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Pursuing higher education in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion: a scoping study of the educational trajectories of youth from an informal settlement in South Africa

Research report
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Dr Faith Mkwananzi
Dr Mikateko Mathebula

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Contents

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Executive summary

In South Africa, rural-urban migration has led to major urban cities being surrounded by a periphery of low-income residents living in informal 'shack' settlements with little or no access to basic services and limited opportunities to access higher education. Research with marginalized migrant youth (Mkwananzi, 2019) and rural and township youth (Mathebula 2019; Walker and Mathebula, 2020) demonstrates the complexity that arises when young people move within and across countries to attain higher education or better living conditions. There is therefore no doubt that higher education is difficult to access for youth from informal settlements. However, little research has been conducted on the context specific factors and dynamics that affect how youth from informal settlements access and/or progress in higher education. Furthermore, no specific policy has been developed by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training to address the needs of this constituency of youth. To determine whether this topic warrants specific attention in higher education policy and research, this project combined a scoping of the literature with an empirical exploration using photovoice with a group of 12 youth from an upgraded informal settlement in the Free State province of South Africa. Findings from the photo stories and literature review indicate that aspirations for higher education are not only influenced by contexts of social and spatial exclusion but also by youth's past and present experiences within and outside of their home environments, which forms a complex web that complicates their pursuit of higher education.

1. Background

Informal settlements are a common feature of the urban landscape in developing countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, majority of the urban population resides in informal settlements which often come about because of war and large-scale displacement (Dodman, Leck, Rusca, and Colenbrander, 2017). In South Africa, the emergence of informal settlements is linked to Apartheid law and legislation like the Group Areas Act of 1950 which forced physical separation between races by creating segregated residential areas for different races (Buthelezi, 2007). The Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 demarcated 'Townships' for black people, usually located in the outskirts of cities (Marutlulle, 2017). In addition, Legislative Acts like the Bantu Education Act of 1953, and the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 entrenched educational inequalities across racial groups. As such, systematic racial segregation was not only prevalent at the social, political, and economic, but also the educational level (Buthelezi, 2007). Various spatial segregation policies also removed individual land ownership rights for black South Africans, and the Apartheid state's lack of investment in the development of housing and municipal services in townships led to housing shortages and overcrowding, but also influenced the establishment of informal settlements (Marutlulle, 2017).

1.1 Rationale of the study

In global South contexts like South Africa, there has been little progress in developing informal settlements, and access to education and training by youth between the ages of 18-24 who live in such contexts is limited (de Jager and Maserumule, 2021). Informal settlements are therefore interesting but under-researched sites for understanding how higher education aspirations and attainment is shaped by contexts of social and spatial exclusion. This study was therefore aimed at a deeper understanding of the multi-interaction of several factors, such as persistent socio-economic inequality, individual choice, motivation, and exposure to what is possible for youth who aspire to higher education in contexts of spatial and social exclusion in South Africa. The study's objective was to identify if there is evidence that can be gathered to make a case for further empirical research on the higher education trajectories of youth from informal settlements in and beyond South Africa.

1.2 Structure of the report

In the following sections of the report, we provide: a brief contextualization of the informal settlement where the study took place; a synthesis of the literature on higher education and informal settlements which is followed by a description of the research methodology. Thereafter, we present the findings, which are structured in a way that responds to the research questions that informed the study. The research questions were:

- How do youth in informal settlements mobilize their agency and social networks to access higher education?
- What role does higher education play in advancing youths' capabilities within and beyond the informal settlements from which they come?
- What informal spaces of learning exist that can be supported and expanded within and beyond informal settlements?
- What can universities learn from the experiences of youth in informal settlements?

The report concludes with reflections and recommendation for the way forward.

2. Context: Freedom Square

The research conducted for the purposes of this study took place in the Free State Province with youth from an informal settlement known as Freedom Square (see figure 1 below). While in the 1990s, the people of Freedom Square were living in extremely precarious conditions (limited access to water, sanitation, or any other form of service) the implementation of various upgrading projects initiated by inhabitants led to an observable improvement of quality of life by the 2000s. Among the improvements are tarred bus routes, an electrical network including public lighting, metered water provided to each stand, community facilities, schools, kindergartens, a clinic, and a community centre (van Rensberg, Botes and de Wet, 2001).

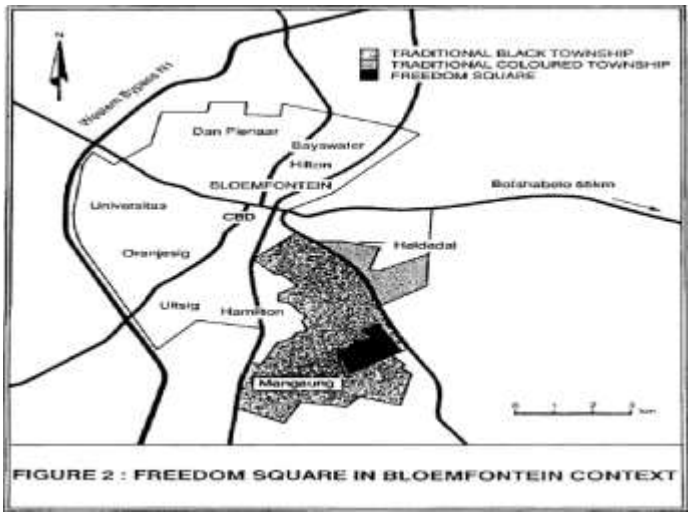

Figure 1: Location of Freedom square in Bloemfontein. Source: Marais and Krige (1997).

However, as informal settlement upgrading experts point out, upgrading strategies should pay careful attention to particularities of the context -social, political, cultural, and economic so that interventions do not only contribute to physical improvements but also create more integrated societies (Fuentes and Pirzkall, 2020). This also entails a 'broad transformation of relationships within communities, between informal communities and the formal citizenry, and between communities and authorities' (Ruster & Imparato, 2003: 87). In our view, the upgrading of Freedom Square has not resulted in this kind of transformation. For this reason, we think it offers a good example of how socio-spatial exclusions come about and affect the pursuit of higher education for youth. The photo-essays, and the interviews we conducted with the youth suggest that Freedom Square has developed a culture that is different from traditional townships, which has a unique impact on the effective opportunities of young people to access higher education.

3. Literature Synthesis

Since 1994, statistics have shown that access to higher education institutions in South Africa has been increasing, a sign that higher education is addressing issues of equitable access in the wake of an exclusionary Apartheid past. Despite these encouraging trends, there are still marginalised youth in society who may never be able to progress to university or college due to multiple socio-economic factors. In South Africa, most low-income youth are in rural areas and townships but also increasingly in informal settlements. As research has shown, the likelihood of realising

educational aspirations in these areas continues to be an issue of academic concern in Africa (Walker and Gore, 2020; Lorenceau, Rim and Savitki, 2021). In particular, rural-urban migration in South Africa has led to major urban cities being surrounded by a periphery of low-income residents living in informal 'shack' settlements with little or no access to basic services, and limited access to quality education (Mkhombo, 1999) and hence limited higher education opportunities. Informal settlements often represent the first point of arrival and encounter with the city for rural migrants (Nkonki-Mandleni et al., 2021). Residents of these settlements locate themselves in particular areas for specific reasons, including access to services, employment opportunities and/or proximity to family and other social networks (Nkonki-Mandleni et al., 2021). Informal settlements are often perceived as disorderly, unsafe, and illegal, with their internal layout and organisation well-conceived, functional, and supportive of a diversity of informal processes, rules, and values. The order and arrangements of an informal settlement support a multiplicity of livelihood strategies and enable residents to survive and live under extremely precarious conditions with very little support from the state or other sectors of society (Nkonki-Mandleni et al., 2021).Whilst much of the literature on informal settlements captures the complex social and survival networks that characterise informality in urban settings (for example see Turok and Borel-Saladin, 2016) literature on the ways these factors encourage or discourage higher education aspiration and attainment is rare.

Our past work with marginalised migrant youth (Mkwananzi, 2013, 2019) and low-income rural and township youth (Mathebula 2019; Walker and Mathebula, 2020) shows the complexity that arises when young people migrate within and across countries in pursuit of their higher education aspirations or of opportunities for a better life. We know that access to higher education is arduous for these youth. Although little is known about what the higher education trajectories of youth from informal settlements in particular looks like, there are some studies that have explored this question. Locally, research by Onyango (2010) looked at Orange Farm, one of the most densely populated informal settlements in the country, with a population estimate of over a million people. Onyango's study showed that only 115 students in Orange Farm qualified to enter University, and only 51 had obtained a B.A. degree. Also conducted in Orange Farm, research by Walker and Mkwananzi (2015) and Mkwananzi (2013) indicates how this kind of deprivation in access to higher education may lead to a downward spiral of youth aspirations and an adaptation of preferences as they observe themselves and others failing to advance their educational hopes. Kitawi's (2019) research carried out in Kenya, shows that neither private nor public universities provide a structured mentoring process to support high school students, but especially those in informal settlements, to transition to tertiary institutions. In India, amongst the problems identified in their research Vesvikar and Desai (2022) highlight the absence of government support, and few sources of psycho-social and financial support for girls in a slum in Mumbai to access higher education. In her study on youth in Brazilian favelas, Melo (2018) emphasises how far favela youth lack behind in educational attainment and 'how enormous the gulf between them and higher education remains'. Similarly, research by Del Monte (2022) and Mitchell, Del Monte, and Deneulin (2018) explains why youth from informal settlements (villas) in Argentina have fewer opportunities to access higher education. This literature suggests that there is a small but growing interest in research that looks at the relationship between higher education and urban inequalities, with a focus on barriers and enablers to accessing university for youth from informal settlements.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research participants

We worked with 12 youth volunteers from Freedom Square, aged between 20 and 30 (three women, nine men). While most of the youth reported being unemployed, they noted that they were 'hustling' as a way of making a living. Hustling included running vegetable stalls, doing garden work, repairing computers, and doing house cleaning work.

Table 1: Table 1: List of youth participants

Name	Level of education	Current occupation	Age	Gender
Lindelwa	Grade 12- Left private college because of financial challenges (was studying towards an Agricultural Diploma)	Unemployed /hustling	20	F
Hlekiwe	Grade 12 (incomplete)	Working towards re-writing Grade 12	23	F
Modiehi	Completed a Bachelor of Social Science degree	Looking for employment	28	F
Malefetsane	Grade 12 (Certificate from private college)	Unemployed /hustling	22	M
Thabo	Grade 12	Unemployed /hustling	24	M
Neo	Grade 12	Unemployed /hustling	20	M
Tshepo	National Certificate in Marketing (N6 Certificate from local college)	Unemployed /hustling	21	M
Sidwell	Grade 12	Unemployed /hustling	26	M
Tlali	Grade 12	Unemployed /hustling	29	M
Kgosi	Grade 12 (Certificate from Central University of Technology)	Unemployed /hustling	26	M
Setjhaba	Grade 12	Unemployed /hustling	20	M

Kamohelo	Grade 12	Unemployed /hustling	20	M

4.2 Project overview

Between 8 August and 2 September 2022, we conducted one-on-one interviews with 12-youth living in Freedom Square, Bloemfontein. The youth were recruited through a local Non-Profit Organisation (NPO). The interviews were followed by a five-day photovoice workshop with the 12 youth. The first four days of the photovoice workshop were held at the office of the partnering local NPO. The fifth and final day of the workshop was held on campus at a venue belonging to the Higher Education and Human Development Group at the University of the Free State.

Because of the challenge of accessing local organisations in the specific community, we worked with just one NPO instead of two. This posed as a limiting factor in gathering diverse stakeholder perspectives. Also, because our networks and contacts were limited to the one NPO – which acted as a gatekeeper to the community, our access to labour market representatives was limited because the NPO did not have any networks with local entrepreneurs who fit the NPO's mandate. For example, many of the local businesses in the community are taverns, which the NPO has distanced its associations with because of its views that these kinds of businesses encourage alcohol abuse among youth. The few local spaza shops (informal tuck shops/mini grocery shops) were said to be owned by foreign nationals, which according to the NPO did not contribute to youth development in the community. The NPO did not have networks with the local hair salon owners, barbeque spots and car wash establishments which we saw during our visits in the area, and which according to the youth were owned by Freedom Square residents, or local citizens. Consequently, because of our commitment to working with the NPO as our gatekeeper, we were restricted in terms of whom we could access. Despite these limitations, the aim of the project, to explore youths' educational trajectories and through photovoice, document how youth participate in higher education, was achieved.

Participants who signed up for the workshop participated in the entire process. Participants were provided with R500 each as a token of appreciation for the time dedicated to the project and for them to purchase mobile data so that participants could communicate regarding the project without limitations. However, for the most part of the project, the liaison was direct with the partnering organisation, and there was no need for data. In addition, most of the youth were not active on online platforms such as WhatsApp. Some youth did not have mobile phones and therefore did not need data. Upon discussion with the NGO, it emerged that most young people would take time off from their everyday income-generating activities. As a team, we agreed that the R500 would be considered an honorarium for participation since it was also sufficient to cover the costs associated with data collection. There was no ethical risk associated with the honorarium provision.

4.3 Discussion of demographics

The age range of the youth interviewed represented captured those who have completed matric within a five-year range leading up to the interviews in August 2022. The youth provided adequate and appropriate insights and views from lived experience in responding to the questions. All of the young people in the project had been born and raised in Freedom Square which made them knowledgeable about the context; for example, they had experienced the development of Freedom Square over the years, which made them believe that the area had shifted from being an informal

settlement to a 'developing township'. From the twelve young people's interview data and photo stories, valuable insight into the challenges they experience in their attempts to access higher education was obtained. Their stories also capture ongoing experiences of fellow young people in Freedom Square that are likely to continue to be experienced unless education development interventions are put in place.

This paints a picture of similar challenges experienced by young people in comparable contexts in the country (e.g., see Mkwananzi, 2013; Walker, McLean, Mathebula and Mukwambo, 2022). The one graduate who participated in the project is evidence that in general, very few people living in Freedom Square can access higher education, concurring with a study done by Onyango (2010) in an informal settlement cum township where the number of graduates with a bachelors degree was 0.001% of the estimated population.

Half of the youth interviewed had lost at least one parent, and a few had no knowledge of their fathers and were raised by a single mother, grandmother, or both. Very few of the youth reported having knowledge about their extended families. This could be a result of their grandparents' migration into Freedom Square from rural areas in the Free State. Generally, people have been internally migrating for job opportunities, separating fathers and mothers thereby distorting the linear structure of the family. Therefore, families generally disintegrate in the process. This family/background dynamic has a strong influence on what the youth aspire to do after high school. Often, youth draw on the influence of the broader community, including influence from their peers. This has implications for research question one on how youth in informal settlements mobilize their agency and social networks to access higher education. In such a context, social networks might yield more costs than benefits, or be more of a liability than an asset. For example, the youth might draw on practices that are common within their networks (e.g., drug use) that might not necessarily impact their agency in a way that is beneficial or relevant to the pursuit of higher education. The analysis warrants the need for further research into the complexities of family structures and dynamics in South Africa and the implications these have on university access, experiences, and throughput in the country.

4.4 Photovoice workshops

The photo story creation was preceded by activities such as the river of life drawing, a community mapping exercise, photography training and individual storyboarding. Each activity was aimed at helping youth reflect on their educational trajectories and identify the obstacles and opportunities they had to pursue higher education. For example, the prompt for the river of life activity was "tell us a story about your educational trajectory from when you graduated high school until now".

Figure 1: River of life drawing. Source: Authors.

The process followed at the workshops started off with the youth sketching their River of Life drawings (see figure 3) which they presented individually to the group, before developing storyboards (see figure 4) which they could use to frame their narratives.

Figure 2: Storyboarding. Source: Authors.

They then took their own photographs, presented these for feedback, followed by further photograph taking. On the penultimate day of the workshops, they curated and captioned their

stories, including a title and caption for each of the six photographs that comprised their photo story. Through the various activities, the youth reflected on various challenges, the most common being low Access Point Scores (APS) which constrained their access to university. For those who had sufficient scores, challenges such as financial resources and lack of family support were reported. In total, 12 photo stories were produced by the youth, with each image representing the unique experiences of the youth as seen in Tshepo's photo story below.

Figure 3: Tshepo's photo story. Source: Authors.

On the fifth and final day of the photovoice workshop, we held a focus group discussion and completed a stakeholder mapping exercise. Youth identified the stakeholders they wished to invite for the exhibition. The exhibition took place on 8 November 2022, at the University of the Free State's Library. The exhibition was well attended, and the youth had the opportunity to retell their stories to various members of the university including students. Some viewers wrote down comments of their impressions of the exhibition in the exhibition notebook.

4.5 Pre-workshop interviews

In line with the proposal, the aim of the interviews was to help young people reflect on their individual experiences of accessing or attempting to access higher education in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion and identify the challenges and opportunities that are crucial for them to achieve their aspirations as individuals. The interviews, ranging from 30 -90 minutes were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in English instead of the locally spoken Sesotho language because, although, we, the researchers understand Sesotho, none of us is fluent enough to conduct a full interview in the language. We acknowledge that the use of English might have restricted the youths' ability to fully express themselves. However, for the objectives of the interviews and the project as a whole, sufficient data was gathered that respond to the research questions, and the interview data is well complemented by the photo stories. To date, there are no interviews conducted with stakeholders, but we have had some enlightening informal conversations with the partnering NPO.

5. Findings

The themes presented in this section are identified from the data and the analysis informing this report draws heavily on the Photo essays more than on the interview data. All photographs and photo stories were discussed with the participating youth. During these discussions, themes for analysis were identified. The analysis of interview data will only involve researchers and be used in writing academic articles[1]. The youth involved in the project have some knowledge about higher education, mostly through school. Universities hold open days where they share information about their programs with high schools. Although such knowledge is available, the stories and interviews with youth indicate several factors that hinder them from pursuing higher education. Thus, social networks and agency became crucial to their education progression.

5.1. Mobilising agency and social networks to access higher education

Youths' potential for action was influenced by the people within their radar who had social influence to either inspire them or connect them with resources for pursuing a university education. The participants expressed concern that youth in their neighbourhoods spend a significant amount of social time engaged in non-productive activities, such as drug use, rather than establishing and fostering social networks that could lead to higher education. While some of the youth, like Tshepo, Lindelwa and Kgosi, had demonstrated levels of agency in pursuing diverse avenues of post-secondary education, others believed they did not have sufficient agency to influence their surroundings, especially in relation to higher education. This gap between young people's educational aspirations and their present socio-economic situation had a disincentivising effect on future behavior (Pasquier-Doumer and Risso Brandon, 2015). The youth expressed a desire to pursue university education despite their circumstances that required them to fulfil one aspiration (for them, generating an income) before realising another, that of attending university. According to Mkwananzi (2013), most young people in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion seek employment soon after high school due to a lack of: financial resources; a motivating environment; and role models. Similarly, we conclude that there is a complex interplay between structural factors, the social environment, effective choices, and decision-making, that together exert influence over the agency youth exercise to pursue higher education. Below we highlight the socio-economic and socio-cultural factors at play in the youth's lives and situate these in the geographic space of Freedom Square, to bring into sharp relief how these factors create a distinct context of socio-spatial exclusion that hinders rather than enables aspiration for, and the pursuit of higher education.

5.1.1. Socio-economic factors influencing access to higher education

There were several realities that confronted youth in their endeavour to continue their education beyond secondary school. These issues include financial resources, limited knowledge of access routes, low access points (academic achievement in high school), family background, and (to a lesser degree) teenage pregnancy.

[1] In this report, the participants' real names are given. This is because, in photo stories and exhibitions, participants use their real names as they engage with diverse stakeholders. However, interviews were conducted anonymously, so we will use pseudonyms when reporting interview data.

Financial resources

While most of the youth stated that they were hustling in one way or another to make a living, the money they earned from these irregular opportunities was not sufficient to afford further education. According to them, the income they were earning was sufficient to support themselves and, to a limited extent, their take care of their families. As a result, lack of financial resources remained a significant barrier. In the case of Lindelwa, she had been registered at a local college but was de-registered for failing to keep up with the tuition fee payments. Although there are several bursary schemes, such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), that provide loans to financially needy students, most youth indicated they were not aware of how to apply, except for Modiehi, and Tshepo who had accessed the bursary.

Insufficient access points

Most of the youth recognised that a university education would lead to better chances of decent employment (secure; well-paying jobs) but some, because of their lower academic achievements in high school, had lost motivation and the desire to pursue higher education. Disebo, for example, was aware that she could not enrol in university with the Admission Point Score she had achieved.

Family background and significant others

When parents do not have an income to support their children, they may encourage their children to seek employment to meet the family's needs more than they would convey explicit expectations or support for further education. Furthermore, the beliefs and values of significant others can serve as resources for reinforcing, informing, or guiding youth in their decisions regarding higher education (Eccles, 2009). It is clear from our study that limited exposure to, little knowledge about, and minimal experience with higher education for the significant others of the youth (parents and immediate family members) negatively influenced the youth's expectations to go to university. In contrast, ongoing discussion, and exposure to information about higher education pathways may positively affect youth's aspirations and agency. For example, after the photovoice workshops, four youth reached out to us to seek information and support for furthering their studies.

5.1.2 Socio-cultural factors

Place, history, and culture in Freedom Square

While Freedom Square was founded as an informal settlement on the outskirts of the city of Bloemfontein in the 1990s, it has undergone much upgrading and now resembles many regular townships in South Africa (see Marais and Krige, 1997; van Rensburg, Botes, and de Wet, 2001; Sinxadi, 2020). However, it still exhibits many characteristics of informal settlements, whose challenges include a high level of poverty, low literacy levels, limited access to justice and health facilities, a high rate of alcohol-related violence, and lack of secure employment opportunities – all of which contributes to increased crime. In addition, limited recreational facilities, and teenage pregnancy are also detrimental to youth development (Mkwananzi, 2013). As found in Mkwananzi's (2013) study in Orange Farm informal settlement, such contexts create a culture of non-support for young people with aspirations for higher education.

Unsupportive environment

In their stories, the youth expressed an array of instabilities related to their upbringings, such as unstable families and inadequate educational opportunities. Watson et al. (2016) found that university discussions with parents predicted higher levels of aspirations for university, and this

link was stronger for students from lower socio-economic status schools. These conversations with parents were missing in the context of Freedom Square youth. There is, therefore, a tendency among youth to exhibit signs of disinterest and lack of motivation, which can be attributed to their upbringing, family background, and exposure to conversations about effective opportunities for higher education. This is a critical finding of this scoping study, which supports Hart's (2009) assertion that promoting the ability to aspire in a supportive environment provides a starting point for young people's visions of the possible futures for their lives.

Teenage pregnancy

A study conducted by Sultan et.al (2021) on the educational aspirations of adolescents living in Bangladeshi slums identified a gendered dimension of educational attainment. In our project, Disebo had the responsibility of caring for her children. She had her first child when she was 18 and her second child when she was 21. Her immediate responsibility and priority were to find economic means to support her children. A similar conclusion is reached by Molukanele (2021) and Levine and Levine (1996), who argue that early motherhood disrupts educational opportunities and creates unique life-changing issues for young parents, which ultimately redirects their intended life course.

5.2 The role of higher education in advancing youths' capabilities within and beyond the informal settlements

In considering the role that higher education could play in advancing the lives of youth in Freedom Square, one must consider the contextual challenges specific to that community, as well as others like it. Our data analysis indicates that the socio-economic status of youth in Freedom Square is a contributing factor to their unlikely enrolment in university, as compared to local colleges (although both types of higher education institutions are within close geographic proximity to Freedom Square). Considering the high cost of university education, this may be related to the perception that a university education is out of reach for those on the margins of society. This is consistent with Guo et al.'s, (2015) argument that expectations to proceed to university are determined by students' perceived likelihood of success and the intrinsic value they hold for university education. A consensus among the youth in the project was that university was accessible to youth in Freedom Square, and that fellow youth were aware of the entry requirements of the University of the Free State and the Central University of Technology. However, for eight of the youth participants, university was accessible in theory rather than being an effective possibility. This is likely to be the case for other young people in Freedom Square. As such, we were unable to fully explore the role of higher education in advancing youths' capabilities within and beyond the informal settlements, because few of the youth had accessed university or college. Those who had, did not describe many capabilities that were enhanced due to accessing higher education, and they had not achieved any social mobility, not had they managed to move out of Freedom Square.

5.3 Informal spaces of learning within and beyond informal settlements

While the youth engaged in diverse informal activities for their daily upkeep including running vegetable stalls or tuck shops, doing construction work, and garden services among other things, there were no informal spaces in which youth were (or could be) supported to master skills and knowledge that could be used to widen their capability sets. Therefore, beyond formal access to

post-secondary school education, youth in the project felt that there were no opportunities for meaningful learning in their community. The NGO we partnered with engages in youth development initiatives, but none of these were educational or focused on skills development per se. Instead, interventions were aimed more at raising awareness and sharing information about safe sex and mitigating teenage pregnancy.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This report sought to provide an overview of the main findings around the education trajectories of youth living in informal settlements in South Africa in accessing and participating in higher education. Despite South Africa's post-apartheid aspirations to improve access to higher education for previously marginalized groups (see Sehoole, 2005; Bunting, 1994), access to higher education for young people living in informal settlements remains limited for a variety of reasons identified in this study. Developing these identified areas could address, in part, the underlying symptoms of poverty that affect the quality of secondary education and youths' aspirations and opportunities to progress to higher education. Findings show that there is scope for universities to improve the extent to which they create opportunities for young people from socio-spatially excluded communities to access higher education. In thinking about what universities can do to enable access for youth in informal settlements, our analysis points to a need for more political agency on the part of the government and on the part of higher education institutions. Also, despite the absence of policies from the Department of Higher Education and Training that specifically address the constituency of youth in places such as Freedom Square, there are initiatives that can be taken by universities, governments, and communities to support the inclusion of youth from informal settlements. We outline some examples below.

6.1 Design youth mentorship programmes as part of community engagement activities

An important part of universities' role is to respond to societal needs. Engagement with the community is an essential aspect of that function. This includes engaging with young people on a variety of levels in which findings from academic research are e.g., used to design interventions to support youths from excluded communities. Similarly, high school students and aspiring university students to receive guidance and support from faculty members as suggested by Rhodes & Dubois (2008) and Rhodes (2002). Alternatively, university students may volunteer to mentor high-school students under the supervision of a lecturer (Thomson et al., 2008). There are a few local examples of these kinds of intervention strategies. Stellenbosch University established Matie Community Service as a non-profit organization to address the educational and training needs of the local community. It offers a structured volunteer experience consisting of information sessions and short courses. An adult basic education program is also designed for illiterate and semi-literate adults, people with disabilities, and youth who are out of school. Another example is SHAWCO, by the University of Cape Town (UCT), which is student-run, and focuses on initiating health and education projects in South Africa. Specifically, the education projects aim to improve learners' access to education, increase access to higher education (universities and colleges) and offer additional interventions in extracurricular activities (UCT 2018). As Kitawi (2019) points out, these kinds of mentoring programs should complement rather than substitute formal education, but they can improve transitions from high school to higher education for youth from informal settlements, and universities can structure such programs in accordance with their operational models for community engagement (Kitawi, 2019). The benefit of such university-led

organisations and programmes is that they not only respond to the needs of communities, but also create partnerships with them to identify context-specific and locally relevant solutions to development challenges.

6.2 Partner with youth development Non-Governmental Organisations

Non-Governmental Organisations (not-for-profit) in the youth development sector are primarily concerned with providing basic education and not necessarily supporting access to and participation in universities (Mathebula and Masutha, 2021). In this regard, NPOs in South Africa, such as Inkamva Youth and the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), stand out in that they have intervention strategies for providing support and guidance to motivated young South Africans from disadvantaged rural households to enrol in higher education and to succeed (REAP, 2019: 1). By partnering with such organisations, universities could widen their reach. This is particularly important since these organizations collaborate closely with communities and may have contextualised knowledge of challenges on the ground that universities lack. These types of partnerships could provide practical solutions to the daily challenges faced by young people whose mobility in higher education remains peripheral. As argued by Mkwananzi and Walker (2015:41) while contexts of socio-spatial exclusion make it very difficult for youth to access higher education, 'this is not reason enough to justify excluding people living in difficult circumstances, or to accept unproblematically that higher education will always reproduce existing social inequalities, writing off large numbers of individual lives.' Rather, we need conceptual and empirical approaches to education and development that will lead to an understanding and action on this issue (Mkwananzi & Walker, 2015).

6.3 Streamlining student recruitment

Literature suggests that the struggle to access higher education is similar for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, some historically excluded groups remain structurally excluded despite increasing enrolment numbers. This is consistent with Tjonneland's (2017) argument, which suggests the various levels of disadvantage and needs among previously excluded groups. Although black students from poor households have increased significantly in the higher education space, the proportion of black students from extremely poor households at South African universities remains low. Five percent of black secondary school students whose parents earn less than R120 000 per annum qualify for university, compared to 70 percent of students whose parents earn more than R600 000, and fewer than half of undergraduate students graduate five years after entering (Tjonneland, 2017). There is scope for the government to revise access policies to be more equity-focused, across different socioeconomic levels. Access policies for historically disadvantaged groups should be streamlined to focus on specific geographic areas. As an example, a black student from an informal settlement might not necessarily experience similar challenges as a black student from a middle-class family in a township. Even though both students meet equity measures, their backgrounds differ drastically, and they have different access needs to acquire a university degree. For universities to apply such inclusivity practices in their recruitment approaches, there must be political will and agency from the government. Policy documents and guidelines should clarify processes and incentives for universities that seek to better support students from contexts like Freedom Square.

6.4 Continuous reflection on access policies

It is important to consider how students from extremely poor backgrounds fare in the higher education system when reflecting on access policies. Socioeconomic challenges still limit the full experiential and instrumental benefits of higher education for the few students who can access it. Some of these students who do access universities leave early due to socioeconomic challenges. Students from poor households drop out of higher education at a higher rate, which is detrimental to efforts to reduce youth unemployment. Such circumstances maintain wealth disparities and systematic poverty. If these students complete their higher education studies, they often cannot access their study records due to outstanding fees. As an example, one of the young people has a university debt of over R30 000. If she doesn't secure well-paying work, it will take her at least ten years to pay off this debt through the small amounts of money she makes from odd jobs. Despite her training, she cannot obtain a certification for the qualification she trained in. If a graduate has the opportunity for employment, university policies should set up legally binding agreements with graduates. Withholding the graduate's certificate significantly limits her chances of finding well-paying employment and restricts higher education's potential to respond to present-day societal needs – which, in South Africa, include addressing the high youth unemployment rate. Especially in a country where higher education is unaffordable for many, employers should work with universities to support graduates who seek employment but have outstanding tuition fees.

6.5 Strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships

Household and secondary school level barriers, such as poverty, and insufficient teaching and learning resources in schools, prevent students from acquiring the skills necessary for accessing and participating in university life. There is, therefore, a need to mainstream higher education into everyday development initiatives and programs at the secondary school level instead of seeing the access challenge as a university-only responsibility. Communities and governments should support these programs. These stakeholders can help identify ways in which secondary schools can better prepare students for university and ways for universities to support previously excluded students on a case-by-case basis. It may require more resources for secondary schools to implement such interventions, but they may team up with communities to find solutions. In this report, we demonstrate that challenges to youths' access to higher education encompass a range of factors from schools to universities to households to policies. By taking a holistic approach, which includes stakeholders across all domains, youth are more likely to access, participate in, and successfully complete higher education.

7. Reflections and next steps

South Africa's experience with upgrading informal settlements indicates that the key is not simply to provide adequate housing and basic services. As mentioned before, this is because the order and arrangements of an informal settlement support a multiplicity of livelihood strategies and enable residents to survive and live under extremely precarious conditions with very little support from the state or other sectors of society (Nkonki-Mandleni et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding people’s existing circumstances in ‘regular’ and upgraded informal settlements is crucial to improving people’s lives (SERI, 2018). However, research on access to higher education for youth from informal settlements is rare. The few studies that have been conducted show, like our findings, that factors such as parents’ low income and low education levels are constraints to obtaining good primary and secondary education in informal settlements, which ultimately affects

access to further education (see Sava and Orodho, 2014). Our study also highlights that universities tend to attract, and therefore select, from quite a narrow social cohort, and that geographic proximity to university campuses does not necessarily make them more accessible to local communities. This poses questions about the ways universities communicate to potential students, as well as whether potential students from urban peripheries see in universities, a community that reflects a broad range of cultures, including theirs when they visit campuses.

The international community has emphasised the importance of creating more inclusive universities, as well as increasing participation in higher education for historically disadvantaged youth. The findings of our study serve as a reminder that inclusive higher education is a multidimensional concept involving a variety of spatial, social, and economic factors:

- Socio-spatial inclusion: By living in an upgraded informal settlement with affordable housing, water, and sanitation, youth in Freedom Square experience forms of inclusion that youth in regular informal settlements do not. Yet, their location and surrounding areas remain, as they describe, 'unruly'. There was a strong desire among all the youth to get out of Freedom Square for this reason. They generally see higher education as a possible yet unfeasible way out for them –although within geographic proximity to universities, they remain socially, economically, and culturally distanced from them.
- Socio-economic exclusion: Youth are unable to fully enjoy the benefits of economic growth afforded by the informal settlement upgrading process, due to high unemployment rates and low-paying, precarious jobs. Thus, youth from informal settlements remain among South Africa's urban poor who struggle to access universities or remain distanced from universities in socio-economic terms.

A comprehensive approach to higher education inclusion should consider the spatial, social, and economic 'proximity' or 'distance' to institutions of higher learning, because these factors are interrelated and affect the potential universities have to contribute to and develop local communities. When these factors interact negatively, they trap individuals such as the Freedom Square youth in poverty and marginalization. In contrast, positive interactions of these factors can facilitate access to higher education and lift youth out of poverty. Therefore, it is imperative to rethink the concept of inclusive higher education in broader terms. This, would encourage universities to identify students from informal settlements as valuable role-players in the current and future development of local communities, thus increasing the potential of higher education to contribute to the just development of cities and society, rather than exacerbate existing urban inequalities (The Bartlett, 2019).

Methodologically, the use of Photovoice for a scoping study produced a greater awareness and understanding of the unique challenges facing youth in Freedom Square. It worked well to provide contextual detail on Freedom Square, and to capture stories that acutely illustrate how persistent socioeconomic and urban inequality, individual choice, and geography intersect to constrain higher education pursuits for youth in an informal settlement. Consequently, our study lays the groundwork for scoping studies using photovoice particularly in the global South, where informal settlements are not only a common feature of the urban landscape but under-researched sites where the use of participatory visual methods could be particularly illuminating. We have seen how powerful Photovoice can be to allow youth to reflect on their lived reality (Woodgate, Zurba, and Tennent, 2017; Courcy and Koniou, 2022) and on their experiences in higher education

(Mathebula & Martinez-Vargas 2021; Walker and Mathebula, 2020; Martinez-Vargas, Walker & Mkwananzi, 2020).

7.1 Forthcoming publications

Mkwananzi and Mathebula are each leading two co-authored papers to be submitted by the end of November.

a. Mkwananzi is leading an empirical paper building on this report on: *Higher education experiences of youth in socio-spatially excluded contexts: Lessons for universities.* The aim of the paper is to share youths' experiences and perspectives on what universities could learn and do to be more inclusive of youth who remain on the margins of urban society.
b. Mathebula is leading a theoretical paper building on the SRHE 2022 conference presentation titled: *Conceptualising higher education (im)mobilities in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion in South Africa.* The aim of the paper is to expand the conceptualisation of [higher] educational mobilities.
c. We are also writing an opinion piece for the University of the Free State on: *Lessons from the field: Partnering and collaborating with grassroot organisations.* The piece is based on reflections on the opportunities and limitations of working with local organisations who are gatekeepers of communities where youth voices are silenced.

7.2 Further Research plans

During the scoping study, we identified the following as potential areas for future research:

- We worked with three young women and nine young men, and there was no specific explanation for the gender disparity, which might be an area for future research. There is potential to conceptualise a gender focused study with a broadened scope focusing on the aspirations for, and participation in higher education by women from urban peripheries.
- Our study took place in Freedom Square, which is an upgraded informal settlement in the Free State province. A broader study that investigates the pursuit of higher education by youth from informal settlements in provinces previously not explored in the existing literature would be helpful for illuminating the situation across the country. Cross-country comparative studies of this topic would allow for a fuller picture of how urban inequalities affect dimensions of sustainable development, including the attainment of higher education, in the Global South.

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Appendices

Youth Stories (Examples)

Hlekiwe_final.pdf

Lindelwa_final.pdf

Modiehi_final.pdf

Tlali_final.pdf

Tshepo_final.pdf