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## **ABSTRACT SRHE Conference 2017**

### **My background, my obstacle! The rising challenge of university access for students from low-income families in South Africa**

The ban of racial segregation and related practices in South Africa in the 1990s positively led to increased access in higher education. However, what emerged thereafter showed that increased access in higher education does not necessarily translate to social justice. While it is evident that higher education is no longer only meant for the elite but any ordinary civilian can access this space comfortably through bursaries, loans and scholarships, it is also important to understand that it is not as easy for those who do not receive such financial assistance to navigate this space. Nonetheless, numbers of students from low income families have swelled in institutions of higher learning due to increased access. Unfortunately, a good matric pass is no guarantee for a bursary or any other financial assistance for school leavers. As a result of this, the system is left with school leavers who do not have financial assistance either from home or from the state and even the private sector. Therefore, there still exists the majority of students who struggle to access higher education despite increased opportunities and access especially at the entry point. The challenges are often caused by lack of financial resources and other socio-economic related matters. With the ever growing statistics on unemployment and reduced job opportunities, children from low-income families suffer the consequences more. In South Africa, such cases are observed due to increased numbers of low-income families with more of their children successfully completing secondary education. The recent *#Feesmustfall* movement is testimony to the frustrations that students face in their attempt to access higher education. It remained in the world news for a long time that students in public universities in South Africa during the second half of 2015 & 16 were on a rampage demanding free education from government. Such stories cannot only be understood by

merely analysing the violent protests, police presence on campuses or the protracted impasse between university management and students in their fight for free, quality, and decolonised higher education. However, these can be explained through hidden bottlenecks that exist at social level before students even get to campus. This is the point of interest for this study.

The aim of this study is to explore how students from low-income families and are without bursary or any other source of financial assistance acquire registration fees and other necessities at the beginning of (each) year. The study seeks to explore alternative strategies that students employ to enter higher education, the risks that they take, and the trade-offs that result from this is at times precarious. The study is limited to a period where students attempt to access admission to study at university. How they access basic resources, this could be registration fees, personal needs such as groceries, bed linen, accommodation in or off campus, transport and other related needs. The study is located at a historically disadvantaged university based in the far North of South Africa, Limpopo Province. It is one of those institutions that are considered as rural-based. It is geographic removed from opportunities that are prevalent in urban communities. Therefore, basic resources become even more limited in this context as compared to those in urban communities. The institution is dominated by students from low income background who are mostly first generation in their families.

This study is framed around the capability approach by Amartya Sen. Sen is concerned about what people are capable of doing and becoming instead of what they already have. Therefore in this study, the concern is about what students and their families are capable of doing in order to access finances for their registration fees and other necessities at the beginning of an academic year. As numbers of students from low-income families who are without financial assistance continue to grow in seeking admission in institutions of higher learning, concerns on how they sought those fees become multiply as well. The research question for the study is follows: *'how do students from low income families access necessary resources for their registration at the beginning of an academic year?'*. In conjunction with Margaret Archer's social realist framework of structure, culture and agency, the capability approach has enabled the study to respond to the research question in a manner that is sensitive to conflating

reality. This implies that the framework considers how the structures that make up the social life of the concerned students create capabilities that enable students to raise funds for enrolment in institutions of their choice. Secondly, the framework enables the researchers to analyse the culture of the institution in dealing with students who intend to register with that institution. Furthermore, with regard to culture the framework enables the researcher to understand the socio-economic background of families that the students come from. Thirdly, the framework allows the researcher to analyse the level of agency that students themselves exercise during their quest for accessing higher education at the beginning of the academic year.

The study found that students face insurmountable obstacles in their attempt to source registration fees and other necessities to begin life on campus at the start of an academic year. Participants of the study were academic peer mentors and tutors mainly in their third year of study and beyond who were not on any form of financial aid such as NSFAS or bursary or scholarship. Since the institution is already classified under the no-fee increment since almost all its students fall within household income threshold of below six hundred thousand per annum, all mentors and tutors who were without any form of financial assistance had the opportunity to participate in the study. Data were collected through an open ended questionnaire which was emailed to these peer mentors and tutors. It was emailed back to one of the researchers. Results revealed that among other risks that students face, especially female students, they go to an extent of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with men who can afford to give them money. Extended family members take the responsibility of assisting these students with finances. Parents also take risks of loaning money from loan sharks since they do not qualify for bank funding. Some students reach a point where they miss the opportunity of registering because of lack of funds. The study recommended that since the institution is known for attracting students from low income families, management has to rise up to the challenge. There could be specialized funding meant for assisting needy students at the beginning of the year. Government should come to support the institution in raising such funds. Currently, the institution's Student Representative Council has a fundraising drive meant to assist students who are in need of finances. However, not all students find assistance from this funding.

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