Opportunities and obstacles in achieving higher education access

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CHAPTER 5

Opportunities and obstacles in achieving higher education access

The previous chapters offered an overview of the Miratho Project and its capabilitarian framing. In this chapter, we ‘drill down’ to the life histories of the students (N=66) to examine factors enabling and constraining their higher education university access. Beginning with a brief sketch of the access literature, we then consider the intersection of seven conversion factors in enabling or hindering access for the Miratho students and, by extension, low-income rural and township youth in general. Using student voices, we examine the challenges they faced and the success they enjoyed in securing a university place.

Spiegler (2018) sums up two well-established findings on inequality in education: (1) access to and achievements in education are shaped by social background; and (2) while there are always examples of individuals who make it, despite coming from lower social strata, these achievements do not shift into group patterns. Thus, Unesco’s (2017) report on 76 mainly low-income countries found that, in 2016, only 1% of the poorest 25–29-year-olds had completed at least four years of university, compared to 20% of the richest. The OECD (2012) affirms that, among its member countries, students from more educated families are almost twice as likely to attend university than their peers. In the UK, USA and Australia research focusing on inequalities in access to opportunities and outcomes, especially social class, reveals a complex intersection of personal efforts and aspirations, parental education history and economic and cultural capital, stratified university systems, and elite university claims to meritocracy in their admissions (see McDonough & Fann 2007; Pitman 2015; Reay et al. 2001; Stevens 2007; Threadgold et al. 2018). In short, the odds of accessing a university education are stacked against those from low-income backgrounds.

The pattern of uneven opportunities is similar for South Africa. A quantitative cohort study on access and progression using national grade 12 examinations data from 2008 to 2013, data from all South African universities between 2009 and 2014, and the 2011 national census found a correlation of grade 12 scores and university access (Van Broekhuizen et al. 2016). The study found that patterns of university access reveal that the school system strongly influences who reaches grade 12 and who attains a bachelor level pass (the minimum for admission into undergraduate degree studies). They found that access turns on grade 12 attainment, school attended, relative wealth of the school
district, race, gender, age and geography (urban/rural and provincial). While these factors intersect, schooling emerges as most important. Chapter 3 identified that access to good-quality schooling is highly uneven by race and income.

Qualitative studies on access similarly show the effects of income and race, family background, aspirations, schooling and university stratification disguised as meritocracy (e.g. Kapp et al. 2014; Naidoo 2004; Walker 2020b; Walker & Fongwa 2017; Walker & Mkwananzi 2015; Wilson-Strydom 2015), as well as personal effort or epiphanies (e.g. Marshall & Case 2010). Except for Walker (2020b), these studies do not elaborate the specifics of student choice-making about access and the interlocking influences on such choice processes and outcomes. Moreover, because ‘[e]xpanded access to higher education alone does not fully address the issue of social equity’ (Altbach et al. 2010: 49), we understand access in terms of widening participation and making equal opportunities available to previously marginalised groups (Goastellec 2008; Morrow 1994; Wilson-Strydom 2015).

Our capability framework emphasises equality of opportunities and freedoms to make good well-being choices, instead of narrowly understanding access only as the numbers who successfully enrol. The framework acknowledges the myriad inequalities that influence access and enables us to reimagine the conditions necessary for equitable access. Most of the 66 students lived with one parent, usually their mothers, or with extended family members (grandmothers were prominent), while 20 students had absent fathers (alive but uninvolved with the family). Most families relied on a combination of child and pension grants and incomes from odd jobs, while a few had stable incomes from jobs requiring some sort of qualification. Fewer than ten students had at least one parent who had graduated from university. Of the 66 project students, 11 enrolled for diplomas and 55 for degrees in the humanities, commerce, education and science. Of those enrolled for degrees, five were in extended programmes which add an additional year to the degree. We asked what contextual factors enabled or inhibited these varied choices about access to university and extrapolated underlying capabilities. What follows is a discussion of the conversion factors influencing access and the extent to which low-income rural and township youth converted their available resources into getting into university.

From the life-history data we identified seven overlapping contextual conversion factors. These were grouped into (1) material (money/funding); (2) educational (schooling); (3) environmental (geography, community development); (4) social (information and support, and extended families and significant others); and (5) personal (personal attitudes, values and characteristics). However, students’ lived experiences were not as neatly packaged as the analysis might suggest, rather intertwined and intersecting. Although conversion factors combine in slightly varied ways for each person, they made visible lived, day-to-day encounters for all students while trying to get into university – ‘their motivations, aspirations, encouragements and benefits … the constraints, incurred costs or compromises’ (King et al. 2019: 5) – as well as common patterns across the group.

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20 An extended degree programme is meant for students from disadvantaged schools who do not meet university requirements. Some universities offer bridging courses in the form of an ‘extended degree’, which adds an extra year to a degree.
Material conversion factors: Money/funding

Funding was a major factor influencing choices about university directly and indirectly through its intersection with other conversion factors (see Chapter 3). When there is inadequate income, there is little or no resource to convert into capabilities and functionings; lack of money was an access constraint that nearly all the students faced. Money influenced aspirations, university and degree choices, and application processes.

Although all students were from struggling low-income families, five explicitly mentioned being unable to afford food. For example, Nyiko (City), who lived alone after his grandparents died and his siblings moved away to attend university, sometimes had to live on ZAR 200 a month; there were times when he ‘could just wake up and … didn’t know what to eat’. Madoda (Rural) lived alone near school and would sometimes get insufficient money from his parents and ‘sleep without eating’. Rimisa’s (Country) family of 15 survived on ZAR 5 000 a month, which was a ‘challenge’, while Lesedi (Rural) and five cousins were raised by their grandmother after her parents’ death so that, ‘sometimes you don’t have food to go to school. Sometimes you don’t have shoes’. Similarly, Tiyani (Metro) noted that occasionally, ‘there was no money for food and stuff’ as his divorced mother singlehandedly raised seven children.

Low-income households understand the value of education to the family’s potential benefit. This is best illustrated by Thapelo’s (Rural) father who refused to let Thapelo work with him in the mines saying: ‘I want you to study more, I don’t want you to just work for ZAR 2 000 that I’m working for. I want you to have a better future than me.’ With a few exceptions, Miratho students’ families valued their child going on to university for the instrumental benefits.

Despite not being food insecure, most students experienced other financial challenges which, to some extent, were determined by an intersection of parents’ education level, (un)employment and family structure (discussed later). For example, Tiyani’s (Metro) parents were separated and unemployed, ‘so there was no source of income’. He explained how:

I would see other parents early in the morning carrying their handbags going to work and stuff with beautiful clothes. And then my mum with those not so beautiful clothes there she is pushing the wheelbarrow, the sun is very hot but she would push that wheelbarrow so that I can get money for transport.

Maada (Country) explained the difficulty of studying in a one bed-roomed house accommodating a family of four (mother, brother, niece and herself). Her mother earned a living by ‘babysitting’. Sifiso (Provincial) from KZN lived with ‘too many’ (15) people: grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts. His grandparents received social grants and his uncles had temporary jobs. Despite financial challenges, parents/guardians nurtured their children’s educational aspirations. Khethiwe (City) explained that:

You know what your financial background is. You know how home is. You know home is a very difficult place. They even know, themselves, that, you know: we cannot afford to send this child to university, but we’re going to encourage them to do well in your school; just study and get that matric [grade 12] certificate. We’re going to make a plan afterwards.
Khethiwe’s statement highlights the constraints on long-term planning. Given families’ low incomes, there was a considerable gap between their earnings and education costs which made future planning untenable, unthinkable for some.

Financial considerations prevented students from considering university. Ten students did not apply for university because their families could not afford it. Lesedi, an orphan, who was raised by her grandmother, a pensioner, ‘knew that she was not going to afford everything if I went to university’. This knowledge of limited funding shaped students’ attitudes as illustrated by Akhona: ‘I never thought of going to university even when going to high school because of the situation.’ At times, financial challenges resulted in students’ not seeking information on further study. Thus, Aviwe (Rural) ‘didn’t know what to do, I didn’t have a career goal’. It was only after securing a Thusanani Foundation bursary that he applied to universities.

As noted by Rimisa, the ‘first problem’ was financial. He only applied to Country, which was nearer and cheaper than other universities. This was the case for several students. Dumisani chose City over a more expensive university because he did not want to be ‘selfish’ and be a ‘strain’ on his parents. Similarly, Olwethu settled for Rural which was cheaper, despite his preference for higher-status universities such as Metro. Lack of funding also influenced degree choices, with some students opting to study education because there was government financial aid attached. These included Anathi (Provincial) and Tintswalo (Country) who, despite wanting to study psychology and law respectively, chose education because it came with a Funza Lushaka bursary and, for Tintswalo, also guaranteed employment after graduating.

Due to financial constraints, some students took circuitous access routes: three changed institutions after securing funding, while two took ‘gap years’. For example, Thapelo matriculated in 2011 and worked in Mpumalanga for two years. In 2014 he enrolled at a university of technology for electrical engineering but left a semester later because he had no funding. In 2015 he enrolled at Rural for a BEd after securing a Funza Lushaka bursary but could not continue with engineering. Also, despite being accepted at Rural, Bongeka took a ‘gap year’ and only enrolled at Provincial after securing funding, as did Zanele (Provincial) who finished grade 12 in 2014 and started university in 2016. In most instances, the Thusanani Foundation helped. While significant others contributed towards university access in various ways, most contributed financially.

Despite all students highlighting financial challenges, some experienced smoother access trajectories than others. From Metro, Wanga, Khuselwa, Rito and Mashudu achieved APSs above 42 points and therefore qualified for merit bursaries which covered their registration fees. In addition, Rito (Metro), knowing his mother could not afford university, bought airtime and ‘just called companies’ until he secured a partial scholarship. For others, the intersection of funding with factors such as lack of information about university fees resulted in students’ not applying or not knowing how to apply for bursaries. For instance, Mbulelo (Rural) did not apply because of a lack of money but then heard about National Skills Foundation (NSF) funding from a friend and applied successfully.

Funding as a conversion factor has received some attention (see Chapter 3), with researchers noting the access impact of bursaries such as NSFAS despite its inability to assist all deserving students (Mngomezulu et al. 2017). However, notwithstanding the prominence of funding as a conversion factor, students’ narratives also point to
interventions by significant others and their own personal characteristics as ameliorating factors (explored later).

**Educational conversion factors: Schooling**

Schooling is central to access because one cannot qualify for university without a diploma or bachelor pass at grade 12. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the ‘two-economy system’ (Bloch 2009) characterising the South African public school system discourages and makes difficult the attainment of the access functioning (Bloch 2009; Njoko 2018; Spaull 2014).

Of the project’s 66 students, 60 had attended quintile 1, 2 and 3 fees-free public schools, while only two attended quintile 4, and four attended quintile 5 schools. Lower-quintile schools were described by students as under-resourced, lacking solid buildings, furniture, books and computers. In one case, Tintswalo (Country) recounted how wandering goats ate books or papers left unattended overnight. Teachers mostly communicated in local languages, even though the official language of instruction is English. Books were shared among two or three learners and, in extreme cases such as in Aphiwe’s (Provincial) school in Joe Gqabi (Eastern Cape), among five or more students. At least five students had under- and unqualified teachers. For instance, Buzwe’s (City) economics teacher taught grade 12 despite not having completed his studies, while Thendo’s (Country) accounting teacher also taught mathematics, for which he was not qualified. Thus, Khethiwe (City) described his teachers as ‘limited editions’ because they could teach the basics only.

School quintiles can serve as a proxy, albeit imperfect, of socio-economic background and quality of education; children from low-income households attend lower-quintile schools located in disadvantaged areas. Spaull (2013: 25) notes correlations ‘between language, socioeconomic status, geographic location and school functionality’. Given such conditions, Lesedi (Rural) from a quintile 3 Eastern Cape school explained that ‘everyone that goes to that school knows that there are less opportunities for me to go for university’. Similarly, Malusi (Provincial) from a quintile 3 school in Harry Gwala (KZN) noted that learners were ‘from really, really poor backgrounds’ and ‘not motivated’ with ‘nothing that inspire[d] them to want better. They’re at school [because] there is nowhere else they can be’.

Comparatively, upper-quintile schools were better resourced as noted by five of the six students who attended them. For instance, Kamohelo’s (Provincial) quintile 5 ‘semi-private school … had everything’ which included good facilities, computer and science labs and good teachers. Siviwe’s (City) quintile 5 school was also well resourced and had ‘brilliant’, ‘dedicated’ and ‘committed’ teachers. Unlike the other five, Sesethu’s (Rural) school in Durban was different. Despite having ‘privileged’ pupils, the school had no library, science laboratory or sports facilities and teachers did not push students to study: ‘If you want to sleep, you sleep. If you want to study, you study. It’s your own future.’ This school was an outlier, as upper-quintile schools are generally better resourced and students are expected to perform well, as will be discussed later. A few student narratives illustrated Spaull’s (2013: 30) critique of lower-quintile schools’ ‘short-sighted’ focus on grade 12 results. For instance, at Bongeka’s (Provincial) school, ‘not everyone was encouraged enough to further their studies, they believe[d] that when
you have a matric certificate, then that’s your achievement’. Also, Thapelo (Rural) ‘just wanted to pass grade 12 because my parents want[ed] me to go to school’.

Demonstrating the value placed on good-quality education, many of the parents/guardians made sacrifices to send children to ‘better’ schools which they believed would provide more opportunities. Despite still being under-resourced, many students attended lower-quintile schools (or upper-quintile schools for those who could afford them) some distance from their homes because of their good reputation, discipline and/or grade 12 pass rates. To get to these schools, some students walked daily distances of more than 10km (Maduvha, Country) and travelled by bus or ‘transport’ for more than an hour (Aphiwe, Provincial), while a few went to live with relatives (Ntando, Provincial) or in rented accommodation nearer schools (Madoda, Rural). For example, while Madoda (Rural) rented a room, a few such as Sesethu (Rural) stayed in boarding facilities attached to higher-quintile schools. Only a few students, for example, Nyiko (City), went to nearby schools regardless of the quality due to financial constraints. This was not to say his family did not value education, as his sister constantly encouraged him to work hard and go to university.

In a bid to find a good-quality education, four students went to commercial or technical secondary schools with specialised curricula. For instance, Nelisiwe’s (City) grandmother, a small market trader, chose the ‘best’, that is, a fee-paying commercial school in Soweto which charged ZAR 1 200 annually. Despite raising 15 grandchildren, Nelisiwe’s grandmother sent only Nelisiwe to this school because she had ‘potential’ and had done well at primary school. Nelisiwe’s story illustrates the sacrifices parents/guardians make to get their children educated, as well as the intersection of schooling, funding and extended families and significant others in influencing access. Because of their specialised curricula and emphasis on achievement in gateway access subjects such as mathematics, such schools broadened the opportunities available to students. However, they also pre-determined the programmes students could study if accepted into university. Accordingly, Nelisiwe developed an interest in accounting and enrolled for a BCom Accounting degree.

Despite several challenges, most (not all) schools tried to provide information about university by doing at least one of the following: organising career exhibitions; inviting university and/or college representatives; hosting motivational speakers; and, organising trips to nearby universities. For example, City, Metro and several further education colleges visited Langutani’s (Provincial) school in Soweto. Also, Makungu’s (City) school trip from Vhembe to Johannesburg included attending the University of Pretoria’s open day where City and Metro representatives were present. Country representatives visited Konanani’s (Country) school’s career exhibition, ‘[s]o it was not that hard for you to know about the university’. In general, university and college representatives visited schools near them. For example, rural schools in Vhembe would only be visited by local rural university and college representatives. Only eight students, seven from the Eastern Cape and one from Limpopo, did not get any university or college visits at their schools. According to Thulani (Provincial), his school in KZN was only visited by representatives of further education colleges because universities lacked confidence in the abilities of rural learners.

Upper-quintile schools held open days and encouraged learners to look beyond grade 12. For Kamohelo (Provincial), such schools provided information about
universities and study programmes because of the need to maintain high academic standards and to encourage as many as possible to qualify for university. Phusu (Metro) also explained that, ‘[i]f you’re from a school that doesn’t have an image or a goal’, then few people would go to university because ‘they were not shown such opportunities’. Because her quintile 4 school ‘was academically orientated’ and had an image to ‘protect’, it provided information about ‘top’ universities and pushed students to work hard and qualify.

The constraints associated with lower-quintile schools could act as enabling conversion factors encouraging hard work and hope and broadening horizons for students. Teachers, and sometimes school principals, provided extra support for students, which made the difference between passing and failing. This included extra morning, evening or weekend classes, photocopying books for students, encouraging and telling learners about university, and sometimes providing application forms. Thendo’s (Country) description of his school encapsulated the experiences of many lower-quintile students, especially in the Vhembe district:

The buildings and stuff, they are not in good condition, actually it’s one of the poorest in terms of buildings, but in terms of the heart and stuff yes, those people, like the principal, he comes at six in the morning, goes at eight, eight nine ten, every day, Monday to Sunday.

For most students, one or two teachers constituted ‘significant others’ playing a substantial role in facilitating access. Therefore, despite attending under-resourced schools, a few students, such as Olwethu (Rural), noted that about 60% of learners from his school went to university. This illustrates Govender’s (2017) point that, despite the weaker results obtained by lower-quintile schools, there are notable exceptions where poor rural and urban schools push against the odds to produce successful grade 12 students. Nonetheless, conditions prevailing in most lower-quintile schools position students for failure. However, as evidenced by the 66 students, there were different ways to work around these challenges. These included personal characteristics such as resilience and the intervention of significant people such as parents and guardians who selected better performing schools and teachers who provided extra assistance. But this placed considerable demands on student agency to do the ‘heavy lifting’ to achieve access.

Environmental conversion factors: Geography and community

Geography

The previous chapter outlined conditions in Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and KZN, where most of the Miratho students came from, and examined how geography contributed towards inequalities. Unlike Altbach et al.’s (2010: 40) observation that ‘geography is easily underestimated as a factor that contributes to unequal participation in higher education’, it was a prominent factor among low-income rural and townships students. There is still limited information on how rural students access, participate and move on from university despite the growing scholarly literature on the impact of geography, specifically rurality, in accessing university (McMillan & Barrie 2012; Njoko 2018;
Timmis et al. 2019) and reports by organisations such as the Thusanani Foundation,21 Rural Education Access Programme (REAP)22 and Axium Education in the Eastern Cape.23 Similarly, there is little research on the access and participation trajectories of township youth (Johnson 2007; Kapp et al. 2014; Mampane & Bouwer 2011).

The effect of geography was more problematic for rural than township students. This was because of the lack of basic amenities such as electricity and roads, technology, and the distance from towns and universities and the information they provided. Students generally associated rural areas with a lack of knowledge and development. For instance, Maada (Country) described her village in Vhembe (Limpopo) as ‘a very ruralised place … so there is no development … It’s still poor. Poor in knowledge’. This was also highlighted by Khuselwa and Mashudu (Metro) among others. Showing the negative intersection of geography, money and information, Maki (Metro) from the Eastern Cape explained that ‘people from rural areas don’t know much about bursaries and all that, you are like, I don’t have money so I am not going anywhere’. A counter example was Mashudu (Metro): despite being from a ‘deep village’ with no roads and social problems such as substance abuse and early pregnancies, Mashudu’s family was ‘very supportive’ of her academic development and it was always expected that she would go to university.

The intersection of distance from towns and a lack of funding made travel difficult. Demonstrating how this influenced the acquisition of information, Wanga (Metro) from Vhembe explained how students whose families relied on social grants could not afford to travel to internet cafés ‘where they [could] find more information’. Even when Country, the nearest university, organised a career fair, there was no money for transport. For many, the distance between home and university determined institution choice, illustrated by students who selected universities based on their proximity. However, a few students deliberately selected universities far from home, for example, Ntodeni and Wanga (Metro) and Nyikiwa (City).

While challenges such as limited access to the internet were mentioned by most, Thulani (Provincial) additionally noted that universities ‘didn’t bother coming to us’. This was because ‘they don’t think people from villages will do it. Like they don’t have resources, and the education level is very low, so they don’t trust that they [village students] will produce what they want’. Rito (Metro) from Limpopo also mentioned that ‘it is really true that higher education is something that isn’t accessible, because when you are coming from a village you only think of what is happening in that small village of yours’. Thus, a rural background becomes a significant challenge for students who qualify and aspire to go to university.

Students’ life histories also revealed how perceptions and expectations are shaped by one’s background. Khuselwa (Metro) had wanted to study medicine:

Since I’m from a village when you tell them I want to do medicine they’ll be like, ‘Oh, will you be able to do it? Will you pass your grades well? Are you good in maths, are you good in science?’ Yes, things like that. So, I got discouraged and I didn’t apply for medicine.

21 http://thusananifoundation.org/
23 https://www.axiumeducation.org/
While geography can be viewed as a conversion factor with a negative impact on opportunity in this context, it was largely overcome by determination and support from others. As highlighted by Khethiwe (City), one ‘needed to have an extra vision to be different and make it to this kind of place [urban area’]. In addition to positive attitudes, the help of role models, such as parents, ‘encourage you to see out of the village’ (Mashudu, Metro).

Community
Home community can be a social conversion factor but here we designate it as environmental to capture the specificity of rural development. This illustrates that conversion factors are not neatly categorised, not least because many of the problems described would apply also in urban townships where the geography of apartheid spatial planning is still apparent. Here we consider students’ perspectives on their communities in relation to development challenges and how they enabled or hindered access, as well as intersections between home community and geography, money, family, schooling and information and support.

Fewer than half of the students described their communities as having good infrastructure or services such as tarred roads, water, electricity, with social challenges including poverty, crime, gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse, early pregnancies, youth unemployment, lack of motivation and prospects, and people dependent on social grants. For instance, Malusi (Provincial) from a village in KZN described villagers as ‘very poor and uncivilised’, ‘violent, unmotivated’ and without any ‘direction in life’. He described his village as comprising mainly ‘mud houses, with some RDP [Reconstruction and Development Programme; low-cost housing project] homes’ where water and electricity were a problem. Consequently, ‘very few do end up at varsity, very, very few’. A lack of electricity meant limited or no access to technologies such as the internet and television, which restricted young people’s exposure to knowledge because ‘[y]ou cannot understand if you don’t have a TV and you’re from rural areas, how are you going to know about the world?’ (Thapelo, Rural, from the Eastern Cape).

While most students had encouragement from home and school, communities as a whole were rather less supportive. Indeed, Maduvha (Country), Lungile and Sonto (City) were actively discouraged from studying by community members. For instance, in Maduvha’s ‘small’ village, few people took school seriously, especially for girls. She was criticised and called names, saying, ‘there’s no one at your home who went to varsity so who are you? What are you doing?’ From Lungile’s township, community members would ask, ‘“Didn’t you pass grade 12?” Then you say “Yes”. They say, “what more do you want?”’. Communities with socio-economic challenges are generally associated with poor educational outcomes, compounded by gender stereotypes which relegate women to family roles. This reduces their chances of getting a good-quality education even more if they also come from low-income families and live in rural areas (Taylor & Yu 2008; Ward et al. 2015). Yet, despite the social and cultural challenges, slightly more than half of the students described their communities in positive terms such as: ‘supportive’, ‘very close’, ‘lovely’, ‘ubuntu’, ‘people with super hearts’, ‘one big family’, ‘fun’, ‘improving’, ‘nice’, ‘not that bad’, ‘peaceful’, ‘quiet’, and (in one or two cases) ‘no violence and crime’. Underscoring the importance of rural community, Thendo (Country) explained that he ‘was raised by the community’ where one has ‘uncles, aunts … extended family’. 
Regardless of students’ positive perceptions of their communities, they still noted challenges in accessing university related to a lack of information, motivation and funding. While a few, such as Thapelo (Rural), remarked that young people were increasingly accessing university, the dominant community view was still negative or indifferent, as ‘many people live off social grants and have no information and funding’ (Neliswa, Rural) and university representatives ‘lack faith in rural learners’ ability to succeed (Thulani, Provincial). Dumisani (City) also explained that, in his township, ‘people drop out easily and it’s not questioned’, while Langutani (Provincial) from another township explained that few young people from her community go to university because families rely on social grants and unemployment is high.

Unsupportive communities worked as a push factor in one of two ways. First, they motivated young people to improve their circumstances so that they could move to more affluent neighbourhoods. For instance, because Lungile’s (City) community in Vhembe had many teenage pregnancies and gender violence, she wanted ‘to get out’. Circumstances also motivated young people to work hard with the aim of improving their communities, such as in Tintswalo’s (Country) case. He chose to study education so he could ‘motivate others’ because few people took learning seriously. Similarly, because Sonto’s (City) township was ‘rough’, and had crime, rape and abuse, she chose to study politics so she could ‘lend a helping hand to people in the community and make a change’. Thus, students made challenging circumstances work for them in ways that influenced their aspirations and degree choices.

Despite challenges, there were also instances where community members motivated, supported and assisted learners. Nelisiwe (City), from a large urban township, made the elders ‘proud’, while ‘even the uneducated women’ from Sesethu’s (Rural) OR Tambo village ‘always encourage[d] us to go to varsity, to make a change’. In addition to encouragement, a few students received financial support from community members. Rimisa (Country) noted how bursary forms from the department of health were distributed among the youth. Also, from Vhembe, a church member paid Ntsako’s (Metro) university application fee. In these ways, communities offered resources for students to convert into university access.

Social conversion factors: Information and extended family and significant others

Information
Many qualifying rural and township youth do not consider or are unable to access university due to a wide education information gap. Information influences access, starting from decision-making during the transition from secondary to high school, about grade 10 subject choices, university application or admission requirements, funding requirements (including bursary applications), and so on.

To choose a degree/diploma of their choice, students require information, for example, relating to gateway STEM subjects such as mathematics. While it is important to consider ability and interest in selected subjects, students can ‘in many ways [be] constrained by their own ignorance of the consequences of selecting subjects for their upper secondary education, or indeed by their academic performance’ (Cosser & Du...
Most schools provided some sort of support for choosing grade 10 subjects and other post-secondary school decisions such as university and programme choice, or they chose for the students. However, a few schools did not provide any information about university, leaving learners to decide with the help of family and friends. In choosing grade 10 subjects, these students mostly relied on ‘hot’ sources of information (Ball & Vincent 1998), albeit unevenly reliable: teachers, friends and family members. For example, Rudzani’s (Metro) school did not provide information and he went along with his family’s choice of science because ‘we knew that if you choose science, you can go anywhere’. Tiyani (Metro) knew he wanted to study engineering but did not know the foundation subjects, so he chose science because ‘everyone’ in his family had studied maths and science. A few, such as Menzi (Provincial), used multiple sources of information. He chose maths and science because ‘about 90%’ of his village’s youth selected it, his brother, a second-year electrical engineering student, suggested it (hot source), and also, most bursary applications he saw required maths (cold source). Thabelo (Country) chose maths over maths literacy (which does not allow entry to a degree in some fields) after teachers told students that maths literacy would disqualify them from studying BSc degrees. Of the 66 students, 19 chose the easier maths literacy over maths. This did not affect their choice of degree or diploma, except in Nyiko’s (City) case. Nyiko chose maths literacy because the maths teacher used corporal punishment. Consequently, he could not enrol for an accounting degree and settled for an accounting diploma. Conversely, Khethiwe (City) chose maths literacy due to low maths grades.

Grade 10 subjects were also indirectly selected by enrolling in technical schools. As noted earlier four students went to specialist commercial or technical schools. While Ndiyafhi (Metro) and Siviwe (City) seemed unaffected by this, Nelisiwe and Sonto (City) were unaware of this limitation. Sonto, who had wanted to study law, noted, ‘I didn’t even know what commercial [school] meant’. Similarly, Nelisiwe had to change from wanting to study medicine to accounting: ‘I just knew that it’s something to do with accounting and numbers.’ While all students were able to achieve diploma or bachelor passes and enrol in different universities, for students such as Nyiko and Sonto, the choices had already been limited by their schooling.

Low-income students are ‘doubly disadvantaged’. First, they lack an extended network of people with prior knowledge of university capable of providing hot knowledge; second, their context is one in which accessing cold knowledge from the internet or universities is limited (Ball & Vincent 1998: 380). Thirty-two of the 66 students were the first in their extended family to go to university (first in family). We use ‘first in family’ to differentiate between first-generation students whose parents do not have degrees but who might have siblings at university or who have graduated. In general, families had little or no information on, for example, course options, navigating the admissions processes and applying for financial support. Olwethu (Rural) failed to enrol at his university of choice due to funding and applied for medicine at Rural. However, he was unaware of the need to submit his grade 12 results and missed the entrance interview. Because he did not want ‘to sit at home’, he enrolled for a BSc Biological Science despite not knowing anything about it. Others obtained information on universities and study programmes piecemeal from teachers, friends and family members. Illustrating the importance of hot knowledge in bridging the information
gap, Thapelo (Rural), who ‘didn’t know about universities’, applied to a university of technology after a friend told him ‘it’s good’. Also, Rudzani’s (Metro) sources of information and application forms were his friends.

Students began considering going to university at different life stages. Around ten of the 32 ‘first in family’ began thinking of going to university earlier than grade 8, despite not having knowledge and funding. Most got information on university only at high school. For instance, Langutani (Provincial) ‘never actually thought’ of going to university until teachers encouraged them and Thusanani Foundation visited her school in grade 12. Three students from the Eastern Cape, two from Limpopo and one from KZN considered university only after passing grade 12. For example, Thulani (Provincial) from KZN ‘didn’t know what to study’ and how to pay for it. Also, highlighting the intersection of a lack of information and geography, Kananelo (Metro) from Joe Gqabi ‘didn’t have that much knowledge’ about university and career choices ‘because I had no one to mentor me or anyone to inspire me’. He attributed this to being from a small town where ‘you don’t get so much people who are well-educated’. Because he was ‘a bit confused’ about what to study, Kananelo chose BCom after failing to qualify for science education, despite not having studied high school accounting. In general, those with family members who had gone to university thought about going to university earlier, due to a combination of family expectations and support offered at school.

Also highlighting the importance of information and its intersection with community and funding were the experiences of Langutani (Provincial), Ntsako (Metro) and Sakhile (Rural). Their degree choices had been influenced by television. Watching medical detective shows made Langutani aspire to study neurology (although she failed to get the required points); Ntsako became interested in civil engineering from watching the National Geographic channel; and Sakhile wanted to study law from watching a series about lawyers, but chose education because his rural satellite campus did not offer LLB degrees. Ntsako, who had previously lived with his grandmother in a house without electricity, started thinking about university only at age 13 after moving in with his mother. It was on television that he first saw people graduating.

Students in general attributed a lack of information to geography, more specifically, rurality, cascading down to communities and families. For instance, Maada (Country) from Vhembe indicated that ‘we did not have much information’ because ‘it is a very ruralised area’. Akhona (Rural) from OR Tambo noted that, ‘others [were] not even exposed to what university is’ because no one told them about university or the need to go there. Ntodeni (Metro) from Vhembe highlighted the prevalence of youth living with extended family members without ‘much knowledge about university’. Also, Rimisa (Country) from Vhembe explained the lack of internet access in rural areas which could provide information for university and bursary applications. Despite limited resources, both Maada and Rimisa acquired both hot and cold knowledge from career fairs where Thusanani Foundation and Country representatives were invited, in addition to a visit by a university (Maada), and visits by universities and colleges in Limpopo (Rimisa).

The internet was a source of information for fewer than half of the students, including those from rural areas in Limpopo such as Ndoda, Mashudu and Khuselwa (Metro), and a few from the Eastern Cape such as Zanele (Provincial) and Mbulelo (Rural). For most, information from the internet added to students’ hot knowledge, enabling them to ‘try to “fill out” or contextualise the grapevine’ (Ball & Vincent 1998:
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For example, Ndoda chose Metro on his teachers’ and mother’s advice. He then selected construction studies after listening to a motivational speaker and doing further research on the internet. Similarly, Mbulelo (Rural) visited construction companies and conducted internet searches in grade 12.

Students’ perspectives on other learners’ failures to access university revealed the importance of information and its intersection with other conversion factors. Ntando (Provincial) from Joe Gqabi explained: ‘When you speak to others they are like, what is Bachelor, like they don’t even know what’s a Bachelor.’ Highlighting the convergence of several factors, Bonani (Provincial) from Joe Gqabi indicated that it was because ‘they don’t have that passion, they lack knowledge in terms of choosing a course, the careers and the financial aid application forms for universities. And then … they are not motivated and encouraged to pursue further their studies’.

Noting that a lack of information ‘leads to many things’, Khuselwa (Metro) explained, ‘you think that I can’t go to varsity because my family doesn’t have money but we have NSFAS’. Similarly, Lwazi (Rural) noted that young people in the OR Tambo district generally do not access university because of a lack of information about funding opportunities. Although a lack of information was more prevalent among rural students, nonetheless only a handful were not aware of university funding requirements. Ndiyafhi (Metro) from Vhembe did not realise he needed to apply for funding and only applied after a family friend told him about the Thusanani Foundation. This made his access path comparatively easier than, for example, for Rudzani and Khuselwa (Metro). Due to a lack of information, they realised the need to pay registration fees only upon enrolment and had to be assisted by the Thusanani Foundation.

About 45 students were informed of university funding requirements by Thusanani representatives who also secured bursaries on their behalf or paid university fees. A few students secured their own funding. For instance, before registration, Tiyani (Metro) applied ‘for a lot of bursaries … any bursary that I would come across I would just apply’, while Rito (Metro) called different companies in search of a bursary. They both enrolled after securing funding.

Illustrating the inadequacy of information alone in securing access, a few students such as Buzwe showed its complex intersection with other factors. Buzwe converted teacher and family support, as well as information from Metro representatives, to enrol at an Eastern Cape province university for accounting in 2015, but dropped out because he didn’t secure funding. He only enrolled at City after securing Thusanani Foundation funding. Nyiko (City) had limited information about choosing grade 10 subjects to be a chartered accountant or about university processes, although he had different sources of information: his sister was a City social work graduate and his brother had studied quantity surveying at college. In addition, Nyiko’s accounting teacher had motivated him to go to university and the school had organised trips to two university open days. Regardless of these information sources, Nyiko ‘had no information how to apply, where to apply or when to apply’ until Thusanani Foundation applied to City for him. On the other hand, Sonto (City) is first in family; her school did not organise any university visits and teachers discouraged learners from going to university. While she did not know how she was going to get to university, ‘all I knew was that I was going there’.

These narratives reveal that students have mixed sources of information. Mostly, they relied on hot knowledge, albeit not always grounded in university experience, while their own agency is significant. Although contact with and information from
universities is crucial, its lack does not limit access by itself. There are several examples of students, such as Sonto (City), who had no contact with universities but still achieved access. However, in cases of limited information from universities, or access to the internet and a lack of support from schools, and sometimes families, students achieve access under these highly challenging opportunity conditions and must exhibit considerable agency to push forward towards their valued goal of university access.

**Extended families and significant others**

Students’ familial support and encounters with significant others emerged as important in shaping access decision-making. We have already seen this in the information factors above. We now explore further the specific influence of the extended family and other significant individuals in enabling or disrupting access and how it intersects with other factors because ‘success stories usually acknowledge the involvement of at least one significant person and/or other assets from the immediate environment’ (Mampane & Bouwer 2011: 115). In all instances, there was almost always someone who supported a student’s educational aspirations through providing information, money (often small sums), and encouragement and advice.

Despite living with parents or guardians who had not themselves completed grade 12, students were generally encouraged to learn and aspire to university even in the absence of funding and, at times, knowledge. Dumisani’s (City) parents were Mozambican immigrants who had never been to school. His father prioritised education and told his son: ‘If something is for school you need to go [even] if it means that we don’t eat inside the house.’ In addition to encouragement, several students such as Aphiwe (Provincial), Khaselwa and Ndiyafhi (Metro) had ‘strict parents’. Khaselwa and her siblings ‘all went to varsity because they [our parents] encouraged us to take our education seriously’ and there was ‘no going out at night’. A few parents such as Aphiwe’s mother did not expect her to contribute to the household chores so she could study. Thus, parent or guardian interventions ensured that students stayed off the streets and in school and understood the value of education. However, sometimes parents’ low educational levels influenced students’ choice of degree. For example, Khaselwa’s parents discouraged her from studying forensic science because they thought she was ‘going to work with dead bodies’. She ended up applying for engineering, a field which they understood.

Thirty-four of the 66 students had extended family members who had gone to university, although not all had graduated. As underscored by Phusu (Metro) and Nyiko (City), people who access university ‘have at least one member in the family who has succeeded’ and ‘showed them the way’. Khaselwa (Metro) explained: ‘Maybe another family has three sisters and all of them never went to university and they all had kids at a young age, there’s a very high probability for the younger one to also do the same thing.’ While Dumisani’s (City) brother did not go to university, he had visited Metro and would tell him about it, ‘and I [Dumisani] could picture it in my mind … and believe that this is the type of environment that I want to be in’. These examples illustrate Smith’s (2011: 165) view that ‘sibling transfers of knowledge about higher education can initiate a narrative thread in which choosing to attend university begins to feel more “natural”’. In the absence of parental knowledge, there were usually extended family members to assist. For example, because Tintswalo’s (Country) parents ‘didn’t even know what was university, what was happening there’ he relied on his uncle, a teacher, for information and support.
Teachers constituted a substantial proportion of ‘significant others’, with almost all students identifying at least one teacher who had helped them. Support included encouragement, information on universities and funding, application forms and money for application fees, transport and sometimes registration fees. Vukosi (City) recalled a teacher who ‘used to tell us that our background doesn’t determine our future … So I believe that’s how I was motivated’. Ntando (Provincial) identified his physical science teacher as ‘the best teacher in the world’ who ‘made me the person I am’, while Nombuso’s (City) maths teacher and Tiyani’s (Metro) English teacher were like ‘father figure[s]’. Thulani’s (Provincial) geography teacher helped with the application process, selecting the university and what to study. Lesedi’s (Rural) maths and life science teachers paid ZAR 3 500 towards his registration fee, and his family paid the balance. While fewer than five students, such as Rimisa (Country), lacked family support, they all had supportive teachers. As a first in family, Rimisa ‘felt lonely’ and ‘no one supported [him]’ at home because they did not ‘understand the situation’ and also faced constrained financial circumstances. Therefore, he ‘depended’ on his teachers who encouraged and gave him financial assistance which resulted in him ‘believing in myself’. Overall, Vukosi (City) noted: ‘I had hard working teachers, I guess they are the ones who were pushing me this far, right now I am at university.’

The Thusanani Foundation played a key role in improving access. All 66 students were helped in at least one of the following ways by Thusanani volunteers who visited rural and township schools: providing information on universities; funding opportunities; applying on their behalf to three different universities; deciding at least three programmes to register them for; registering students; and, filling out forms and submitting them. At least 45 of the 66 students were exposed to the Thusanani Foundation while at school, usually in grade 12, and the remaining 21 encountered the foundation after registering at university. Thusanani Foundation was pivotal in overcoming information and money challenges and securing access for most, and continued participation for some. Several students expressed how Thusanani Foundation ‘played a vital role’ in their lives (Bonani, Provincial) such that they ‘made us, took us from nothing to something’ (Malusi, Provincial). Underscoring the importance of Thusanani Foundation (and other such NGOs), five students, including Nyiko (City) and Maki (Metro), indicated that, had it not been for Thusanani Foundation, they would not have thought about going to university.

Thusanani Foundation applied to three universities on students’ behalf and, although students indicated preferred degree programmes, Thusanani sometimes chose different ones where they thought students were more likely to be admitted. While access was achieved and students sometimes grew to ‘love’ these programmes, occasionally they were dissatisfied. For instance, although Nyikiwa (City) had, perhaps unrealistically, selected veterinary science and optometry, Thusanani applied to City for a diploma in logistics. Despite being unaware of what logistics entailed, Nyikiwa now felt that ‘they did me a favour, because I love this course’. Bonani (Provincial) ‘never wanted to [go] to university’, preferring to study at an agricultural college. However, due to a lack of funding, he had enrolled at Provincial with Thusanani’s assistance. Notwithstanding studying BEd, majoring in agricultural science and technology, Bonani was dissatisfied because he was not ‘going that deep into agriculture’. While such students were not enrolled in programmes of their choice, they had accessed university and stood a better chance of securing employment after graduation than those who did not.
**Personal conversion factors: Attitudes, values and characteristics**

Agency and motivation play a significant role in securing university access for low-income students. Personal dispositions can function to ‘close the gap in support from schools and families and the lack of information about higher education or the money to go’ (Walker 2020b: 11). Thus, negative influences are mitigated by determined and tenacious student agency. But we also emphasise that agency on its own is not enough to secure access as our analysis of intersecting conversion factors shows: agency is always in interplay with social systems and relationships with others.

To achieve good grades, six of the Miratho students decided to repeat grade 12, sometimes in the face of discouragement. The other 60 students, with the exception of Aphiwe (Provincial), claimed to have worked hard in high school. Most were motivated to work hard to change their individual circumstances, that of their families and, sometimes, their communities. Hence, Asanda (Provincial) commented: ‘Our background plays a huge part. It motivates us a lot, because that’s motivation from within. That I have to push hard, I have to work hard to change [things] back at home.’ Despite adverse circumstances (lacking knowledge, funding and, at times, support), students demonstrated their agency in navigating their way to university. Examples include students opting to repeat grade 12, walking long distances to school, and applying for bursaries and to universities. Mthunzi (City) illustrates this tenacity. He was accepted at City after repeating grade 12. Because he lacked funding, he joined the student representative council which paid his registration fee while simultaneously submitting his documents to the Thusanani Foundation which also assisted him. The need to push themselves was highlighted by Khethiwe (City) from Joe Gqabi where people thought ‘no ways, varsity is not for us … [w]e are coming from a rural background’, while he told himself, ‘I know I’m going to make it’. Unlike more traditional university students with financial security and family histories of university, some low-income students relied on themselves to forge an access path. Notwithstanding the support of significant people, students indicated the need to take responsibility and ‘push yourself individually so that you can be where you want to be in life’ (Sonto, City). Most students described themselves in positive terms as hardworking, smart, determined and committed. For them, these qualities were necessary to overcome the challenges of poverty and inequalities and the uneven access terrain.

Thus, despite the challenges, students were determined to access university. For example, regardless of going to a school with a low grade 12 pass rate, Lwazi (Rural) believed that ‘if you want to pass you can pass’. Also, despite being first in family, Bongeka (Provincial) already ‘knew in [her] heart’ that she wanted to go to university, ‘[e]ven though there was nothing that said you will go to university, in terms of money and all that’. For Asanda (Provincial) it was ‘a challenge’ – being first to go to high school, university and ‘to graduate and to have a proper work’. Such students showed a sense of self-efficacy, understood as the beliefs about our (in)ability to influence events affecting our lives. This determines ‘how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave’ (Walker 2019: 55).

Nonetheless, some students had a weaker sense of self-efficacy than others, as was illustrated by Busisiwe (Provincial). She had no plans for university because of ‘the situation at home’. She only focused on passing grade 12 and ‘did not think what [she was] going to do next.’ Only after her aunt ‘pushed’ her to apply to Provincial and she was accepted, did she begin thinking about how to pay the registration fee ‘and I did
not even think if I don’t have a bursary, who’s going to pay for my fees after that? I was just worried about registration’. This lack of long-term planning was also mentioned by Khethiwe (City) and illustrated by Mthunzi’s (City) caution that ‘you plan, then things happen the way they want to happen’.

Such sentiments can be attributed to the precarious positions of low-income students which made long-term planning difficult, especially in relation to funding. Given that aspirations can reflect people’s measure of control over their future, low-income students tend to have ‘a more brittle horizon of aspirations’ (Appadurai 2004: 69). Thus, students such as Busisiwe made short-term achievable plans rather than shooting for what appeared to be unachievable long-term goals.

Students’ access narratives illustrated the importance of personal dispositions and values in overcoming challenges such as a lack of funding and information, poor schooling, and geography. As Archer (2003) explains, we deliberate about what is possible, in the light of our objective circumstances, and work towards some notion, however imprecise, of the course of action to take to advance our (access) projects. Still, while structural constraints can be circumvented, they are not entirely overcome. Thus, there are degrees of freedom in determining one’s course of action and these will vary with the stringency of constraints (such as poverty) and the strength of enablements and relationships. Agency matters, but cannot be the whole story.

Conclusion

Although access to university was achieved, access trajectories varied based on the different combination of unfreedoms the students faced. By examining intersecting factors in enabling and hindering access, the discussion has tried to untangle and trace students’ lived experiences, adding to the limited research on how low-income students access university. Access for disadvantaged students is tenuous and negotiated, rather than guaranteed. Whereas some students converted resources available to them into achieving ideal places at the universities of their choosing, opportunities were unequal and others had constrained choices and settled for universities and degrees or diplomas which they qualified for or their resources (e.g. a bursary specific to training as a teacher) allowed them to take up. Although some students eventually accepted and sometimes even grew to enjoy their degrees or diplomas, others remained unhappy with their constrained choice. Further, even though conversion factors affected individuals differently, students’ narratives revealed patterns of intersecting multiple inequalities. These inequalities highlight that access to university does not start at the point of applying for admission but begins well before: at school, at home and in communities. Thus, an understanding of students’ contexts and how they shape available opportunities helps to identify enabling and constraining conditions in context – material, educational, social and personal.

Students do not arrive at university as blank slates without some capabilities in place or development. In relation to the set we identified in Chapter 4 and with regard to access, we think that the life histories show that students were already strong in the domains of ubuntu and navigation. Epistemic contribution, however, was thin insofar as it related only to passing examinations; students were not yet participants in giving and receiving knowledge, nor recognised as legitimate and credible knowers (which
is not the same as saying they had nothing to offer or brought nothing with them). Emotional balance was compromised by stress and worries, especially about funding. The uncertainties they lived with made it difficult to make long-term plans for a good life (practical reason) beyond getting to university and working hard once there. These were effectively dormant capability possibilities which would depend on conducive higher education experiences and conditions.

Inclusion and participation is harder to evaluate. It is probably fair to say that they mostly felt included in their schooling albeit as junior members with a common language and common ethnicity, but participation was limited pedagogically. Future work/study would depend on how they fared at university and in the labour market: schooling shaped this capability in relation to grade 12 results and school subject choices but, aside from that, this higher education capability was yet to develop. Thus, most capabilities could be described as emergent, waiting in the wings as it were. The next three chapters therefore explore students’ experiences of getting on and getting out of university, examining how (and if) they were able to expand their capabilities.