



M I R A T H O

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

WHAT RURAL AND TOWNSHIP STUDENTS SAY

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1. HIGHLIGHTS

Secure funding: ‘that’s the main highlight’

Students all hugely appreciate financial support from the National Skills Fund (NSF), National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) or Thusanani Foundation, which stepped in when funders did not support students. Students told us: ‘That’s the main highlight.’ ‘All of us would not be able to receive funds from our families to go to university...It’s a gift!’ ‘My family can’t afford [to help me]’. ‘We really appreciate.’ ‘Now we are in a position where we are confident ...it is really so bad in our families who are very poor. It makes a huge difference.’

Diversity: ‘meeting different people’

Being a university student, meeting people from different parts of South Africa who speak different languages, who come from different social groups was valued. Students appreciate: ‘being in a place with diversity and learning about new cultures and people from different backgrounds’.

Independence: ‘you need to be more mature’

‘Being in university has taught me to be independent...it prepares us for a new stage of life, to work, to serve the whole country’, students said. Students spoke about gaining maturity - ‘you need to be more mature to face the difficulties and pass’.

Aspirations: ‘my dream is coming true’

University is a place to pursue your career ambitions, which would otherwise not be possible: ‘Being a social worker was my childhood dream. Now one of my dreams is coming true.’

Knowledge: ‘thinking at university level’

Students told us that expanding knowledge is challenging and interesting, and ‘you develop cognitively’. They explained that: ‘Thinking at a university level, you need to be mature and disciplined and responsible to deal with work at university and manage yourself and your time’, and that they get better opportunities than they had had at school. ‘We get to be involved in practicals and lab work which we could not do at school because of the lack of resources.’

Academic challenges: ‘you find you can excel’

Students talked about how they value having to face, cope with and conquer academic challenges. They explained: ‘You find you can excel in ways you did not think were possible. You step out beyond your comfort zone.’ ‘There are people who motivate you, who see what you can do, they understand and value your ability, you are with people who have the same vision to achieve as we do.’ ‘At our schools they did not foster our abilities so that most students become nothing in life. We are the ‘gifted ones’ who made it to university.’

2. CHALLENGES

But while students value the opportunity to go to university, they also experience significant challenges.

Funding: ‘It’s very tough’

Having funding is great but not having secure funding is a tremendous source of worry for all students: ‘It’s very tough’. Insecurity of funding leads to ‘psychological discomfort’ (anxiety and worry) ‘not knowing whether your fees are paid and this makes it difficult to study’. Finance is always a challenge for every single student we spoke to – finding secure funding to study, for accommodation and to live: ‘The funding scheme of the country chows our dreams’. A student explained that NSFAS funding requires that you submit the same documents every

year, for example, your parents' death certificates. 'You are constantly having to prove your situation in order to be eligible for funding. NSFAS funding is not secure. Financial exclusions and debts do not go away. They are carried over. Then you are told that you cannot have funding. You have only studied for one year. You cannot get back in, because you are told that you are in debt, because even if you get a bursary it won't cover outstanding fees so you still can't register'. Students without access to computers and the internet are further disadvantaged by the new requirement for on-line NSFAS applications – 'It's not like we all have access to the internet. So I didn't apply'. The information to students about on-line applications for funding is also confusing.

Students told us that those from 'the poorest of the poor' backgrounds often have to choose between meals and using a stipend to pay for other things. The university forgets that to attend lectures you must first shower, eat, brush your teeth, etc. You need access to basic toiletries like deodorant, and women need to be able to buy sanitary towels. There is no money to go home: 'Those things are taken lightly but they affect students who cannot come up and say these things'. Funding needs to cover these items – 'they affect your participation in classes, where you won't ask questions in case other students make mocking gestures' (that you smell badly, for example). Also rural students told us that 'when we go home there are very few or no shops that accept our student cards so we cannot buy food during the holidays. If you exchange the card for cash, you might be robbed by the shopkeeper [if this is someone we do not know].'

NSC vs IEB

Students who come to university with the National Senior Certificate (NSC1), (the matric exam set by the government for public schools) are concerned that students who took the Independent Education Board (IEB2) exam (offered in expensive private schools) have higher levels of educational achievement. . The latter is harder and more demanding, they say. There are items cut from the curriculum for NSC students (particularly in Maths) that IEB students already know when they arrive at university.

¹ [http://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NationalSeniorCertificate\(NSC\)Examinations.aspx](http://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NationalSeniorCertificate(NSC)Examinations.aspx)

² <http://www.ieb.co.za/index.php>

Gaps between high school and university and not knowing what to expect: 'we have no idea what varsity is'

There are knowledge, language and information gaps that challenge students, and of course, the gap between high school and first year at university: 'we didn't know what to expect', a student said, 'and we had to become independent and look after ourselves'. Teaching is very different. Suddenly, 'you meet white professors who only speak and teach in flourishing English' and 'you do not understand'. Students struggle with the amount of work required after what could be described as 'spoon feeding' at school, when learning was 'broken down' into smaller chunks. There are knowledge gaps between high school and university, yet the university assumes 'you already know from school'. 'There is also an expectation at university that you already know what to do and you know how to learn at a higher education level. But many lecturers don't really interact with students the way teachers at schools did; you are left on your own'.

Students also struggle with finding information to choose the right course for them. Students said they come with an 'abstract picture' of what they are going to do, for example, become an actuary: 'For actuary, you know that it is hard and you will earn a lot of money when you are finished, but you don't know what happens in the middle'. 'We have no idea what varsity is', one explained. 'You have a very abstract picture of the course you are going to do. Then in year 1 you realise the course is not the one for you'. Another said, 'You are used to a school which is very small and looks like a box, and then you move to this very, very big university'. Students just 'do not know what is going to happen when they come to university'. There is no access in rural areas to careers information or course choices. They have to find accommodation, apply for residence, and struggle with finances. Students feel 'clueless'. There are so many 'surprises' and activities on offer, 'sporting activities you have never heard of', and they don't know what to join and initially spend money trying to join everything. On the other hand, students living on campus often feel 'forced' to be involved in 'res' or campus activities 'which disturb your academics', even when they are not interested, for example, 'We don't all feel the same about Rag', 'these things get in the way of academics'.


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High expectations: ‘you have that pressure to excel’

Students face additional pressures from their families and communities to succeed at university: ‘coming from the background that we come from you have that pressure that you need to excel. There are expectations that you are expected to live up to. People from home don’t realise that university is very different from school, so we get anxious and stressed. You think you can’t cope.’ Moreover, they have no-one to really turn to who understands the university experience, and few if any role models from home because, ‘any role models in the community leave and do not come back’.

Technology: ‘not everyone has their own computer’

Students from rural areas and townships are not used to a technological environment e.g. the Blackboard e-learning platform, or how to use a computer, and how to type. But there is an assumption at university that you will know all this, so you are just expected to get on, and start writing your assignments using a computer or logging in every day to find out what is happening at the university. But also there is limited access in the universities, a lack of computer labs and printers, while at one university some of the labs are restricted to students on certain courses, for example, B.Com, while other programmes, such as Social Work, have no designated lab.

Racism: ‘the fabric of racial segregation’

Students say that ‘the fabric of racial segregation that is still embodied in this country’ affects their experiences. At one university, students say that when their names were used on test papers and assignments, there was an expectation that the quality of work would be lower if the name was obviously that of a black student. They said that this practice has now been changed to anonymous marking using an ID number but that there are still ‘subtle disadvantages’. Students who fail three or more courses at one university are discussed during a ‘marks meeting’ where failing students are named, with photographs, and decisions are taken about who may write supplementary examinations. The rules allow for two supplementary exams only, yet, say the students, some white students are allowed to write three supplementary exams.

Belonging: ‘you don’t know what is happening’

Fitting in and ‘belonging’ are a challenge. Social problems ‘affect your academics’; ‘you don’t know what you are doing. You have to figure out what people to associate with’. The clothes you wear, the use of makeup or not, marks you out as ‘different’. ‘You just comb your hair. But you see others are putting on full makeup and wearing weaves.’ ‘You don’t know what is happening’ faced with urban middle class students. There is a ‘break between you and the [black] people you thought you might be able to associate with because you can’t express your problems’. By way of contrast, students appreciate the contacts and solidarity in those student residences where there is a ‘sharing culture’ of food and other resources. Spaces for people to eat and study together would be helpful to enable people to work with each other and support each other, students said.

Student protests: ‘fees must fall’

The student protests around fees must fall, are a challenge for some, but a highlight for others. Overall, most students we spoke to support the demand for free higher education as this would directly benefit them and their families. For those who found the protests a challenge it was not that they did not support the demand but rather they spoke of not being able to go to classes when the university was shut, ‘we couldn’t go to class, so you must go home and there is no internet there so you can’t make up classes. Those of us living on campus were evicted from residence for security reasons so we had to go home’. Students felt that no account of these issues was taken when they were being assessed (tests and exams). For some getting arrested for their involvement was the biggest challenge!