

## South African Rural Matriculants' Perceptions of Barriers to Higher Education

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***Abstract-**A qualitative method was employed to investigate rural matriculants' perceptions of the barriers to Higher Education (HE). Data was collected from a purposive sample of High School matriculants (N=6) through focus group discussions. The Narrative Enquiry approach was used to analyze the data. The study suggested the following major barriers: lack of information about career options and opportunities; lack of information about the process of applying to universities; peer discouragement; fear of negative stereotypes of rural background; lack of parents who appreciate the benefits of higher education; not wanting to leave one's home; lack of financial support; getting married; family responsibilities and lack of interest in Higher Education. The study recommended the following interventions: provision of a full scholarship to improve affordability and the introduction of guidance and counseling program in the school to increase students' awareness of career options and opportunities.*

**Keywords** - high school, matriculants, barriers, accessibility, counseling

### INTRODUCTION

The democratic government of South Africa inherited a Higher Education system that discriminated by race, ethnicity, class and geography. Prior to 1994, African citizens, the largest demographic group in the country had the smallest participation rate in higher education notwithstanding that the demand was very high. The high demand for tertiary is conceivable given that there is a strong belief that education is basically a 'social good' hence its desirability (O'Neal & Davies, 2002).

The government sought to mitigate the effects of apartheid, by providing a system of education that builds democracy, human dignity, equality and social justice (DoE, 2001). Duvenhage (2006) summarizes the focal points of educational transformation as follows:

- The creation of a single, non-racial education dispensation wherein there is space for all participants.
- The entire overhaul and democratization of education management.
- The upgrading and improvement of the education infrastructure and
- The transformation of curricula in order to eradicate the legacy of apartheid in the system.

A number of substantial achievements had been made as a result of the reconfiguration of the High Education system. Due to funding related interventions, including the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) introduced in 1996, enrolments in South Africa expanded phenomenally (Wange-Ouma, 2012). With respect to equity, the proportion of black students in public higher education jumped from 32% of the total enrolment in 1990 to about 60% in 2000. Further, women participation

increased three times as fast as men's from 42% in 1990 to 53% in 2000 (CHE, 2000). Whereas in 1993 African students constituted 40% (191 000), and black students 52% of student body, in 2008 they made up 64.4% (514 370 and over 75% respectively of overall enrolments (Wange-Ouma, 2012; DoE, 2007).

In spite of the concerted efforts by the government to reconfigure the education system so that equal educational opportunities are created and distributed to all, resistant barriers to date make accessibility to Higher Education elusive for some disadvantaged groups particularly the rural youths. Research shows that higher education remains elitist, with the majority of students completing higher education coming from economically privileged segments of society Goodchild, 2009). By definition, anything is considered a barrier if it impedes the path to college degree (Roberts, 1999). These are factors which prevent learners from accessing educational provision.

Literature suggests that barriers to higher education are multifaceted (O'Neal & Davies, 2002; Marrett, 2000; Pantojas-Garcia, 2000; Boylan, Hill, & Kay, 1994). These barriers manifest themselves in different ways and only become obvious when learning breakdown occurs, when learners 'drop out' of the system or when the excluded become visible.

Recent research has confirmed that lack of information can be an impeding barrier to higher education access for an example the rural youths lack the 'road maps' necessary to access colleges( Meece, Irvin, Petrin & Schafft, 2009). Their networks do not give them adequate information about good affordable colleges along with the financial aid for which they are legible.

The most significant barriers reported by African American and Hispanic/Latino students were getting married; needing to help support the family, not wanting to leave friends economic hardship and parents with lower levels of education (Wash, Crawford & MacDonald, 2006).

In Australia researchers have identified a number of factors that encumber the country students' progression to tertiary study. These typically center on financial difficulties, social and emotional issues associated with moving away from established networks, academic difficulties and limited access to information about courses in the tertiary sector (Scott & Hendry, 2007).

In South Africa, matriculants are usually unable to access higher education due to poverty, poor education, lack of information, distance from urban centers or educational hubs, and historical apartheid discrimination (Wange-Ouma, 2012). Some researchers have revealed that black matriculants from poor communities are unable to access Higher Education because of:

- Poverty, in particular lack of financial resources
- Lack of information
- Poor education
- Weak support and motivational background (Chapman & Boylan, 1990).

As barriers that stand in the way of matriculants participating in higher education are said to vary from context to context (Gale, Tranter, Biulls, Haffman & Comber, 2008) it is prudent to find out what rural matriculants perceive as the barriers to higher education access. This study therefore attempts to identify barriers to higher education access as perceived by rural matriculants.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to identify the barriers that confront rural high school students when accessing Higher Education.

### **Objectives**

The key objectives of the study were:

- To identify the key barriers attributable to lack of access to Higher Education by rural high school graduates.

- To recommend intervention strategies that policy makers could engage to make higher education more accessible by rural high matriculants.

### **Significance of the study**

The importance of this study is that it identifies factors in a specific context that renders Higher Education inaccessible by rural matriculants. This knowledge might be useful to policy makers as it may enable them to determine the necessary interventions.

### **Context of the study**

This study was conducted in one of the underdeveloped rural areas in South Africa. The dwellers are poor, uneducated, unemployed and are largely dependent on Government Social Grant that barely meets their basic needs. Service delivery including education leaves a lot to be desired.

There is only one poorly equipped dysfunctional high school whose matriculants majority barely meets the entry requirements of tertiary institutions. Unemployment rate is significantly high among the graduates from the high school.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative method was employed to investigate rural matriculants' perceptions of the barriers to Higher Education (HE). A qualitative approach was preferred because it enables the researcher to share in the understanding and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives (Berg, 2006). The researcher made use of a qualitative approach because it attempts to understand subjective experiences of the participants and describes their social settings (Bryman, 1999).

### **Participants**

The target population was those who had graduated from the school in the period 2005 to 2011. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was used to select six participants, (three male and three female) for the study. Although about 20 matriculants were contacted initially only six were available for the interviews. The participants' average age was 22 years.

## Procedure

The school records were used to locate people who had graduated from Greendale High School from 2005 to 2011. The exclusion criteria for this selection were that the participants had graduated from the school from 2005 to 2011 and that the participants resided in the community within which the school was located.

The six participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study for any reason and without notice. The participants' consent was also requested for the use of tapes to record the interview sessions. All the participants gave the researcher their consent to use the tapes.

The participants preferred being interviewed in the comfort of their homes. All preferred to use their local language. The interview sessions took approximately thirty minutes. The participants grappled with the following key question: What were the main reasons why you decided not to proceed to High Education?

## Data analysis

The recorded data were translated into English by a two language experts at one university. The thematic content analysis of the participants' narrations was made to determine the barriers that made Higher Education inaccessible to the rural matriculants.

## RESULTS

Below are the narrations or voices of the six participants.

Participant 1: 21 years old

I am a lady. I completed Grade 12 in 2008. I wanted to go for tertiary education. However this did not materialize because my family did not support me. My parents are very poor and would not afford financing my tertiary education. I am aware that there is government grant but one needs to top it up. One does not have adequate information about funding available to us. The options I had were to either find work or get married. My friends were discouraging me in a big big way. They did not want me to leave the village.

Participant 2 lady 20 years

For me it was clear that I would not go for Higher

education. Firstly, my family is very poor and post-secondary education was just as impossible. Secondly, my boyfriend wanted us to marry and was wholly supported by my parents who were keen to have the bride price. Thirdly I do not think I was the passing material as we hardly have graduates from the school meeting tertiary entry requirements. The school is termed a dysfunctional school because of its high failure rate. It is poorly resourced and that contributes to high failure.

Participant 3 Male 24 years

I am working at a Construction Company. I could not go for Higher Education because you eh see I got addicted to drugs while doing Grade 8. I also got married while doing Grade 10. So I have a lot of responsibilities. After all even if I had passed I would not leave my village and friends. In the village you have these strong strong relations and eh it is difficult to go away. For a man you just need to get money buy yourself a car and enjoy yourself. The problem is that rural schools are eh disadvantage. They get poorly qualified teachers and the resources are inadequate.

Participant 4 Male 23 years

I real liked to go further with my education up to tertiary level. However, poverty affected me. Maybe if poor rural students could get full grant to cover tuition, clothing accommodation and transport. When you go to a University you must have nice clothes otherwise you feel very awkward. In the rural reas you do not get sufficient information on career options and funding.

Participant 5 female 22 years

You know I could make it to Higher Education coz my matric results were good. The disadvantage that we have in the rural area is that we do not get information on funding or university entry requirements. Well I could not proceed to Higher Education coz my parents were against it. Instead they were encouraging my boyfriend to marry so that they could get the bride price. Even if my parents had money for me to go the university, I doubt if could have because I have great passion for this village. We know each other, we feel for one another. So you see. The other truth is that money is not available here. We only live from hand to mouth kinda of thing nothing to spare. With a Grade 12 one can look for a job and compete with those with degrees. I am

working at the Education offices. I want to build my parents a house and then get married.

Participant 6 (male)

People think that you need Higher Education to make it in life. You see I have got a car already. Immediately after completing Grade 12 I went to look for work. I am a proud owner of a Nissan van. Now I make a lot of money transporting people's produce to the city. I have started building a beautiful house. I already have Miss

Right. I did not go for Higher Education because I did not need it. I always see some who are learned but are still struggling in life.

#### Themes from narratives

The following themes (barriers) emerged from the Thematic Analysis of the participants' narratives: peer influence; employment; substance abuse; poor achievement; lack of information; marrying; family support and unaffordability.

TABLE 1 PERCEIVED BARRIERS

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital status	Perceived barriers to Higher Education
1	female	21	married	Lack of family support; unaffordability; getting married
2	female	20	married	Poor achievement; unaffordability; getting married; discouragement from peers & family
3	male	24	married	Substance use; poor performance; reluctant to leave village poorly resourced school; need for employment;
4	male	23		poverty
5	female	22	Want to get married	Lack of information; lack of family support; reluctant to leave village; unaffordability; need to get employment
6	male	24	single	Higher education unimportant; working more important

Table 1 shows the perceived barriers that made higher education inaccessible for the six matriculants. The common barriers were: unaffordability; lack of family support; getting married for ladies; need for employment and lack of information about tertiary education

#### DISCUSSION

The study sought to determine the barriers which made higher education inaccessible. The following major common barriers were identified: unaffordability, lack of information, lack of family support and discouragement from peer.

It would appear that the community has jaundiced gendered perceptions of higher education. The parents encouraged their daughters to marry and benefit from the bride price than supporting them to access higher education. Exclusion of female matriculants makes gender equity just but a dream. Some parents are generally over protective of their daughters and may be



reluctant to send their daughters to the city.

The study identified unaffordability as a major challenge rural-matriculants face in accessing Higher Education. Unaffordability and poverty within these rural families have a direct and indirect effect on the matriculants' ability to access higher education (Wange-Ouma, 2012). Most of the matriculants' parents relied heavily on Social Grant from the Government that is insufficient to pay for fees, books and transport. Although all the rural matriculants in the current study were eligible for some form of government assistance, they still needed supplementary income from parents and this to many was a tall order.

Most of the matriculants were reluctant to leave their family and peers. The physical disconnection from established social networks at home is quite critical (Wange-Ouma, 2012). Several studies highlight the considerable social and emotional dislocation inherent in having to leave family and friends and enter a metropolitan environment which is considered to be relatively alien. Feelings of loneliness and homesickness are quite haunting.

The matriculants described a knowledge deficit about what is expected of them regarding university requirements such as the application process, funding and accommodation. The challenge of locating suitable low-cost urban accommodation is an issue that is considered to be a major deterrent to non-metropolitan people relocating to pursue education and training.

## CONCLUSION

There is no equity in access to higher education in South Africa. The rural matriculants encounter inter alia financial and lack of information barriers. There is need to employ psychologists in rural high schools to assist students with career options, information on tertiary entry requirements and funding

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