

# THE *MIRATHO* RESEARCH PROJECT 2016-2021

## Conversion factors influencing access to university

*The Miratho project (see Overview Research brief) focused on students who historically have not gained access to university because of social and resource barriers associated with rurality, race and inequalities. This brief focuses on access, which we understand to have been achieved when a student is both accepted and is able to register for a degree. We trace the project students' access trajectories and analyse the inhibiting and enabling factors using Amartya Sen's capability approach, a normative framework that emphasises the real opportunities that people have to realise valued outcomes. The approach situates higher education as enabling people to flourish by enlarging the horizon of vision in the economic, social, political and cultural aspects of people's lives.*

### **Conversion factors**

*We use Sen's notion of 'conversion factors' to enable a critique of current arrangements which influence access. Conversion factors point to the degree to which individuals can transform resources (material and non-material) into functionings, such as grade 12 grades, support and encouragement from families, and their ambitions into university access. To understand how factors intersected, we grouped them into five factors: 1) educational (schooling); 2) material (funding/money); 3) social (social conditions and relations including students' access to information and support from family and significant others); 4) personal (attitude, values and characteristics); and 5) environmental (the physical or built environment- geography, province, rural/township community development) factors. Although neutral, conversion factors intersect with each other and with the context to influence the outcome for each*

*individual, in this case, university access.*

### **Key findings**

*An analysis of factors influencing access revealed the following:*

- *University policymakers generally assume that high school learners equally have, and can mobilise resources needed for access, regardless of their socio-economic contexts. Some rural universities are more aware of the access struggles prospective students face.*
- *Outreach activities by NGOs such as Thusanani Foundation who travel to remote areas to disseminate information on university access and assist with applications, are crucial. Outreach by universities is significant but regrettably limited.*
- *Many learners achieve good enough grade 12 results through their own hard work to enter university despite having attended poorly resourced rural high schools. While a more varied student demographic is increasingly accessing higher education, especially due to improved information dissemination and through funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)<sup>1</sup> and the DHET bursary scheme, low-income youth from rural and township areas who qualify to enter university are nonetheless still marginalized in various ways.*
- *Understanding individual lives and the influence of context on the distribution of resources and on educational well-being should inform meaningful access interventions.*
- *Limited access to university education compounds the historical injustices experienced by people in rural and township areas, precluding the equitable and widespread realisation of*

*SDG4, which aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’.*

### **Conversion factors influencing access**

#### **Material**

*Funding/money. Limited monetary resources adversely affects students’ basic needs such as food, healthcare, shelter and learning materials, consequently influencing the lives they are able to lead. Inadequate funding means students’ have limited or no resources to convert into accessing university. Such resources include attending inadequately resourced quintile 1-3 schools<sup>2</sup> (only 6 out of the project’s 65 students attended quintile 4 and 5 schools); and, having insufficient money for application, registration, and university fees. While some students are aware of the financial requirements associated with university (but still fail to raise the required money), the intersection of funding with factors such as lack of information about university financial requirements results in failure to apply for bursaries such as NSFAS<sup>3</sup> and consequent challenges in accessing university.*

#### **Educational (schooling)**

*Most participants in the Miratho project attended under-resourced quintile 1-3 schools with generally limited support for choosing grade 10 subjects and other post-secondary school decisions such as university and programme choice. In the face of little or no support, learners make decisions independently. For example, some students opt to study Maths Literacy instead of Pure Maths, unknowingly limiting their degree choices as some (mostly Science) programmes require only the latter. Thus students may attain a diploma or degree entrance grade 12 pass but often do not qualify for the programme of their choice, for example, Law or Medicine, and register for whatever programme will accept them (for example Tourism and, for many, Education). Also, lack of resources, in particular computers, means that learners cannot apply for university or gain information via the internet. In this way, the quality of schooling and the technology gap act as disabling conversion factors, inhibiting university access. However, in other instances, school also acts as an enabling conversion factor encouraging hard work, hope and opening up opportunities.*

#### **Social**

*Information and support (about how to get into university, choice of degree). Information influences access, for example: grade 10 subject choices; university choice and degree; application or admission requirements; and, funding requirements, including bursary applications. This was especially the case in rural areas where students had limited or no contact with universities, most of which visited only urban quintile 4 and 5 schools. Country University in a rural area was the exception. As a conversion factor, lack of information and support intersects with others such as low-quality schooling, lack of funding, remote geographies and the technology gap to inhibit students’ capacity to get into a university and programme of their choice.*



2018, photo by Boniswa Shoba

*Extended families and significant others.* ‘Non-traditional’ university students may lack familial support in proceeding to higher education. This may be due to the lack of knowledge about higher education, lack of funding and/ or not valuing in higher education. However, amongst our students member, we found that there was always an immediate or extended family member or significant other(s) who supported the student’s higher education aspirations through providing information, money, and encouragement. The presence of a parent/extended family member or significant other with post-secondary school education almost always makes a difference to students’ trajectories.

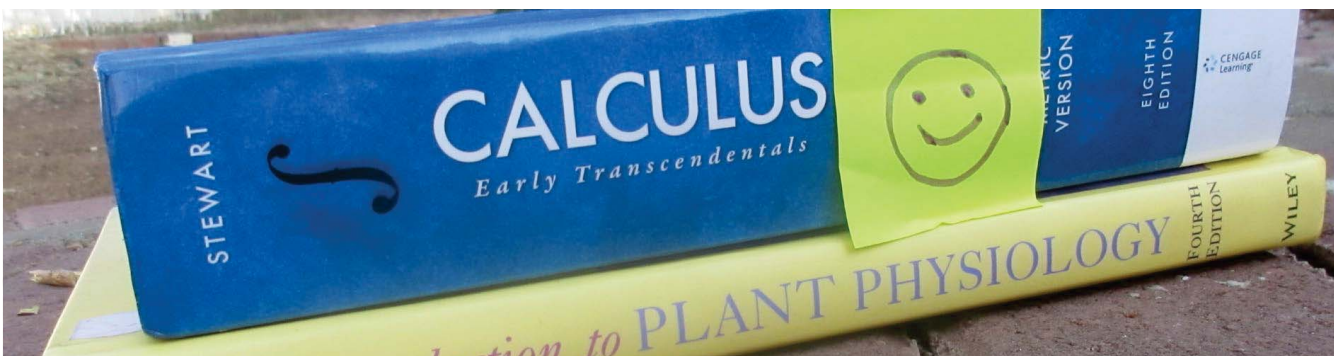
**Environmental**

*Geography* (province, rural, township). This is a major factor shaping access choices. Due to limited contact with universities, students have little information about universities in general and possible study programmes, and therefore work under limited conditions of possibility. In addition to lack of information, geography intersects with financial constraints as there is inadequate funding to travel to universities to apply in person or to collect information at open days. Also, quintile 1-3 schools have limited careers support or guidance, and schools focus on grade 12 results rather than what happens next, all further compounding access challenges.

*Home Community Development.* Most of the Miratho students came from communities where little value is placed on (higher) education. There were challenges such as drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, crime and rape and few young people successfully finished high school. In some instances, students were actively dissuaded from attending university. Combined with lack of information and poor schooling, the community can adversely affect higher education access. However, there are instances where the community is supportive, sometimes even assisting access by providing information and moral support, which in turn encourages aspirations and hard work.

**Personal (attitudes values and characteristics)**

A distinct characteristic of most of the project’s students is the determination to change their own circumstances and that of their families. This motivates them to work hard to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Despite the adverse circumstances they find themselves in (lacking knowledge, funding and at times, support), students show resilience and agency in pushing against the odds and navigating their way to university. Unlike more traditional university students with more financial security, histories of university education and familial support, low-income students rely largely on themselves to forge their own access pathway where none already exists for them.



2018, photo by Babalwa Sontashe

## Recommendations

Overall, there is a need for inclusive and equal opportunities for access. University policymakers should:

- Listen to students: low-income students' stories are not homogenous. Moreover, they have compelling stories to tell.
- Make information about possibilities to enter university and succeed readily accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic background or geographic location. This means using different sources and platforms for information dissemination such as working together with current and past students from similar backgrounds.
- Expand marketing links to rural high schools, for example, through open days and district visits and not just to schools in urban areas.
- Work with district officials and teachers in schools so that they too are better informed about the opportunities open to students. In particular, more attention should be paid to choices made

for grade 10 subjects and more accessible support materials produced for teacher and students about subject choices and future career pathways.

- Recognise the technology gap and find ways to bridge this in providing information about access.
- Respect and celebrate the agency that low-income students bring to getting into university.

<sup>1</sup> Funding provided to students whose parents or guardians had a combined annual income of less than ZAR120,000 (raised to ZAR 350 000 from 2018).

<sup>2</sup> South African public schools are categorised into 5 quintile groups based on the relative wealth of their surrounding communities. Schools in the poorest communities are classified as Quintile 1 (non-fee paying) and schools serving the wealthiest communities are classified as Quintile 5 (fee paying schools).

<sup>3</sup> Although the Miratho project started before fees free higher education came into operation, even after its implementation, qualifying students still lacked knowledge of how to apply and how to reapply if they are turned down.



2018, photo by Fumani Mashaba