# *Francophone transnational students, social exclusion and the challenges of adaptation at a South African University of Technology*

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***Abstract***

*This article emerges out of qualitative data gleaned through semi-structured interviews with fifteen Gabonese and Congolese students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in Cape Town. It draws on theoretical conceptions such as transnationalism, social exclusion and migrant adaptation, to interrogate the social experiences of francophone students and their tactics for dealing with exclusionary practices from peers and staff. Using selected excerpts from the data, this article attempts to analyse characteristics of transnational student life, patterns of social exclusion and the challenges of adaptation experienced by the francophone community in this teaching and learning space. Against this backdrop, the article seeks to make sense of their learning experiences and the implications for the broader challenges of studying in a post-apartheid higher education institution.*

***Keywords*** Sub-Saharan Africa, adaptation, social exclusion, transnational students, francophones, post-apartheid South Africa.

## *Introduction and contextual background*

One hallmark of global human mobility is the increasing number of Africans studying in universities around the world. This increase is often attributed to wider conceptions such as neo-liberal transformation of higher education, internationalisation and transnationalization of education (Madge et al. 2014; Giroux 2014; Kim 2011). In South Africa, the urgency to transform and indigenise universities has become even more imperative, especially after the demise of apartheid (Mouton et al. 2013; Tshotsho et al. 2015; Kwaramba 2012; Sehoole 2006). This has widened access to higher education for black

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students and it has changed core curricula and pedagogical approaches. Consequently, new patterns of African migration into post-apartheid South Africa include the influx of transnational students, particularly from francophone sub-Saharan African countries like Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and so on. For this category of migrants, South African universities do not only offer a cheaper alternative to acquire internationally recognised qualifications, but also provide a unique opportunity to study in predominantly English-medium institutions, especially given the international status of English. For South African universities, international students are not only a source of revenue for universities, but they also symbolise modern universities' envisions for intercultural education and internationalisation (Sam 2001; Andrade 2006; Ryan & Viete 2009). For example, transnational students bring with them a repertoire of skills that contribute significantly to the scholarship of research, teaching and learning. They also bring unique learning, social and cultural experiences which add value to the rich and unique diversity of South Africa (Mubembe 2012; Maharaj et al. 2011).

However, because migration into South Africa has been shaped by violent forms of social exclusion such as xenophobia, Afrophobia and racism, African student experiences in South African universities include dealing with extraordinary conditions of marginalisation, rejection, psychological and physical victimisation as well as language challenges (Landau 2011; Mubembe 2012; Maharaj et al. 2011). Given that the majority of these students have always spoken English as an additional language, "their discourse knowledge is seen as deficient and their learning is expected to conform to seemingly immutable and often implicit norms laid down by the local academy" (Ryan & Viete 2009: 303). In this article, we use qualitative data gleaned through semi-structured interviews with fifteen Gabonese and Congolese students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in Cape Town. It draws on theoretical conceptions such as transnationalism, social exclusion and migrant adaptation, to interrogate the social experiences of francophone students and their tactics for dealing with exclusionary practices from peers and staff. Using selected excerpts from the data, this article attempts to analyse characteristics of transnational student life, patterns of social exclusion and the challenges of adaptation experienced by the francophone community in this teaching and learning space. Against this backdrop, the article seeks to make sense of their

learning experiences and the implications for the broader challenges of studying in a post-apartheid higher education institution.

### *Description of case study*

To understand the unique characteristics of francophone students at CPUT and the reasons for focusing on Gabonese and Congolese students, we provide a brief description of the university. Geographically, CPUT is located in the peninsula of Cape Town in the Western Cape Province of South Africa and it is the largest of the four universities in this province, in terms of student enrolment. According to statistical data from CPUT's Management Information System (MIS), the current student enrolment is approximately 34 176 of which approximately 2355 are African students mostly from sub-Saharan Africa (Pineteh & Ralarala 2014; MIS 2016). The university has six faculties: Business and Management Sciences, Engineering, Health and Wellness Sciences, Informatics and Design, Applied Sciences and Education and these faculties are spread over six campuses (MIS 2016). Of the total number of African students, almost 50% are from francophone sub-Saharan Africa. This is evident from the following statistics: DRC-706; Zimbabwe-370; Angola-358; Namibia-329; Gabon-192; Nigeria-116; Republic of Congo-110; Cameroon-85; Rwanda-45 and Lesotho-44 (MIS 2014 & 2016).

In addition, the statistics show that the majority of CPUT's francophone students are from DRC and Gabon, justifying the choice of participants for this article. Moreover, although CPUT's language of teaching and learning is English, this university remains an attractive choice for francophone students because of affordability, the type of qualifications and the industry-oriented pedagogies. For instance, the majority of these students are undergraduates, enrolled for Business, Information Technology, Sciences and Engineering qualifications and CPUT's tuition fees for these qualifications are generally more affordable if compared with the other provincial universities like the University of Cape and Stellenbosch (Pineteh & Ralarala 2014). However, the findings of Pineteh & Ralarala's (2014) study on international students at CPUT revealed that francophone students encounter similar academic and sociocultural challenges regardless of the country of origin. Therefore, for this project we selected Gabonese and Congolese students from two faculties: Informatics and Design, and Business and Management Sciences, for the simple reason that we had unfettered access to the students.

### *Literature review and theoretical framework*

The challenges of international students globally have been researched extensively from a myriad of perspectives. In fact, the expansive corpus of knowledge on the institutionalisation of higher education globally speaks explicitly to the upsurge of international students in modern universities (Habib et al. 2013; Yim 2011; Lee & Rice 2007). This body of knowledge alludes to international student mobility, pedagogical changes and spatial transformation at universities influenced by the presence of transnational students. There is also a burgeoning scholarly interest in international student academic experiences away from home and associated psychosocial and cultural discomforts such as cultural shock, social exclusion and adaptation (Menzies & Baron 2014; Scharter 2015; Bayaga 2011). The changes in what Madge et al. (2014) refer to as the global eduscape suggest that international students do not only contribute to research, teaching and learning, they "increase the diversity of student populations, add new perspectives to classroom conversations and […] increase our awareness and appreciation of other countries and cultures" (Lee & Rice 2007: 381). Therefore, we should begin to interrogate international student mobility not simply as a transfusion of social capital in a new space but something that has strong implications for higher education pedagogy.

This is essential to our understanding of transnational studentship because experiences of international students are often nested in several challenges associated with cross-border human mobility such as social exclusion, cultural adaption, feelings of isolation, homesickness, prejudices and so on (Yim 2010; Swami et al. 2010). As modern universities transform to accommodate their diverse student communities, these learning spaces have equally become enclaves of new patterns of social exclusion (Kim 2011; Lee & Rice 2007). In the South African context, the often-neglected language difficulties of particularly francophone students tend to play a significant role in their higher education experiences. Here, one of the key determinants of successful socio-cultural and academic adjustment of international students is being proficient in the hegemonic language of the institution (Barratt & Huba 1994: 429; Yeh 2003: 23; Bartram 2008: 666).

Given the contributions of international students to change the global eduscape, transnational migration still evokes feelings of "restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and [is] unsettling to others" with host institutions doing very little "to identify ways of meeting the special needs of

international students" (Madge et al. 2015; Lee & Rice 2007: 386). The host institutions are expected to play a more critical role in socialising international students into the new learning environments, but very often, they are isolated and left alone to deal with physical and emotional burdens of dislocation from their families. To find new ways to adapt, they resort to forging multiple and contested identities "positioning these identities within broader contexts of social, cultural, and economic formations…" (Arthur 2010: xiii). Here, a two-way process of adaption, which is supposed to involve the hosts and the migrants, is reduced to a one-way process (Chhetri 1980; Sonn 2002; Pineteh 2015). For transnational students, it is therefore imperative to maintain ties with homeland either physically or virtually, find solace and companionship in friendship and international student associations (Menzies & Baron 2014).

For example, in their study of international students' perceptions of discrimination, Lee and Rice (2007) argue that the challenges associated with language and cultural adaption increase the psychological and sociocultural distress of international students. These predictors have strong implications for the quality of their social lives and academic performance (Swami et al. 2010: 57). In a university like CPUT where English is the language of tuition, the socialisation of non-English speaking international students into a higher education space depends on their ability to interact with peers and staff. The ability to communicate in English is indeed a useful tactic to handle and mitigate discrimination, and/or negotiate new social relations with local students. As argued in the literature, students who are fluent in English are likely to experience lower levels of acculturative distress such as isolation and low self-esteem (Karuppan & Barari 2011: 78; Swami et al. 2010; Yeh 2003: 23). The quality of life of those with a paucity of English skills tends to fluctuate rapidly as they struggle to adapt in a foreign land. Their higher education experience is reduced to clustering with other students from the same linguistics and cultural background, constantly imagining a return to the homeland after graduation (Pineteh 2015; Brown 2008).

To understand the experiences of francophone students and their challenges of studying in a post-apartheid higher education institution like CPUT, we frame this article around three theoretical conceptions, namely transnationalism, social exclusion and migrant adaptation. For example, transnationalism has become a conceptual frame and social praxis for understanding the asymmetries of global human mobility (Van Hear 1998; Portes et al. 1999; Lazar 2011). The epistemological strength of

transnationalism is that migration is essentially a process of 'living' and 'there' through a seamlessly socioeconomic and political interconnectedness with the migrants' countries of origin (Pineteh 2015; Vertovec 2001). It is a process whereby "members of the group are bound by retained memory of the homeland, partial alienation from the host country [and] an aspiration to return to the homeland" (Van Hear 1998: 5). Although transnational migrants, including students, construct new identities as a strategy to adapt, "these identities are reconfigured and given new meanings in transnational spaces and contexts by merging old identities with the new ones they establish abroad" (Arthur 2010: 55). Along these contours, transnational students are always emotionally and/or physically attached to their roots/kinships and they tend to express these feelings through virtual interactions, sending of remittances, regular home visits and so on.

This emotional and physical attachment with home is often exacerbated by feelings of social exclusion experienced in the host countries. Social exclusion is used here as the "lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas [which] affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole" (Levitas et al. 2007: 9; ECCV Policy Discussion Paper 2009; Saith 2001; Sen 2000). In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, the social exclusion of transnational migrants like francophone students has been expressed through increasing xenophobic fervours, draconian immigration policies, isolation and discrimination in public spaces such as schools, hospitals and universities (Pineteh 2015; Bayaga 2011; Landau 2011).

However, since migration is transitional and often involves a temporary severance of social networks and relationship with friends and families, there is always the need to adapt or assimilate (Sonn 2002; Berry 1997). In the case of francophone students at CPUT, adaptation is imperative to enable them to complete their studies and for hopeful futures. As a conceptual lens, adaptation in the sphere of cross-border human mobility is premised on the presupposition that "migrations are not isolated events and generally associated with some kind of economic, social and cultural change to which people make an adjustment" (Chhetri 1980: 49). This adjustment process could entail the formation of support systems, cultural integration, and the construction of new acceptable identities and new patterns of social

interaction. Therefore, as people migrate, there is always the expectation to adapt or adjust although the process is always challenging (Jakubowicz 2012; Sonn 2002; Saith 2001). These theoretical conceptions have provided a discursive space to analyse the experiences of francophone students at CPUT.

### *Research methodology and methods of data collection*

This article is based on qualitative interviews conducted with 15 francophone students from DRC and Gabon in the Faculty of Informatics and Design as well as Business and Management Sciences at CPUT, Cape Town campus. The students were selected using a snowballing technique and they were comprised of 9 males and 6 females as well as 8 Congolese and 7 Gabonese, mostly first year students. We decided to focus on first year students because, as newcomers, their experiences are usually more excruciating than those who have been at CPUT for longer. The interviews were conducted in the office of one of the researchers and they lasted for a maximum of 30 minutes. They were semi-structured, which gave the researchers the opportunity to probe emergent issues (Babbie et al. 2001; De Vos et al. 2005). Each interview was preceded by an explanation of the purpose of the project and the interviewee signed a consent form in which the researcher agreed not to disclose any information that could reveal the participant's identity. As such, the participants are cited in this article as participant 1 up to 15. This approach was used to generate responses that can be categorised, analysed and discussed under specific themes (Babbie et al. 2001; Maree 2007). In addition, the interviews gave the researchers an opportunity to probe social experiences such as class discrimination, relationship with locals, CPUT learning environment and other learning challenges. The analysis of the data tried to connect emerging themes to the focus of this article, namely patterns of transnational student life, social exclusion and the challenges of adaptation.

### *Analysis and discussion of key findings*

Modern universities in a neo-liberal dispensation are changing radically from spaces for social change to those with "a dominance of a form of a powerful and ruthless, if not destructive market driven notion of governance, teaching, learning, freedom, agency and responsibility" (Giroux 2014: 87). The transformation of modern universities into corporate- like institutions has reduced students into clients and it has taken away their erstwhile core values as agents of social transformation. Critical aspects such as inclusive education, social cohesion and racial/cultural tolerance as well as the development of

students into critical thinkers are becoming more and more peripheral (Giroux 2014; Pineteh 2014). Although, transformation and social cohesion are the buzzwords at CPUT, the university has done very little to promote the quality of social inclusivity which can respond to its richly linguistic and culturally diverse student population (Hlatshwayo & Siziba 2013; Rawjee & Reddy 2012). It has somehow failed to embrace the idea that "the phenomenon of international students in universities is an opportunity for cultural and indigenous knowledge exchange between people of different nationalities and continents" (Mda 2011: 13). In the following sections, we discuss the experiences of francophone students in three interrelated sections: francophone transnational life, social exclusion, the challenges of adaption and strategies for survival.

### *CPUT francophone students as transnational students*

Migration is always a burdensome experience, which involves spatial dislocation from kinship and familiar spaces. When people migrate they struggle in different ways to deal with the emotional and physical disconnect from families while at the same time trying to adapt to new unfamiliar spaces (Pineteh 2015; Brown 2008). In the context of South Africa, African students including francophones are becoming more and more transnational migrants, especially given the host country's culture of gratuitous violence against foreigners triggered by its own social challenges, xenophobia fervours and the politics of belonging and citizenship (Landau 2011; Hassim et al. 2008). With the francophone transnational students that we interviewed, transnationalism meant regular travels back and forth and reconnections with family networks through virtual communication as well as regularly remitting money back home. For example, Gabonese students, chatted about memories of home, holiday visits and the dreams of an eventual return:

I came here just to study and after my degree I am going home. The way this South African people treat us, I can't stay here even during holidays; I want to be with my family. I only call or whatsapp them during school time and before the university closes, I already buy air-ticket to travel home and I am always going home…I know it is expensive but my parents understand because they see the xenophobia on TV and the know we are not safe here (Participant 10).

Although technological advancement has facilitated the way diasporic communities reconnect with families and friends back home, in the case of this Gabonese student transnationalism is about "regular physical presence […] in

both the country of origin and settlement" (Mamattah n.d: 4; Vertovec 2001). This transnational pattern, especially amongst Gabonese students, exudes an impassioned attachment to home and excavates memories of homelessness while in exile. For them, migration is about living here and there, illuminating the contested notion of integration and disintegration associated with transnational migration. This often propels exclusionary tendencies because Gabonese students tend to see themselves or areseen by local students as the outsiders. Escaping and finding solace in regular home visits, exemplifies "rejecting aspirations of or claims to membership [… and] distancing themselves from the citizenry" (Landau 2008: 107).

By contrast to Gabonese students who prefer going home during holidays, Congolese transnational students see migrations as a long-term process which could result in permanency despite the perceived discrimination from fellow local students. For instance:

I don't go home a lot because a flight ticket is expensive. Besides family really only need you to send them money rather than coming home. Although it is difficult staying here because of the way we are treated in and outside, you have try fit to in and not run to your parents every time South African treat you badly. There is no need to go home because I can email, whatsapp and even skype my family. What I try to do is work during holidays, make some money and send it home to support my family. They are always happy with me when I send them money (Participant 8).

This interviewee is a Congolese student originally from DRC, who has lived in South Africa for more than 10 years. For him, the diasporic predilection of living here and there should deviate from the essentialist notion that transnationalism entails the "physical presence of the transmigrant on the territory of the country of origin" (Riccio 2001: 597). Despite South African's nativism, which privileges violent exclusion over tactical inclusion, to succeed as a student in post-apartheid in this case means greater interactions with local students and communities (Furnham & Bochner 1986; Zhou et al. 2008: 63). Here, migrant remittance is not simply a source of economic livelihood for migrant families, but a chain of reconnection between exile and home. This perspective of a transnational student is enforced in the following quote:

Yes, but I think my culture is the same as them, I don't have to separate myself from them, It is not like I have to use my particular culture here. Because when I come to a place as a foreigner, I have to respect that place and I have to deal

with that situation but if I have something new, people will learn from me and I will also learn from them, it's not conflict but it's culture that people in DRC don't have. We must improve each other (Participant 4).

Here, the notion of transnationalism in a multicultural learning environment like CPUT is about embracing cultural difference. For them, being moored to native cultural beliefs and values that connect migrants with the country of origin is as important as finding new ways to adapt and tap into the resources of local students. To this, Zhou et al. (2008: 70) argue that "through connections with their compatriots in the host country [francophone students] might learn a series of culturally relevant skills to facilitate their academic success." This transnational trajectory has clear implications for the way francophone students deal with exclusionary tendencies at CPUT.

***Patterns of social exclusion in the case of francophone students at CPUT***

Generally, higher education exerts enormous pressure on transnational students because they are expected to socialise into a new academic environment and cope with equally new learning demands and expectations. In the case of CPUT-based francophone students, this pressure is worsened by exclusionary tendencies from both their peers and lecturers. The interviews with the participants pointed to three intertwined forms of social exclusion namely language, academic and cultural differences (Talebloo & Baki 2013). Because they are primarily French speaking, interviewees claimed they often experience exclusion because of their inadequate English language skills especially since English is the main medium of teaching and learning at CPUT. One participant commented:

I was now thinking that I am stupid. They do not understand that I don't speak English properly because I am from another country. They were saying that I am stupid and I make many mistakes when I am speaking, for instance during presentations they were laughing because of my accent. I wanted to quit but the counsellor told me that if I pass all my subjects I will prove them wrong. And the entire Gabonese students, all foreigners passed all their subjects. (Participant 3).

In this testimony, the lack of adequate English language to engage in academic activities and local students' responses to this challenge resulted in the student's experience of alienation. Here her intellectual aptitude is compromised because of the inability to communicate in the university's medium of instruction, resulting in a form of rejection. Although local students

who are not first language English speakers encounter similar linguistic challenges, the experience of transnational students is more agonizing because they "are separated from their social and cultural comfort zone" (Menzies & Baron 2014: 84). Instead of embracing diversity and encouraging a culture of collective peer support, local students see their francophone counterpart as the Other, equating their accent and lack of English proficiency to academic incompetence (Errey 1994; Felix & Lawson 1994). In this sense, the attitudes of local students psychologically affect the self-esteem of francophone students and their desires to interact socially in this learning environment. The learning space intimidates and breeds fear in francophone students, fears that are not only socially exclusionary but may force them to shelve or isolate themselves from participating in enriching academic activities (Saith 2001; ECCV Policy Discussion Paper 2009). Using language proficiency to prevent francophone students from active classroom participation pushes them into a 'silent mode' perpetuating the misconception at CPUT that francophone students are "deficient in academic skills such as critical thinking and [are] unwilling participate in class discussions" (Ryan & Viete 2009: 304). This has a direct negative impact on the way their oral and written projects are assessed by academic staff.

This socially intimidating and exclusionary learning space, does not "take into account both the multiple and contested nature of literacy learning in multicultural classrooms and intercultural innovations in meaning and identity making" (Ryan & Viete 2009: 305). Interestingly, this dysfunctional space is not only created by local students but also by local staff. The interviews revealed a general lack of willingness from staff to provide a supportive learning environment to francophone students. In the following quotation, one participant shares their experience:

There are some lecturers when you go to them when you want to know more about the subject or the brief they gave you, they will say no and tell you to go read the brief or you have to ask your friends because they do not have time now. But while I was leaving one of these lecturers' office, one of our class students (a South African) went to the same lecturer and she helped her. When I got my assignment from the lecturer, I failed and she said I did not understand the assignment and my language was bad. They are not supposed to say that to a student. If a student goes to a lecturer it means that he/she does not understand. The lecturer has to freely explain what the brief is talking

about. I think the lecturer does not like us coming from other countries especially us who cannot speak English well… (Participant 3).

From the quotation above, this student is denied access to out of classroom learning support from their lecturer simply because of their foreignness. Although the university expects lecturers to provide regular one-to-one consultation with students, this student is academically excluded from this enriching learning experience because of the lecturer's attitude towards francophone students (Tati 2010; Maharaj et al. 2011; Menzies & Barons 2014). This example shows clearly how "English language proficiency often influences the ways international students are assessed and afforded rights of participation" (Ryan & Viete 2009: 304). Moreover, by tactically blaming the student for their own academic failure, the lecturer does not uphold the responsibility of mentoring and providing an inclusive learning space to "students from diverse cultural backgrounds" (Maharaj et al. 2011: 211) as expected in a richly diverse university like CPUT. Furthermore, the lecturer's actions marginalise, oppress and silence, making the process of academic socialisation more burdensome to this francophone student (Watson 2013).

These classroom experiences expose not only the linguistic but also the cultural differences that shape the learning journeys of francophone students at CPUT. During the interviews students highlighted specific aspects of cultural difference that tend to enforce social exclusion in this academic environment (Ward 1997; Viete & Peeler 2007; Viete & Phan 2007). They mentioned aspects such as showing respect, learning attitudes, social behaviours and so on. For example:

The way we treat lecturers is different here at CPUT. Students call lecturers by their names instead of sir, madam or doctor. I think this is not showing respect because the lecturer is an elder and has studied more than the student, and in my country we respect elders. Also, they are very close to lecturer and these lecturers treat students like their friends, so they disturb in class and even answer their phones during class. For me it is very difficult to make friends with people who do not show respect. That is why you always see me with other foreigners because we are similar (Participant 12).

Although this mode of student/lecturer relationship is very common with the current generation of university students, for this student, it is a marker of cultural difference in terms of the expression of respect. Here an inclusive learning environment is hindered by francophone students' cultural values

and belief systems, which consider lecturers as "founts of all wisdom" (Ryan & Viete 2009: 304). In the quotation, there is a feeling of culture shock and the interviewee represents local students' behaviours, beliefs and values as unacceptable and should be avoided (Li & Gasser 2005; Thomson et al. 2006). This promotes a culture of clustering amongst international students, mitigating opportunities for "developing an understanding of and adaptation to the new culture" (Thomson et al. 2006: 3). By trying not to socialise with local students because of their social behaviours, the process of adaptation becomes more challenging and stressful.

Local students' social behaviours recurred prominently during the interviews, as having visible implication for their attitudes to learning. For francophone students, it was difficult to develop a sense of collective identity because of the values that South African's attach to education and also because of their perceptions about other Africans. They alluded to the culture of xenophobic violence and increasing racialised classroom behaviours as a barrier to social inclusion (Hassim et al. 2008; Neocosmos 2010; Landau 2011). The feeling of a racialised classroom is expressed in the following quotes:

No, it is not the same. There is still discrimination. It means that apartheid is not finished yet. White people sit with white people, coloured people with coloured people and foreigners with foreigners. We are not very open to each other (Participant 15).

When the lecturers give group work, South African students do not want to work with us. When we ask them they will say it is because the want to talk their local language and we are not going to understand. But I think it is because South Africans don't like foreigners […] they think we are going to take their jobs when we finish studying. Like they are always asking us when are we going back home? Are you going back home after you finish? You can see that they don't like us here. We also don't want to work with them because they are lazy; they always have excuses like work, trains, buses, funerals etc. So any group works, we foreigners prefer to work together (Participant 6).

In the above quotation, the learning environment at CPUT is mediated by racial and xenophobic tendencies associated with post-apartheid South Africa. The fear of the foreigner is not only a street level intimation but also a common discourse in an academic space like CPUT where local students perceive this multicultural space as an "exclusively South African domain" (Hassim et al. 2008: 114). In the same token, labelling local students as 'lazy' and 'full of

excuses' reinforces the practice of insulation from South African citizenry perpetuated by migrants who "claim rights to be in South Africa but not part of it" (Landau 2008: 107).

***The challenges of adaptation in a new learning environment***

From the different characteristics of transnational student life and exclusionary constellations expressed above, it is expected that francophone students would face many challenges adapting to a new learning environment in post-apartheid South Africa. In the interviews, they blamed the challenges of adaptation on the post-apartheid pathologies such as crime, poverty and violence as well as on cultural and linguistic differences. While this blame game featured prominently, francophone students' perceptions about local students have also contributed significantly to the challenges of adaptation (Chhetri 1980; Zhou et al. 2008; Tati 2010; Lazar 2011). As Chhetri (1980) has argued, a process of adaptation is in fact a two-way process which involves migrants and host nationals. Scholarship on transnational migration speaks to spaces of flow, which require movements, adjustments, acculturation, integration and assimilation (Lazar 2011; Sonn 2002; Chhetri 1980). These symmetries of migration by no means suggest that uprootedness and adaptation in an unfamiliar space is less challenging. In the case of the francophone community at CPUT, the challenges of adaptation were linked to length of stay, ethnocentricity, memories of home and the feeling of loss, familiar prejudices about foreigners and local students' attitudes to learning.

Nostalgia is real and yes it happened to me. I remember in my first year calling my father and telling him that I wanted to come back home. My family and friends encouraged me and told me that this bad feeling will go away (Participant 10).

When I just arrived South Africa, it was difficult for me because I missed my family and friends in Gabon. I didn't have any friends, so I spent hours in my room thinking about my parents and some days I would even cry (Participant 5).

This excerpt reinforces the notion that transnational migration in South African is characterised by culture shock and a feeling loss and in the early days in exile, migrants want "to meet social and psychological needs for belonging and relatedness" (Sonn 2002: 10). The culture shock and need for belonging often translates into homesickness and memories of loss, affecting their social relationship with local citizens. These competing forces impeded

francophone students' eagerness to adapt because instead of negotiating new ways of belonging and searching for an "opportunity for developing an understanding of and adaptation to the new culture," they decided to insulate themselves from local students (Thomson et al. 2006: 3). By insulating themselves, they tend to experience cultural and social distress and, as articulated above, resort to reconnection with home and family as a coping mechanism. The feeling of discomfort, dislocation and distress experienced by francophone students exacerbates the challenges of adaptation in that these lived experiences further alienate them from the host community.

In addition to homesickness and memories of home, francophone students at CPUT also alluded to academic discrimination, social boundaries and prejudices as challenges to adaptation in this learning environment. One interviewee commented:

I have learnt that even outside the university people do not interact with each other. Something I realised and what I am still seeing up to now is that people do not get together at the university. Coloured people are with coloured, white people with white and black people with black. Foreigners are acting the same between themselves (Participant 4).

I have noticed that South African people do not get used to foreigners. They are in their corners. In my country, we are different because we are welcoming people and making them feel at home. However, in South Africa, foreigners only chat with fellow foreigners. As foreigners, we usually feel that we are not welcome (Participant 6).

In the above quotations, the classroom dynamics show that student relationships are still fractured along racial, ethnic and cultural lines, constellations "of negative psychosocial consequences for international students which may seriously interfere with their adaptation in the host country and [with] their capacity to achieve optimally in the university setting" (Thomson et al. 2006: 7). The clustering of students along identical racial or nationalistic sentiments prohibit integration and cross-cultural interactions between students, which are "essential for international students to become full members of the learning community" (Ryan & Viete 2009: 305). The experiences of this community of francophone students show that student relationships in this learning space tended to promote even deeper feelings of exclusion and isolation, which reminded them that they do not belong there.

To survive at CPUT and succeed academically, francophone students are expected to circumvent social boundaries and deal with the different forms discrimination on a regular basis. For them, an immediate response to the painful experiences was to establish new social networks with other foreign students in their learning space (Schartner 2015; Warner & Miller 2015). These new social formations were expressed in transnational friendships, study partners, or membership in international students associations on campus because "greater co-national interaction is [often] linked with stronger cultural identity" (Zhou et al. 2008: 70). However, these coping strategies do not only create an imaginary sense of belonging, they further complicate the process of adaptation.

As I said earlier, South African students do not like foreigners, even the lecturers but when you are here, you have to look for ways to survive. In my first year, things were really difficult because I was new, and did not have any friends but now I have friends from other countries like Cameroon; Nigerian because they are like us, so we hang out together. In class I work with other foreigners and it does not worry me anymore that South Africans do want to work with us …I am also a member of the international student association in Cape Town. When you go there, you meet other foreign students and you feels good (Participant 13).

Francophone students' adaptation in the CPUT learning environment requires sustained academic and social interaction with local South Africa students. These interactions are mutually beneficial because they reduce stress levels and enhance psychological adjustment (Warner & Miller 2015; Zhou et al. 2008). However, because of perceived discrimination and social exclusionary tendencies of local students as well as foreign students' sense of loss and attempts to stay connected to home, successful adaptation in this case has been extremely discomforting. By turning to other foreigners for friendship, comfort and support, francophone students become more resilient to adaptation because the new social networks provide an alternative support system, which help them to cope with discrimination and rejection from local students. They also provided a renewed sense of community and an imaginary sense of belonging (Schartner 2015, Ward & Kennedy 1999; Berry 1997).

### *Conclusion*

Despite the increasing number of transnational students from francophone sub-Saharan Africa, living and studying in post-apartheid South Africa is still a

socially and culturally stressful experience for many of these students (Maharaj et al. 2011; Tati 2010). These students' belief systems, memories of home and the maintenance of family ties while in exile as well as social exclusionary fervours of local students make the adjustment process more challenging than expected. In South Africa, universities have become transnational migratory localities with different academic and sociocultural tensions, which reflect the consciousness of local and international students. These tensions force transnational students to forge new identities which reflect "their multiple and complex cultural heritages, their work ethic [and] commitment to education" (Arthur 2010: 22). In this article, we have discussed patterns of transnational student life, social exclusion and the challenges of adaptation in the case of francophone students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

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