



Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: Developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based higher education index.

## ACCESSING UNIVERSITY

MIRATHO WORKING PAPER 2017/3

Melanie Walker and Mikateko Hoppener  
WalkerMJ@ufs.ac.za and hoeppenerm@gmail.com

# Accessing University

Melanie Walker and Mikateko Hoppener

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Institute of Race Relations (IRR 2017), 1 789 000 (51.7%) white and 8 052 000 (30.6%) African/black<sup>1</sup> people (a doubling since 2002) aged 20 and over completed matric in 2015. By the same year, 1 511 000 (5.7%) Africans and 994 000 (28. %) white people aged 20 or older had completed post-school education. African matric results have increased from 201 284 passing in 1994 to 369 903 passing in 2015. In 2015, 118 017 (21.5%) Africans achieved bachelors passes making them formally eligible to access university. Moreover, while in 2015, 67.4% of African children passed their matric examinations, 98.8% of white children passed. African children enrolled in former Model C schools do very much better than those in former black schools, described by the IRR as ‘the long shadow of apartheid’ (IRR 2017, p. 4). African children do not do well enough in mathematics (a gateway subject for many professional degrees, also see Van Broekhuizen et al, 2016) at matric: only 26% who sat the exam achieved 40% or above, while the figure for white children is 84.9%. For physical science (another gateway subject) 31.1% of Africans passed, compared to 80.0% of white students. Matric pass rates varied across provinces in 2015, with the Eastern Cape and KZN having the lowest number of African passes and Gauteng, the highest making for a regional ‘dividend’ or ‘penalty’. Access is clearly uneven.

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Race’-based categories were invented/constructed during the apartheid regime but continue to be used both across the political spectrum and in government and university data to measure transformation and redress. Thus statistics continue to use categories of Indian (people of Asian descent), Coloured (mixed race heritage) and African or black for people who are indigenous black African. The category black is now less expansive than it was during earlier political struggles. White refers to those of colonial descent. However problematic the notion of race undoubtedly is, the power of racial imagery and categories persist.

South Africa also faces considerable wider equality challenges in addition to those of education. The Gini coefficient ranges from about 0.660 to 0.696 (depending on whether or not welfare payments are included). This makes South Africa one of the most consistently unequal countries in the world; extreme inequality ‘corrupts politics, hinders economic growth and stifles social mobility...It squanders talent, thwarts potential and undermines the foundations of society’ (Oxfam 2014, p. 3). Bhorat (2015) attributes pronounced inequality in South Africa to skewed endowments (assets that people and households have) post-1994. Higher education constitutes one such intergenerational endowment, for instance, how many people have a post-school education constitutes an endowment, and endowments are linked to social im/mobility and access for example, to management and leadership positions in both the public and private sector (IRR 2017).

In the light of such persistent challenges, but also some significant success in opening higher education opportunities to young South Africans, this paper reviews key literatures on access research. We try to capture the changing and contested meanings around who the legitimate subjects of admission policies are, and underlying conceptions of fairness (whether of merit-based admissions, or something else), and what research has been done internationally and in South Africa.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMING OF ACCESS

We propose the capability approach (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000), which asks what constitutes individual and collective human flourishing - as a goal of access. The key concepts are: 1) Capabilities - the substantive freedoms or real opportunities to lead the kind of life that people value. It is important to understand the idea of capabilities as freedoms or opportunities which can be chosen and put into practice – as functionings or actual beings and doings. They include both material things and the states of people. In this approach disadvantage can be dynamically understood (it can improve or worsen) as ‘a lack of genuine opportunity for

secure functionings' (Wolff and De-Shalit 1997, p.182). Risk (financial and other forms) and uncertainties are components of disadvantage and disadvantages can cluster and intersect and it is this combination and plurality of contextual factors that shapes individual advantage or disadvantage. Higher education oriented to the public good would then be capabilities-promoting for all students, including at the point of access and admissions. 2) Agency is both intrinsically and instrumentally important 'in assessing what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good' (Sen 1985, p. 206) - the ability of the individual to pursue and achieve the objectives they value for their own well-being but also that of others. An agent is, in short, someone who acts and makes change happen. 3) Democratic participation and public reasoning, including political values, individual biographies and structural conditions are interconnected for Sen.

Equality then consists of 'equality of capability to function fully as human beings' (Therborn 2013, p. 41), and this capability is influenced by inequality arrangements, in the case of higher education, across intersecting dimensions of resource inequality understood as unequal resources to act (including money or income), and existential inequality, where the latter refers to inequality of personhood (including recognition, association, status and power) (Therborn 2013). Our framework pays careful attention to poverty of income because understanding and addressing poverty of income 'can be helped by explicit consideration of the relations between deprivations in different spaces, especially between incomes and the capability to lead secure and worthwhile lives' (Sen 1999, p. 9). While equalizing resources might not be sufficient nor enable two people to access similar choices, access to sufficient resources is nonetheless a necessary condition, and resources loom very large indeed in access to and accessibility of higher education. A focus on capabilities expansion would also allow us also to reclaim the idea of choice and agency. The capability approach envisages genuinely enlarging people's choices about what they value choosing to be and to do with concern for both economic and non-economic issues, and equality of opportunities and the human and social conditions for achieving genuinely free choices. Being able to have genuine choices and options allows us to recognise the conscious and deliberative aspects of human agency, but also the way power and society erect barriers to full justice. We therefore propose framing

access as a challenge of capability expansion, with human well-being and human development as the ends of higher education and development.

All this makes the challenge of access particularly pertinent for thinking about the public good contributions of universities. If students from poor backgrounds cannot get into universities in the first place, this raises questions about how public, or which publics, and how good, and for whom universities are. Even if one argued that people living in poverty might benefit indirectly from access to the services of university educated professionals, there is evidence that this is uneven (poor teaching quality for example, uneven quality of nurses in public health clinics, doctors and lawyers preferring private sector work, overstretched social development services, and so on (see Walker and McLean, 2013), together with a disconnect between the concerns of the middle class and the poor (e.g. Bentley and Habib, 2008).

### 3. CONTEXT

In the last few decades, the South African higher education system has expanded considerably with higher numbers of women than men undergraduates, and a growing proportion of black students. However, the demographics of student participation indicate that black students and, we think, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are still heavily underrepresented, even though there have been significant gains at the individual level. While white students have witnessed only a slight increase in numbers, black student numbers have almost doubled from 286 144 in 1995 to 689 503 in 2013, showing the result of efforts to address inequalities of the past by numerically expanding black access (IRR 2016). However, participation rates by 'race' are still uneven; in 2013 for black students it was 16.5% and for white students 54.5% (IRR 2016). Some formerly white universities are also historically better placed to sustain their historical advantage and retain their predominantly middle class intake, leaving less advantaged universities (historically black, especially in rural areas) to provide access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>2</sup>. University status then plays out to reproduce

---

<sup>2</sup> Under apartheid, higher education institutions were designed to serve one of four apartheid racial groups ('Africans', 'Coloureds', 'Indians' and 'Whites'). By 1985 based on the flawed notion of 'separate but equal', 19 HEIs (universities and technikons) for the exclusive use of whites, two for coloureds, two for Indians, and six for Africans had been established. By 1994, there were 36 HEIs which included: 1) ten 'historically disadvantaged' (HDI) universities and seven 'historically disadvantaged' technikons designated for all black South Africans, with 2) ten 'historically

privilege (see Walker and Fongwa, 2017). These historical inequalities which persist at university level, led Higher Education South Africa (HESA), (now called Universities South Africa or USAF), the organization of all vice-chancellors to comment:

The continued under-developed macro-influenced institutional capacities of historically black institutions must be emphasized: providing access to rural poor and working class black students, inadequate state support for the historically black institutions to equalize the quality of undergraduate provision compromises their ability to facilitate equality of opportunity and outcomes. (2014, 10)

The Green Paper which preceded the 2013 policy White Paper similarly noted:

A diverse university system steeped in inequality is the product of apartheid education policies, and that reality still confronts us today. While our leading universities are internationally respected, our historically black universities continue to face severe financial, human, infrastructure, and other resource constraints. (DHET 2012, 11)

This then plays out at the micro level of access and accessibility in individual lives and opportunities. For example, a student may attain the necessary grades to access a university but be unable to secure the finances for her course, either because she lacks the information on how to go about securing the state NSFAS loan, or she knows about the loan but cannot get hold of the documents she is required to provide to 'prove' that she qualifies for financial aid, or the university she wants to attend prefers an equally qualified middle class student, or all these factors might intersect in some way. For this student to fail to secure a place at the university of her choice would be an individual injustice, multiplied many times for students

---

advantaged' (HAIs) universities and seven historically advantaged technikons for whites and, 3) two distance HEIs catering for all races; the University of South Africa (Unisa) and Technikon South Africa (TSA). The higher education system in pre-1994 was thus seriously skewed towards the advantage of white South Africans and structured to entrench the racial ideologies of the apartheid government. While the system has been restructured to break down apartheid barriers - to some extent- advantaged universities continue to be advantaged into the current time. It is indicative that only formerly white universities make it into the top 500 Times Higher international rankings.



similar to her to become a social injustice and perpetuation of disadvantage for specific social groups.

Moreover, accessibility does not begin only at the point of application but much earlier in students' schooling careers. Bloch (2009) and others have referred to the extreme inequalities within South Africa schooling which shapes initial access opportunities as the 'two-economy system', where the majority of public schools are underfunded, poorly staffed and produce few matriculants who qualify for higher education, while a minority of formerly white public schools have managed to retain enough resources and skilled teachers to produce a larger share of university entrants (Bloch 2009; Spaul 2014). As Spaul (2014) points out, in South Africa we effectively have two public schooling systems: 'one which is functional, wealthy, and able to educate students (about 25% of public schools); with the other being poor, dysfunctional, and unable to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills they should be acquiring in their schooling career (roughly 75% of public schools)'<sup>3</sup>. According to Mukovhe Masuta (interview, 2016) due to a lack of information, advice and encouragement, many talented young South Africans living in rural areas and townships either do not consider or are unable to access institutions of higher learning, especially universities. There is a widening educational information gap between rural/township high school learners and their urban counterparts. Further, for disadvantaged youth, access to vital 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) needed to negotiate university access, understand different course options, make sense of admission processes, and apply for financial support is limited.

---

<sup>3</sup> In South Africa public schools are divided into five bands, with quintile one schools being the poorest. The poverty rankings are determined nationally according to the poverty of the community around the school, as well as, certain infrastructural factors (e.g. access to sanitation). Schools in quintile 1, 2 and 3 have been declared no-fee schools, while schools in quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying schools. Although imperfect the quintiles do serve as rough proxy of socio-economic background and quality of schooling. What may not be captured would be cases where a low paid domestic worker is resident in suburban area and able to send her child to a quintile 4 or 5 school (possibly with the assistance of her employers in paying the fees). Spaul (2014) further points out that on the surface the differences between the matric pass rate by quintile are not too large with 70% of matrics from Quintile 1 passing and 92% of matrics from Quintile 5 passing. But, he says, pre-matric dropout is twice as high in Quintile 1 compared to Quintile 5. By matric there were only 105,954 Quintile 1 matrics and 104,344 Quintile 5 matrics. Of 100 Grade 8 Quintile 1 students, 36 made it to matric and passed. Of 100 Grade 8 Quintile 5 students, 68 made it to matric and passed. Similarly, the proportion receiving bachelor passes by quintile is only 36% for Quintile 1 matrics and 68% for Quintile 5 matrics. However, if we calculate it as a percentage of Grade 8 enrolments four years earlier the figures drop to an abysmal 10% for Quintile 1 and 39% for Quintile 5. As a proportion, the number of Quintile 5 students in Grade 8 that will go on to pass matric with a bachelor's pass is four times higher than that for Quintile 1 students.

There are of course notable exceptions to the negative results obtained by lower quintile schools, with strong evidence of under-resourced schools performing exceptionally well under dedicated leadership, and with relatively poor rural and urban schools pushing against the odds to produce cohorts of successful matriculants (see Govender, 2017a). But the point is that these schools perform well - against all odds. Generally speaking, schools that are able to supplement their income using tuition and parent contributions to operational costs have significantly increased opportunities to ensure that more students obtain the school-leaving certificates needed for entry into higher education, further entrenching historical inequalities in the school system. The larger the number of well-off parents, the higher the contributions to school budgets and the more access to skilled fundraising opportunities and networks. Pitman (2015, p. 289) explains well when he writes that, ‘a high-status student with accumulated cultural capital’ is ‘more valuable to an elite university than a low-status student [even] with subsidised economic capital’ in the form of a state loan. The South African higher education sector is therefore not status homogenous.

Moreover, with an underfunded higher education system (a real term decline over ten years of -1.35% see DHET 2015), we must assume that for the foreseeable future, higher education will remain a scarce commodity. We therefore need to consider how accessible the existing places in higher education are, to whom, on what grounds higher education in different kinds of universities is made available to which students, and what criteria prevail, for example social priorities, academic merit, expanding student diversity of socio-economic and race backgrounds, and so on. Lack of places for all who qualify would be an availability constraint and there is certainly evidence that more students with a matriculation bachelors pass want to enter university each year than there are places for them. For instance, in 2014 the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) had 5500 places for first-year students, but received 46 000 applications; the University of Cape Town (UCT) received nearly 20 000 applications for 4200 places; the University of Pretoria (UP) received 42 000 applications for 10 500 places; while the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) attracted 89 000 for 8400 places –notably all historically advantaged universities and all in the Top 500 of the rankings (Makholwa, 2014). The best success ratio was achieved at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), where 8840



of the 22000 who applied got a place (Savides, Pillay & Eggington, 2015). Savides et al. (2015) estimate that only one in eight students<sup>4</sup> will find a place at university; which means about 12,5% of students who apply actually get accepted into first year undergraduate programmes.

Resources-based inequality looms large in South Africa. Take this one example: Babalwa Dingindlela matriculated in 2013 and is from Kokstad, Kwa- Zulu Natal, the monthly family income is around R18, 000.00. She is studying public relations at the Durban University of Technology but owes R34,560.00 from the previous year's fees and needs to find R15, 000.00 for 2017 and a deposit of R2, 100.00. No-one in the family has any higher education. Babalwa explains: 'My siblings and I have been living with my grandmother since I was seven years old, when my parents passed on. She has been taking care of me and my four cousins who also lost both their parents. We survive solely on her pension of R1, 500.00 a month. I matriculated in 2013 but had to take gap year because of financial difficulties. I have been a public relations student since 2015. After waiting months for a response from NSFAS, my grandmother called on my behalf only to find that my application had been unsuccessful. I applied again for my second year, only to receive the same response. I applied again last September. My application has yet to be evaluated' (quoted in Abdulla and Wazar 2017, p. 30).

Ouma (2012) points out that from 2001 onwards, state allocations to higher education started dipping and in 2004 the government imposed enrolment caps, citing financial constraints as the reason. The government claimed that the higher education system had grown more rapidly than the available resources and that the resulting short-fall in funding placed severe pressure on university infrastructure and staffing, effectively compromising the ability of higher education institutions to discharge their teaching and research mandate. The introduction of enrolment caps as a way of limiting rapid growth of student enrolments indicated further that government funds available for higher education were not infinite. There are not enough places for the numbers of qualified students who want to attend university, so most universities turn tens of thousands of applications away every year.

---

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2015/02/02/only-1-in-8-students-will-find-a-place-at-university>

Makholwa (2014) asserts that most of the 197 900 first year places that were available in 2014 were at historically disadvantaged and under-resourced institutions that tend to have lower admission criteria and lower fees for most degree programmes. It is clear that such a situation contributes to the perpetuation of inequality in South African universities.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was introduced in 1999 with the aim of increasing access to higher education for previously disadvantaged groups. Currently, students qualify if their family income is below R122, 000.00 per annum, and/or if they attended quintile one to three schools, and/or and if their families are recipients of social grants (Govender, 2017b). Despite the significant increase in NSFAS payments to students since its inception, the allocated funds have not been able to meet the increasing demand for funding by students in need of financial support. This has been observed in the recent (and ongoing) #Feesmustfall movement. Nonetheless, there has been clearer recognition of the financial obstacles facing different student groups. First, the need for financial aid for students from poor families, with an annual family income of R122, 000.00 or less is accepted and acted on through NSFAS. The needs of the second group – those from families with incomes above the NSFAS threshold but under R600, 000.00 per annum – have gone largely unmet. A family in this group (teachers, social workers, nurses – the missing middle) cannot afford to pay all the costs of higher education from its own resources for one or more family members, but prospective students do not qualify for NSFAS support. While changes to the state loan and bursary scheme are underway these are likely only to be fully operational in 2018, with a view to funding poor and ‘missing middle’ students (Govender 2017b).

It is not coincidental that historically disadvantaged universities tend to have the largest numbers of NSFAS students, and that the best schools (quintile 5) have the highest achieving students and we can assume the widest range of opportunities from which to choose (Broekhuizen et al. 2016) or that advantaged universities have more of these kinds of students (Cooper 2015; Walker and Fongwa 2017). Cooper, in his account of the ‘stalled revolution’ in South African higher education access, points out that (and in so far as Africanization is a somewhat imperfect proxy for class), the five most elite universities in South Africa have around 30% black students compared to 85% attending the lower status universities.



With implications for access, South African universities in the face of declining government funding regularly increase tuition fees to compensate. The problem overall is the high cost of university which could amount to as much as R100, 000.00 per year; for the average student, support of almost R500 000 over the course of a degree may be required (see Grant 2016). To give some examples of the range of fees charged, in 2015 UCT charged between R37 000 and R54, 000; Limpopo R22, 000 to R28, 000, Stellenbosch R32, 000 to R40, 000 and Univen R14, 000 to R42, 000. The more expensive (and higher earnings) degree programmes include medicine, law and engineering, and the humanities is the cheapest. To put this in social context, in 2015 the average monthly earnings were R16 506 (less than half the required fees even for the cheaper programmes). A skilled worker earned an average of R35, 000.00 and a domestic worker R3, 000.00 (IRR 2016, 305-307). Income to fund studies is therefore a key determinant both of availability and accessibility.

As Therborn (2013) sharply observes, there is not much money will not buy. Moreover, an underfunded system is unlikely to cater well for poorer students who may need academic support.

South Africa has an historically stratified higher education system. Thus in South Africa the issue of access and access for whom and to which universities is crucial, given the transformation imperative to redress the historical legacy of apartheid and exclusion. While there are significant South African research gaps, from international literature, we know that university access, accessibility and aspirations to both is strongly shaped by 1) access to the right kind of information from the right people, 2) decent schooling and supportive teachers who form and encourage higher education aspirations, and 3) families who know about higher education. For poor students, financial aid is crucial. In short it requires an aspirations window (and the funding that goes with this) characterised by what Ray (2003) calls 'similarity', which in turn forms aspirations for higher education 'for someone like me', and beyond this, aspirations to the best universities (Walker and Fongwa, 2017). It means for many students a 'wide' aspirations gap in term of how many higher education students or graduates they come into contact with for developing navigational maps and practices to

access higher education. Research on graduate employability (Walker and Fongwa, 2017) indicates that students who accessed Wits (an historically advantaged university) and Univen (an historically disadvantaged university) were involved in very different aspirational and choice-making processes, came from different kinds of schools, and financed their studies differently. Rebecca attended a model C school (Quintile 5) in the north of Johannesburg. She comes from a family of civil engineers, her father and uncles and her sister, all having studied or worked at Wits. Wits is an easy choice for her. Her parents will pay her university fees. Ramagoma attended a rural school in the Limpopo area. She did not consider the best universities and only applied to Univen and Turfloop (University of the North) but only Univen replied. She chose Univen because it is close to home and she thought she could study viticulture (in fact not offered at Univen). She would have chosen radiography if she could have. She ends up in Animal Sciences and has a NSFAS loan to pay for her studies (from Walker and Fongwa, 2017).

The context suggests that higher education access is not fair to all. Poorer students and rural students appear to have less access and less access to the better universities, while resource and information inequalities loom large as intersecting conversion factors for capabilities.

#### 4. RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

In the discussion of enrolment distribution to follow, the UNISA enrolments are included to give a full picture of the size and shape of the sector, but when we turn to retention and throughput only the residential (that is, predominantly contact teaching) universities are included.

Available research indicates that globally, more persons from financially and socially better-off backgrounds access higher education (and succeed) compared to those from poorer, disadvantaged sectors of society (for example, Archer et al. 2007, O'Shea 2016, Spiegler and Bednarek 2013). Research has investigated the ways in which working class and middle-class students make different choices about higher education (Reay et al, 2001 and 2005), revealing a complex intersection of personal (including psycho-social), social, cultural, economic and

institutional issues (Archer et al. 2007) and aspirations (Hart 2013). However, most of the published research comes from developed countries (although see Carnoy et al. 2014 on BRICs). For example, the OECD (2013) reports that amongst member countries, students from a more educated family are ‘almost twice’ as likely to attend university (p. 3) than their peers. Anders (2012) found that a greater proportion of people in the top income quartile in the UK (66%) apply to university compared to those in the bottom quintile (24%). Ball et al. (2002) suggest that in families where one or more members have been to university, it is assumed that others will follow (often in the same subject fields); this effect of parental level of education is also confirmed by Oliveira and Zanchi (2004). Family histories and individual opportunities are then shaped (even if not over-determined) by social structures and opportunity conditions (Stevens 2007; Zipin et al 2015).

On the other hand, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) indicate that family background can provide vital resources in the form of parent’s attitudes to education and its value, interpersonal relationships in the family which single out a child as the role example, or parent’s unquestioned belief in the child’s abilities, while ‘family capital’ (values, strategies, resources) may also influence futures. The research by Bathmaker et al. (2016) which tracked pairs of students entering and progressing through two different English universities – Bristol (elite) and the University of the West of England (former polytechnic, post 1992 university) – found that while students can and do exercise agency, nonetheless their choices are structured by the social context in which they grew up. They found that although the school or college attended had a significant impact on post-18 choices, of greater impact was family background – expectations and available capitals - so that getting in to higher education is not just an individual project but a family endeavour. They write that: ‘Middle-class young people and their families can normally draw on an array of capitals to their advantage, while those from the working-classes tend to have to rely on personal resources and determination, backed up by emotional support from their families, rather than access to dominant cultural capital’ (2016, 71). The issue, however, as Bathmaker et al (2016) show empirically, is not to pathologize or blame working class families, but to recognize that the structural conditions under which they make family and education choices may not be fair.



Educational stratification is not only imposed upon the student but also may be self-imposed with young people making choices that are similar to those of their peers and their families (Bathmaker et al, 2016; Hart, 2013; Zipin et al, 2015, Gale and Parker, 2015; Reay et al, 2005; Watts and Bridges, 2006), including choosing more familiar institutions – generally lower status universities for working class students and even lower status degree programs (Thomas and Quinn, 2007), while middle and upper class students choose and higher status universities (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Reay et al. (2005) indicate that choice for their working-class participants was governed by conceptions of ‘fit’ with the institution. Thus research on university choices (e.g. Reay et al, 2005; Hart 2013; Stevens 2007) shows how choices and aspirations are socially constructed under conditions of inequality. Reay et al (2005, p. 85) comment that choice for a majority of ‘non-traditional’ students involve[s] either a process of finding out what you cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options left, or a process of self-exclusion’ so that ‘choice’ is ‘a social process which is structured and structuring’ (p. 160), informed by one’s social position and educational background, and for many, means ‘[having] a choice of one’ (p. 85).

In the case of first generation students, such self-limitation based on what is known or what is suitable for ‘someone like me’ can result in individuals and social groups being more likely to ‘study less prestigious subjects at less prestigious universities’ (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013, p. 324). Crawford et al. (2012) sum up for England that if one considers participation at ‘high-status’ institutions – whose degrees typically earn their holders the highest returns in the labour market – the socioeconomic gap is even starker: young people from the richest fifth of families are almost ten times more likely to attend such institutions than young people from the poorest fifth of families. On the other hand, Cowdry et al. (2010) make use of newly linked administrative data to better understand the determinants of higher education participation amongst individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, following two cohorts of students in England – those who took GCSEs in 2001-02 and 2002-03 – from age 11 to age 20. The findings suggest that while there remain large raw gaps in HE participation (and participation at high-status universities) by socio-economic status, these differences are substantially reduced once controls for prior attainment are included. Moreover, these findings hold for both state and private school students. This suggests that



poor attainment in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower participation rates amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry into HE.

Not surprisingly prior attainment is the single largest factor in differential patterns of access to higher education (Vignoles and Crawford, 2009). The interaction between the admissions and selection process (accessibility dimension) and the candidate is explored in studies which focus on the variations in distribution of particular forms of ‘cultural capital’ amongst candidates (Zimdars, 2010) and the process of homophily (i.e. unconsciously looking for those who are socially similar to oneself) on the part of the selectors (Zimdars, 2010). A US study of the admissions process at one elite university (Stevens, 2007) reveals how competitive admissions are for entry to the ‘best’ universities. As Stevens sums up, his research ‘is largely about privileged families and the impressive organizational machinery they have developed to pass their comfortable social positions on to their children’ (p. 3); they ‘parent’ their children into the kind of student elite universities want. Stevens points out how college admissions criteria have become the goals of child rearing – for those aware of them. Affluent parents and less affluent but knowing parents encourage in their children the attributes elite colleges claim to want: measurably high academic achievement, athletic ability, artistic accomplishment, and service to the community. Of course these in turn are open to interpretation, and affluent parents need to be sure that their interpretation accords with that of the college. He also notes the importance of studying privileged groups to understand how such privilege is transmitted generationally and how ‘accomplished applicants’ are produced (p. 242), from accessing a good school to ensure high academic accomplishments with investments in children’s extra-curricular activities, and how an apparently class neutral meritocratic ideal is accepted. For the most advantaged, Stevens suggest, it is not so much whether they will get into an elite college but which one they will get into. Under such conditions, rewriting the rules of admissions (accessibility) will never enable places for everyone at the best universities. Moreover, institutions are complicit in selecting the kind of students they want, as Pitman (2015) argues, using Australia as the context to show that students from disadvantaged groups are over represented in low-status institutions. He considers university ‘status’ as the elephant in the higher education room, and that the better

off are simply ‘better’ at playing the access and admissions game, loading the dice with their own cultural capital. University status (McCowan’s ‘horizontal’) must therefore be factored into equity and access policy for a ‘more democratic distribution of its benefits’ (Pitman 2015, 290).

The UK Schwartz Report (DfES 2004) on fair admissions proposed some reframing of admissions in that it endorsed the case for assessing achievements, talent and potential in the light of a candidate’s background and contextual factors, whilst at the same time stressing that such consideration should not amount to any form of social engineering or move towards quota places for those from particular groups (DfES 2004, 23). However, candidates still enter into a competition for admission. Even if they are considered as individuals, they must still be compared against others in order to be assessed for the places available. A second complexity arises out the fact that the Schwartz Report (DfES 2004, 6) advocates contextualisation, a necessary condition of which is consideration of background characteristics, whilst nevertheless claiming that ‘a legitimate aim for universities and colleges [is] to recruit the best possible students regardless of background’. There is ambiguity here which leaves the recommendations open to interpretation. According to Featherstone (2011) there is a strong sentiment amongst tutors at the elite English university college she studied – and indeed, enshrined in admissions policy documents – that admissions processes should be based on ‘academic judgements’ and decisions (see Naidoo 2004 for a South African account of how academic standards discourse is mobilized). For some, the systematic use of contextual information falls outside the realm of the ‘academic’ (as if that is context neutral). When asked whether selecting for diversity was a laudable goal, many respondents in her study were of the opinion that selecting applicants on the basis of academic ability and potential would in itself lead to a diverse student body. But, she notes that it is not clear how fair outcomes will result from individuals making individual judgements about individual applicants. It remains the case that ‘admission is a multi-player game where individual chances of success are dependent on the decisions of powerful institutional gatekeepers’ (Zimdars 2010, p. 308 quoted in Featherstone 2011, p. 17).

A recent (BIS, 2015) in England claims that while there is an extensive existing literature that examines the factors that influence progression to higher education in the UK, research to



examine the way in which factors interact and the relative influence they have on different groups is more limited. The research therefore explores the interplay between gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status and wider social, cultural, personal and economic factors and the intersectionality of influences. The study found differences in parental aspirations for girls compared to boys, with parents more likely to encourage girls to stay in education, although the study also found that young people's own attitudes were still the more important in influencing participation in education. They found that gaps persist in higher education applications by ethnicity, especially when correlated with disadvantage. They also found from interviews that experiences of participation or non-participation are similar and shared. Despite the barriers that disadvantaged students face, the research found that drivers of success include: strong support networks; positive attitudes towards education; clear aspirations and goals; relevant and timely information; and appreciation of the costs and benefits of choosing or not choosing higher education. BIS found, as has other research, that those from a more disadvantaged background were more likely to view higher education as a loss rather than a gain because of the expected costs involved. The BIS study also reaffirms that educational attainment is still the platform for securing a university place. It identified key points in time in which career and education decision-making come into focus: from a young age children begin to explore their interests and motivations which could develop into career aspirations; the transition points into secondary and further education are significant. Beyond lack of attainment they suggest that lack of progression cannot be attributed to a single factor. But a major determinant of higher education applications they found is attainment at Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16, roughly correlating with grades 9 and 10 in South Africa), when crucial decisions are made that affect choosing university. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) further affirm that decisions about which subjects to study at school, and what degree to aim for, which universities to apply to, and so on are influenced by social class background and type of secondary school attended. Unequal conditions lead to unequal chances and unequal capabilities to choose.

Such conclusions are further supported by a comprehensive review of college access literature and inequality in the USA by McDonough and Fann (2007), examining both individual level studies looking at choice, families, communities and school influences, and organizational

arrangements and structural and cultural processes that mediate individual access (what Sen [1999] would consider personal and social conversion factors). They point to a gap in field level analysis which integrates individual and organizational analysis ‘by accounting for the reciprocal influence of students and institutions on each other and by illuminating the dynamic interactions of student behaviour and professionals’ and policymakers’ practices’ (McDonough and Fann 2007, p. 55). Addressing both levels allows for analysis of the reciprocal influences, they suggest. They then organize their review according to: 1) individual (socio-economic status; parents and family; quality of schooling; race, ethnicity and culture; traditional/non-traditional status of applicants; and geography-rural); 2) organizational (schools – academic preparation and counselling; higher education outreach; university recruitment; and, college type); 3) field level analyses (financial aid, admissions policies and practices; and ‘entrepreneurial admissions’. They conclude that US higher education ‘remains intractably inequitable in advantage and disadvantage’ (p. 81). They propose for research that integrative inquiry is needed to examine the whole system of education – both individual experiences across the system and key indicators and transitions that constitute equality and inequality in education, and the interconnectivity and interdependencies of inequality. Student agency also needs to be taken into account in their ability to influence their own educational achievements.

Overall then, the themes that emerge from research are: finance/cost-benefit, and funding (parental/family income/financial aid); choices; aspirations and agency goals; attainment at school-leaving examinations; the role of universities (selection, outreach); subjects chosen at school and in applying to university; perceptions of university status; and information about university. Research suggests that these are not neutral processes or only individual choices, but contextually and socially produced. Access as availability is also constrained by the number of university places and in which subjects. Accessibility is shaped by apparently neutral meritocratic procedures which end up advantaging the already advantaged. Finally, we need to consider integrating the macro (field), meso (university) and individual levels in our analysis – action and change on all these fronts would be required to advance the public good of higher education capabilities and human well-being. Constraints at one level may interrupt change and development at other levels.

## 5. SOUTH AFRICAN RESEARCH ON ACCESS

As noted above, a unique contribution of this study was the analysis done by location – rural, township and urban. This new analysis also posed the biggest challenge for the study as there is no common classification of students into categories of urban, rural as well as township categories in the HEMIS dataset.

We highlight a small number of studies; overall there seems to be gap in research on access in South Africa although we did not investigate the grey literature of masters and doctoral dissertations or studies which might be about something else but which include some attention to access (for example Walker and Fongwa 2017 have a chapter on aspirations which considers university access and choice). Based on a comprehensive review, Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) point to a plurality of factors influencing access and success at university. These include social arrangements such as schooling background, socio-economic status, race and gender.

It is also the case, however, that there is some evidence that if students are well supported, they can succeed at university, even with low access points as happens at the University of the Free State (UFS) whose University Preparation Programme (UPP) students have a higher completion rate than ‘regular’ students (see CTL 2014). Historically, this challenge was also taken up through sustained attempts at UCT to develop an Alternative Admissions Programme (Yeld and Haeck, 1997) that paid attention to past educational histories, given that matriculation results for applicants from the township schools consistently proved to be an unreliable indicator of future academic performance, particularly in the lower ranges. The project therefore developed and evaluated tests were intended to widen access for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, with the potential to succeed at university. These tests were designed using principles of constructivist rather than content-based learning and indicated the potential of township students to cope with English medium academic education. By the end of 1994, 964 students (who would not, on the basis of their school-leaving results, have been accepted by the university) had entered via this route and 77.4% had graduated or were continuing. Similarly research at Wits suggested that matriculation



scores from poorly performing schools were not necessarily a reliable indicator of success at university when compared with first year pass rates at Wits – disadvantaged students performed better than their low matric scores suggested or predicted (Classen, 1987). Thus while it may broadly hold (Van Broekhuizen at al. 2016) that there is a correlation of matric scores and university success, we need to be careful not to assume that access should necessarily be based on high matric scores. This has implications for McCowan’s (2016) dimension of higher education ‘accessibility’ as a dimension of access and the selection of students by universities.

A recent comprehensive quantitative study of secondary data looks at macro indicators which tell us something about access (Van Broekhuizen at al 2016). The paper uses a unique dataset that combines matric examinations data from 2008 to 2013 with data from all South Africans universities (HEMIS data) from 2009 to 2014, and adds to that data from HEMIS (schools data) and the 2011 national census. The combined dataset allows, the authors say, new analyses of the transition from school (matric) to university, i.e. university access, and how matric results influence university outcomes (completion and dropout). Also, as data are available for all public universities, it is possible to track students not only from school into university, but also within the same university over time, and even between universities. Overall, the results reported here allow a ‘much more nuanced understanding’, they suggest, than previously of the transitions from school to university, and of how school results influence pathways through university. Broekhuizen at al. (2016) assert that many of the patterns of university access, and to a lesser extent university success, that are observed are ‘strongly influenced’ by school results so that the school system has a major influence on who reaches matric, and how they perform in matric. This, they say, and particularly the achievement of bachelor passes, explains much of the difference in access to university by race, gender and province. With bachelor level passes at matric used as a rough proxy for university readiness and the minimum criteria for admission into undergraduate degree studies at most universities, accessibility challenges turn on: matric attainment, including gateway subjects, quintile of school attended, quality of school, relative wealth of the school district, race, gender, age and geography. For the most part, these access challenges intersect and cluster.



According to the Report, approximately one-third of matriculants (35 193) who qualified never enrol in university in the next six years. Of these around a third attended quintile 1 to 3 schools and around half were black. Amongst the group of only 36 812 matriculants who achieved a Bachelor pass of at least 60% and at least 55% in Mathematics, 4 664 (12.7%) did not attend university - that is, the better the matric, the fewer did not go to university. The point here is that many students who qualify, including some with good results do not enter university. We do not know if this is by choice, or if they are prevented through lack of finance, or if there are insufficient places (availability) for those with lower matric scores. A number of matriculants who do go to university also do not enter university in the year following matric, but only one or more years later. (Again, we do not know why this is. A student delaying entry by taking a voluntary gap year is rather different from a student who takes a job to try and earn money for the first year of university, see Vignette 5.) Matriculants in the poorest three school quintiles constituted 35.2% of all bachelor passes, and a slightly lower 34.0% of those gained university access, indicating that matriculants from such schools were 'slightly less inclined' on average to gain university access.

Considering matric results, the claim is made by Broekhuizen et al. that university access amongst black matriculants is 'significantly better' than for white matriculants (given performance, white access is the lowest of all population groups (but we do not know the range of alternative options white students may have). For the lower quintiles, the order varies, but again it does not appear as if there are large deficits in university access for children from the poorest quintiles - provided that they perform well in matric. They suggest that access to university amongst the black population is largely constrained by poor school results, rather than other barriers to access (but see CTL 2014). Gateway subjects of mathematics, mathematical literacy, physical science, and English as first additional language also seem to be associated with university access and success. There may be a positive association between access and success in university and participation in mathematics and physical sciences, and a negative association with participation in mathematical literacy and English first additional language. Gateway subjects then shape programmes chosen and relative success. Learners who enrolled in SET (science, engineering technology) programmes did better in matric than

those who enrolled in BCM (business, commerce, management) programmes. Learners who enrolled in BCM programmes, in turn, generally performed better in matric than learners who enrolled in HSS (humanities and social sciences) programmes. We can speculate that access to these subjects in turn is likely to be shaped by the quality of school attended. But all this tells us nothing about the choice-making processes of different students or the cultural and social context. We should therefore be wary of dismissing race as a relevant social conversion factor.

With regard to accessibility and selection by universities, according to Broekhuizen et al., there are large differences across universities in the average matric performance of students who attend these universities. Learners from the 2008 matric cohort who enrolled at UCT or US (University of Stellenbosch) in 2009, for example, had average matric achievement levels of around 75%. Learners from the same cohort who enrolled at UZ (University of Zululand), TUT (Tswane University of Technology), CUT (Central University of Technology), or VUT (Vaal University of Technology) achieved closer to 55% in matric, on average. One of the contributing factors may be that some universities are more inclined to attract students for degree studies, while many technical universities have a smaller component of degree courses and more certificate and diploma students. The differences between provinces is also striking: the two best-performing provinces (Western Cape and Gauteng) achieved pass rates in excess of 75%, while the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Limpopo all achieved pass rates below 55%. In Gauteng and the Western Cape, roughly 40% of the passes achieved were bachelor passes. On the other hand, less than a quarter of the passes in Mpumalanga and Limpopo were bachelor passes. There appears thus to be a possible rural barrier. This rural 'gap' is further reflected in the proportions of learners achieving an average grade of above 50% in matric: while this proportion is roughly 40% for the Western Cape, it is about 25% for KwaZulu Natal and North West, and less than 20% for both Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. The provincial differences in the proportions of learners who achieved an average matric grade of 60% or above are just as striking: roughly 21% of learners from the Western Cape achieved this grade, while only about 6% and 7% from learners from Limpopo and Eastern Cape did so. Given these provincial differences in matric performance, one might also expect provincial differences in university access and success. While Gauteng and the Western Cape

have the highest access rates, Limpopo and Mpumalanga have the lowest. There are some exceptions, however. Learners from the Eastern Cape had the fourth highest university access rates, on average, despite the fact that the province performed comparatively poorly in 2008. Gauteng and the Western Cape had the highest six-year access rate, at around 27%. This contrasts sharply with rates as low as 13% (Mpumalanga) and 15.2% (Northern Cape). Not surprisingly, the more universities there are in a learner's province of matriculation, the more likely the learner is to remain in that province for undergraduate studies. Again, there may be rural 'access gap' as these are the students who may have to leave home, notwithstanding the presence of universities in rural areas.

Broekhuizen et al. found age, gender, race and wealth all affected access; our particular concern is with their intersectionality. Whether or not learners are of the appropriate age in Grade 12 conveys important underlying information about their entry into and pathways through the schooling system (Van Broekhuizen, 2016, p. 31). By the end of 2014, that is, six years following their National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, fewer than 8% of average learners from the 2008 matric cohort had gained access to public universities. By contrast, about 32% of appropriate age and underage learners had gained access at some stage between 2009 and 2014. With regard to gender, though about equal proportions of male and female matriculants passed matric overall, proportionally more females achieved bachelor passes (21%) than males (19%). As a result, females accounted for 56% of all learners achieving Bachelor passes in the 2008 NSC exams. Slightly more females (21.2%) gained access to university within the first six years of writing the NSC examinations than males (18.6%). Despite the claim that race is not an issue, Broekhuizen et al. also show that there are 'staggering differences' in matric pass rates across race groups. Only about 57% of black learners passed the 2008 NSC exams, compared with 99% of white learners. Among white learners who passed matric, 71% achieved bachelor passes, but in the case of black learners this was only 24%.

The proportion of learners from quintile 5 schools who passed matric is more than double (93%) that of learners from quintile 1 schools (46%). In terms of matric pass rate, quintiles 1-3 schools perform roughly similarly, quintile 4 schools perform quite a lot better, and quintile



5 schools perform much better still. The differences in matric pass type between the different quintiles follow a similar pattern: while 53% of learners attending quintile 5 schools achieved bachelor passes, only 8% of learners from quintile 1 schools, 9.3% of learners from quintile 2 schools, 12% of those from quintile 3 schools, and 22% of learners from quintile 4 schools did so. While only about 12% of learners from quintile 1-3 schools enrolled in undergraduate programmes at some point between 2009 and 2014, the corresponding proportions for learners from quintile 4 and 5 schools were roughly 24% and 45% respectively. There are also vast differences in the extent of delayed entry into university between learners from different types of schools (in terms of poverty quintile). Only about 6% of learners from quintile 1-3 schools enrolled in undergraduate studies in 2009, the year immediately following matriculation, as against 15% and 34%, respectively for quintile 4 and 5 schools. Learners from different quintiles also differ in terms of proportions enrolled in degree programmes. The proportions of learners enrolled in undergraduate degrees for learners from quintile 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 schools were 4.4%, 5.5%, 7.4%, 13.7% and 34.9% respectively.

Moreover, Broekhuizen et al.'s own wealth index for each school among the 2008 cohort confirms that university access and completion are positively associated with the wealth index of the schools that learners attended. Increases in the wealth index are more closely associated with increases in university access rates than completion or dropout rates. Also related to 'wealth' are NSFAS awards<sup>5</sup>. Of the 112 402 learners from the 2008 matric cohort who enrolled in undergraduate programmes between 2009 and 2014, 26.7% received NSFAS awards during their first year of studies. Nearly half of students from quintile 1 and 2 schools received NSFAS awards in their first year of studies, compared to 11.1% of learners from quintile 5 schools. Fairly large numbers of students from the lower quintile schools applied for NSFAS awards in their first year of studies, but were either not deemed eligible for those awards or were turned down for unknown reasons.

We now turn to Naidoo (2004) for a different kind of access study, with empirical research conducted in the early 1990s. Her account of access and admissions practices (one of very few

<sup>5</sup> The HEMIS data used in this study contains only limited information on NSFAS, noting only whether students applied for, were eligible for, and/or received NSFAS loans in a particular year of study.

on South Africa) at two contrasting universities, Mount Pleasant University and Freedom University, still holds relevance, not least because the recent students call for decolonization highlight the continuing unreflexive assumptions about ‘merit’ and the ‘meritorious student’ arguably still found in many South African universities. Naidoo considers how the admission judgements implemented by ‘powerful agents’ at elite Mount Pleasant University did not appear to be conscious or racist in deliberately excluding black students from an institution that was (at that time) predominantly white<sup>6</sup>. Forces for exclusion in admissions in the early 1990s restricted undergraduate numbers and required students for whom English was a second language (the majority of black students) to take an English language proficiency test<sup>7</sup>. ‘Forces for redress’ allowed a parallel entry route which admitted a ‘small number’ of African students, in the period of the study, no more than 1% of places was allocated by this route generally admitting students to a foundation or academic development programme before they could progress to the mainstream. By allowing race-based admissions, ‘the strict operation of academic principles; was compromised but nonetheless, ‘academic potential’ became part of the institutional narrative and students were admitted depending on their results in a designed to measure academic potential. Naidoo argues that this focus on potential to succeed actually re-inscribed academic merit while still being able to lay claim to wider inclusion of disadvantaged students. The judgements implemented by powerful agents in Naidoo’s analysis of her interviews indicated that how students were classified ‘appeared to be part of an orientation to conserve institutional arrangements that a new system of admissions could potentially threaten’ (Naidoo, 2004 p.463). New criteria (other than academic) were resisted, she writes, because academics were concerned that more students from low quality schools would ‘threaten’ institutional arrangements such as time for research and would further endanger the student progression rate at the university. It was feared, she says, that these changes ‘would endanger the status of the university in the intellectual field’ (p. 463). Naidoo’s analysis of the legitimate academic capital of what were considered ‘typical’ students coincided closely with qualities possessed by students from advantaged schools. Thus, although students did not appear to be directly excluded on race grounds, admissions

<sup>6</sup> Instead of ‘white’ we might now say ‘predominantly high achieving black and white students from well-resourced schools’, although even these black students struggle to fit in, see Kessi (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Also see Yeld and Haack (1997) although they claim that the UCT tests were voluntary and aimed at widening access rather than exclusion.



practices did exclude the majority of black (African) applicants. On the other hand, Naidoo suggest that one could argue that Mount Pleasant was enabling an elite minority of African students to access more privileged positions in society.

In her second case study university, Freedom University (an historically disadvantaged institution) had attempted to challenge academic merit (based on matriculation results) as the key determinant of admission, given that black students were disadvantaged by low quality schooling and could not compete on the same merit-based field as those from good schools, a situation which persists, as Cloete (2016) argues, ‘only a tiny minority of students from deciles one to seven ever qualify for higher education’. ‘Redress’ and ‘rights’ was adopted at Freedom University as a principle for access, alongside academic merit. According to Naidoo, Mount Pleasant felt threatened by this problematization of merit-based admission (an interpretation similarly made by Pitman, 2015) – the worry that such changes might require dominant and elite universities to shift, even though some years after the research it was concluded Mount Pleasant had if anything reinforced its merit based admissions policy. While becoming more racially inclusive, it is also middle class. Both universities, Naidoo argues, related to external (largely political forces) in the 1990s differently – either to protect a dominant position or to erode academic merit as the sole admissions criteria. In current times, room for such manoeuvres may need to work differently and the spaces will be both different and potentially tighter. More to the point, Naidoo’s is one of a tiny handful of detailed studies which examine access and admissions; far more research is needed at both elite and non-elite South African universities. But her work confirms the grip of merit-based approaches, and more importantly argues for a field based approach to research on access and ‘a conceptual apparatus through which the macro forces and institutional practices could be analytically related’ (p. 466) so that research needs to pay attention to ‘the interaction of external forces with the logic and structure of the field of university education’ and ‘how external determinants may be restructured, repelled or even reversed’ so that universities are understood ‘as imbedded in complex relations of power with other universities’ (p. 467) with each taking up a position shaped by its structural position in the field and which is oriented to safeguarding or improving this position.



The exclusion of poor and working class students, as with Mount Pleasant, appears neither overt nor deliberate but the exclusionary effects are the same. Indeed the apparent objectivity of the criteria and the transparency of the process and the apparently just deserts that result might make it harder to fathom or challenge for those on the outside. Persistence, hard work and resilience will never suffice without knowing the precise rules of the admissions game, including knowing how to go about getting scholarships, who to approach, whose door to knock on, if you are less well off. What results is an ‘aristocracy of merit’ (Stevens 2007, p. 242); elite colleges ‘get just what they are looking for’ (p. 247). Naidoo’s findings regarding the reproductive role of admissions are supported by the work of Stevens (2007) on selective admissions practices cited earlier, and confirmed by McDonough and Fann’s (2007) call for more integrated higher education access research.

A different kind of access study focussing on why students chose particular universities was conducted from a marketing perspective (Wiese et al. 2009) and, while empirically helpful, takes for granted a particular kind of student who knows how to look for relevant information and where to find it, who can access campus open days and websites, has friends and family to consult, and so on. Nonetheless the study is worth looking at and one can interpret some of the empirical findings in a more nuanced way than do the authors. The study’s objectives were to establish the relative importance of different choice factors in selecting a university (for example the academic reputation of the university) to see if this differed across different universities, and to find out how useful diverse kinds of information was to students. A survey was administered to first-year Economic and Management Sciences students enrolled at six universities during the first quarter of the academic year: Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), University of the Free State (UFS), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), North-West University (NWU) and University of Pretoria (UP). Of the 1241 respondents, 46% were white, 41% black African, 9% Indian, 3% Coloured and 1% from other ethnic groups. The majority of the respondents (60%) were resident in the province of the institution they attended, an interesting finding which suggests that most students – black and white prefer not to move to far from their homes whether to stay close to family or for reasons of cost (Walker and Fongwa ,2017)] found both reasons across their four university study sites). For students in rural areas this could be a problem as



rural universities are all from the historically disadvantaged sector. Also interesting in their sample is that these might be considered higher achieving students: 53% of the respondents had an average grade of 70% or higher in their final Grade 12 examinations, 47% had an average of less than 70%, while only 9% had an average of less than 60% in their final matriculation exams. These are unlikely therefore to be the very poorest students from low quality schools. This is further suggested by the fact that fees and financial assistance ranked low on the list of concerns (13th and 14th respectively), which suggests that these students were not that concerned about paying for their studies or about the cost. Academic reputation, quality of teaching and employment opportunities ranked relatively high. Source of information that were valuable were university publications, followed by word-of-mouth (difficult if nobody in your community knows about the programme and the university). The least useful source of information, and yet potentially more widely accessible, was advertisements on television and radio. Campus visits and open days were rated as excellent by 30% of the respondents, (if you have the money to get there), followed by university web sites, which were rated as excellent by 26% of the respondents (if you have access to the internet). Although 60% of respondents rated friends (word-of-mouth) as a good to excellent as a source of information, respondents did not necessarily choose an institution because their friends had studied there, but they still gained access to useful 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Less useful were visits by universities to their schools, yet this may be more important to poorer students. The study confirms the importance of access to multiple sources of information and of good academic grades, but we can also assume that as funding is not a problem for these students given that they were predominantly middle class.

In a small-scale study on student choices about higher education and their aspirations, Walker and Mkwanzani (2015) conducted a small-scale study in an informal settlement (Orange Farm) interviewing students from a local orphanage and framing the study in terms of their resources and opportunities for well-being, agency and future-forward aspirations. They argue that while the context of Orange Farm does not look promising for accessing higher education, this is not reason enough to justify excluding people living in difficult circumstances, or to accept unproblematically that higher education will always reproduce existing social inequalities, writing off large numbers of individual lives. Although, these



young people had higher education aspirations, they lacked knowledge about what this entails. They did not know the names of all the universities institutions in the region and certainly did not know how to get hold of their brochures. Given the geographical isolation of the settlement, this was not surprising but it disadvantages students in terms of the conditions for informed choice-making. In promoting the ‘apply now campaign’ recently launched by the DHET, the deputy minister of the department, Mduduzi Manana (2013), noted that students could apply to universities as early as Grade 11 to avoid late applications. Yet the young people interviewed were in grade 11, and had no idea they could already apply to university. With regard to which South African universities they had heard about, five of the eight young people reported that they had heard about the University of Johannesburg (UJ), and three of the five had also heard about the University of Witwatersrand (Wits). In other words, of the 23 (now 26) public universities in South Africa, they were aware of only two. Knowledge about Wits and UJ could be influenced by the proximity of these two universities to Orange Farm. On the other hand, the North-West University has a campus in Vanderbijlpark, which is closer in distance (34km) compared to Johannesburg (55km) where the UJ and Wits are located. The young people seemed to be influenced from their networking with other students at school, teachers, and their orphanage guardians, even though these informants may not hold reliable knowledge about higher education. In Ball and Vincent’s (1998) terms the young people are doubly disadvantaged in that they both lack decent hot knowledge residing in close family members who have been to university and teachers and schools about accessing higher education, they do not even have much in the way of cold knowledge, that is reliable information from brochures, the internet, and so forth.

Although not directly on access, Kapp et al. (2014), as a part of larger longitudinal qualitative study, consider how study participants (black and working class) negotiated their high school contexts and neighbourhoods, neither of which were socially conducive to learning and academic attainments but which were also not over-determining in the face of student agency. They argue that universities should attend to individuals to understand how working class back students have gained entry to an elite university despite their schooling backgrounds and teachers who discourage applications to university. These students constructed themselves as hard working people who did not give up and sought out equally serious peers to form study



groups. They also sought out community organisations which could provide support, including churches. Thus student agency emerges as important but the research does not quite show how some students were agency-enabled and others were not in the face of the same constraining opportunity structures.

Another study that makes the connection between access and success, and investigates the dilemma of access for students in the transition from school to university is that of Wilson-Strydom (2015), who focuses on the schooling end of access (Grade 10-12) and on the transition into first year. Wilson-Strydom proposes a list of access capabilities (based on Walker 2006 with modifications) which might usefully be applied and tested in other projects on access. If successful in accessing higher education, new challenges extend into university study and influence both completion and employability. Her research provides evidence of the many challenges faced in particular by students who need to adapt to an urban context, who have been under-prepared for some social and academic aspects of higher education due to under-resourced schooling, and the important role that language plays in enabling or constraining access. There is also evidence that race and class play a pivotal role, with many working class black students being overwhelmed by obstacles and potential failure, while more privileged students with adequate support, preparation and financial resources described their experience as challenging but ultimately manageable and enriching. Using the capabilities approach, Wilson-Strydom argues for attention to human dignity and the respect and recognition to be accorded to each student in the processes of access and accessibility and to pay close attention to the (mal)distribution of advantage, working on policies and strategies for social change. Each university applicant should have a fair opportunity to get into university, and a platform of well-being (capabilities) to enable this. Much of this may rest on schooling quality and family background but this does not absolve universities for designing interventions that begin before university or public policy from taking capabilities as the informational basis of a just access policy. Thus Wilson-Strydom has developed a conceptual-empirical list of seven university readiness capabilities to guide policy and practice<sup>8</sup>. Fairness would require that each applicant had the opportunity to develop these

---

<sup>8</sup> They are: decision-making; knowledge and imagination; approach to learning; social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional health; language competence and confidence.

as ‘internal’ capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000) supported by external conditions to form what Nussbaum (2000) calls ‘combined capabilities’.

Individual narratives of access can be illuminating and we lack this kind of research in South Africa to complement the comprehensive quantitative data of Broekhuizen et al. (2016) although bits can be extrapolated from studies on access programmes (eg. Lubben et al. 2010) or student experiences (eg. Marshall and Case 2010). Nonetheless we also need to take care that individual narratives are socially located and explained. In the Marshall and Case (2010) study they use one student narrative – Mandla’s - to rethink disadvantage. The section of interest here is when the student talks about coming to choose higher education and engineering at the University of Cape Town (a high status university, high attainment and high status programme). According to Mandla (from a large and poor family) at a critical point he started to believe in God and turned away from gangsterism and began to take a longer term view of his future. It seems he takes an individual decision to see where his academic studies might take him, read about a black guy ‘like me’ working at a paper mill, did some research and found out that this was connected to engineering and decided on this as a career path, then secured an industry financed scholarship. What we do not know is anything about the conditions under which his choice was made or his aspirations formed or encouraged. Access studies would need to move beyond the life story to life histories which contextualise individuals socially and historically if we are to understand access beyond the individual exception.

In one study of undergraduate sociology students, we found evidence of student choice being constrained by a number of social factors, such as lack of parental support and knowledge (Manyonga, 2017). In an individual case study, Memory, who is a sociology major, faced a cluster of constraints in accessing higher education, which included not being sure what to study, where to apply and then dropping out of an engineering course at an FET college. The process of choice in her experiences suggests that despite strong individual aspirations and agency in pursuing higher education, Memory’s trajectory into higher education is complicated by lack of adequate information and support. In the same study, other participants identified lack of information as important factor in their choice of a degree



programme. Mayonga also suggests that the participants in his study ended up in the Humanities not because of choice or aspirations, but because of low school-leaving scores and as a result, limited choice of degrees and future careers. In yet another micro-scale study by Calitz (2016), one student explained that she selected a university close to their family for financial and cultural reasons - living close to her family and contributing to family responsibilities was more important than attending a prestigious university. In both these studies there was an important gender dimension, in parents exerting pressure on their daughters to stay close to home instead of pursuing degrees in larger urban centres, and therefore acting as another limit to their opportunities to attend more prestigious universities.

## 6. IN CONCLUSION

Overall the international and South African literatures confirm that contextual and conversion conditions university access practices exclude certain kinds of students – in South Africa mostly black students from rural areas and poor homes. As Bentley and Habib (2008) point out, given the overlap between race and class in South Africa with its black majority population, redress constructed on class foundations ‘could thus not but have the net effect of privileging black citizens’ (p. 345). This needs to be captured also in the accessibility of universities to those from class-disadvantaged backgrounds, although such statistics are not yet collected nationally.

Even from a purely instrumental, human capital perspective this is grossly unfair. South Africa has the highest rate of private returns from higher education of 39.5 (compared to Ghana 28, Brazil 17, Turkey, 14, Argentina 12, USA 14) (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014), higher education seems rather essential to economic development and to fair social mobility. Higher education is understood by students and their parents as the best post-school route to follow, rather than accessing one of the many further education colleges. Rationally this is borne out by the returns of university education so far, and the much lower unemployment rate of graduates with a degree at around 6 per cent (Van Broekhuizen and Van der Berg 2013). More expansively, unequal opportunities to choose and access higher education constrain the capabilities of many young people.





The question then is what higher education can or ought to be doing to advance the public good of higher education access in the face of persistently low quality public schooling for most young South Africans. At what stage in the access cycle do or can and should universities intervene?

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is a shortened version of the paper prepared for the Access thematic group in the ESRC-NRF funded project 'Pathways to personal & public good: understanding access to, student experiences of, & outcomes from South African undergraduate higher education', grant number ES/N009894/1. Talita Calitz contributed to the longer paper. Its preparation has also been supported with funding from the NRF SARCHi chair grant number 86450.

## 8. REFERENCES

- Abdulla, M.J. and Wazar, M. (2017) Big dreams, high fees, Mail and Guardian, 24 February to 2 March, 30
- Anders, J. (2012) What's the link between household income and going to university, Department of Quantitative Social Science, Institute of Education, London. [http: repec.ioe.ac.uk/RePEc/pdf/qsswp1201.pdf](http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/RePEc/pdf/qsswp1201.pdf). Accessed 1 November 2016 .
- Archer, L., Hollingworth, S. and Halsall, A. (2007). 'University's not for me', *Sociology*, 41 (2), 219-237
- Ball, S.J. & Vincent, C. (1998). I Heard it on the Grapevine: Hot Knowledge and School Choice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19 (3), 377-400.
- Ball, S., Maguire, M. and Macrae, S. (2002) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post 16*. London: Routledge
- Bathmaker, A-M.; Ingram, N.; Abrahams, J.; Hoare, A.; Waller, R. and Bradley, H. (2016) *Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bentley, K. and Habib, A. (2008) (eds) *Racial Redress & Citizenship in South Africa*. Pretoria: HSRC Press
- Bhorat, H., 2015. Fact Check: Is South Africa the Most Unequal Society in the World? <https://theconversation.com/factcheck-is-south-africa-the-most-unequal-society-in-the-world-48334>. Accessed 31 March 2016
- Bloch, G. 2009. *What's Wrong with South Africa's Schools and How to Fix It*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

- Calitz, T. (2016) A capabilities approach to student experiences of pedagogy, power and well-being at a South African university. Unpublished thesis. University of the Free State.
- Carnoy, M., Froumin, I., Loyalka, P.K. and Tilak, J.B.G. (2014) The concept of public goods, the state, and higher education finance: A view from the BRICs. *Higher Education*, 68, 359-378
- Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) (2014) Report 2014. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State
- Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A. and Vignoles, A. (2010) Widening 'Participation in Higher Education: Analysis using Linked Administrative', IFS Working paper W10/04, Institute for Fiscal Studies University of London
- Classen, G.M. (1987) Identifying Disadvantage: Some Antecedents Of Academic Performance Among First-year Arts Students At The University Of The Witwatersrand in 1982. Unpublished Master of Arts dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand
- Cloete, N. (2016) University student fees – A trilemma of trade-offs, *University World News*, 13 May 2016, issue No 413 <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160510095751190>. Accessed 10 June 2016
- Cooper, D. (2015) Social justice and South African university student enrolment data by 'race', 1998-2012: From 'skewed revolution to 'stalled revolution', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 69 (3), 237-262
- Crawford, C. (2012) Socio-economic gaps in HE participation: how have they changed over time? IFS Briefing Note BN133, Institute for Fiscal Studies, University of London.

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2015) Understanding progression into higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups, London: BIS

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2012) Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Pretoria: DHET

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2013. White Paper on Post Compulsory Education and Training. Pretoria: DHET.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2015) Annexure 3: Are We Making Progress with Systemic Structural Transformation of Resourcing, Access, Success, Staffing and Researching in Higher Education: What Do the Data Say?' Paper Prepared for the Second National Higher Education Summit, Durban, October 2015.

Department for Education and Skills (DFES) (2004) The Schwartz Report: Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice. London: DFES

Featherstone, L. (2011) Fair Admissions and the Elite University: An examination of the practice of 'contextualisation' in the undergraduate admissions process, *Reflective Education*, 7 (1), 5-22

Gale, T. and Parker, S. (2015) Calculating student aspiration: Bourdieu, spatiality and the politics of recognition, *Cambridge Journal of Education* 45 (1), 81-96

Grant, L. (2016) How much will it cost to go to a South African university in 2016? <https://africacheck.org/reports/how-much-will-it-cost-to-go-to-a-south-african-university-in-2016/> Accessed November 2016

Govender, P. (2017a) "'Merc C" matrices top of the class', *Mail and Guardian*, 24 February to 2 March, 10

- Govender, P. (2017b) Missing-middle varsity students score', Mail and Guardian, 24 February to 2 March, 7
- Hart, C. (2013) Aspirations, Education and Social Justice. Bloomsbury: London.
- Higher Education South Africa (HESA) (2014) South African Higher Education in the 20th Year of Democracy: Context, Achievements and Key Challenges. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee of Higher Education and Training in Parliament, Cape Town, 5 March. <http://www.hesa.org.za/hesa-presentation-portfolio-committee=higher-education-and-training>. Accessed 12 January 2016.
- IRR (2016) South Africa Survey 2016. Johannesburg: Institute of Race Relations
- IRR (2017) Auditing Racial Transformation, FastFacts, January 2017. Johannesburg: Institute for Race Relations
- Kapp, R., Badenhorst, E., Bangeni, B., Craig, T., Janse van Rensburg, V., Le Roux, K., Prince, R., Pym, J. and van Pletzen, E. (2014) Successful Students negotiation of township schooling in contemporary South Africa, Perspectives in Education, 32 (3), 50-61
- Lewin T. and Mawoyo, M. (2014) Student Access and Success: Issues and Interventions in South African Universities. Inyathelo: The South African Institute for Advancement, Cape Town <http://www.kresge.org/sites/default/files/Issues and Interventions in South Africa>. Accessed 5 May 2016.
- Lubben, F., Davidowitz, B., Buffler, A., Allie, S. and Scott, I. (2010) Factors influencing access students' persistence in an undergraduate science programme: A South African case study, IJED,30, 351-358
- Kessi, S. (2013) Transforming historically white universities: Students and the politics of racial representation. New Agenda, second quarter, 53–55



- Manyonga, B. (2017) The sociology curriculum, pedagogy and capabilities formation: A case study in two South African universities. Unpublished thesis. University of the Free State.
- Makholwa, A. (2014) Which SA universities get top marks? <http://www.financialmail.co.za/coverstory/2014/01/23/which-sa-universities-get-top-marks>. Accessed 17 October 2016.
- Marshall, D. and Case, J. (2010) Rethinking disadvantage in higher education: a paradigmatic case study using narrative analysis, *Studies in Higher Education*, 35 (5), 491-504
- Montenegro, C.E., Patrinos, H.A. (2014) Human Development Reports Comparable Estimates of Returns to Schooling Around the World. Washington, DC: The World Bank. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-7020>. Accessed 31 May 2016.
- McCowan, T. (2016) Three dimensions of equity of access to higher education, *Compare*, 6 (4), 645-665
- McDonough, P. and Fann, A. (2007) The Study of Inequality; in P. Gumpert (ed) *Sociology of Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 53-93
- Naidoo, R. (2004) Fields and institutional strategy: Bourdieu on the relationship between higher education, inequality and society, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25 (4), 457 - 471
- Nussbaum, M. (2000) *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Oliveira, T. and Zanchi, L. (2004) Participation in higher education in Britain: the effect of ability and parental incom'. Leeds: University of Leeds Business School. <http://www.le.ac.uk/economics/to20/heeea.pdf>. Accessed 15 November 2016

- Ouma, G. (2012) Tuition fees and the challenge of making higher education a popular commodity in South Africa, *Higher Education*, 64, 831–844
- O’Shea, S., May, J., Stone, C. & Delahunty, J. (2015). Breaking the barriers: Supporting and engaging first-in-family learners and their families. Final Project Report. <http://firstinfamily.com.au> . Accessed 1 February 2017
- OECD (2013). Education indicators in focus, September. Paris: OECD <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school>. Accessed 1 February 2017
- Oxfam (2014) Even It Up. Time to End Extreme Equality. Oxford: Oxfam. [http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/creven-it-up-extreme-inequality-291014-en.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/creven-it-up-extreme-inequality-291014-en.pdf). Accessed 1 November 2014.
- Pitman, T. (2015) Unlocking the gates to the peasants: are policies of ‘fairness’ or ‘inclusion’ more important for equity in higher education? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 45 (2), 281-293
- Ray, D. (2003) Aspirations, poverty and economic change. New York University and CSIC. <http://www.nyu.edu/econ/user/debraj/Courses/Readings/povasp01.pdf>Ray. Accessed 14 May 2016.
- Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M. and Ball, S. (2001) Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, ‘Race’ and the Higher Education Choice Process. *Stoke-on-Trent*:(35) 4, 855-874
- Reay, Diane, David, Miriam E and Ball, Stephen (2005) Degrees of Choice: social class, race and gender in higher education. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books
- Reay, D, Crozier, G and J Clayton (2009) ‘Strangers in Paradise: Working class students in elite universities, *Sociology* 43(6), 1103-1121

- Savides, M., Pillay, T., and Eggington, S. (2015) Only 1 in 8 students will find a place at university. Times Live, 02 February 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2015/02/02/only-1-in-8-students-will-find-a-place-at-university>. Accessed 19 October 2016.
- Sen, A. (1985) *Commodities and Capabilities*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Shepperd, C. (2016) 'Cohort Study of Rural, Township and Urban First-Time Entering Undergraduate Students, 2006 and 2007 Cohorts'. <http://www.miratho.com>. Accessed 14 December 2016.
- Spaull, N. (2014) 'Education in SA – Still separate and unequal'. <https://nicspaull.com/2014/01/12/education-in-sa-still-separate-and-unequal-extended-version-of-citypress-article/>. Accessed 15 November 2016
- Speigler, T. and Bednarek, A. (2013) First-generation students: what we ask, what we know and what it means: an international review of the state of research, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 23 (4), 318-337
- Stevens, M.L. (2007) *Creating A Class. College Admissions and the Education of Elites*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Therborn, G. (2013) *The Killing Fields of Inequality*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Thomas L, and Quinn J. (2007) *First Generation Entry into Higher Education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Van Broekhuizen, H., Van der Berg, S. (2013) 'How High is Graduate Unemployment in South Africa? A Much-Needed Update'. <http://www.econ3x3.org/.../how-high-graduate-unemployment-south-africa-much-needed/>. Accessed 13 July 2016.

- Van Broekhuizen, H., Van Der Berg, S. and Hofmeyr, H. (2016) Higher Education Access and Outcomes for the 2008 National Matric Cohort, Stellenbosch Working papers 16/6, University of Stellenbosch
- Vignoles, A. and Crawford, C. (2009) The Importance of Prior Educational Experience; in M. David (ed) Improving Learning by Widening Participation in Higher Education. Abingdon: Routledge, 47-61
- Walker, M. (2006) Higher Education Pedagogies. Maidenhead: Open University Press and the Society for Research into Higher Education
- Walker, M., McLean, M. (2013) Professional Education, Capabilities and the Public Good. London and New York: Routledge
- Walker, M., Mkwanzani, F. (2015) Challenges in accessing higher education: A case study of marginalised young people in one South African informal settlement. IJED, 40, 40–49.
- Walker, M. and Fongwa, S. (2017) Universities, human development and employability. New York: Palgrave
- Watts, M. and Bridges, D. (2006) The value of non-participation in higher education', Journal of Education Policy, 21, 3, 267-290.
- Wiese, N. van Heerden, Y. Jordaan, M and North, E. (2009) A marketing perspective on choice factors in selecting a higher education institution, Southern Africa Business Review, 13 (1), 39-60)
- Wilson-Strydom, M. (2015) University Access and Success: capabilities, diversity and social justice. London: Routledge.
- Wolff, J., De-Shalit, A. (2007) Disadvantage. Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Yeld, N and Haeck, W. (1997) Educational Histories and Academic Potential: can tests deliver?, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 22 (1), 5-16
- Zimdars, A., 2010. Fairness and Undergraduate Admission: a qualitative exploration of admissions choices at the University of Oxford. *Oxford Review of Education*, 36(3), 307-323.
- Zipin, L., Sellar, S., Brennan, M., and Gale, T. (2015) Educating for futures in marginalized regions: A sociological framework for rethinking and researching aspirations. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(3), 227-246.