Analysis of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme's role in decolonising higher education in Makhanda

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Abstract

This research critically examines the potential and limitations of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme at Rhodes University as a tool for decolonising higher education and enhancing epistemological access for historically disadvantaged students in Makhanda, South Africa. Initiated in 2016, the programme targets Grade 12 learners from under-resourced, no-fee schools, aiming to increase their chances of entering higher education. While the programme has successfully improved Bachelor-level pass rates and local enrolment at Rhodes, this study argues that true access involves more than just university admission. Conducted in 2021, the study uses qualitative data from 12 in-depth interviews with former Nine-Tenths mentees at various levels of study, ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate. The paper explores how the programme facilitates epistemological access, defined as the ability to engage meaningfully with academic knowledge, and its role in the decolonisation of higher education. Findings reveal that while Nine-Tenths bridges the gap between secondary and tertiary education, students continue to face substantial challenges upon entering university, including socio-economic obstacles, language barriers, and feelings of alienation within a historically white institution. While the programme marks progress toward decolonisation, deeper institutional transformation is necessary to achieve epistemological equity and create a truly inclusive academic environment. This paper concludes with recommendations such as enhanced first year support systems, targeted socio-economic interventions, and curriculum reforms that embrace diverse epistemologies. By emphasising the need to move beyond mere access to ensure meaningful inclusion and success, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on decolonisation in South African higher education, and the urgent need for systemic transformation in historically exclusionary institutions.

Keywords: *Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme; access to higher education; historically disadvantaged students; decolonisation; epistemological access; community engagement*

Introduction

In the words of Sizwe Mabizela, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, "Our university is not just in Grahamstown [now Makhanda] but is also of and for Grahamstown [Makhanda]" (Rhodes University, 2019, p. 3). This statement reflects a redefinition of the university, requiring it to become more relevant to the Makhanda community (Westaway, 2019). This vision has driven the university's commitment to confronting the deep inequalities in the local education system, leading to the establishment of the Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative, within which the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme plays a central role.

The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, initiated in 2016, seeks to address the stark disparities in educational access and outcomes as university students mentor learners from local no-fee schools, aiming to equip them with the tools necessary to succeed in higher education. The urgency of such initiatives is underscored by the reality that many young people in Makhanda's public schools face significant barriers to accessing institutions like Rhodes University (McCann et al., 2021). The programme's impact is evident in the marked improvement in Bachelor-level pass rates – a pre-requisite towards gaining a university entrance in South Africa – among the participating schools. The increase in Bachelor-level passes has in turn, increased the number of local students enrolling at Rhodes University (Westaway, 2021). The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme has significantly improved physical access to higher education in Makhanda. For example, as Wilmot (2019) notes, in 2017, just a year after the programme's establishment, the three selected schools had increased their combined Bachelor-level passes from 16 to 52. Of these, 26 enrolled as full-time students and seven as part-time students at Rhodes University. However, while these quantitative gains are significant, they raise important questions about the nature and quality of access being provided.

This study therefore investigates the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme at Rhodes University, evaluating its effectiveness in fostering epistemological access and contributing to the decolonisation of higher education in Makhanda. Drawing on interviews with 12 former mentees, the paper examines student transitions to university and identifies structural and institutional barriers that persist. While the programme has increased Bachelor-level pass rates and local enrolment, true access involves more than admission. It requires enabling students to engage meaningfully with knowledge in an inclusive academic environment. In a historically white institution like Rhodes University, this includes institutional transformation and curriculum reform to support diverse epistemologies.

The first part of the paper presents literature reviewed and the theoretical framework guiding the study. This is followed by a description of the study which includes research design and methodology, participants, data collection and analysis, findings and lastly, the conclusion and my final thoughts.

Literature review

Histories of higher education in South Africa

The history of South African universities reflects the broader struggles of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid. From their colonial origins to their role in apartheid and post-apartheid transformation, these institutions have been sites of oppression and spaces of resistance (Badat, 2010). Understanding this history is essential for addressing the ongoing challenges in the higher education sector and for building a more equitable system.

Early South African universities, such as Rhodes University (1904) and the University of Cape Town (1829), were modelled on British institutions and primarily served white elites (Ashby, 1964; Badat, 2010). These universities entrenched Eurocentric knowledge systems, reinforcing colonial values (Maylam, 2005, 2016, 2017). Rhodes University, alongside other historically white institutions like the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal, and the University of the Witwatersrand, became part of a group of 'liberal universities' that distanced themselves from the apartheid government's control over higher education (Bunting, 2006, p. 42). Despite apartheid legislation, these universities occasionally admitted black students, although access was still heavily restricted (Bunting, 2006, p. 43).

The apartheid era marked a pivotal moment for South African universities, particularly with the Eiselen Commission (1953) and the Bantu Education Act (1953), which sought to segregate and control the education of black South Africans. Hendrik Verwoerd, often seen as the architect of apartheid, argued that black education should serve the needs of the white economy, famously stating that "What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?" (Basebenzi, 2019, p. 1). This policy led to the establishment of underfunded historically black universities (HBUs) and Bantustan institutions designed to produce a subservient labor force (Ajayi et al., 1996). Lazar (1987) and Davies (1996) note that the apartheid government intentionally stifled these institutions, ensuring they could not operate autonomously and limiting their intellectual capacity.

Historically black universities, like the University of Fort Hare (founded in 1916), were initially established to provide higher education to black South Africans. However, under apartheid, these institutions were constrained to comply with segregationist policies. Despite these limitations, universities like Fort Hare became centres of resistance, fostering leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe, and playing an instrumental role in anti-apartheid activism (Bunting, 2006). The 1976 Soweto Uprising, sparked by the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, was a direct protest against the Bantu Education system and signified broader dissatisfaction with apartheid education (Christie & Collins, 1982).

Post-1994, the democratic transition led to significant reforms aimed at addressing the injustices of the past by integrating segregated institutions, increasing access for historically disadvantaged students, and promoting African-centred, socially responsive

curricula (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2004; Jansen, 2004). These efforts reflect ongoing attempts to decolonise the university and democratise knowledge production in South Africa. However, as predicted by Ashby (1966), the impact of colonialism and apartheid would continue to affect South African universities, with persistent challenges related to funding, access, and institutional culture.

The post-apartheid transformation of higher education, and the role of community engagement

The post-apartheid era therefore required significant efforts to increase access to higher education and transform curricula to reflect the realities, languages, and experiences of the majority of South Africans. Successive governments have made attempts to reform the education sector (Badat, 2010), with the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education, 1997) advocating for a socially responsive, equitable, and inclusive higher education system. This policy emphasised the democratisation of knowledge production and the integration of community engagement into the core functions of universities, elevating it from a peripheral 'community service' to a scholarship of engagement (Department of Education, 1997; Bhagwan, 2018). Initiatives like the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) further supported this alignment of university activities with societal needs (Perold, 1998).

Community engagement programmes, such as the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, have been pivotal in improving physical access to historically white institutions like Rhodes University. These programmes bridge the gap between universities and marginalised communities by offering academic support, mentorship, and pathways for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education (Rhodes University, 2018). While successful in increasing physical access, questions remain about their effect on epistemic access, namely the ability of students to fully engage with and challenge the knowledge systems within universities (Morrow, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The 2015/2016 student protests in South Africa highlighted these issues, with students calling for the decolonisation of curricula and institutional structures to address historical injustices (Albertus, 2019). The protests underscored the tension between physical and epistemic access, as students from marginalised backgrounds often struggle to engage with knowledge production processes. This study builds on these discussions, exploring how students who transitioned to Rhodes University through community engagement initiatives navigate their position within a historically white institution. It examines whether such programmes improve not only physical access but also epistemic access, challenging colonial legacies and fostering inclusive knowledge production.

In response to the call for decolonisation, South African universities, including Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town, formed task teams and curriculum transformation committees (Le Grange et al., 2020). Rhodes University has also prioritised decolonisation in its Institutional Transformation Plan (RUITP) (Rhodes

University, 2018). Against this backdrop, the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme offers a valuable case study for examining the possibilities and challenges of decolonising higher education at the local level. This paper evaluates the programme's effectiveness in not only increasing access but also promoting meaningful engagement with higher education, contributing to the broader discourse on decolonisation in South Africa's universities.

The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme

Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme overview

The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme is a structured, community-based mentoring model in which Rhodes University student mentors work directly with Grade 12 learners from local non-fee-paying public schools. These schools often face deeply rooted challenges including overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced learning environments, and a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in critical subjects like Mathematics and Science.

Mentors are paired with mentees early in the academic year and engage in at least nine structured mentoring sessions, covering key topics such as time management, study strategies, goal setting, exam preparation, and university application advice. These sessions are carefully scaffolded and go beyond academic guidance, focusing also on emotional and motivational support. In many cases, mentorship relationships extend informally beyond the formal sessions, offering learners continued encouragement and role modelling throughout the school year. Nine-Tenths incorporates various stakeholders, including learners, schools, mentors, and programme coordinators, to provide a holistic support system for learners. Through this programme, learners also gain access to university-level resources, such as the Rhodes University Library, computer labs, and a memory card preloaded with educational content.

Laying the groundwork: Conditions giving rise to Nine-Tenths

Nine-Tenths emerged as Rhodes University sought to redefine its post-apartheid identity, transitioning from a historically insular institution to one more engaged with and accountable to the local community. This shift includes confronting the deep-rooted inequalities in Makhanda's education system. In response, the Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative was launched to support historically disadvantaged, no-fee-paying schools in Makhanda by addressing systemic barriers to quality education. The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, introduced in 2016, is a key component of this initiative.

The programme aims to address educational disparities in Makhanda, particularly the challenges that prevent students from accessing tertiary education. Many learners in Makhanda's public schools face socio-economic and structural obstacles that hinder their ability to attend institutions like Rhodes University (McCann et al., 2021). Nine-Tenths targets the critical final school year, providing Grade 12 students with the tools they need to succeed. Co-managed by RUCE (mentor training) and GADRA Education (school liaison),

the programme prepares mentors, primarily Rhodes University students and some staff members, through structured training sessions. Mentors are tasked with supporting mentees academically, emotionally, and in planning for life after high school.

Possibilities and limitations of the programme

While decolonisation and epistemological access are not explicit goals of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, they align with Rhodes University's broader transformation agenda. Nine-Tenths serves as an extension of the university, contributing to transformation through targeted, community-driven interventions that improve academic outcomes. It exemplifies university-community collaboration, focusing on knowledge co-production and empowerment, rather than charity or outreach. The programme has notably increased local access to higher education, particularly for students from historically disadvantaged schools in Makhanda.

Though Nine-Tenths cannot resolve all systemic issues in these schools, it provides critical support during a key academic year, and serves as a model for socially responsive higher education. However, it operates within structural constraints and cannot, alone, address deeper inequalities in the basic education sector. Its impact is significant at the individual level but relies on broader institutional transformation efforts. The need for further action to tackle entrenched issues in post-apartheid education is clear. The 2015–2016 student protests in South Africa underscored the urgency of decolonisation debates (Le Grange et al., 2020, p. 26). Following these protests, Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande called for universities to 'Africanise/decolonise' the curriculum (Le Grange et al., 2020, p. 26). However, there remains little consensus on what a decolonised higher education space should look like.

This study contributes to the growing literature on decolonising higher education by critically assessing mentorship programmes like Nine-Tenths in improving access for historically disadvantaged students. While much research focuses on curriculum reform, this paper emphasises the broader institutional and socio-economic factors that shape students' engagement with higher education. It also explores potential unintended consequences of initiatives like Nine-Tenths and distinguishes between access and epistemological inclusion, offering a nuanced perspective on decolonisation in practice.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is informed by decolonial theory and the concept of epistemological access. Decolonial theory provides a lens through which to critique the lingering colonial structures within the South African education system, highlighting how historical inequities continue to shape educational access and outcomes. Complementing this, epistemological access, as defined by Morrow (2009), emphasises that true access to higher education involves more than just physical entry; it requires the ability to engage meaningfully with the knowledge systems and academic practices

of the university. Together, these frameworks support an analysis of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme not only in terms of student support but also as a potential site of decolonisation and epistemological access within a historically exclusive institution.

Decolonisation of higher education

Decolonisation in higher education is a complex and contested concept, requiring a deep understanding of colonialism's ongoing impact. Le Grange (2020) highlights the need for South African universities to address their colonial pasts, while Fanon (1967) emphasises that decolonisation must be a collective process of liberation, not just individual freedom.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) differentiates between colonisation, which involves territorial control, and colonialism, a broader epistemic project that erases indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultures, concepts he terms 'epistemicide,' 'linguicide,' and 'culturecide.' Mbembe (2016) builds on this, arguing that decolonisation requires a radical rethinking of knowledge systems to displace Eurocentric epistemologies and incorporate African and Global South perspectives. However, critics like Le Grange et al. (2020) warn of 'decolonial washing,' where institutions claim to engage in decolonisation without meaningful change. Tuck and Yang (2012) assert that decolonisation is 'not a metaphor' and must involve sustained, concrete actions addressing historical dispossession and systemic inequalities, rather than symbolic gestures that maintain institutional power dynamics.

Rhodes University exemplifies institutional attempts at decolonisation, particularly through its Institutional Transformation Plan (2019–2022) and further. The university aims to remove Global North ideologies from the centre of its curriculum, focusing on knowledge relevant to the Global South. This includes promoting indigenous languages in teaching and research and reorienting the curriculum to reflect the lived experiences of students. The university's plan also emphasises the need for epistemological access, ensuring that students engage meaningfully with knowledge and are active contributors to knowledge production, not just consumers (Rhodes University, 2018, 2019).

Epistemological access

Epistemological access is central to decolonising higher education. Morrow (2007, 2009) distinguishes it from physical access, emphasising that true engagement with academic knowledge requires active participation, not just enrolment. A responsive curriculum should support this by fostering deep learning and accommodating diverse student backgrounds.

However, there is no consensus on how to define or measure epistemological access. Scholars like Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) stress curriculum responsiveness, while Moll (2004) highlights the importance of aligning teaching with students' socio-cultural realities. Despite decolonisation efforts, students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds often experience alienation – feeling excluded from both the curriculum and institutional culture (Mann, 2001).

This idea can be linked to Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, which demonstrates how structural inequalities shape who is recognised as a credible knower within academic spaces. Fricker distinguishes between testimonial injustice, where individuals' contributions are undervalued due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where marginalised groups lack the interpretive frameworks to make their experiences intelligible within dominant discourses. Applying Fricker's framework to higher education highlights how students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds not only face material barriers but are also epistemically marginalised, limiting their full participation in knowledge creation and engagement. Maniram and Maistry (2018) argue that institutions must actively support students in bridging knowledge gaps, as epistemological access cannot be assumed or left to individual effort. In sum, decolonisation requires more than widening access, it requires structural transformation to ensure all students can engage, participate, and succeed in academic spaces.

Research Design and Methodology

This paper explores the successes and limitations of the Nine-Tenths programme in relation to the broader mission of decolonisation and improving epistemological access in higher education. Although decolonisation and epistemological access are not explicit goals of the Nine-Tenths programme, they are central to Rhodes University's wider plans for institutional transformation. Throughout this study, the Nine-Tenths programme is viewed as an extension of Rhodes University itself, playing a critical role within the Makhanda education sector and holding potential to contribute beyond mere physical access to higher education.

Research objectives

The study was guided by two primary objectives:

i. To assess the potential and limitations of the Nine-Tenths programme in advancing the decolonisation of higher education in Makhanda.
ii. To evaluate whether the programme has been successful in providing epistemological access to the students involved.

Research design

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, using a case study design. This approach was selected because it provides an in-depth exploration of social phenomena within their natural settings, allowing for a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences (Marshall, 1996, p. 524).

Participant selection

12 participants were selected through purposive sampling, chosen for their relevance to the research aims (Showkat & Parveen, 2017, p. 8). All were former Nine-Tenths mentees enrolled in tertiary education at the time of the study, primarily at Rhodes University, and able to reflect on the programme's long-term impact. Participants came from four historically disadvantaged Makhanda schools, Ntsika, Nombulelo, Mary Waters, and Khutliso Daniels, which partnered with the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme. Most were born or raised in Makhanda, and many were first-generation university students, offering valuable insights into the compounded challenges they faced.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore participants' experiences transitioning from high school to university. A flexible interview guide ensured consistency while allowing participants to elaborate on topics they found important. Questions focused on academic preparedness, integration, and the impact of the Nine-Tenths programme, with examples including: "Were you planning to go to university before the programme?" and "How prepared were you for the university workload?".

To examine epistemological access and language transition, participants were also asked about their experiences using English as a primary medium of instruction and any feelings of alienation upon arrival at university. These interviews, conducted in person or online based on participant preference, lasted 45–60 minutes. All were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify patterns. The analytic process involved the following stages: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from Rhodes University's research ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were briefed on the nature of the study, their rights to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect anonymity, participants' real names were replaced with pseudonyms in all transcripts and reporting.

Role of community partners

Community partners, including representatives from the Nine-Tenths programme and local educational stakeholders, were consulted during the research design phase. Their input helped shape the research questions and ensure the study addressed relevant issues. However, their involvement was primarily advisory, and they did not play an active role in

data collection, analysis, or interpretation. While this study acknowledges the importance of community engagement, it did not fully embody the principles of engaged research, which typically involves deeper collaboration with community partners throughout the research process.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings drawn from the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews. The analysis explores the potential and limitations of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme as a vehicle for decolonisation and epistemological access. To provide a structured evaluation, the findings are organised into key themes that shaped the students' experiences. The discussion begins with an examination of epistemological access, followed by an exploration of the programme's potential and limitations in advancing decolonisation and providing epistemic access.

The role of schooling in preparing learners for university

Many students face difficulties when it comes to adjusting from high school to a higher education institution. However, as seen in Miniram and Maistry (2018, p. 307), the level of preparedness to enter the university space is largely dependent on the type of high school the student attended. They further state that students who come from historically disadvantaged or ill-equipped schools tend to have a harder time adjusting to higher education. This view can be linked to that of Spaull (2015, p. 34), who argues that most poor students who emerge from disadvantaged backgrounds and dysfunctional schools tend to have gaps in their competence sets.

One of the interviewed students mentioned that "We didn't really have a teacher at Mary Waters for Grade 12, and for most of Grade 11. I managed to pass, but most people failed" (Chulumanco, 2021). In this instance the student was unable to be immediately admitted to Rhodes University and enrolled in GADRA Matric School, which assists students to improve their Grade 12 performance, to upgrade their marks for English and Mathematics. The reason for this was because, although they had passed, their marks did not meet the entry requirements to be accepted to study for a Bachelor of Commerce degree.

This student's experience shows that although the programme plays a positive role in improving the education sector in Makhanda, it is not able to fully address issues such as lack of teachers or infrastructure, which influence how equipped these students are to enter university and presents a possible barrier to university entry. In this instance the fault is not necessarily with the programme and has more to do with the education sector of the town. The student's experience also shows that although the number of Bachelor-level passes have increased in Makhanda, this does not automatically mean that these students will be accepted to Rhodes University, nor does it mean they will meet the entry requirements for their intended degree.

Community engagement programmes, like Nine-Tenths, play an important role in supporting students who face systemic barriers to higher education, yet they can only do so much within the confines of the existing structures. While these programmes may help individual students improve their academic performance or gain access to resources and mentorship that they would not otherwise have, they are often unable to address the underlying structural inequities that persist within the education system. These systemic barriers, such as underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of qualified teachers, continue to hinder students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result, while these community programmes can assist in providing immediate solutions for students, such as helping them meet university entry requirements, they are unlikely to bring about lasting change unless they also engage with and challenge the broader institutional and policy-level issues. Programmes that focus on advocacy, policy change, and systemic reform, in addition to academic support, would be necessary to truly dismantle the barriers that prevent equal access to higher education for all students. Without addressing these structural issues, such programmes may inadvertently reinforce the very systems they aim to alleviate.

Mentor-mentee relationships

It has been established that the programme has played a significant role in increasing the number of local entrants admitted to Rhodes University. However, it is important to look at what happens to these students once they physically access the institution. 10 of the 12 students interviewed had difficulties adjusting to higher education and felt underprepared to fully engage with the content and to fully participate in their degree programme.

This section focuses on mentor-mentee relationship. The relationships are nurtured during the Grade 12 year, and after, when the students are admitted into Rhodes University. One of the interviewed participants stated that:

> My mentor was perfect for me I guess, she was what I needed, and she was there every time I needed something. Besides the Nine-Tenths hours, she was there on Whatsapp, I could ask her anything or talk to her about something.

The data gathered suggests that mentors play a key role in preparing these students for university. What can be seen from the data collected was that there were varying levels of preparedness and that this was partly due to the type of relationship the mentor and mentee have. Those who maintained regular contact with their mentors were able to communicate beyond the structures of the programme and it was through these extra sessions that they were able to discuss the adjustment to university. A good mentor-mentee relationship provides many benefits and allows the mentee to fully benefit from what the programme has to offer. However, being paired with a mentor that is either disinterested or not fully engaged puts the prospective student at a disadvantage.

The interviewee cited above, who had a good relationship with his mentor, explains the relationship as follows: "Sometimes we would have sessions, where we would talk about our lives and stuff. So, it was more of friendship and family, rather than just schoolwork" (Chulumanco, 2021). This is an important statement, because it shows that some mentors and mentees established good relationships, and this positively impacted their academic and personal lives during matric.

Another interviewee stated that:

> *When I was writing my supplementary exams, I kept on meeting my mentor, she was the one supporting me, she even paid for my registration. She encouraged me, so that I could write the exams and get back my funding.*

In this instance the student had failed their first year at university, because they could not submit their assessments due to their home environment. As a consequence, the student lost their funding. However, with the assistance of their former Nine-Tenths mentor, they were able to pass their supplementary exam, and able to successfully appeal to get their funding back.

Although keeping contact with one's mentor, does not automatically guarantee academic success, it can have a positive impact in other ways that contribute to making adjustment to university easier. The above statement also shows how limited the programme may be in addressing the core issues of inequality in Makhanda. From the data gathered, nine of the 12 students mentioned that they no longer speak or have any contact with their previous mentors, despite being enrolled in the same institution. Only three of the interviewed participants were still in contact with their mentor, however even amongst these students there were varying levels of communication between the mentor and mentee.

The relationships between mentors and mentees, as described by the interviewees, highlight the significant role that mentorship can play in providing emotional and academic support during critical times, such as during matriculation and university adjustment. While staying in contact with a mentor does not automatically guarantee academic success, the support and encouragement offered by mentors can provide students with a sense of stability and motivation. In the case of the student who was assisted through their supplementary exams and successfully regained their funding, the mentorship relationship played a crucial role in helping the student navigate personal and academic challenges. This highlights that mentorship programmes can offer invaluable support in areas beyond the academic field, such as providing emotional encouragement and assisting with practical issues where possible.

However, as the interviewee's experience also suggests, the programme may still fall short in addressing the core issues of inequality that students confront in Makhanda. While mentorship can offer critical individualised support, it is not sufficient to tackle the broader structural and systemic challenges, such as the socio-economic disparities and lack of resources in the community, that hinder students' ability to succeed academically. Mentorship can provide a crucial safety net, but it cannot replace the need for systemic

change in education and socio-economic conditions. Thus, while the programme offers a positive impact on individual students, it must be seen as part of a larger, ongoing conversation about addressing the deeper inequalities that affect students' access to education and their ability to thrive in higher education.

Many students struggle with the adjustment to university, and those that come from historically disadvantaged schools tend to have a harder time adjusting not only to a different environment, but also to new ways of learning and teaching. One participant stated that "It was a very difficult year for me, since like as a first-year student, I was even planning on dropping out last year … even to deregister, because of the situation that was facing because of COVID-19, having no devices to do the work" (Thandiwe, 2021). In this instance the student had struggled with the adjustment to university and was unable to both physically access the institution and epistemologically access the curriculum, because they did not have devices to do so.

Another interviewee who had failed their first year at Rhodes University provided a similar response. The student stated that:

When we started experiencing COVID-19, we were forced to go back home. At home where I live there is no electricity, I come from the 'squatter camps'. I was left behind with my work. As a result of that, I failed to submit lots of assignments and tests, since I didn't have access to electricity. Due to that in first semester I failed politics and legal theory, the only module that I passed was isiXhosa.

The student cited above was a local student from Makhanda, who was initially living in the campus residences. As a result of the pandemic, she had to leave her university residence early in the academic year. Due to her going back home, where her household did not have electricity, she was unable to participate in the fully virtual academic year, and this largely contributed to her failing. In this example we can gather that just because the student is institutionally enrolled in an institution does not automatically mean that they will be able to access the institution epistemologically or even physically. From the above two interviews, being unable to physically access the institution was a hindrance to obtaining epistemological access. The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools and universities to rapidly transition online, exposing deep inequalities in access to technology, data, support, and highlighting urgent issues like food insecurity among students from poorer households.

Another student who had a difficult time said, "I even thought of dropping out, because I was not doing well academically, and I felt alone" (Mbali, 2021). This statement reflects some of these students' sentiments once they enter this space. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the experiences of the students after they have completed the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme and gained access to Rhodes University, in line with the goals of the programme. Many of the interviewed participants stated that they had or are still having issues adjusting to Rhodes University, be it academically, socially and economically. Students who are not adequately prepared for the transition to higher education are often not able to fully engage with the content that they are learning. This speaks to the notion

of epistemological access, because simply being in the institutional space does not equate to epistemological access. These students need to be able to meaningfully engage with the content to truly benefit from their education.

Language

Rhodes University, in the RUITP, states that decolonising entails the decentring of knowledge away from a Global North centered curriculum towards knowledge that is produced in the Global South. Decolonisation according to the University includes the promotion of indigenous languages for teaching, learning and research, alongside English (Rhodes University, 2018). Most of the learners from the selected schools have isiXhosa and Afrikaans as their first language.

Although these students are not first language English speakers, they are able to read, write and communicate in the language. However, there were varying levels of fluency when it came to the use of English. One student stated that "I wrote my exams in English, but when I started Grade 8, I was doing everything in Afrikaans, and then I changed from Grade 9" (Lungile, 2021). In some instances, the use of English presented a barrier which impacted how much of the content they were able to understand. What this means is that unlike some of their fellow classmates, they did not only have to adjust to a different institutional space, but they also had to adapt to having English as the primary language of instruction, learning and writing.

The research participants were affected differently by this adjustment, with some finding it relatively easy to make the switch, whilst some struggled to adjust to this change. The students who struggled with the adjustment reported that the level of English required at university, far exceeds what was expected of them at high schools. For example, one interviewee stated that:

> *English from high school is so different, when you compare to the one at university. First of all, you get pressured that your English has to be good, so that your lecturers, can get what are saying. At high school you can explain something in Xhosa and the teachers will not mind. Here [Rhodes], you have to talk everything in English, it is compulsory for you to speak English, while at high school you had the opportunity to explain something that you wrote in English, in isiXhosa.*

Another participant stated that "for one assignment I had the communist manifesto, and I had no idea what was going on, and had to read it a number of times to understand what was going on" (Thobile, 2021). In these two responses what can be observed is that although the students are able to understand and speak English, in some instances for these students the use of English as the primary language at institutional level presents a possible barrier to their learning, understanding, and writing, which can impact how much content they are able to understand. This also impacts their ability to effectively communicate their understanding of the subject in assignments. These language-related

barriers align with Fricker's (2007) notion of testimonial injustice, where students' contributions are undervalued due to prejudices about linguistic competence. Moreover, many students face hermeneutical injustice, as the dominant academic discourse does not sufficiently accommodate their linguistic and cultural realities, limiting their ability to fully participate in meaning-making processes.

There have been attempts at the institution to incorporate isiXhosa into coursework, with some departments allowing for learners to submit some of their work in isiXhosa. At face value, this initiative seems to be beneficial for local learners who might have trouble understanding the coursework. However, from the data gathered, many of these students were aware that there was an option to submit in another language but had decided to not use this mechanism. When this was probed further, one learner mentioned that their readings were in English, meaning that they would have to translate it into isiXhosa themselves, and further stated that they were not fully confident in their written Xhosa to submit an assignment in this language.

What can be gathered from the data is that students who experienced the most issues when it came to this adjustment were those in the Humanities faculty. Students interviewed from the Pharmacy and Commerce faculty stated that English was not an important issue for them when it came to their discipline. However, this is not to say that these students were completely unaffected by the transition to the use of the language. The issues faced by these students were more cultural and institutional, in terms of their surroundings, and this will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The Humanities faculty at Rhodes University requires extensive reading and weekly essay writing. Some of the previous Nine-Tenths mentees in the faculty experienced difficulties with grasping the knowledge, due to them not having a full grasp over the use of English. One of the participants described her difficulties as follows:

> When I first got here it was not easy at the beginning of the year. Meeting people from different places was intimidating, especially last year before COVID-19 when we were still attending face to face classes. We used to do a debate in politics, and you could hear the accent of other people and you would also feel intimidated. I would wish I was like that person. I would be not saying anything because of my accent.

What can be seen in this instance is that some students may struggle to adjust to the different environment, because of a language barrier. Although these students would be able to understand and converse in English, they are unable to fully engage with the work and their fellow peers. While there have been efforts made to accommodate students, who might want to submit in another language, only one of the participants had submitted in their home language. The participants cited various reasons for not utilising this mechanism, however the common theme was that they were not comfortable with the use of a language other than English for their submissions. One interviewee explained: "The course outline is in isiXhosa, and they told us we could submit in another language, but the readings were in English" (Thandiwe, 2021). In this instance the student stated that they did not make use of

the option to submit in another language, because it was difficult to translate the readings themselves, and they were not fully confident enough to submit in isiXhosa.

Institutional culture

Although it has been a few decades since South Africa became a democracy, except for allowing entry of non-white students into historically white institutions, the education system has not changed (Albertus, 2019). The author further states that the social structures of colonialism and white privilege still manifest in the everyday experience of non-white university students. One of the interviewed participants stated that:

> *For me socially, I was really struggling to make friends. I was staying in res. In my class there were people from Makhanda, but I did not know them because they went to the schools in the township, and I went to a coloured school. I ended up hating res, packed my things and just go home. I asked myself do I really belong here.*

In this instance, what can be seen is that, although Rhodes University is becoming more diversified and inclusive for local students, there are still some students who feel alienated in this space. These findings reflect what Mbembe (2016) describes as the persistence of coloniality within university spaces, where institutional cultures continue to centre Eurocentric norms and marginalise students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite increased enrolment, the symbolic and cultural structures of the university often remain unchanged, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and alienation among local students.

 As mentioned earlier, improving accessibility to the institution is a step in the right direction when it comes to decolonising higher education. However, for the space to fully become decolonised, the transformation that is needed goes beyond simply improving access. This transformation needs to be institutional and one that caters to the lived realities of these students. Institutional culture plays a crucial role in shaping students' experiences within higher education, particularly for those from historically marginalised backgrounds.

While increasing access to institutions like Rhodes University is an important step toward transformation, it does not automatically create an environment where all students feel included and valued. The lived experiences of students, as indicated by the above student, highlights the complexities of social integration within the university space. Feelings of alienation, isolation, and a lack of belonging can have a significant impact on students' academic performance and overall well-being. This suggests that institutional transformation must go beyond demographic diversity and address the deeper cultural and structural barriers that continue to exclude certain groups.

While the transition from secondary school to university is often challenging to most students, it is more especially difficult for students from previously marginalised communities. For these students, a truly decolonised institution would not only focus on who is allowed entry but also on how students experience and navigate the university space once they are there. This means critically engaging with curriculum content, teaching

practices, residence life, and social integration efforts, to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging. Efforts to shift institutional culture should include creating safe spaces for open dialogue, implementing mentorship programmes that bridge social divides, and actively working to dismantle the lingering effects of colonialism and privilege within the university environment. Without such changes, the diversification of higher education remains superficial, and students from marginalised backgrounds will continue to face challenges in fully engaging with and benefiting from their university experience.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper presents the findings from a study that evaluated the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme's potential and limitations as a vehicle for decolonising higher education and enhancing epistemological access at Rhodes University in Makhanda. The Nine-Tenths programme has improved physical access to higher education, but challenges remain in ensuring epistemological access. Students continue to face socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural obstacles.

True decolonisation requires structural changes to dismantle persistent inequalities. Programmes like Nine-Tenths are a starting point, but deeper institutional transformation is needed for lasting impact. To ensure that decolonisation efforts go beyond surface-level changes, it is important for universities to implement meaningful and sustained curriculum transformations that genuinely reflect diverse epistemologies.

While the incorporation of isiXhosa into certain departments at Rhodes University is a step towards linguistic inclusivity, it does not necessarily equate to decolonisation. True decolonisation requires a fundamental shift in how knowledge is produced, valued, and disseminated within academic spaces. This means not only integrating indigenous languages but also centring African knowledge systems, histories, and ways of knowing in teaching and research.

One way to move beyond 'decolonial washing' is for lecturers to actively design linguistically inclusive programmes that allow students to engage with content in their home languages while also critically analysing dominant knowledge structures. This could involve offering multilingual academic support, encouraging students to produce work in indigenous languages where possible, and including texts by African scholars in core reading lists. Additionally, fostering an environment where students feel empowered to challenge Eurocentric frameworks can contribute to a more genuinely decolonised learning space. Without these deeper transformations, curriculum changes risk being tokenistic rather than truly transformative.

The data collected highlights that while Nine-Tenths has been effective in facilitating physical access to higher education, it falls short in ensuring comprehensive epistemological access, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, many students lacked access to necessary resources at home, such as laptops, stable internet connections,

and conducive learning environments, these factors significantly impacted their academic performance. Some students even failed courses due to these challenges.

The data also reveals that many students struggled in their first year of study, feeling underprepared for university life. To address this, Rhodes University should provide additional support during the first year to help students adjust and feel less isolated. A strong support system could positively impact their academic success and reduce the sense of alienation.

Limitations of the Study and Areas for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme in promoting access to higher education, it has some limitations. The small, homogenous sample focused solely on former mentees at Rhodes University. Including perspectives from non-participants, mentors, faculty, and programme administrators would provide a fuller picture of the programme's impact. Future research could also explore long-term outcomes such as graduation rates, employment, and continued engagement with decolonisation. Comparative studies with similar mentorship programmes at other institutions would help assess the scalability and adaptability of the Nine-Tenths model.

Final Thoughts

The 2021 research findings show that while the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme has improved physical access to Rhodes University, it falls short in ensuring epistemological access. Socio-economic challenges continue to hinder students' academic success, highlighting the need for broader support. The programme prepares students for entry but does not adequately support them once enrolled.

True decolonisation requires more than access, it demands structural change to create an inclusive academic environment. It must remain a transformative goal, not reduced to token efforts or 'decolonial washing'. As current data shows, significant barriers persist. While the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme is a positive step, it is not a complete solution. Rhodes University must go further to ensure all students can thrive, thus fully embodying the values of decolonisation and becoming not just 'in' Makhanda, but truly 'of' it.

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