Information gaps along the higher education access trajectory: A case study of low-income rural South African university students

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The Team

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About the Miratho project

- Longitudinal study: 2016- 2020.

- Multi-method: life-story interviews with students (65 in 2017; 61 in 2018; and 60 in 2019); survey (piloted with 41 and administered to 472 students at 1 university); photovoice project (19 co-researchers).

- 5 diverse universities across 4 provinces: 'City', 'Country', 'Metropolitan', 'Provincial' and 'Rural'.

- Focus on inclusive higher education access, participation and outcomes for low-income rural and township youth.

About the Miratho project cont'd…

- We apply Amartya Sen's capabilities approach as a conceptual framework: 'capabilities' are freedoms each person has to *choose* a *combination* of beings and doing or 'functionings' that they have *reason to value* for their own well-being.

- The approach is concerned with enlarging people's choices about what they value to be and to do (in an informed and reasoned way), and pays attention to economic and non-economic factors that influence the equality of opportunities and the conditions for converting genuine opportunities and choices into well-being.

- Focusing on choices and effective freedoms allows us to recognise the way power and wealth in society, but also institutions (like universities) erect barriers to social justice and human flourishing.

The problem

- Qualifying black low-income youth from rural areas continuously get left behind:
  - **National participation (20-24 year olds) rate of 18,4%, of that: African (15,4%); Coloured (14,2%), Indian/Asian (48,9%) and white (53.1%)**
  - **First-time entering university students: from urban areas (68%) from townships (17%) from rural areas (15%) -** (Sheppard 2016).

- Reasons are many, but a factor often overlooked in literature on access to higher education is the limited access to timely and reliable information and 'hot knowledge' (Ball, 1998) or 'information capital'.

- Implicit assumption (by universities and policy-makers) that all high school learners have access to information about higher education, regardless of their geographic location or their socio-economic contexts.

- Our data shows that this is not the case.

Data

- Miratho project has more rural (59) than township (6) students.

- Presentation is informed by life history interviews with rural students who were in their 2nd year at university at the time of the interview, but draws on excerpts from 5 selected interviews with students from a rural area in Limpopo who are studying at Metropolitan University.

Student	Gender	Family to go to university	Degree programme
Khuselwa	Female	3 sisters	BSc Civil Engineering
Wanga	Female	1st in family	BSc Mechanical Engineering
Mashudu	Female	Both parents	Bachelor of Pharmacy
Rudzani	Male	1st in family	BSc Computer Science
Rito	Male	Mother and brother	Accounting Science

Findings

Students' perspectives on the value of information for accessing higher education shows information gaps along 6 points of the access trajectory:

1. Grade 10 subject choices.
2. Application and admission requirements.
3. Study programme / degree choice.
4. Choice of university.
5. Funding opportunities and bursary requirements.
6. 'Hot knowledge'.

1. Grade 10 subject choices

"They [high school teachers] didn't prepare us enough because I realised it last year when I got to Metro University that some things I didn't know about civil engineering. I knew nothing....we weren't exposed to that kind of information. If I know maybe I would have come more prepared than I was because I found that we also have to do drawing, I knew nothing about drawing. We weren't told, yes, we were never told, yes, there was nothing even when we had to apply it wasn't there…"

"I had like tutorials on Wednesdays for drawing. I know that Wednesdays are my days for crying. I knew that because I wouldn't understand a thing"

- Khuselwa

2. Application and admission requirements

"*We actually had one student from my school, from class of 2013, he was one of the best students ever in matric during his time. So he came to Metropolitan University. What he did was he took 20 application forms from Metropolitan University and took them back to my school. Yes, so I used one of those application forms to apply here*"

<div align="right">– Mashudu</div>

"*Oh, with the information some we hear from friends. Like hey, I've applied to this university. Some when I asked like how did you get the form, they said you have to write a letter to the university then they'll send it to you, but then Metropolitan form where did I get it? I think I got it from Thusanani when they brought that day in high school, because they came back again when I was in Grade 12. Yes, I think so. And then I applied. Country, I got it from a friend, but then we went to submit, it's just in town. And then UCT, UCT I think I wrote a letter. Yes, I think I wrote a letter. And then Stellenbosch I asked a friend who's there, then he sent me a form*"

<div align="right">– Rudzani</div>

3. Study programme / degree choice

"You have to know what you want to do. Like you have to do like serious research, but anywhere more where you don't have something like internet or somewhere where you can get more information. It's a problem, yes it's a problem. Let's say you want to do computer science or maths, and then you don't really know like what would they do on a daily basis. Okay, maybe maths. Yes, maths it's solve, maths you learn new stuffs. With computer science, what is it which I can do with computer science because there's a difference between computer science and computer engineering and IT. So you have to do your homework"

– Rudzani

"What I've realised there is that we don't have information in rural areas (…).There are many things which are there, which are out there, but then we don't know much about them. Because like in rurals you find that maybe people know about being a doctor, being a nurse, being a lawyer, being a philanthropist…We don't really know much about I can say science, what happens there"

- Rudzani

4. Choice of university

"My village is about 30km from the town, so remember, there is only one university in Limpopo* and it's at Thohoyandou so for those learners to get information about university they will also have to travel. Sometimes you find that the family only depends on the grant, and they have to support the whole family, so which means for their child to go to university and even sort of like get information about universities is going to be difficult because they won't sort of get money to get access to the Internet where they can find more information about which universities they can go to".

– Wanga

"So maybe if they say there is a career fair at Country, still they will have to pay for transport, so that money won't be enough for them to go to Country to get more information about how to get to university"

– Wanga

5. Funding opportunities and bursary requirements

"I think it's lack of information, yes, I think so because it leads to many things. If you don't have information you think that I can't go to varsity because my family don't have money but we have NSFAS. We have like cheaper varsities which NSFAS can cover everything. But since most people don't have that information, yes, it's the lack of information…They didn't tell us about varsity or anything like that. The only thing I remember, I remember them telling us it was that year to pass well because so that we can get bursaries because varsity is expensive, only that…."

- Khuselwa

"So when I came there, I wanted to register. I didn't know about this thing of paying registration fees. So I stood there in a queue and then when my time came to get that form, so I took that form. So that madam asked me if I've already paid registration fees. I was like registration fees? I don't know… I didn't really know much about funding in the universities and I didn't know how much for Metropolitan like needs."

- Rudzani

6. 'Hot knowledge'

"I feel like I was privileged, that's how I feel. I come from humble beginnings. I come from the deepest rural area that's there. I was lucky enough, my parents were working and educated and they took me to one of the best schools. I know that not everyone has that kind of opportunity, you understand? I feel like nobody has access to … Not everyone has access to internet. I had that. I had people, I knew people from Metro, even in high school, whom I can contact and say, I need this application form. How do I…? I had resources to apply online and all that. But I feel like there's someone out there who doesn't have that. But I'm here, I know the information I can share. I've been through the hardest also. If I go help somebody else, I can do that"

- Mashudu

What students are doing

- *"…one of the greatest things that one can offer to a person to change their lives for good is giving them information... I might not give you money today that might change your situation, but if I can give you information, that might transform your life forever…"*

- *"…we sometimes just get together and then we discuss about the challenges that we have identified of trying to adapt into university – things that we didn't know when we were still in high school, so those are the people that I sometimes meet with. When we go back home, that's where we go and address learners, because I find myself currently in a platform where I was lucky enough to sit on a board of a non profit organisation, which deals with the accessibility of higher education or bridging the information gap, whereupon we facilitate applications for people, because the online introduction system that people are using now to apply, sometimes it's not user friendly so then since we know a glimpse of what it feels like actually to go through such, then we go back and we assist, so those are the things that I've been a part of and with the people that I went to in high school"*

<div align="right">

- Rito

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What should universities do?

- Listen to students' stories; low-income or 'disadvantaged' students are not homogenous.
- Make information about possibilities to enter university and succeed readily accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic background or geographic location
- Make use of different sources and platforms for information dissemination:
  - Extend their links to rural high schools and not just those in urban areas (open days).
  - Work together with current and past students to disseminate information on at least the 6 areas we identified, in addition to the application forms.

Lessons learnt

Lack of information:

- Limits people's choices and available opportunities for the realisation of well-being.

- Compounds the historical injustices experienced by people in rural areas, precluding the equitable and widespread realisation of SG4, which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

- Is part of structures of disadvantage and inequality, which shape the choice architecture of people living in rural areas, making access to information available to all, a step towards social justice.

Conclusions

- It is clear that rural youth have reasons to value higher education.

- It is also clear that many achieve good enough matric grades to enter university in spite of having attended poorly resourced rural high schools.

- Although access was achieved for students in the Miratho project, the initial information gaps influence their experiences and success in and beyond university.

- These gaps are partially being addressed through outreach activities by NGOs who support rural students, e.g. Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), Thusanani Foundation etc. but their reach is limited.

Thank you.

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