



## POLICY BRIEF

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### ***Multi-dimensional student poverty at a South African university:***

#### ***A capabilities approach***

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#### **About this brief**

This policy brief summarises the findings and recommendations from a study conducted between 2016 and 2018 which sought to examine students' conceptualisation of poverty with the overarching aim of designing a Multi-dimensional Student Poverty Index (MSPI) based on student experiences and understandings at the University of the Free State. The findings articulated below shed insight into the incidence and intensity of student poverty in South Africa. The brief provides rationale for the study, elucidates the significance of the methodology employed to create the MSPI, and proffers empirically ground recommendations to policy makers and other stakeholders.

#### **Rationale**

South Africa in general and higher education in particular is plagued by profound inequalities. The impact of these inequalities hinders some students from either accessing or participating or succeeding in areas where others flourish. Though efforts have been made to address inequalities in South Africa in general, not much has been done to address inequalities within students in higher education. Consequentially, South African students took a red-letter stand against these inequalities through participating in nationwide protests from October 2015 to February 2016 (#FeesMustFall, #OpenStellenbosch, #UnsilenceUFS #RhodesMustFall, #OpenUFS, among others). The protests accentuated the plight of student poverty and engendered a lot of interest in the topic among policy makers and researchers. Although research has been published looking into monetary student poverty, professional capabilities for poverty reduction in education, and student inequalities, there is a dearth of literature relating to multidimensional student poverty. This study therefore comes as a response to the scarcity of research into the status, incidence and intensity of multidimensional student poverty in South African higher education.

#### **Methodology**

The study was framed within capabilities approach, and a hybrid research design was contrived using the Alkire-Foster and the Individual Deprivation Measure as guiding methodologies. The latter method was chosen for its focus on individual deprivations and for its ability to foreground participant voices, while the former was chosen for its proven record the construction of robust multidimensional poverty indices. An exploratory sequential mixed methods case study was conducted at the University of the Free State, with an initial qualitative inquiry followed by a quantitative phase. Qualitative data was collected through iterative in-depth key informant interviews (three informants interviewed twice each) and four independent rounds of guided focus groups comprising thirty-two students (eight students in each of the three initial groups, and eight in the final follow-up focus group). The qualitative data was analysed and the results informed the design of the survey questionnaire, which was administered online and by means of hard copies at the University of the Free State. A total of two thousand three hundred and six (2306) students completed the survey.

## Key findings

### Indicators and dimensions of Multidimensional Student Poverty

It emerged from the study that students face a plethora of deprivations which were broadly categorised as follows: basic needs which are most vital for student functioning or survival, essential resources for learning and living as a student, the living conditions and living arrangements of students, freedom of participation and aspects of psychological and psychological wellbeing. Through participatory methods, weights were assigned to the indicators and Multidimensional Student Poverty Index (MPSI) was constructed. The table below gives a detailed summary of the dimensions actual uncensored indicator headcounts, the actual raw headcounts (Percentage deprived in that dimension) for each dimension as well as each dimension's assigned weight. The table is followed by a figure which shows censored indicator headcounts, that is, the percentage of students who are deprived in particular indicators and also multidimensionally poor.

**Table 1: Raw head count ratios**

Dimension	Indicator description	Indicator name	Students Deprived (Raw headcounts)
<b>Basic Needs</b> [weight 30%]	I enjoy at least two healthy and adequate meals a day	Food	23.7%
	I have my own accommodation, i.e., I am not squatting or living illegally	Accommodation	10.6%
	I have access to clean water, electricity and decent sanitation	Amenities	9.8%
	I have access to basic healthcare	Basic healthcare	15.2%
	I struggle with my physical health	Physical health	32.4%
	I struggle with outstanding debt	Outstanding debt	43.8%
			<b>3.5%</b>

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Indicator description</b>	<b>Indicator name</b>	<b>Students Deprived (Raw headcounts)</b>	
<b>Learning resources</b> [weight 25%]	I have means of paying my study fees Current year (CY)	Tuition CY	31.2%	<b>22.4%</b>
	I have means of paying for other university expenses Current year (CY)	Stud exp CY	38.6%	
	I have means of paying my study fees in Future Years (FY)	Tuition FY	48.5%	
	I have means of paying for other university expenses in Future Years (FY)	Stud exp FY	50.3%	
	I am able to manage my financial resources, i.e., to budget well	Budgeting	38.4%	
	I have all the resources I need to learn.	Resources	30.0%	
<b>Living conditions</b> [weight 20%]	I live in accommodation which is conducive to my studies	Living environment	31.5%	<b>5.5%</b>
	I experience challenges with transport that negatively affect my studies	Transport	29.6%	
	I feel safe and secure where I live	Security	24.9%	
	I have not been a victim of an assault on campus	Assault campus	13.0%	
	I have not been a victim of assault off-campus	Assault Off-campus	20.1%	
<b>Psychological wellbeing</b> [weight 15%]	I have adequate social support to succeed in my studies	Social support	16.4%	<b>12.9%</b>
	I am sometimes ashamed of who I am because of what I have or do not have	Shame	43.4%	
	I am a self-confident person	Confidence	21.7%	
	I have someone to talk to when I feel worried or anxious –Support when worried	Support worried	29.4%	
	I am often worried or anxious about the challenges I face as a student	Worry	82.1%	
<b>Participation</b> [weight 10%]	The university environment is socially inclusive of diverse students.	Environment	18.4%	<b>11.6%</b>
	I participate freely in study-related activities	Participation study	25.0%	
	I participate freely in leisure activities	Participation leisure	36.5%	

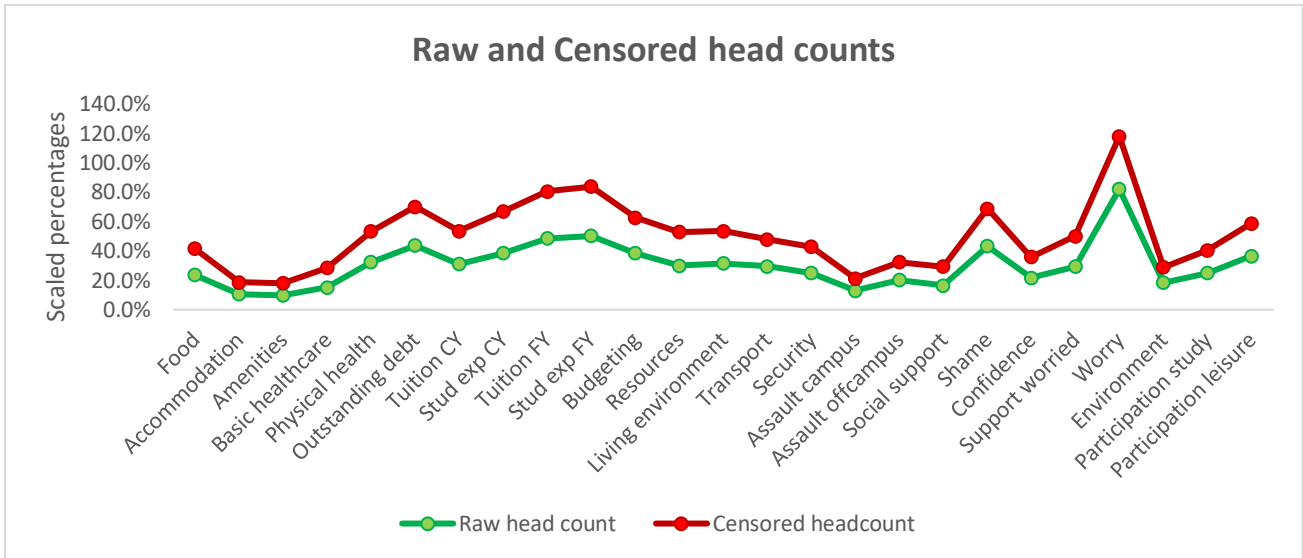


Figure 1: Indicator counts

### Multidimensional Student Poverty Index (MSPI) scores

The calculated cross-sectional multidimensional student poverty index for the University of the Free State was 19% at the time of the study, meaning 19% of all students were multidimensionally poor. It emerged that those who are poor are deprived in at least 44% of the dimensions at a considered cut-off point of  $k=30\%$ . Further, disaggregating the MSPI score according to demographic categories shows that there are vast differences in the MSPI scores for different groups within a demographic variable. For instance, males are more multidimensionally poor than females (MSPI of 21% and 18% respectively). Concerning residences, on-campus students are almost two times less likely to be multidimensionally poor (MSPI=14%) than off-campus students (MSPI=21%). Students who use NSFAS (MSPI=24%) and other government funding or part-time work to fund their studies (MSPI=22%), students from rural (MSPI=25%) and township schools (MSPI=23%), and first-generation students (MSPI=25.5%) experience multidimensional poverty more than their counterparts. It also emanated from the data that having two parents with tertiary education lowers the poverty score by a factor of three. In addition, students who come from homes with no employed person have the highest levels of multidimensional poverty (MSPI=29%), and those with more than one employed person in the household experienced comparable multidimensional poverty levels, regardless of the number of employed people (average MSPI or 13%). It is noted that having dependants also increased the poverty score. Furthermore, there was also a correlation between self-reported marks and poverty, that is, the higher the self-reported marks, the lower the poverty scores, implying that academically struggling students experience more multidimensional poverty than their academically well-performing counterparts. Different faculties also had different poverty scores, for instance, Health Sciences students obtained lower multidimensional poverty scores (MSPI=8%) than students from other faculties; whereas those from Education have the highest MSPI scores (MSPI=24%).

## Recommendations

The following table outlines some of the recommendations that are drawn from the study.

**Table 2: Summary of recommendations**

Challenge	Recommendation
Inadequate funding leading to food insecurity and eventually poor academic performance.	Government (and other sponsors) should constantly review the food allocation in their bursaries and partner with universities to ensure that students receive adequate funding.
Off-campus security	<p>To whatever extent possible, evening classes should not be scheduled for undergraduate students to ensure that all students can travel home during the day while it is still light and somewhat safer.</p> <p>The feasibility of providing transportation services should be established to ferry students, especially after sunset.</p>
Corrosive multidimensional poverty (Poor students becoming poorer)	Accommodation emerged as a key component in combating degenerative multidimensional student poverty. So giving financially struggling students preference in residence allocation goes a long way in lowering multidimensional poverty in institutions.
Student apathy and non-participation	<p>Information should be shared in more accessible platforms like SMS as opposed online means to cater for students who have no internet off campus.</p> <p>Student representative councils are encouraged to promote city residences and student associations more so that all students become part of communities</p>
Mental health	<p>Campaigns should be run with well-marketed and free counselling sessions on offer to students.</p> <p>Student leaders can also be trained to be peer mentors</p>
The methodology	The index should be calculated at a future time to track changes over time

## Useful references

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