are being given a fair chance to access university education and build a better future for themselves and their loved ones. In reality this is not necessarily the case. However, those who control the field of higher education might not really want a paradigm shift, and might not be ready for a more equitable redistribution of social privileges. It is essential to reflect on who will take the lead in this struggle against the established structures and institutions. It is clear that students are too engaged in their studies. They are also fearful of not being awarded their degree if they go against the established system. Academics have a key role to play in critiquing the system. This is further discussed in the final chapter (See sections 8.3.3 and 8.3.4).

Students from upper social classes have a completely different experience of university education. They generally have plenty of time to carefully decide on their career path and where they see themselves in the future. However, they are also very realistic in their approach to university education, conscious of the fact that they will never be able to change the system. Instead, they focus on their future career through which they will achieve 'eudaimonia'. They opt for a private university education (even if it is costly), believing that they will be in a better position to achieve their objectives. Making such bold choices can determine one's future. However, the type of guidance and advice received, as well as the clarity of one's career objectives, and one's financial situation, are key elements in determining the way such critical decisions are taken.

For students from the upper social classes, their experience of university education reflects the way in which the system reproduces the social hierarchy. Attending a public university was clearly not an option. While they have different reasons for their choices, the cultural clash, the language issue and habitus influence their choices. They are aware that, by opting

for a private university, they have a better chance of obtaining a place in a top global university for postgraduate studies. They will also likely obtain a more rewarding position, which they will use their contacts and networks to secure. The fact that private universities have a close relationship with industry is a further advantage. While the participants from the upper classes initially felt that their academic achievements are solely based on their academic performance and that they would have made it anyway, they did come to realise that their educational trajectories could easily have been otherwise had they not been privileged. The fact that they attended private schools, and come from an educated and cultured background, and have access to all the facilities and resources required, helped them tremendously to be where they are in terms of educational performance and achievement, even though they may have worked hard. Their present university experience is also based on the fact that they are part of the upper class culture and can easily adapt to the university's institutional habitus. Given that they are predominantly meant for upper class students; the private universities establish the necessary logistics to cater to their needs. Just as public universities adjust their structures, processes and practices for their client base, private universities go out of their way to pamper upper class students and ensure that they have a memorable experience. They even bend the rules at times to accommodate students' requests. They ensure that the solidarity of the group is maintained and a 'corps' is established so as to perpetuate the structures. Private universities also do their level best to ensure that upper class students feel at ease and convey their satisfaction through word of mouth, thereby contributing to a replication of the model.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter applied Bourdieu's sociological perspective and Sen's human development outlook as a dual theoretical lens to analyse the way students across social classes experience university education. The analysis provided new insight into the role of the university at societal level, and the ways in which the characteristics of university structures, processes and practices, as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude influence students' experiences of university education. These factors impact on the life chances and the future of students from different social backgrounds, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of the established social hierarchy.

## **CHAPTER 8:**

### ***Concluding thoughts***

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#### **Introduction**

This study approached social class and human development from a cross-sectional perspective. Chapter 7 probed the experiences of university education of students from different social classes, analysing how the structures, processes and practices as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude impact on such experiences. This chapter highlights the study's key findings and their implications, as well as the study's limitations. Areas for future research are suggested in order to extend our knowledge on the link between social class and the experience of university education.

#### **Chapter Orientation**

Section 1 presents a summary of the key findings. Section 2 examines the implications of the findings, whilst Section 3 highlights the study's contribution to the academic literature. Section 4 outlines the study's limitations and Section 5 offers suggestions for future research. In Section 6, the researcher reflects on the completion of this exciting academic journey.

#### **Summary of findings**

##### **8.1 Experiences of university education across different social classes in Mauritian Universities**

When the narratives collected for the purpose of this study are analysed through the dual lens of Bourdieu and Sen, a number of elements emerge with regard to the experiences of university education across different social classes in Mauritius. This section summarises the key findings.

- The primary and secondary school experience plays a significant role in higher education choices and/or options. Thus, the experience of university education needs to be studied in conjunction with students' trajectory at primary and secondary level.
- Parents' role in the educational trajectories of their children cannot be underestimated. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents have not completed university education do not receive the same level of advice and guidance as upper class students on crucial choices in relation to higher education. There is overall consensus that parents' unconditional support in the form of emotional and financial investment, plays a critical role in students' educational performance, even if the parents have not been educationally successful.
- Competition for university places is rigged at primary and secondary school level, given that private tuition plays a crucial role in the sifting process at these levels. Thus, the structures, processes and practices prior to university admission act as social filters.
- There is a huge gap between the experiences of students in private schooling and those who are in public institutions. Students in private schools have all the facilities and logistics required to succeed, and also have the right network of contacts, well-educated parents, and access to economic, social and cultural capital.
- Whilst lower class students view admission to university as a dream come true, upper class students' admission seem to be more carefully planned. Whilst students from lower classes leave it to chance, or go according to the places available, their upper class counterparts tend to make strategic choices, or chose their university and field of study based on informed guidance from their parents, and the repository of knowledge in their social network.
- A high level of motivation is noted across social classes. Students tend to have high expectations of university education, and attach a high value to education. However, even if the relationship with academics tends to be cordial, there is overall consensus that the focus is on teaching content, with insufficient time devoted to the philosophy of education, and revisiting the knowledge shared as well as the way it is presented.

- Whilst private universities project an image of being open and accessible to all, they practice social closure, resting on three main pillars: fees charged, traditional / preferred feeders / the organisational culture. Concealed behind this illusion of openness, the social filters in place in these universities contribute to the emergence of an academic aristocracy.
- The financial element plays a significant role in determining one's choice of university. It can even act as a barrier to university education. High-performing students from the lower classes can easily be tempted by immediate gratification and decide not to enroll in university programmes, even if they are eligible for them.
- Students report having minimal interaction with the university administration, and tend to have a limited view of its functions. They thus give little consideration to its influence in terms of selective recruitment policies, as well as the way the university positions itself in the continuum comprising of universities meant for the elite on one side, and those meant for the masses. They contribute to the perpetuation of class-based divisions, even if they display a facade of equality of opportunity in terms of enhanced access.
- The students' voice is virtually non-existent in university decision-making. Students are pre-occupied with their studies, and are unable to influence high order decisions that are imposed on them. They are at university for a short period of time and are thus unlikely to bring about a major overhaul of the system. They are not in a position to devote their time and mental energy to fight for change in the established structures, processes and practices.
- The hurdles that students from the lower social classes confront and the overall adverse situation motivate them to work even harder to succeed. The educational and social trajectory of working class students can constitute a hurdle, given that middle-class values tend to prevail in the university setting. There is thus a need to transform the curriculum and revisit the pedagogy.
- The multi-pronged influences of cultural capital are also highlighted, in terms of the parents' level of education, the choice of subjects and the field of study; and the ease of adapting to the culture of the higher education institution.

- Students registered at the same university, and in the same cohort, do not necessarily experience the education provided in the same way. There is an active, but invisible process of social closure in the higher education field, whereby the upper class maximises rewards by deliberately restricting access to resources and opportunities (Parkin, 1979).

## **8.2 The maintenance of class differences**

The participants' experiences also reveal how university processes and structures as well as individual pre-dispositions and aptitude contest or maintain social class differences. Sen is of the view that students have the potential to develop the capacity for high level reflection, to establish strong links, and even to question established doctrines. They have the agency to bring about change to improve their conditions and determine their own future. Bourdieu takes a more pragmatic stand, based on the inevitability of social reproduction, given that the pre-established structures and processes ensure that stratification across class lines is perpetuated through the education system. This study examined the experiences of university students through this dual sociological and human lens. The key elements that emerge from this exercise are outlined in sections 8.2.1 and 8.2.2.

### **8.2.1 Characteristics of structures, processes and practices**

One of the primary objectives of this study was to identify the specific elements within the existing structures, processes and practices that contribute to the maintenance of class-based divisions within the higher education context. An extensive analysis of the participants' experiences through the dual lens of Bourdieu and Sen provided insight into the characteristics of these elements, which can be summarised as follows:

#### **Key role of economic, social and cultural capital**

The narratives reveal the key role played by accumulated economic, social and cultural capital in perpetuating class-based differences, and how one's academic track and educational achievements are, to a large extent, influenced by one's relationship with capital.

### **The replication of the schema and not questioning same**

What can also be deduced from this study is that the current higher education model is tilted towards the creation of subject specialists, and does not emphasise higher levels of reflection, and the development of critical thinking. It was found that there is little effort on the part of academics to encourage students to ask pertinent questions and to critically examine university structures and the established social hierarchy. Furthermore, university structures are depicted as frozen in time, operating as a bureaucratic institution, and difficult to change.

### **Ideology of fairness**

The ideology of fairness that is diffused across the higher education setting, and reinforced by public policies, creates a false impression that universities operate in an equitable way. They even create the impression that the inequalities experienced during the primary and secondary schooling cycle are addressed in the higher education setting. However, concealed behind this idyllic image of universities and the false generosity of policy makers, are institutions that replicate and perpetuate social patterns.

### **Narrow training to occupy specific positions**

Through their structures and pedagogy, both private and public higher education institutions are actively engaged in running specialised programmes and in the legitimisation of the academic credentials required by the labour market or to undertake further studies. Little consideration is given to the knowledge needed to initiate a transformative agenda, which can ultimately lead to a paradigm shift.

### **Manipulation of the higher education field**

Through its control of capital, the upper class is able to influence what takes place in the higher education field. Its members ensure that they remain united through strong affiliations, whilst also perpetuating the subservience of the lower social classes, and diffusing an image of neutrality. Students across social classes are made to believe that the structures operate for the benefit of everyone. However, they are manipulated by the

established system, which ensures that they are properly calibrated and fit to operate within the prevalent economic and social system. Competencies are evaluated and legitimised through the institutionalisation process in the form of academic credentials.

### **The generosity of the state and the commitment of private universities**

Students studying in public universities are provided with an array of services and support, which leads them to accept the university structures, and even to develop some kind of admiration for what is offered. For their part, students in private universities are made to believe that the degree they will ultimately earn will give them an edge in the job market or for further studies. They are therefore geared towards their studies and their future career.

### **Institutions in control**

Through an active class-based selection process, the processes in place ensure segregation of students entering public universities and those channeled to private institutions. The upper social classes are coached to take on leading roles, whilst students from lower social classes are lured by a neutral image of higher education institutions and policy makers that care about them.

### **Instrument of reproduction**

Class-based segregation is initiated very early (from pre-primary level) and continues through primary and secondary schooling. The establishment of a parallel system of education for the upper social class, in the form of fee-paying institutions, perpetuates class-based divisions, but these are blurred by the ideological state apparatus through the myth of a meritocratic education system. The focus being on the mainstream educational system set up for the masses.

### **The Gap**

Whilst working class students, and even those from the lower middle class, are passive recipients of knowledge that silently do what they are told to do by public universities with middle class values, students from the upper class are actively coached by private universities to take up leading roles in society and the economy. The assistentialism of the

state towards students from disadvantaged groups on the one hand, and the upper class' economic, social and cultural machinery on the other, ensure that the gap between the different social classes is upheld.

## **8.2.2 Characteristics of aptitudes and pre-dispositions**

### **Activation level**

The analysis of the narratives collected through the Bourdieu-Sen framework shows that students from different social classes' level of awareness, preparedness and readiness to undertake university education is not necessarily the same, even if they are considered to be on par in terms of achieved functioning. The concept of 'activation level' was thus introduced to refer to students' ability to take informed decisions regarding their academic choices, given that the way they do so might be influenced by their social background as well as their pre-university educational trajectory.

### **Ability to develop coping strategies**

The study found that the participants from disadvantaged backgrounds had to adapt themselves to a 'hostile' pathway towards university education. Everything in the educational setting seems to be pre-decided and established. Upon reaching the university doors, they felt that their difficulties were not yet over, as they had to face the challenging university environment. However, instead of complaining, allowing fatalism to take root and ultimately giving up, they were able to turn this adverse situation to their advantage by developing a high level of intrinsic motivation that would help them to survive adversity. This is an essential element in distinguishing between fighters and those who give up, or even decide not to try.

### **Impact of the institutional habitus**

Despite their determination to succeed, the participants from lower social classes report that they were constrained by the institutional habitus, in terms of the ethos, rules, and expectations of the higher education institution. The participants from the upper social classes took a completely different pathway, and were also better prepared to join the university. Being second-generation university goers was also a significant advantage for

them. However, the university setting in general seems to be focused on immediate tasks rather than on high level reflection on equity and social justice in the higher education setting.

### **The myth of access to university as an equaliser**

The rhetoric of access to university education as an equaliser, broadly diffused and internalised across the educational sector and the wider society makes students believe that they have an equal chance of making it to the top through higher education. They do not seem to question this and seem to be unaware that, through the influence of economic, social and cultural capital, many aspects of their educational trajectory have already been decided before they enter the university.

### **The Limit-Situation**

For Freire (1970), a limit-situation impedes the process of developing one's full potential as a result of internalising one's oppressor's consciousness. There are many things that those who are oppressed will never be able to achieve, as they ignore their very existence. The narratives suggest that the participants from disadvantaged backgrounds went through a primary and secondary schooling trajectory that limited their abilities, even if they seem to be unaware of this, and happy and thankful for having been admitted to a public university. However, these universities act as selective agencies and decide on the ultimate outcome of the students' educational trajectory.

## **Implications**

### **8.3 The pseudo social-reconstructionist/progressive / social justice agenda of universities**

#### **8.3.1 The facade**

The study's findings suggest that, while universities in the Mauritian setting project an image of pursuing a reconstructionist/ progressive / social justice agenda, this is not necessarily the case. While much emphasis is placed on the social measures introduced to support socially disadvantaged students and on broadened access to university, there is little

evidence of universities being actively engaged in fighting inequality, and contributing to the creation of a society based on justice for all. On the contrary, the study shows that universities are perpetuating the influence of social classes at all levels. Whether in terms of the curriculum, or the conditions inside and outside the lecture room, the study reveals that the Mauritian system is far from promoting equitable access to high quality tertiary education. Rather than addressing income inequality and elimination of discrimination, the system seems to be institutionalising and legitimising it. The dual higher education system promotes the emergence of academic elite primarily composed of upper class students while lower class students seem to be confined to subordinate positions.

### **8.3.2 The utopia of changing the structures**

Furthermore, the study's findings imply that, irrespective of their social class, Mauritian university students do not devote much attention to social justice and equity in the university system, or the education field as a whole. Their focus is satisfying course requirements so as to complete their degree. There is little concern for what they consider as 'peripheral' issues that would divert them from their main focus. It would therefore be over-optimistic to suggest that undergraduate students will readily be willing and able to engage in a struggle to overhaul university structures, processes and practices on their own. Their pre-dispositions and aptitudes limit them even further. Students from the lower social classes have even more of a sense of urgency to earn a degree, which is perceived as their passport to a better future. They are driven by the desire to move out of their precarious situation and to reach more stable ground. They want to put an end to their parents' struggles and make them proud of them. Their upper class counterparts are focused on their current and postgraduate studies, and on their future career. Can it be reasonably expected that students who are over-burdened by the academic requirements of their programmes, and pre-occupied by their future, will display unflinching commitment to a cause which seems to be remote and unreachable?

### **8.3.3 Key role of academics: The Mount Everest extended metaphor**

It is likely that, left on their own, students from the lower classes will be like mountaineers climbing Mount Everest who reach the base camp full of optimism and expectations. They have prepared themselves to climb this mythical mountain for years, have gathered the

necessary funds, and fulfilled all the requirements. They peaked a summit of at least 6 000 metres before coming to Everest, and have been certified medically fit. On paper, therefore, they have all the pre-requisites to succeed.

However, two crucial elements can never be taken for granted in any Everest expedition:

(i) **Oxygen bottles are needed to reach the peak**

The Everest peak is above 8 000 metres and there is less oxygen in the air than what is required by the human body. Mountaineers who want to make their way to the summit therefore need oxygen, and oxygen bottles are brought all the way up for them, so that they are able to make it through the 'death zone' as they reach the peak. Very few mountaineers have managed to do so without oxygen masks.

(ii) **Impossible without Sherpas**

Sherpas make it possible for mountaineers to climb Mount Everest. They play a barely visible yet vital role, organising everything all the way to the summit, taking care of food and shelter, and planning the right equipment. The sherpas guide mountaineers from the very beginning, and assist them along the way until they return to safety. Over time, they have gathered much experience. They know how to listen to Mount Everest. Once they reach the peak, mountaineers are brought back to the base camp, and return to their respective countries full of pride at having achieved something exceptional: climbing the highest mountain on earth. They want to tell the world about it and feel that they are part of an exclusive elite. The sherpas' key contribution is generally underplayed. Carrying some 60 to 70 kg of gear, food and equipment in this tough terrain and high altitudes is not easy. The sherpas are able to do so due to differences in their mitochondria, which means they use oxygen very efficiently. Their innate pre-disposition, as well as their wide experience of their mountain, which they respect and refer to as 'Chomolungma' (Mother of the World) makes it possible for mountaineers to ascend Mount Everest. Sherpas are experienced guides who accompany these climbers through icefalls, avalanches and extreme altitude. Following an expedition, they return to their humble village, until they are hired again. There is less pride in what they do, and they have less to say about it. This is their job and they are devoted and committed.

The Mount Everest analogy applies to the higher education field. No matter how brilliant a student is, and even if he/she has the required economic, social and cultural capital, if left on his/her own, the student will not be able to organise him/herself properly and find his/her way through the education system, whilst at the same time rethinking the established structures, processes and practices. Just as the mountaineers need oxygen and the sherpas, students need academics' support to develop the right predispositions and aptitude. Academics understand what students go through as they have travelled this route themselves. Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1948) refers to organic intellectuals in his famous 'Prison Notebooks'. These are academics who are not driven by self-interest and upward mobility, but are genuinely concerned about the conditions of the class that they come from. Having travelled the route, they know the terrain and can lead and accompany students along the way.

Mountaineers come to the Everest at a certain point in their lives, struggle through until they reach the summit, and then move on to other challenges whilst forever cherishing their Everest moment. The sherpas never stop. In the same way, students join the university, spend three or four years there, and leave for new adventures. Academics take on another cohort of students every year. Over time, sherpas and academics accumulate so much experience that no one is more knowledgeable about their particular field. They have mastered the elements. The field talks to them and they are able to listen to the voice of reason. However, who listens to the sherpas' voice? Who listens to organic intellectuals who seek to bring about greater social justice and equity in the higher education field?

#### **8.3.4 Chameleon-like academics**

Academics also come from different social classes, and they have a key role to play in the struggle for greater equity and social justice in university structures, processes and practices. However, by observing our academic peers, it seems that not all academics coming from the lower social classes are genuinely concerned about the conditions of the class that they come from. we can also encounter **chameleon-like academics**, who come from the lower social classes but find themselves in a zone of comfort, having secured a permanent and pensionable position at the university. They adopt the way of life of the upper classes, and are unwilling to identify themselves with the social class they originate from. They are re- formatted. Instead

of fighting to change the structures, processes and practices and to bring about more equity and fairness, they perpetuate the social relations, and even extend the privilege of the ruling classes. They can even become cynical with regard to the students and academics who, coming from the lower social classes, are still struggling.

## Contributions to knowledge

### 8.4 Re-visiting the myth of university education as an equaliser

#### 8.4.1 Pseudo-illumination

University students are made to believe that through university education, they will be able to challenge the structures, whilst they are in fact controlled by these very structures, processes and practices. The higher education system is therefore luring students with an illusion of empowerment and illumination which can be referred to as **pseudo-illumination**. Students are unable to see how, through these structures, processes and practices, as well as their own pre-dispositions and aptitude, they are made to replicate the social hierarchy. Those who form part of the ruling elite and are expected to take up leading positions in society undergo a completely different educational trajectory from those who are expected to occupy middle-management positions, or more subordinate roles. Thus, admission to a specific university is a signal of even greater social differentiation, rather than an equaliser.

#### 8.4.2 Shallow mirroring

Whilst their parents (and the students) have high expectations when they join the world of higher education, this will not necessarily lead to positive outcomes in terms of climbing the social ladder or improve their ability to understand how they are being compartmentalised based on their initial position in the social hierarchy. They are made to believe that they have a fair chance and that the most deserving students make it to the top, whilst in fact, the race is rigged from the very beginning. What takes place on the ground is that, despite the rhetoric of university as an equaliser, university education contributes to a **shallow mirroring** of the social hierarchy, where there is a mere replication of the initial stratification present within society.

### **8.4.3 Social pods**

Based on the thick narratives collected, it can be seen that the experience of education is not the same for students from different social classes. The findings illustrate that students across social classes can be conceptualised as being in different pods, even if they are moving in the same direction. Those in each of these class-based pods have a completely different experience from those in the other pods. Within the semblance of equality and enhanced access to higher education, students in the different pods are under the impression that they are on par. However, this is a surface illusion. Under the veneer, there are clear gaps in terms of their experiences of university education.

### **8.4.4 Putting epistemological access at the centre of the debate**

This study reveals that higher education stakeholders in the Mauritian setting tend to be complacent regarding the maintenance of the current system. Public and private universities, as well as the regulating authorities, have not placed epistemological access high on their agenda. All these institutions tend to be more concerned with enhancing physical access, skills-based teaching, and training subject specialists. The rhetoric of equality of opportunities is also widely used. Irrespective of their class background, students seem to be even less concerned with accessing meaningful knowledge so as to be able to question the established structures and processes. The implication is thus that academics have a crucial role to play in putting epistemological access back on the agenda. The study highlights that the epistemological agenda is not only absent in public discourse, but suffers from deliberate erasure, given that the Mauritian higher education field, and the education system as a whole, seem to have established a situation of stasis, where all the parts of the educational machinery seem to be well-oiled and therefore operate in a relatively stable environment. The challenge, therefore, is to place epistemological access back at the centre of the higher education agenda. Reflecting on the current situation, where all the parties seem happy and satisfied, it is up to the organic intellectuals, who have been through the system, and are fully aware of the biased way in which it operates, to lead this fight for its transformation. This is discussed in sections 8.3.3 and 8.3.4.

#### **8.4.5 Activation level**

This study built on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and Sen's outlook on functionings, to introduce the concept of 'activation level' of students across social classes (see Section 7.3.4.1). Bourdieu and Sen do not consider the level of awareness, preparedness and readiness to undertake higher education studies, assuming that students are on par once they reach the door of the university. However, this study shows that students' ability to make informed decisions is heavily influenced by their pre-university activation level. It also highlights the key role that it plays in determining their educational trajectory.

#### **8.4.6 Social class: evidence of gradations**

The study highlights the centrality of social class in the higher education field, and locates its influence in the primary and secondary educational setting. Contributing to the debate on the significance and pertinence of social class, it identifies how it influences the experience of university education. However, class boundaries seem to be in a liquid state, with tones and shades that emerge across a zone of convergence, rather than strict lines of demarcation between social classes. In line with the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Savage (2013), social class takes the form of transitions and gradations in the Mauritian higher education setting.

#### **8.4.7 Revisiting Bourdieu's views on cultural capital**

The study also contributes to the theoretical debate on cultural capital's influence on educational trajectories. Building on the work of Bourdieu (1987) who views cultural capital as co-existing in three forms (embodied state, objectified state, and institutional state), what emerges from the current study is that the long-lasting disparities of the mind and body (embodied state) and the possession of cultural goods (objectified state) in fact influence the competencies that are to be evaluated and confirmed by the university (institutionalised state). Students' pre-dispositions and aptitude, as well as possession of cultural goods, impact on educational credentials (See Section 7.1.3.5).

## Limitations

### 8.5 Methodological limitations

- Due to the time factor, this study provides a retrospective outlook on the students' experiences. It also analyses their present experience of university education and their outlook on the future. In an optimal situation, a longitudinal study would have provided a better picture of the students' experience, starting with how they prepare themselves to enter the university setting, their initial experiences and how their outlook changes over time as they progress through their studies. The students could also be followed in the work setting to analyse the ultimate outcome of their university journey, and whether it has a determinant impact on their position in the social hierarchy.
- The researcher opted not to consider the subtle differences across social classes, and instead focused on extended social class groupings (Upper Class, Middle Class, Working Class). This approach was adopted as it was both feasible and workable given the limited time-frame and resources. However, it does not take into account the sub-divisions and gradations across social groupings. The study is also based on the narratives of six participants. More participants would have provided a clearer picture across social classes and the nuances within the sub-groupings.
- The study was carried out in the Mauritian setting. There was therefore a need to contextualise social class for the purpose of this research. Given the Mauritian context with its universal and mandatory education system, and its free university education, the conclusions reached cannot be generalised. Nonetheless, the study provides pioneering insight into the elements of the structures, processes and practices, as well as students' pre-dispositions and aptitude that impact on their experience of university education.

## **Future research**

### **8.6 Future directions for research**

#### **Students proceeding abroad**

The study did not take into account students who opted to proceed abroad for their university education. This would entail a completely different study that investigates the following key questions: How do students across social classes experience university education in a foreign context? What are their aspirations after completion? How has exposure to a different culture changed their outlook on the future?

#### **Longitudinal study**

There is also a need to follow students across social classes through a longitudinal study in order to obtain a clearer picture of the influence of social class in terms of their achievements in the world of work, or in their postgraduate studies.

#### **Gaps in earnings**

It is also important to study the gaps in earnings across social classes to obtain a clearer picture of the extent to which universities contribute to the establishment of a bastion of the privileged. In this respect, there is a need to focus on the systemic dysfunctions in the Mauritian setting in terms of infrastructure, teaching facilities, staffing and the curriculum that lead to wide gaps in terms of throughput and successful completion rates across social classes.

#### **Enrollment, throughput, completion and drop-outs**

It is also important to gather statistics on enrollment, throughput, completion and drop-out rates across social classes. This will provide a clearer picture of how the situation is evolving over time, and could be a powerful signal for policy-makers.

## Reflections on my research journey

When I first decided to enroll for a PhD, little did I know that I would be spending the next five years of my life in academic immersion. I underestimated the number of hours that I would be spending at my desk. Looking back, these have been the five most challenging, yet most enriching years of my life. They have completely changed my vision of research. The study also gave me an opportunity to probe an issue that has always been dear to me: the academic trajectory of students from different social classes. From my own academic trajectory, I realised that many factors impede or ease one's educational pathway. As an academic, I am in regular contact with students from different social backgrounds, and am aware that they approach university education in very different ways. This research provided me with the opportunity to probe the experience of university education across different social classes.

At the same time, I acquired and developed skills that will be useful in my future research undertakings. Developing a theoretical framework is one of the most challenging aspects of research. Positioning myself epistemologically was another struggle. Parting with whole chapters on which I had worked for months was not easy. I felt frustrated and discouraged. 'This is normal at this level,' I was told. I had no alternative but to keep going, as quitting was not an option. I was in a 'no retreat – no surrender' mindset.

Nonetheless at different points of this research, I felt that I had more questions than answers, and the way forward seemed blurred and complex. In these moments of uncertainty, I asked myself whether I would be able to find my way out of the messiness. I was partly reassured to hear that these doubts, messiness and uncertainty were normal for research at PhD level, and that in fact they were indicators that I was on the right track.

Above all, this research journey taught me the real meaning of humbleness, and how much I don't know. Paradoxically, it helped me to build confidence in myself, and in my abilities. *'C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron'* (Practice makes perfect). I also learnt the value of hard work, and the feeling of satisfaction that the completion of the different milestones brings.

What is surprising, however, is that now that I am writing the last sentences of this +/- 100 000-word journey, I am already feeling a sense of emptiness, realising that, for five years, I have been in a state of constant academic bubbling. I am under the impression that PhD level research leads to an unquenchable and insatiable thirst for knowledge. Is this also normal at this level....?

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25 July 2019

Mr Nicolas Jean-Francois Ragodoo (2180811670)  
School of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mr Ragodoo,

**Protocol reference number: HSS/0427/019D**

**Project title:** Social class and the experience of University Education: A narrative inquiry

**Approval Notification - Expedited Application**

In response to your application received on 14 May 2019, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

**Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to Its Implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.**

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 1 year from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be **applied for on an annual basis**.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully



Dr Rosemary Sibanda (Chair)

/ms

Cc Supervisor: Dr Lester Brian Shawa, Dr Rubby Dhunpath and Prof H Mariaye  
cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Ansurie Pillay  
cc School Administrator: Ms Sheryl Jeenarain

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Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Rosemary Sibanda (Chair)

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100YEARS OF ACM1.EMIC EXCEU.ENCE

Bois Cheri Rd

Moka

Mauritius

20/03/19

To,

The XXX

XXX University

Dear Sir/ Madam,

**RE: Application for permission to conduct research at Middlesex University, Mauritius**

I, Nicolas Ragodoo, PhD candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Senior Lecturer at the University of Mauritius is hereby making an application to conduct research at your highly esteemed institution. This research will be carried out in two public universities (University of Mauritius and University of Technology, Mauritius) and two private universities (Curtin Mauritius & Middlesex University, Mauritius).

The proposed research title is: *'Social Class and the Experience of University Education: A Narrative Inquiry'*

The research focuses on the experience of University education for students from different social classes.

The research questions are:

1. What are the experiences of university education of different social classes in Mauritian Universities?
2. How do different social classes experience university education in Mauritian Universities?
3. Why do different social groups experience university education in Mauritius the way they do?

Application is made for the sampling of a maximum of 10 undergraduate participants through an initial social-class profiling exercise.

The study will consist of interviews through the life story approach. The signing of the informed consent form will be required from all participants.

All considerations pertaining to ethics of consent, anonymity, right to withdraw, release of sound clips, safe keeping of all research records and for the disposal of such are covered by the UKZN Ethics committee requirements which are available for inspection on request. All participants will be issued with consent forms outlining the research focus and the necessary clauses that address their constitutional rights pertaining to privacy.

The research timeline is as follows:

Data collection – interviews and audio recordings (Sept 2019 – Dec 2019)

Going through transcriptions and discussions (Jan 2020 – Feb 2020)

Data Analysis (Mar-June 2020)

The researcher respectfully requests that access to your highly esteemed institution as a centre for PhD research supervised at UKZN is granted.

**Kindly note that upon receipt of the consent from your institution, all documents will be submitted and vetted by the UKZN ethics committee for ethical clearance prior to be granted permission by UKZN to start the data collection process. A copy of the Ethical Clearance from UKZN will be submitted to your office before starting the fieldwork at Middlesex University, Mauritius.**

I remain at your disposal if you require any additional information/ clarification.

With anticipated thanks,



Nicolas JF Ragodoo

PhD Candidate

Student No: 2180811670

University of KwaZulu-Natal

School of Education

Mobile: + 230 5254 0 777

Email: [ragodoo@gmail.com](mailto:ragodoo@gmail.com)

Bois Cheri Rd

Moka

Mauritius

23/04/19

Dear Mr/ Mrs / Ms XXXXXXXXXXXXX

**RE: Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research**

My name is Nicolas JF Ragodoo from the Department of Social Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Mauritius. My contact details are as follows:

**Office Phone No.:** 403 76 84

**Mobile Number :** 52540777

**E-Mail Address :** n.ragodoo@uom.ac.mu

You are being invited to consider participating in a study entitled '***Social Class and the Experience of University Education: A Narrative Inquiry***' that I am presently conducting as PhD candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The main objectives of this research are as follows:

- To explore experiences of university education of different social classes in Mauritian Universities
- To analyse how different social classes experience university education in Mauritian Universities
- To examine why social classes experience university education the way they do.

This research will be carried out in two public universities (University of ■■■■■■■■■■ and University of ■■■■■■■■■■) and two private universities (■■■■■■■■■■ & ■■■■■■■■■■ University) and will involve a total of 6 full-time undergraduate participants

The research questions for this research are:

1. What are the experiences of university education of different social classes in Mauritian Universities?
2. How do different social classes experience university education in Mauritian Universities?
3. Why do different social groups experience university education in Mauritius the way they do?

The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be of 4h 30 minutes (3 interviews of 90 minutes). The study will consist of interviews through the life story approach. Given that interviews conducted through this approach generally involves an in-depth study of your life experiences, this can lead to situations whereby you might feel uncomfortable with the questions being put to you. However, you will understand that this is a purely academic study that is going to contribute towards a better understanding of university education from a social class perspective.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number: HSS/0427/019D)

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at:

**THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL STUDIES**

**Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities**

**University of Mauritius**

**Rduit**

Alternatively, you can contact the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

**HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

**Research Office, Westville Campus**

**Govan Mbeki Building**

**Private Bag X 54001**

**Durban**

**4000**

**KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA**

**Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609**

**Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)**

There is no cost to be incurred by participants as a result of participation in the study. Participation is purely voluntary. On the other hand, there is also no incentive or reimbursement provided for participation in the study. Your participation in this study will be conducted in a confidential way, and will be treated in such a way that your anonymity is preserved.

In that respect, the following measures have been taken:

- All data collected will be for the sole use of the researcher

- Information collected will be safely stored and will be destroyed / discarded after the research process according to the methods indicated to the ethics committee at UKZN
- All written and audio materials may be consulted by the supervisor and external moderator upon request (all parties are bound by confidentiality clauses at their institutions)

In addition, all audio recordings during interviews will be transcribed and given to you as participant to ensure that they are a faithful transcription of your views.

Whilst we greatly appreciate your participation in this important study and the valuable contribution you can make, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part in this study.

If you do choose to take part, and an issue arises which makes you uncomfortable, you may at any time stop your participation with no further consequences. You can do so by sending an e-mail to the researcher.

If you experience any discomfort or unhappiness with the way the research is being conducted, please feel free to contact me directly to discuss it. Please note that you are free to contact the research office (indicated above) too.

Kind regards,

Nicolas JF Ragodoo

PhD Candidate

Student No: 2180811670

University of KwaZulu-Natal

School of Education

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**CONSENT**

I Mr / Mrs / Ms xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx have been informed about the study entitled **Social Class and the Experience of University Education: A Narrative Inquiry**’ by Nicolas JF Ragodoo.

I fully understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any negative consequences whatsoever.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at

THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL STUDIES  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities  
University of Mauritius

Redit

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

**HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus  
Govan Mbeki Building  
Private Bag X 54001  
Durban  
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Witness**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## Social class and the experience of university education: A narrative inquiry

### Life-history Interview schedule

#### PART 1 – BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS

<b>About yourself</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your name?</li> <li>• How old are you?</li> <li>• Where do you live?</li> <li>• What is your personal and family situation?</li> <li>• What programme are you following at University, and in which year are you?</li> </ul>
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#### PART II - PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

<b>Your primary and secondary education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which school did you attend at primary level?</li> <li>• How was your performance, overall?</li> <li>• What was your experience of Primary Education?</li> <li>• How did you feel in class?</li> <li>• How comfortable were you?</li> <li>• Which secondary school did you attend?</li> <li>• How was your academic performance and secondary level?</li> <li>• What was your experience of secondary education?</li> <li>• How did you feel in class?</li> <li>• How comfortable were you?</li> <li>• What was the attitude of your primary and secondary teachers with regards to your social class?</li> <li>• Did you perceive any issue regarding social justice at primary and / or secondary level?</li> <li>• On what basis did you choose your subjects for upper secondary education?</li> </ul>
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**Part III- SOCIO – ECONOMIC SITUATION IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE**


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<b>Your socio-economic situation in childhood and adolescence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about your parents and family when you were in primary and secondary school.</li> <li>• What were your parents' occupation?</li> <li>• What was your economic situation?</li> <li>• What were your living conditions?</li> <li>• Where were you living?</li> <li>• How did your socio – economic situation impact upon your experience of primary and secondary education?</li> </ul>
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**Part IV- UNIVERSITY EDUCATION - PAST**


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<b>Your initial outlook on university education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why did you choose this university?</li> <li>• How did you opt for this specific programme?</li> <li>• Did anyone/ anything influence you in this process?</li> <li>• How did the application process go through?</li> <li>• Were there any element easing or hindering the application process?</li> <li>• What were your initial aspirations about university studies?</li> <li>• To what extent do you have the feeling that these have been met?</li> <li>• Were there constraints/ difficulties that you faced initially?</li> <li>• How did your social background impact on your initial experience of university education?</li> <li>• How did you cope with the university administration?</li> <li>• What was your experience of same?</li> <li>• Do you think students are in a position to influence university rules?</li> <li>• Can students impact on the allocation of university resources?</li> <li>• What was your initial perception on University academics?</li> <li>• How did your relationship with them evolve over time?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel that academics take time to listen to students and accommodate their requests whenever possible?</li> <li>• Can you give a few examples of your encounters with university administration and university academics to illustrate your experience of same?</li> <li>• Do you feel that the university administration and the academia are in a position to bring changes to the system?</li> <li>• Are they willing to do so?</li> <li>• Did you come across any conflictual situation during your university education?</li> <li>• Did your peers influence your experience of university education?</li> <li>• How did you cope with your university studies over time?</li> </ul>
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**Part V- UNIVERSITY EDUCATION - PRESENT**

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<p><b>Your present appreciation of university education</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are you doing in your studies presently?</li> <li>• Upon accessing university education, has your vision about social justice in society changed?</li> <li>• What are your best experiences of University life?</li> <li>• What are your worst experiences of University life?</li> <li>• Do you think that the experience of University education is the same for all university students?</li> <li>• How do you think your social background impacts on your experience of University life?</li> <li>• Do you feel that one’s social class impacts on the amount of efforts that a student put in his/ her studies?</li> <li>• How would you describe the atmosphere on campus?</li> <li>• How would you qualify your interaction with your peers?</li> <li>• Please give your appreciation of the following with regards to your university experience:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Bias</li> <li>(b) Self interest</li> <li>(c) Prejudices</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What is your appreciation of the established rules and procedures at University?</li> <li>• Who defines the rules on campus? How are these decided upon and applied?</li> <li>• Do you feel that students have a say in same?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are these experienced by students? Is there any feeling that these need to be changed?</li> <li>• Do students actively engage with the university administration to initiate things, or do they accept and reproduce the same rules and procedures?</li> <li>• What guide you in your decision making regarding your university education?</li> <li>• Do you always take decisions regarding your university education in a rational way?</li> </ul>
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**PART VI – UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: FUTURE**

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<p><b>Your views on the impact of University education</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you see your future after university education?</li> <li>• Has your experience of university education influenced your outlook on the future?</li> <li>• How do you compare your life chances with that of your university peers?</li> <li>• Do you think that the University controls or channels you in any way? Or does the University enhance and promote your creativity?</li> <li>• How to ensure that students participate more in the university education process in the future?</li> <li>• In there anything you feel need to be addressed in terms of equity in the experience of University education?</li> </ul>
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## Appendix 5: Data Production Plan

**Research Title:** Social Class and Higher education: The Case of Mauritius

**Critical questions:**

- What is the social class profile of students attending public and private Universities in Mauritius?
- Why do they engage in higher studies? What are their expectations, their beliefs and aspirations?
- How is their actual experiences of the University linked to completion level and the drop outs, and how does this impact on their life chances?

<b>Questions</b>	What is the social class profile of students attending public and private Universities in Mauritius?	Why do they engage in higher studies? What are their expectations, their beliefs and aspirations?	How is their actual experiences of the University linked to completion level and the drop outs, and how does this impact on their life chances?
Why is the data being collected?	To establish the social class profile of students in higher education To be in a position to compare the composition of public universities and private universities in terms of social class	To analyse whether students from different social background have the same expectations, beliefs and aspirations in enrolling for a seat at University	To investigate the link between the actual experience of the students with regards to University and completion level  To analyse the impact of completing the programme on the life chances of the student, from a social class perspective
What are the research instruments?	Structured interviews	Narrative Inquiry	Narrative inquiry
Who (or what) will be the sources of the data?	Students of public and private Universities	Students of public and private Universities	Students of public and private Universities
<b>Questions</b>	What is the social class profile of students attending public and private Universities in Mauritius?	Why do they engage in higher studies? What are their expectations, their beliefs and aspirations?	How is their actual experiences of the University linked to completion level and the drop outs, and how does this impact on their life chances?

How many of the data sources will be accessed?	5% of the student population for each University ■■■■, ■■■■, ■■■■ & ■■■■	60 students from each University ■■■■, ■■■■, ■■■■ & ■■■■	60 students from each University ■■■■, ■■■■, ■■■■& ■■■■
Where is the data to be collected?	The data will be collected at the respective universities of the participants	The data will be collected at the respective universities of the participants	The data will be collected at the respective universities of the participants
How often will data be collected?	Structured interviews – 1 interview for each participant – 30 mins in duration	1 in-depth interview for each participant Interviewing and recording (one hour per participant)	1 in-depth interview for each participant Interviewing and recording (one hour per participant)
Justify this plan for data collection.	Structured interviews are convenient for university students, given that they are conversant with this form of data collection.  Relatively quick and straight forward  Reliable	Will provide the researcher with the voices and experiences of the University Students	Will provide the researcher with the voices and experiences of the University Students

## **Appendix 6 : ORIGINAL QUOTES**

### **AN**

*An zeneral, mo ti enn zelev mwayin, me apre kan finn ariv lexame, mo finn met mo serye et mo'nn reisi ariv pou CPE. Me mo enn zelev ki inn refer siziem...li ti mal pase...parski mo ti ena problem lasante ou si...mopa ti pe reisi catch-up...lerla mo'nn realize, mo'nn dir non...ki fer mo frer kapav ek mwa mo pa kapav ? Mo dir mwa ou si m pou metmo serye...mo'nn reisi malgre lasante pa ti tro korek ou si...me mo'nn manz ar li...*

*Dan kote leson, ti ena enn bann zelev, bann kamarad dan klas ki ti pe pran leson avek sipa tel tel profeser...zot dir ou ki sa proferser-la dan larezion li bokou pli bon...tandi ki nou, nou ti bizin pran leson avek profeser lekol mem akoz li ti pe fer lamwatie pri pou nou. Aster bann seki pa pran leson la, sa maye mem sa...*

### **NJ**

*J'étais une élève très brillante au primaire...généralement, j'étais première en classe ou seconde, avec des A+, A, jamais de B.. Les profs accordaient beaucoup plus de temps au élèves brillants...Je réalisais que c'était pas juste, mais je restais tranquille, parce que je bénéficiais de cela...Les profs savaient que je travaillais bien, et ils étaient confiant que j'allais avoir de bonnes notes...Ils m'ont bien soutenu.*

*Mo ti bizin adapte mwa a kiltir kiltir kolez-la, c'est plutôt enn star school comme vous savez...alors la... comme il y avait beaucoup d'élèves qui venaient des familles aisées. Et moi pas du tout...alors il y avait cette culture de compétition...il y avait une rude compétition dans l'école...et il avait tous les trucs à acheter... Ça coutait énormément.*

*Parce qu'il n'y avait personne pour me guider...pour me dire qu'est-ce que je dois faire...j'ai changé plusieurs fois de filières...j'ai fait science en Form 4, et puis Arts, Food and Nutrition, et puis an HSC j'ai fait Anglais, Maths et Sociologie... alors je ne savais pas vraiment quoi faire dans ma vie...il n'y avait personne pour me guider...j'ai changé carrément de filière à plusieurs reprises. Pour moi, vu que « mo fami pa ti eze, mo ti bizin pran an konsiderasion » the cost of my studies.... J'ai dû choisir les filières qui coutent moins cher...*

*Les profs prennent tout 'for granted' dans le sens que, if you are a girl from XXX (this school), so it is assumed that you know everything, and that you are going to take private tuitions....alors il ne s'investissent pas autant...ils ne vont pas mettre autant de*

*leur énergie dans la classe...il ne vont que mettre un exemple sur le tableau...alors allez travailler par vous-mêmes, et si vous avez des questions, venez demander...parce qu'ils savent que tout le monde prend des leçons...tandis que moi je ne pouvais pas prendre tous les leçons. Je ne prenais pas de leçon de maths, par exemple. Par rapport à ça, j'étais pas ok en maths, j'ai eu 9. J'ai dû prendre des leçons, sa 9 la inn vinn enn 3 finalman.*

*Si j'étais ok financièrement, j'aurais eu plus de personnes autour de moi, des profs pour me guider, et j'aurais été mieux encadre. Mais dans mon cas, tout a été préétabli et imposé sur moi...*

## **SJ**

*Pou gagn bon rezilta, bizin pran leson. Saki pa pran leson, li res par derier mem. Dan leson, profeser travay serye serye, ek li explik pli bien.*

*Papa ousi so travay pa ti pe ase,lerla li ti pe bizin fer bann travay apar pou kapav meet bann nesosite saki mwa mo ti pe bizin. Zot finn trase ek finn fer zot maximum, mem si zot pa finn tro al lekol. Selma, mo pa sagrin ki mo paran pa ti ena plis kas ousi, parski si mo ti ena plis mwayin dan kolez, mo ti pou gate plis, ek kapav mo pa ti pou la zordi ...mo pa ti pou pran ledikasion sa serye-la, mo'nn oblize fer plis zefor...mo'nn servi sa kouma enn zouti pou mo mont lao...*

## **KL**

*Oui....mais après ce qu'il faut savoir c'est que mon école primaire, même si c'était une école privée, ce n'était pas la meilleure école privée, ce n'était pas comme...disons le Lycée Labourdonnais, ou l'école du centre ou quoi...c'était un peu...disons...l'école privée du middle class...c'était pas du tout pour l'élite...c'était pas l'élite académique...ni l'élite financier non plus...*

*Au XXXX (her new school), c'était bon, c'était bien, mais c'était un peu compliqué parce que...justement je venais d'une école ou il n'y avait pas beaucoup d'élèves...donc c'était un peu comme une famille...et là j'arrive dans une école ou il y avait vraiment beaucoup d'élèves...et où il y a des gens de différent...ou tout le monde est différent...différentes cultures, différent niveaux académiques...différent rangs sociales... différent tout...et la donc c'était un peu un choc.....honnêtement...je sais que ça peut sembler étrange, mais c'était un peu un 'cultural choc'... Mais je ne dis pas cela d'une façon supérieure ou quoi...c'est juste qu'au début j'avais du mal à m'adapter....*

*Définitivement...je pense que si j'avais un autre background social, disons que si j'étais du upper class... je pense que j'aurais été dans une meilleur école...j'aurais été dans une école privée...du style Lycée Labourdonnais, école du centre, ou le Bocage...et je pense*

*aussi que j'aurai commencé mes études plus tôt, parce que le fait que je sois du middle class, Vu que mes parents ne sont pas eux même des 'high achievers' académiquement, je n'ai jamais eu cette influence de... comme si...que je peux tout faire...comme si...entreprendre des grandes études et tout.... Autre chose, j'aurais commencé l'université plus tôt, et j'aurais potentiellement pas fait mes études à Maurice. Sans vouloir...sans vouloir look down sur les universités qu'il y a à Maurice...*

## **ZK**

*Pour commencer, je n'ai pas suivi le cursus normal, j'ai suivi le cursus français...je suis entré dans le système français à trois ans à la maternelle....puis le primaire et le collège, et après j'ai continué au lycée jusqu'à la terminale et finalement j'ai obtenu mon Baccalauréat.*

*J'ai eu une éducation assez moyenne parce qu'au primaire j'avais rencontré des difficultés, c'est-à-dire des troubles, des angoisses et tout...du coup, j'avais suivi un programme d'insertion scolaire...un programme différent des autres élèves pour pouvoir vaincre cette angoisse, mais après, j'ai commencé à gagner en confiance en moi petit à petit et grâce à ce programme, j'ai pu vaincre mes difficultés et tout. En niveau de l'encadrement, je peux dire que j'ai été bien encadré par les profs et tout...Ils m'ont bien apporté leur aide pour que je puisse suivre une scolarité normale et saine pour arriver là où je suis aujourd'hui.*

*Il n'y a que les établissements scolaires français qui font ce programme là...à ma connaissance, il n'y a pas cela dans les autres établissements...*

*Mes parents m'ont bien soutenu, ils m'ont bien apporté leur aide...et surtout, ils ne m'ont pas vraiment mis la pression...parce que s'ils m'avaient mis la pression, ils savaient que j'allais pas pouvoir progresser...Du coup, ils m'ont laissé faire à mon rythme, me débrouiller, puis j'ai pu y arriver petit à petit... Ça a été assez long...assez laborieux...mais après le travail a porté ses fruits au fait...c'est grâce au fruit de mon travail et tout... que j'ai pu arriver là où j'en suis...*

*Je me posais la question, au fait...il faut noter déjà, qu'au tout début j'avais des difficultés...si j'étais parti dans un cursus normal, j'aurai pas eu cette aide la comme j'ai eu au primaire et tout...j'aurai pas eu sa ...si je n'avais pas eu ce support, je n'aurai jamais pu continuer au niveau du secondaire, et entreprendre des études universitaires...j'ai vraiment de la chance d'être dans un établissement comme celle-ci...et d'être encadré par des professeurs qui ont tout fait pour que je puisse poursuivre des études...et voilà le résultat aujourd'hui...*

## AN

*Liniversite touletan mo ti rev sa...mo ti dirk i si mo fer mo HSC ek mo pas pou lexame, mo pou kontign mo letid mwa...mo pa anvi aret lamem...*

*Mem si mo ti ena swa, mo pa ti pou al enn lot plas...parski mo ti ena mo bann kouzinn ki ti liniversite isi mem dan lepase e « aujourd'hui » mo trouv zot inn bien reisi...zot ok...zot osi zot ti pe reste dan site mem...kifer bizin al lot plas al pey pli ser, kan isi mem nivo-la bien bon. Mo pa trouv lezot liniversite pli bon ki isi mwa. Anplis li preske kado.*

*Social Work, sa mo ti bien kontan sa kan mo ti fer HSC...mo ti ena enn profeser, li ti touletan montre nou Sociology, e mo ti mari interese ek sa size la... mo ti pe anvi al fer Leadership Sosial, pou vinn enn formater dan Leadership Sosial, parski mo ti an kontakt avek avek enn mentor ki ti pe okip travay sosial dan site... kan mo get so travay ki li pe fer lor terin ek so travay dan biro, sa finn inspir mwa bokou... lerala mo ki pourquoi pas mwa ousi mo fer parey.*

*Kan mo finn gagn mo seat pou Social Work, mo ti extra kontan parski mo ti pe atann...mo'nn gagn li...mo ti rantre de semenn apre...*

## NJ

*Au fait c'est à cause de mo sitiasion familial ki mo pa finn kapav antreprann bann letid à l'étranger.. Et même pour l'université aussi, c'était un struggle. Au XXX, les élèves commencent leur application pour les universités étrangères très tôt. Les parents de mes amies avaient les moyens de payer leurs études. Mais pas moi. J'étais triste, et même un peu jalouse. Mais les études à l'étranger, c'est seulement pour ceux qui ont de l'argent. Alors j'étais résigné à trouver un emploi pour aider ma famille. Coming from a working class family, et vu que mes parents ont que le salaire minimum, alors nou servi tou pandan enn mwa ek pena savings as such. Et moi je ne voulais pas partir à l'université parce qu'on n'avait pas les moyens. J'ai dit à maman que je vais pas partir à l'université, que je vais chercher un emploi and all...mais quand j'ai terminé mon HSC, c'était un problème d'avoir un job. Et là il y a enrôlement pour aller à l'université. La maman m'a dit que non... tu dois partir... elle a emprunté de l'argent parce qu'elle voulait absolument que j'aille à l'université. J'ai dit ok.*

*J'ai opté pour la sociologie à l'université parce que j'avais fait comme « Main subject » à l'école. Au fait, à l'école j'avais fait la sociologie, parce que ça allait me coute moins en termes de leçons etc. J'ai eu un A+ en sociologie, et j'ai été classe parmi les meilleurs élèves au niveau national. Mais je ne savais pas que je pouvais opter pour un autre cours à l'université. Je croyais que je n'allais pas avoir d'autres cours. J'aurais pu opter pour des cours qui sont plus en demande, mais je ne savais pas comment ça marchait...et personne de m'a guidé...je n'ai pas eu le « proper guidance » ... c'est une*

*fois à l'université, avec le recul que je réalise que j'aurai pu « apply » pour un autre sujet, qui aurait été mieux, en termes de carrière.*

*En ce qui concerne l'application pour l'université, je n'avais pas vraiment de choix : ou je pars à une université publique, ou je pars travailler. Au fait, personne ne m'a influencé. De toute façon, il n'y avait personne pour me guider. Personne dans mon entourage ne l'avait fait avant moi. J'ai fait l'application par moi-même et c'était assez simple, clair et direct. Immédiatement comme j'ai un mon Letter of Offer, j'ai vu qu'il y avait un deadline pour payer les « fees » ... ..il y avait Rs 22,000 à payer. C'était une somme énorme pour nous, mais maman m'a dit : ne t'inquiète pas on va chercher de l'argent...et elle a emprunté de l'argent de son employeur.*

## **SJ**

*Liniversite deor pa ti kapav parski mo finn get dapre mo mwayin...pou peye li ti difisil, parski papa ti deza ena enn loan pou pey « la maison », lerala li pa pou kapav rebran loan. Sa osi mo redir ou, mo pa ki ena okenn swa pa ti ena okenn gid mem, nek mo'nn trouv ena open day, partou ena open day, nek mo'nn vini, lerala mo'nn tonb lamem.*

*Non, person pa finn inflians mwa...par momem saki mo mo finn deside...mo'nn gagn mo deziem swa ofe (Communication)... premier swa ti Angre, me mo ti kone pa pou gagne mem sa...mo ti kontan pou fer zournalis.Mo finn swazir sa size-la parski li inpe parey kouma bann size mo ti fer : histoire, géographie, littérature. Ler mo'nn vinn isi, bannla inn explike, zot finn dirk i li enn mix-up e mo pa pou gagn okenn difikilte. Apre, zis pou samem ki mo ti kalifie.*

*Ti inpe difisil parski tou ti onlin, sa ousi mo finn bizin al kot enn fami aswar pou ranpli akoz mo pa ti ena internet... pa ti ena nanye kot mwa...portab ousi ti ankot bouton...lerla pe trouve ki bizin bann sertifika ki mo'nn konpoze...ki mo'nn fer avan...mo'nn bizin al kot enn fami Trèfle pou fer sa...lerla mo'nn bizin repey enn transpor, re-al Britannia pou al sers tou mo bann doiman...sa fami-la, li ti pe travay dan bann zafer computer tousa , lerala li ti ena bann ekipman ki bizin, kouma scanner tousa.*

*Premier tizanzan dan mo fami ki rant liniversite, ki li kote mo mama ou mo papa. Ti enn gran fierte pou mo fami. Mo ti santi mo'nn fransi enn letap dan mo lavi. Li enn gran zafer pou mwa ousi ek pou mo fami ousi.*

## **KL**

*Après mon HSC, déjà c'est pas dans mes plans de faire des études... parce que j'ai pas les moyens de faire des études... donc je travaille...et je sais pas aussi je que je veux faire...donc je travaille dans un restaurant ou je m'occupe un peu de tout...ensuite je*

*travaille dans un business hôtel ou je fais personnel assistant pour deux ans... ensuite je travaille dans un autre hôtel...et au final, je me cherche et je finis par comprendre que, oui j'ai envie de faire des études...et oui j'ai envie de faire des études en psychologie....et à ce moment-là j'ai pris un Loan pour commencer mes études de psychologie.*

*J'ai choisi XXX (cette université privée) parce que je savais qu'elle offrait un degré en Psychologie. Je n'ai pas choisi une université publique à Maurice, parce que j'ai entendu dire que leur diplôme en psychologie n'était pas nécessairement reconnu. Il n'il n'y a pas de masters à Maurice...pour aller ensuite faire un Master en psychologie à l'étranger, c'est pas sûr que les études fait dans les universités publiques à Maurice soient reconnu. Donc, J'avais un peu des doutes... mais il faut dire que je ne me suis pas beaucoup renseigné non plus... et savoir que XXX (l'université ou j'étudie) c'est anglais, ça paraissait plus « safe », plus fiable et plus reconnu internationalement*

*The application process is very smooth, je sign in, je m'enregistre, j'envoie mes documents, mes certificats de Form V et mes résultats de HSC , et il m'ont répondu , je me souviens plus..peut-être quelque semaines après pour me dire que j'ai suffisamment de crédits pour avoir accès au cour...je n'ai pas eu de Foundation Course à faire...j'ai été enregistré directement pour un BSc.*

## **ZK**

*Au fait au tout début je ne savais pas vraiment où aller à Maurice... Il y a des amis de ma mère qui m'ont conseillé d'aller à cette Université...et aussi j'avais vu aussi durant les visites des salons universitaires que (cette institution) délivrait des diplômes internationaux. C'est ça qui m'a flashé directement...et après par la suite, il y avait des amis qui m'ont conseillé de venir aussi... J'ai choisi cette université, parce que tout d'abord c'était un établissement français, pour mieux rester dans le cursus, et aussi parce qu'au début je me sentais pas trop près pour aller étudier à l'étranger... L'établissement est reconnu pour ces diplômes délivre à l'international...c'est ça qui m'a plus tenté...et en plus ça me permettait de rester dans le système... Je ne voulais pas rejoindre une université avec un autre système d'enseignement parce que je ne voulais pas perdre la cadence au fait...mais après je compte poursuivre un degré en ACCA et tout après ma licence...au fait je fais ça pour ne pas perdre le fil....*

*Au fait j'étais au lycée et puis après j'ai commencé directement au XXXX University...J'ai choisi la filière de la gestion parce qu'au fait, cela va me permettre après de reprendre le business familial qui est l'immobilier...et en même temps pour pouvoir exercer mon métier que j'adore, c'est la comptabilité...c'est mon deuxième hobby.*

## AN

*Mo ti pe get liniversite koumadir li pou enn lot lemond...kot pou gagn nouvo kamarad, pou fer nouvo rankont, e li pou diferan... tou letan nou tann « parler »...nou get dan televizion, nou trouv liniversite inn fer sa, inn fer sa...kan bann zelev gradie, ena graduation ceremony dan televizion, zot koze, zot finn reisi achieve sa pandan zot trw-z-an, nou dir « pourquoi pas » nou mem... be kan nou inn reisi rantré, nou dirk i dan trwa-z-an nou pou parey koumsa.*

*“Mo pa ti ena laptop, mo ti bizin al kot fami pou fer mo bann notes ek PowerPoint ek lor sa mo ti ena enn module statistik ki ti pe bizin laptop pou kapav swiv dan klas”*

*Dan klas li ti fasil pou mo adapte... mo pa finn gagn tro gran problem pou fer kamarad tousala...*

*Dan klas li ti fasil pou adapte...mo pa finn gagn tro gran problem pou fer kamarad tousala...dan mo klas, zot tou korek, ek nou tou kamarad...nou dan enn liniversite ki anglob tou dimounn...ena plizier klas sosial ladan...nou tou kapav gagn akse ek nou tou alez.*

*Li inpe mitize...ena bann zafer ki mo ti panse li koumsa e kan mo finn vini, mo finn trouve exakteman li koumsa...par exanp, li pa zis akademik, nou gagn kontakt ek bann lecturer... li pli ouver lor lemond ki zis dan liv...parkont saki mo pa ti panse pou koumsa se ki ena fwa ou bizin debrouy ou par oumem...lecturer pa pou ed ou touletan..oumem ou bizin gete kouma ou pou fer...li pou donn ou bann gid, li pou larg ou dan lamer...ou bizin gete kouma ou pou naze...mo ti panse ki bann lecturer pou pli ed noue k akonpagn nou.*

*Mo finn travay dir ek letan gagn rezilta Year travail dure ek letemps gaye rezilta Year Semester 1, mo gagn 3 B ek enn A. Sa rezilta-la inn donn mwa kouraz pou fer plis, parski mo ti pe trouve ki mo ena potansiel ek mo fami touzour deryer mwa.*

## NJ

*Etant donné mon family background, je veux travailler dure pour pouvoir réussir. Depuis le début, j'étais motivé à bloc...ce qui me motive, c'est que j'ai vécu des situations difficiles...I have been through so much struggles in my life... I should get out of these struggles... et je dois attain something....L'université, c'est un grand monde, et c'est une grande chance pour moi d'en faire partie. It is one of the ways through which je vais avoir un job et je vais pas seulement m'en sortir, mais aussi briller...parce que je sais*

*que je suis intelligente et que j'ai la capacité de travailler et de réussir, afin d'améliorer les choses pour ma famille.*

*Tout change une fois que je suis à l'université. Je m'adapte très vite à l'université, et j'arrive à 'cope' avec mes études. Au collège, les élèves viennent plus des upper classes families, or upper middle classes, mais à l'université je me retrouve avec des étudiants qui share more or less the same economic background as me. Donc la pression est immédiatement moins à l'université. This is one of the good things about joining this university.*

*Le fait que j'étais au XXX....au fait, tous les élèves du XXX partent à l'extérieur pour leurs études. Et moi je me suis retrouvée dans une université publique à Maurice...XXX, excusez-moi de dire ça, mais c'était une certaine classe.....je voulais partir, aller étudier à l'extérieur moi aussi, et ne pas me retrouver dans une université publique de Maurice. Mais je n'avais pas le choix. Idéalement ça aurait été à l'extérieur. Mais j'ai dû me résigner à rester à Maurice. Je pensais qu'étudier à Maurice n'allait pas être aussi plaisant...but I was wrong. I can say that it has been a very good experience as from the first day.*

## **SJ**

*Kan mo pa ti ankor rant liniversite, mo ti pe gete dan bann fim...sirtou bann fim indien...mo ti panse koumadir liniversite ti pou ena so lamizman ousi e ki pou bizin aprann ousiencore rentre l'université, mo ti pe guetter dans bann films..surtout ban film indien ...be mwa mo ti pe fini plan ki mo pou bizin konn balans mwa dan enn sertin nivo pou ki mwa sa pa afebli mwa...parski mo paran pou investi dan enn sertenn fason, e mo bizin reisi rekolte frwi-la...mo pa kapav let them down.*

*Saki mo gete dan fim ek larealite, li later lesiel diferan...mo donn ou enn lexanp, get dan bann fim tousala..mo ti trouve bannla sante danse tousala dan kafetarya...mo ti panse li pou inpe dan sa model la...fason bizin abiye mem vini...kote aprann mo ti panse pou ena dissiplinn parey kouma dan kolez...pou gagn rapor...me letan mo finn vinn la, li diferan...parski mo pa'nn realize...mo ti ankor dan sa lemond zanfann kolez la...letan an, zot bann adilt...vedir li pa parey (kouma kolez)... li pou diferan...lerla mo finn santi o finn grandi.*

## **KL**

*Puisque je souhaite devenir soit un clinical, counselling, ou educational psychologist, j'avais en tête que ce premier degré allait me donner une base solide, et me préparer pour pouvoir faire un Master. J'étais confiante d'avoir fait le bon choix, car le diplôme était délivré par une université anglaise, et avait donc une reconnaissance internationale. Je pensais aussi qu'on allait avoir plein de cours, et d'interactions avec*

*les lecturers, et en même temps, j'allais me faire beaucoup d'amis. J'étais motivée à bloc pour cette nouvelle étape de ma vie...c'était comme une nouvelle aventure qui commençait.*

*Dès la première semaine, j'ai réalisé que c'était plus compliqué que ce j'avais imaginé...genre on doit être à l'heure en classe, on ne doit pas utiliser notre téléphone...on ne doit pas faire ceci...genre un peu un high school vibe, même en étant à l'université. Mais de l'autre cote, je dois dire que dans la classe, le courant passe tout de suite...On s'est adapté très vite au fait.*

*En terme de student life, je pensais que ça allait être un peu plus...pas forcément de détente...mais je pensais que la vie universitaire allait être un peu plus...oui on est très autonome, mais je pensais pas qu'on allait nous mettre autant la pression....mais sinon ça se passe très bien, mais il faut souligner que je fais face à beaucoup de academic stress...je me mets beaucoup de pression...parce que j'ai envie de réussir, et le workload est quite heavy...et je m'attendais pas que ça soit aussi stressant que ça....*

*Je m'attendais aussi qu'on allait avoir plus de cours...je savais pas que ça allait autant de travail par soit même... je ne m'attendais pas à avoir si peu d'heure par semaine...je ne saurais vous dire combien d'heure on fait par module, mais...par exemple, je vais à l'université que deux fois par semaine...pour chaque module, on rencontre le prof une fois par semaine pour une session de deux à trois heures, et c'est tout.*

## **ZK**

*J'étais déterminé à travailler dure, comme je l'ai toujours fait jusqu'ici. J'étais confiant que j'avais fait le bon choix, au niveau de l'institution...L'objectif du cours c'est de vous insérer directement dans la vie active...dans le monde du travail...du coup c'est déjà pour avoir les bases...arriver à la licence, là je savais que j'allais avoir un bagage solide du monde du management et tout...*

*Déjà, quand je suis arrivé dans ma classe, j'ai vu qu'on était mélangé avec des étudiants en alternance (ceux qui travaille en entreprise). Du coup, je me suis dit que ça allait être très compétitif au fait...les gars a cote de moi avaient déjà 3, 4 ou 5 années d'expérience de travail alors que moi je rentrait directement dans le système universitaire..., du coup c'était très compétitif...mais après on a développé des liens d'amitié, et maintenant, tout est bien mieux. On s'entend parfaitement....*

*Au niveau de l'enseignement. C'est parfait...les profs sont bien encadrant, à l'écoute des étudiants et tout...sauf qu'au fait moi je pensais que les profs à l'université allaient être comme les profs que j'ai connu au lycée... Mais arrive à l'université, c'était à un autre niveau...plus de sérieux ...c'était pas du tout ce que j'avais entendu avant d'entrer à l'université....*

*Je peux pas vraiment dire que j'ai eu des difficultés jusqu'à présent. J'ai appris beaucoup de choses pour m'intégrer dans la vie professionnelle et tout...j'ai pu connaître les bases...puis ensuite, c'est vrai qu'on débute j'ai rencontré pas mal de difficulté parce qu'il y avait des sujets qui ne m'intéressaient pas...genre ressources humaines et tout... mais après quand on pratique, qu'on participe, et qu'on s'intéresse, après ça devient normal.*

## **AN**

*Bann lekturers, mo ti panse ki pou ena enn distans ant zot ek bann zelev...zot pou lor enn sertenn nivo, e ki nou, nou pou lor enn lot nivo, e donk nou bizin ekoute..me li pad itou sa...mo ti panse ki ti pou ena enn gap...mo ti panse ki zot pa pou tro aksesib...me mo'nn trouv linvers. Bann lectures aksesib ninport kan nou bizin zot, zot la pou nou. Zot pa get figir nanye, zot get tou dimounn parey...Selma, ena enn-de, ki nek vini fer klas ale, ek zot dir ou zot pena letan, zot bloke ek bann lezot zafer. Me sa,se zis enn ou de lekturers .*

## **NJ**

*Ils sont très helpful en général. Même si avec le temps, la relation c'est amélioré, mais avec un ou deux ça s'est détérioré avec le temps. Au fait ces lekturers la viennent en classe juste pour deliver the lectures. Il n y a pas vraiment de guidance. They don't really listen to us and try to accommodate our needs. They impose things on us. They don't give you the opportunity to explore and to discover. Mais je ne fais qu'accepter. Parce que c'est clair que la structure universitaire est plus fort que les demandes des étudiants. Cependant, ce sont des exceptions. En règle générale, les lekturers sont très compréhensifs dans leur approche.*

*Au niveau de l'effort, moi je donne le meilleur de moi-même. Je pense que c'est comme ça pour tout le monde. Au fait ça dépend de la personne. Si la personne veut travailler, il va le faire, mais s'il ne veut pas, il ne va pas le faire. Le problème c'est que la structure va imposer quelque part, mais as working class student je sais que je dois travailler et donner le maximum de moi-même. Il y a un soft compétition dans la classe. Bon, c'est pas aussi rude qu'au collège, mais ça me motive à travailler. Le contenu est déjà décidé, car il y a un programme document, avec les modules à compléter, et les crédits tout sa....On ne peut pas changer grand-chose car les modules contents sont déjà préétabli...c'est bête de remettre cela en question...*

## **SJ**

*Depi Year 1, tou saki mo'nn fer, mo'nn fer zis par mwa, ena bann ti ed profeser, me momem mo'nn fer tou par momem Me parkont bann lezot kamarad ki mo ena, zot finn gagn ed ek zot bann seniors... Bann seniors get zot. Par exanp, premie fwa mo gagn enn*

*assignment, mo pa kone ki ete sa...mo finn bizin fer tou par momem. Tou saki mo'nn fer se orizinal. Parkont bann-la finn gagn gid, ein met sa....ein met lot...Mo pa'nn santi mwa kouma dir inferyer dan enn sertenn fason...mo'nn pran li pozitif..ki fer ? mo pe devlope momem..kouma dir pou mwa mo pe devlope momem, mo pe amenn enn nouvo zafer dan mo travay...mo pa pou pran travay enn lot dimounn, apre mo kopie preske mem zafer, apre mo pou azout enn ti nouvo zafer. Non. Si li bon, li bon. Si li pa bon ou si mo pou kone kotsa mo pou bizin ameliorer....pou mwa mo'nn pran sa, des au commencement...*

## **KL**

*Honnêtement. Euh... les lecteurs.... c'est un sujet un peu sensible parce que nous avons eu quelques soucis avec nos lecteurs...pas personnellement...mais j'ai pu voir que mes camarades de classe...ou des élèves qui sont dans d'autres années ou dans d'autres cours etc. On a eu des petits soucis avec les lecteurs...genre il prennent tout leur temps pour répondre à des mails....des trucs comme ça... J'ai l'impression que nos lecteurs n'ont pas vraiment de temps... il n'ont pas de temps pour rien au fait...mais je veux dire...par rapport au prix qu'on paye, j'aurai expect que les lecteurs soient plus au 'petits soins'...mais il ne faut pas mettre tout le monde dans le même panier...il y a de très bon lecteurs...mais certains, j'ai l'impression qu'ils ont eux aussi un workload énorme, et du coup c'est compliqué pour eux de pouvoir handle tout sa...c'est l'impression que j'ai...*

## **ZK**

*J'ai toujours recherché une université qui offrait des diplômes internationaux, parce que moi, je comptais peut-être plus tard aller travailler à l'étranger et tout. Du coup c'était important pour moi d'avoir ce diplôme car j'aurai accès à plusieurs jobs dans le monde, en France, à Dubaï et tout...j'aurais plus d'ouvertures au fait...tandis que si j'avais opté pour une université publique locale, j'aurais été limité dans mes choix et tout...parce qu'au fait, en entreprise, avoir un diplôme d'état Français, c'est bien reconnu, et ça représente un plus dans le monde du travail.*

## **AN**

*Parfwa administrasyon ena inpe letarzi.zot tarde pou pran bann aksyon...par exanp kan enn zanfan per antre, zot bizin fini kone ek bizin fini organize pou donn li so bus pass.. Pas kan li'nn fini rantre tou...enn dimounn ki pena « les moyens »...pandan enn mwa net li fini al liniversite san pass, lerla pe donn li so pass....me selma, mo pe trouve aster ki bann etidyan atraver l'Union, ena bann zafer ki zot trouve pa korek, e zot met presion pou ki administrasyon sanz sa. parfwa ena bann sanzman ki fer, me parfwa li pa fer... ..li res koumsamem ....Ofe ena enn gap ant bann zelev ek administrasyon.... Bizin pas*

*par lecturers...dir zot get enn kou si zot kapav fer demars-la pou nou... bizin pas par programme coordinator, ek pa gagn akse avek ladministrasion.... Ena fwa administrasion pa kone ki pas par zot latet osi...zot ti pe dir pou fer graduation lor terin football...me etidian-la inn fer zefor trwa-z-an, apre sa zour spesial la, ou dir li al fer sa lor terin football, eski pa bizin donn zelev-la s ovaler... ladministratsion fer bann lalwa bankal.... Administrasion pa pe fer so travay kouma bizin.*

## **KL**

*Je me suis adapté très vite, et je suis les règlements à la lettre. Au fait c'était pour moi un relâchement total, comme une délivrance, parce qu'au collège il y avait tellement de pression. Ici il y a bien moins de pression. Au fait les règles sont correctes et sont faire to one and all. Je ne pense pas qu'il y ait grand-chose à changer. Le système est établi, et c'est toujours comme ça. L'administration de l'université opère d'après les procédures établies, et ne peuvent pas réellement changer quoi que ce soit. On ne fait que suivre. Même si ça m'es arriver de penser qu'il y a telle chose qui n'aurait pas dû être ainsi, mais je sais que moi seule, je ne peux rien faire. Au fait je ne fais pas vraiment attention aux règlements. I just comply with everything, so as not to be in trouble. Et je pense que c'est le cas pour la grande majorité des étudiants. Zot pa pou al esey sanz enn sistem ki deza la. Se inpoz sur nous et on va suivre comme des moutons. On ne peut rien y faire. On laisse comme c'est.*

## **SJ**

*Zame mo pa finn lir mem okenn lalwa liniversite.(laughs...) Mo fer saki bizin fer...mo pa al andeor kad...mo swiv tou...si mo bizin fer tel zafer, mo fini fer li...si ena form pou ranpli, mo net ranpli li...mo pa pou al kas latet ar sa mwa...mo nek ranpli li mo ale... pa pou reflesi plis ki sa...kifer ena sa... « ou quoi »...nek swiv prosedir...Dan biro administrasion, nek kan ena pou al kolekte 12as ski mo finn al laba, sinon zame...bon li posib sanz bann regleman tousala...parsi etidian mazorite, ek institision la li roule par enn group « personnes » ...vedir se bann etidian-la ki pou vinn la, ki pou vinn aprann...zot ena pou rod tel fasilite...tel fasilite pena..be lerla zot kapav inpoz pou upgrade nivo bann fasilite...Ena zot poz kandida pou zot eli...lerla zot pou kapav fer kitsoz...me pa reisi selma...mo trouv tou parey mem, mwa..*

## **KL**

*Non, Je n'ai jamais eu de problème avec l'administration. Et de toute façon, je vais à l'université, je rentre chez moi, je fais mes assignments, je soumets mes devoirs, et ce qu'il y a autour...ça ne m'intéresse pas vraiment...je n'ai pas un sens d'appartenance vraiment à l'université.*

*Non....enfin.....je vais dire qu'on pourrait éventuellement....mais pour moi, ça ne m'intéresse pas, honnêtement vous dire...mais après je pense que les autres, s'il ont des idées et tout, si c'est pas trop sérieux, je pense qu'ils peuvent mettre ça en place...mais je ne pense pas non plus qu'ils pourront faire de grands changements...mais après c'est mon opinion...et il faut savoir que je suis pas très très involved dans l'université...par rapport au fonds de l'université, et comment c'est alloué, par exemple, je pense pas que les étudiants peuvent influence la façon que c'est fait..*

*Je pense que c'est décidé en Angleterre, et que Maurice ne fait que suivre les plans préétablis...les étudiants mauriciens n'ont pas leur mot à dire...we just abide...Les étudiants sont engagés, il rentrent dans des groupes...mais par rapport à la gestion de l'université, il ont un peu peur je crois...il n'accepte pas...il n'y a des choses « qu'il ne sont pas d'accord », qu'ils veulent changer...mais je pense que la majorité des élèves ont peur d'ouvrir leur bouches....il ont peur que ça a un impact sur leur 'grades'...que ça reflète sur le traitement qu'ils auront à l'université...j'ai l'impression qu'ils préfèrent la fermer...Mais les lecturers, eux, contrairement aux étudiants, ils peuvent changer les choses...on a eu des situations où il fallait changer les heures, changer le time-table, ou bouger un deadline...mais si c'est nous qui demandons, ce n'est pas fait tout de suite...mais quand c'est les lecturers qui doivent faire des changements en fonction de ce qui les convient le mieux, ça se passe mieux, et c'est fait très vite...*

## **ZK**

*Au fait dans chaque classe, on a des délégués...on a des représentants de classe...et eux ils notent ce que les étudiants veulent changer au sein de l'établissement. Ils remontent l'information à l'administration. Par exemple si on a des soucis avec les examens et tout, les délégués se concertent et après remontent l'information par rapport à ce que les étudiants ne sont pas d'accord, et après il y a une décision qui est prise par l'administration. Donc ils peuvent avoir une influence sur l'administration jusqu'à un certain niveau...Cependant en ce qui concerne les décisions plus importantes pour l'université, les délégués ont très peu d'influence. Ils peuvent seulement intervenir dans la vie de tous les jours sur le campus, mais pas vraiment par rapport aux structures universitaires, et aux procédures établis.*

## **AN**

*Parski nou finn asize nou finn analize avek paran, nou finn trouve ki par rapor avek « le taux » kip e bizin peye isi, li bokou pli aksesib pou nou konpare avek se ki bann lezot institision pe propoze. Al aprann deor-la, sa li inposib sa..Mem isi la, nou bizin trase pou gagn sa tigit ki ena pou peye la.*

## **NJ**

*Premièrement on n'a pas les matériaux nécessaires. Moi je viens du working class. Il faut avoir un laptop. Moi je n'avais pas de wifi a la maison. Comme je suis entrée à l'université, ma maman a dû faire les démarches pour avoir le wifi. Je n'avais pas de laptop aussi pour mon SC et HSC. Mais dès ki mo finn join l'université, mo finn bizin sanz mo portab, mo finn bizin pran enn lapotop pou mwa ...c'était des dépenses additionnels... Le problème au niveau de l'université, c'est les fees qu'il fallait payer. Ma Maman a dû emprunter pour payer...maintenant s'il y avait le full tuition fees à payer, je n'aurai jamais pu être à l'université.*

## **SJ**

*Selma pa tou zanfana ki ena mem experyans...parski ena saki pli ros-la, li vini, li desann dan so loto, li swiv so kour, li santi li ot, ler klas fini, li rant dan so loto li re-ale...li pa pou gagn okenn interaksion..me pou « la classe moyenne » ek bann seki mizer, li pa parey...fason ki zot pou grandi, li enn lot kalite.... Isi tou zafer deroul peyman mem. Si ou bizin fer enn peymanla, ou bizin kopi enn resi ou bizin pey Rs 50.00...pou enn testimonial ou si bizin paye...aster si ou finn blie anrezistre pou bann modil, ou si ou ena re-sit, li pli ser ankor...*

## **KL**

*Je sais pas comment les autres fonctionnent, mais je sais que moi, je peux pas 'afford' de refaire une année...j'ai pas les moyens...j'ai plus forcément l'âge...d'après moi... refaire et tout...donc vraiment oui...le facteur de savoir que j'ai pas les moyens forcément me motive à faire mon maximum....et aussi le fait de me dire que si j'ai des bons résultats et tout, peut-être que ça va me permettre d'avoir un accès plus facilement dans une université ou il y a beaucoup de compétition, et ou peut-être sa coute pas aussi cher que ça...le fait de savoir 'at the back of my mind' que j'ai pas les moyens, ça me motive de mettre toutes les chances de mon côté en faisant les choses bien.*

*Je pense que ceux qui ont moins de moyens se donnent à fond. Ceux qui ont les moyens. Ils n'ont pas forcément peur...s'ils doivent refaire une année, papa va payer... même s'ils n'ont pas les meilleurs résultats, ils ont les moyens pour aller dans les meilleures universités pour leurs masters...donc c'est ok, il n'ont pas à aller dans les universités ou il y a une grosse compétition et ou ça coute pas aussi cher...et puis, même s'il ne réussissent pas avec un First Class et tout, les gens qui appartient à la classe sociale supérieure ont plus de backing et ont plus de chances d'avoir un job dans tel ou tel domaine...*

## AN

*Li ti ok..li ti fasil pou adapte...mo pa finn gagn tro gran probelm pou fer kamarad tousala...dan mo klas, zot tou korek, ek nou tou kamaard...me ena enn-de ki met zot dan enn sertin grander... zot met dan ran parski zot ena plis kas..me selma, sa fason ki zot fer la, samem ki pous mwa pou al pli de-l-avan...sa motiv mwa pou mo fer bokou pli mie...mo manz ar zot...saki mo trouve, se ki bann saki vinn bann fami pov, ou kategori mwayin, zot ena tandans pou fer bokou plis zefor...kan zot trouv zot kamarad pe show off, zot gagn sa lanvi pou al de-l-avan la ...Pa zot tou ki pas parey....ofe sak zanfan ena so prop lexpéryans dan lavi iniversiter mo panse...saki vinn depi enn milie sosial pli ba, li pe vini avek enn lide ki sa letid-la pou ed li pou al de-l-avan, pou arive, me ena ki vinn liniversite akoz li kontan size-la, li li kone ki sa pou ed li, me li pe vini zis pou gagn degre-la, me apre li pa pou itiliz degre zis sa degre-la, li kone ki apre li ena bann lezot zafer ki mo pou al fer ...pou li se zis enn premie pa...ena qui bizin konplet zot degre ek lerla al travay pou kapav aprann ankore...saverdir ena ki vini avek enn plan dan so latet, ek ena ki vini zis pou gagn sa degre-la ek al travay.*

## NJ

*J'ai un petit groupe d'amis qui sont vraiment très gentils. On travaille ensemble en général quand il y a des assignments et des group-works. We share all our notes. Bon, c'est vrai aussi qu'il y a des divisions en classe. C'est par rapport à leur classe sociale. Mais moi j'ai un bon groupe d'amis. Je peux communiquer, et partager et je peux aussi compter sur eux.*

## SJ

*Pou integre bann group kamarad pa ti sinp...touletan mo esey rod enn semin apar « comme si »...fer koumadir bann-la pe al manz enn minn bwi...lerla mo amenn li dan enn sort badinaz, mo amenn mo dipin mwa...mo dir mo kapav aste enn minn mo fer li lakaz mo manze, li kout mwa pli mwins...li pou kout mwa mwins ki Rs 15....Selma, mo kapav dir ki mo finn gagn bann bon kamarad, mo finn gagn bon klas. Touletan mo'nn tande ki dan bann class, ena group kip a koz ar sann' group la...sann'la pas gagn lot la, lot la pas gagn sann'la...me dan mo klas, de-z-an mo'nn fer, me tou korek...mo finn gagn bon kamarad kot sakenn la pou zot kamarad. Sakenn soutenir so kamarad.*

## KL

*C'est super bien, j'aime parler avec tout le monde j'ai l'impression que tout le monde est mon ami...irrespective of which social class they come from...au fait, je ne sais même pas de quel social class ils sont...il n'y a pas de problème du tout...tout le monde est mélangé...tout le monde est ensemble...et on s'entraide*

*Pour moi, ma meilleure expérience, c'est surtout quand il y a des cultural days, il y a vraiment une diversité à l'université et j'adore sa...je pense que c'est vraiment ce que je préfère à l'université...la diversité, et les activités qu'on a quand il y a un cultural Day...sa j'adore vraiment...*

## **ZK**

*Avec l'arrivée des malgaches, des comoriens et tout, c'était vraiment une diversité culturelle énorme, et aussi avec les étudiants venant du cursus anglais aussi. Au fait, au début c'était difficile pour moi de m'y habituer, parce qu'on venait d'horizons différents...et on n'avait pas la même culture...mais après...au fur et mesure, ça s'est développé positivement...*

## **AN**

*Liniversite finn bien inflians fason ki mo get bann zafer...Lontan mo ti plis judgemental... par exanp, momem mo vinn depi working class mem, me mo ti abitie panse ki bann saki dan working class la, ena ki pa anv fer zefor, ek ki zot ti pe reste kot zot ete pa pou bouze la...reste par lamem...me aster mo finn realize , atraver bann kour ki mo finn gagne, ki ena bann blokaz ki fer ki ena bann dimounn ki pa reisi bouze....par exanp ena, zot kapav gagn akse a ledikasion, wi...me selman, eski zot pe gagn mem fasilite ki bann lezot ?*

## **NJ**

*Même avant je savais déjà que la société n'est pas égale du tout. Etant une étudiante brillante, j'ai pas eu la chance de make the most of my intelligence, of my capabilities. Mo ti kone quelque part ki ena sa bann inegalite-la dan lasosiete. Ma vision n'a pas vraiment changé. Se mwa of eki bizin travay pou reisi. Sosiete-la li rest parey, pena okenn sanzman. Au contraire, en rejoignant l'université, ma vision par rapport à l'injustice s'est renforcé...*

## **SJ**

*Depi mo'nn rant liniversite, dousman-dousman, dapre bann size ki mo finn fer, bann modil ki mo finn konplete, ek bann dimounn ki mo finn zwenn, mo finn konpran ki ena diferan fason ki nou kapav get lasosiete.. Nou kapav get li depi enn lang pli pozitif...par exanp lapovrete... mem si ou pov, me ena enn motivation , ou santi ou pli for, e ou kapav reisi...avan mo ti pe get tou negatif...Etidian liniversite kapav zis swiv ek fer parey kouma lezot...me zot kapav ouisi esey « être créatif » ek amenn bann zafer nouvo...liniversite ouisi kapav ed bann etidian ki ena bann bon lide ek pe esey amenn enn kontribision pozitif...selman za zis dan teori sa...dan pratik, zero.*

## **KL**

*Je pense pas l'université nous 'format' forcément...mais j'ai impression qu'on nous fait bien comprendre que les études sont importants qu'il faut réussir, et qu'il faut toujours faire plus...il faut travailler plus dure...il faut aussi think critically, to think out of the box et tout...mais de l'autre...par exemple pour les assignments, il faut absolument les faire comme on nous explique and we need to stick to it...go by the guidelines...ça semble paradoxal, mais c'est ainsi...*

## **ZK**

*La filière où je suis, encourage les étudiants à prendre des risques, à ne pas hésiter, à ne pas s'imposer de limites et tout...genre dans le BTS, la filière où je suis, il y a pas mal d'étudiants qui veulent lancer leur propre business et tout...Du coup, ce que l'université fait, il nous encourage à « comment » un 'business plan' et tout...et aussi avoir des notions de management, et aussi nous inculque que dans la vie il faut prendre des risques pour y arriver...*

## **AN**

*Mwa premie dabor, mo pou rod enn travay, apre mo pou ramas mo kas pou mo al purswiv mo letid dan size ki mo kontan : social leadership...*

*Me selma mo kone ki ena pou gagn travay fasilman, me ena ki pou bizin struggle...dan klas mem, par rapor a bann modil ki nou pe fer, ena etidian pe fini panse ki zot pou fer ek koman zot pou gagn enn debouse ek sa bann modilla, parski zot deza ena kontakt..e sa li fasilite zot pou gagn travay kouma kour fini.*

*Bann zafer ki bizin sanze pou li vinn ekitab ? Non mo pa trouve vreman ki bizin sanze parski lamem mot pe donn aksesibilite, avek gratwite, be li deza ase.*

*Je vais devoir chercher un emploi. C'est la première chose à faire. Cependant même si je complète mes études, je sais qu'il y aura toujours des 'struggles' dans ma vie. Parce que ça ne se termine pas là. Je reste une fille du working class et donc ça va être difficile de trouver un job même si je réussis brillamment.*

## **SJ**

*Mo kone ki mo pou ena pli bokou sans. The university is a gateway to achieve more. It is going to make me become better. Ma vision de la vie s'est élargi. Mais je sais que les étudiants qui viennent de classes sociales plus élevés ont plus de chances de trouver un job, même si je suis plus brillant académiquement.*

*L'université est un établissement dans laquelle on rentre, et on ressort avec un degré. C'est tout. Il n'y a pas grand-chose en termes de créativité.*

*Mo lavi ankor touzour parey..parski mwa mo pa'nn gagn okenn gid...tout zafer mo finn bizin fer par momem... mo share enn zafer avek ou: mo'nn travay marsan anbilan ousi pandan konze Desam zis pou gagn enn pocket money...pey enn-de ti zafer...kan mo vinn liniversite pe bizin fer fotokopi..fer printing..be mo bizin trouv larzan...lerla sa bann zafer-la mo pa bizin demann mo paran...pou aste mo portab ousi mo finn travay marsan anbilan..selma bizin sov-sove, kasiet, travay pou ki lapolis pa reisi trap ou...sinon bizin pey lamann, lartik sezi...*

*Sans-la, mo kapav ena li, kouma mo kapav pena li ousi...parski asterla, ou bizin ena rekomandasion...si ou konn intel dan plas-la, lerla ki pou kapav gagn travay-la...sinon, sertifika-la, li pena sa gran valer ki ti ena avan...aster tou zafer deroul lor rekomandasion...tou dimounn pena mem sans..dimounn mizer- la, si fer rekritman...lor 100, zis 2 dimounn mizer ki pou rantre ladan..pa plis...leres la pou rant lor rekomandasion...sa de la ousi, se zi pou montre lizie, ki wi, nou rekrite bann dimounn mizer...*

## **ZK**

*Arrivé à l'université, j'ai commencé à avoir plus confiance en moi...du coup, avec cette confiance, je pourrais aller plus loin...je pourrai créer mon entreprise et tout...au fait, j'ai pas eu de souci tout le long de mon parcours académique...grâce à l'encadrement que j'ai eu, le support et tout, je suis sûr que j'aurai aucun mal à intégrer le monde du travail, aussi bien que de monter mon propre business. Apres la licence, j'aurai un bagage solide pour construire mon avenir.*

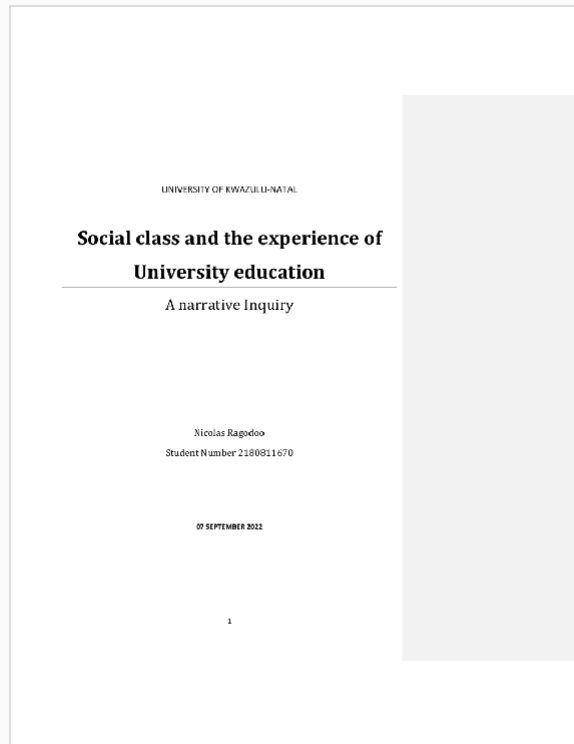


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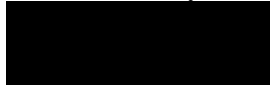
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Yours sincerely,

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