

BEYOND HARD BARRIERS: LACK OF ASPIRATION AS A SOFT BARRIER TO ACCESS HIGHER EDUCATION AMONGST YOUTH LIVING IN LOW-INCOME HOUSING ESTATE

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the perceived barriers inhibiting the youth's access to higher education. The article goes beyond the hard barriers to explore "lack of aspiration" as a soft barrier impeding access to higher education amongst the youth. In this article, the term "soft barrier" refers to lack of aspiration, a less tangible aspect that is much more subjective and less easily measurable. On the other hand, "hard barriers" are understood as factual issues that are easily recognisable and measurable, financial issues, for instance. This article interrogates lack of access to tertiary education as a key development problem in South Africa. Hence, the youth are underdeveloped socially, economically, and academically. The article draws from youth experiences to interrogate inadequate access to tertiary education and its impact on youth vulnerability. In this qualitative study, youth residing at Kenneth Gardens were interviewed to generate data. This study found lack of aspiration as a major soft barrier impeding the youth from accessing higher education. Among other factors, this study also found financial issues, informational barriers, and inability to meet the minimum university entry requirements as the underlying hard barriers impeding young people from accessing higher education.

Keywords: aspirations, barriers, capabilities, development, higher education and youth

INTRODUCTION

Despite the remarkable recent improvements in access to higher education, evidence shows that many people remain excluded (Bétéille et al. 2020; Brock 2010; Lambrechts 2020; Taylor and Cantwell 2019). Prior 1994, access and participation in the South African higher education was uneven (Statistics South Africa 2004). Based on the statistics, only about 9 per cent of Africans had access to higher education (Statistics South Africa 2004). Further evidence suggest that White students had higher participation rate of about 70 per cent in higher education before the year 1994 (Statistics South Africa 2004). These numbers are disturbing because South African population was, and is still, dominated by Africans as compared to other racial groups. In addition, a substantial number of matriculants who applied to further their studies with higher education institutions were disqualified because they did not meet the entry requirements

(Statistics South Africa 2011). As evident in the statistics, the access to South African higher education disparities declined after 1994, but remained largely uneven (Statistics South Africa 2011). Unsurprisingly, such disparities were associated with social and economic status, with those from poor backgrounds unlikely to successfully complete their higher education studies (Statistics South Africa 2011). The 2019 education statistics shows that 45.7 per cent of the youth aged 19 and above were not in education. These young people were supposed to be attending in institutions of higher learning (colleges and universities). Of 41.4 per cent of young people who attended high school in the year 2018, only 6.4 per cent of them were accepted to further their studies with tertiary education institutions in 2019 (Statistics South Africa 2019). Therefore, despite the improved access to tertiary education enrolments over the past decades, the participation of young people has remained relatively low and skewed (Statistics South Africa 2019).

Increasing access into institutions of higher education is essential to promote youth empowerment. This can enable young people to make substantive contribution to the economy. While this investment is essential, understanding the role of aspiration in youth's access to higher education is equally important. Generally, there is limited understanding of what aspiration entails, particularly among the youth. This study draws from Appadurai's idea of "the capacity to aspire" to articulate the role of aspiration to access higher education (Appadurai 2004). Appadurai (2004) avers that capacity to aspire provides direction or a roadmap to the future (Appadurai 2004). In other words, the capacity to aspire is deemed a navigational function that enables individuals to have future success (Appadurai 2004). Central to the notion of capacity to aspire is the role of social capital which is developed in a social context through social life that shapes human aspirations (Appadurai 2004). Therefore, humans were clearly born without aspirations, as these are developed overtime based on the individual's cultural context and social life. Thus, aspiration has become a key factor influencing participation in higher education (Flowers, Milner, and Moore 2003; Seginer and Vermulst 2002). This article argues that addressing hard barriers, including financial obstacles, impeding participation in the institutions of higher learning is important, but not drastic to ensure access to higher education. This article therefore presents "lack of aspiration" as a soft barrier impeding the youth from accessing higher education. Arguably, improving youth's access to higher education also requires developing aspirations for higher education that can propel youth to seek higher education. This study is crucial in so far as it informs interventions that aim at addressing the barriers inhibiting access to higher education. This article suggests that appropriate interventions geared to address barriers to access higher education, including boosting aspirations for higher education, should be implemented at all levels.

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

It is argued that higher education is now both massified and stratified (Pillay 2019; Walker 2018). While higher education transformation has partially addressed the injustices of the apartheid, research shows that the majority poor people have no access to higher education (Pillay 2019; Walker 2018). The issue of access to higher learning has been widely debated in the literature. The term “access” generally means increasing opportunities for the previously disadvantaged groups in the institutions of higher learning. While governments across the world, including South Africa, have developed strategies to improve access to higher education for everyone, Magopeni and Tshiwula (2016) argued that access does not make the higher education system fair. Thus, other factors that determine success after access should be considered. Therefore, access should not be an end in itself. According to Wilson-Strydom (2017), participation in higher learning institutions for students from marginalised backgrounds is largely influenced by factors that affect their capabilities including their communities, high schools, and families. Accordingly, these factors tend to affect young peoples’ desire to peruse tertiary education.

Many countries, particularly developing countries such as South Africa, are still characterised by unequal access to higher education. Throughout the democratic era, the South African government in partnership with other development stakeholders has been seeking ways to advance equity in higher education (Lin 2004; Ramohai 2019). Accordingly, there has been major improvements on investments in higher education, particularly to increase the participation of previously disadvantaged groups (Lin 2004; Ramohai 2019). However, various obstacles have undermined the South Africa’s government effort to advance the involvement of youth in higher learning (Shaw and Allison 1999). Resultantly, government and other South African stakeholders are challenged to find innovative approaches to promote access to higher education (Shaw and Allison 1999). Funding challenges generally impede many South Africans from participating in higher education. Studies have demonstrated that solving mainstream obstacles like inadequate funding is not a drastic solution for inadequate access to higher education. Little evidence exists to bolster the assertion that poor aspirations significantly impede the youth from accessing higher education. As evident in the existing literature (for example, Conradie and Robeyns 2013; Jones and Thomas 2000), poor aspiration is still an overlooked factor which potentially undermines the ability of youth to secure employment. While individual inclinations influence aspirations, the social environment is the key in building such aspirations (Sen 1993 cited in Lambert and Vero 2013). Accordingly, further developing context enquiry is imperative to determine the extent to which lack of aspiration undermines the youth’s access to higher education.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Globally, governments and higher education stakeholders are seeking ways to enhance access and participation in higher education. Literature highlight that addressing funding obstacles is an important development policy objective (Pierszalowski, Vue, and Bouwma-Gearhart 2018). Despite recognisable effort to promote participation in higher education, lack of finance remains a key barrier hindering access to higher education for many young people (Bowl 2001). Financial barriers still persist and often draw a line between those who enrol in and graduate from higher learning institutions and those who do not. Some studies show that students from low-income families often experience financial challenges that impede their tertiary education, especially given the rapid rise in associated costs (Glater 2017; Forsyth and Furlong 2000). In most poor households, financial situation remains an important consideration influencing the decision to pursue studies in higher education (Scanlon et al. 2019). Due to financial barriers, access to higher education has thus remained a controversial topic. Hence, the adoption of student loan in the modern society has become a widely accepted strategy developed to finance higher education. However, this approach has been criticised for students' indebtedness after graduation (Glater 2017; Prakhov and Sergienko 2020). The financial issue meant that massification of higher education does not translate to equal access for everyone as intended. This remains a challenge as access to higher education is still determined by financial capacity to a larger extent. Likewise, Prakhov (2015) argues that participation in tertiary education is determined by parents' financial status; thus, students whose parents are unemployed and uneducated are likely to experience financial exclusion in higher education.

Furthermore, access to higher education is highly determined by the ability to pay for it and one's spatial location, which affects the desire to pursue higher education and academic success in higher education (Watts and Bridges 2006). The financial cost is viewed as an obvious reason for non-participation in higher education for youth from poor families (Gorard et al. 2006; Hubbard 1999). Similarly, Kirk and Day (2011) argued that lack of funding is often identified as a common obstacle barring the majority of youth, mostly those from impoverished families, from accessing higher education. Enhancing the participation of young people in higher education depends on resource availability and academic capabilities of prospective students (Bridges 2005). Nevertheless, the price of higher education is the key factor which draws the line between participation and non-participation (Finnie 2012). Clearly, lack of funding is the key factor impeding participation in higher education, but other influential factors should be considered.

YOUTH CAPABILITIES AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

While financial resources largely determine participation in the institutions of higher learning, one's capabilities are essential for both access and success in tertiary education (Clark 1960). Promoting equal access to higher education is equally crucial as promoting equity in higher education. Unsurprisingly, government has increased educational opportunities for previously disadvantaged groups in particular (Harry, Chinyamurindi, and Mjoli 2018). While promoting participation in higher education is a key policy concern, the capability of an individual is an important consideration that determines both access and success in higher education (Matear 2006). Meeting the higher education minimum entry requirements is the key necessity to participate in higher education, a factor that depends on individual's capability (Matear 2006). Accordingly, the quality of basic education should be improved to ensure that matriculants qualify to pursue higher education (Matear 2006). High quality secondary schooling allows young people to access higher education based on academic merit (Matear 2006). This also implies that those who are facing financial constraints, yet academically capable, should get a chance to attend a public higher education institution (Clark 1960).

Efforts that improve access to higher education can address key developmental issues facing many developing countries, South Africa included. Improved access to higher education cannot only address unemployment, but it can also reduce poverty and inequality levels (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Preston 2017). Personal attributes, such as intelligence, are key enabling factors that stimulates individual's desire to pursue higher learning (Kirk and Day 2011). It is also worth mentioning that intelligence can also enable individuals to meet the admission requirements of higher education institutions. There is increasing research evidence suggesting that youth from the impoverished families are underrepresented in higher learning institutions (Kirk and Day 2011). This problem is due to the inability to access high quality secondary schooling which can enable academic qualification for higher education and financial barriers which restricts access to higher education (Kirk and Day 2011; Kiyama 2010). If high school results are poor owing to poor high schooling quality, one cannot gain access to higher education, a situation in which most young people found themselves (Walberg and Greenberg 1996). Therefore, among other factors, academic capability promotes both access and success in higher education.

CAPABILITIES TO ASPIRE AS ARTICULATED UNDER THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

The youth aspirations for higher education are articulated in the lenses of capability approach in this article. The capability approach focuses on the capabilities of individuals to achieve well-

being given the freedom that enables such achievement (Clark 2005; Sen 1993). What is of interest to unpack is the extent to which aspirations link with capabilities. This article seeks to understand the interplay between aspirations and capabilities as far as access to higher education is concerned. The article discusses access to higher education as influenced by aspirations from a capability approach perspective (Nussbaum 2001; Sen 1993). In the context of the capability approach, Sen defines functioning as involving various things that someone does (for example, reading) or states of existence or being (for example, freedom from illnesses) (Sen 1993). Functionings are linked to capabilities which are defined as either favorable external conditions that support individual's freedoms which may be undermined by obstacles or internal conditions that enhances the capability of individuals which may be undermined by obstacles (Sen 1993). On the other hand, Nussbaum (2001) complements Sen's idea of the capability approach. According to Nussbaum, psychological and physical well-being constitute the basic capabilities of individuals (Gasper 1997; Nussbaum 2001). Furthermore, combined capabilities are constituted by internal and external conditions.

It is argued that for youth to achieve their aspirations for higher education, they should exercise their agency (Conradie 2013). Literature evidence shows that it is capabilities that enables individuals to aspire higher education and achieve such aspirations (Conradie 2013; Jeffrey 2012). In addition, Ward (2006) argues that aspiring to pursue higher education is driven by one's motivation. Therefore, key factors that motivates the youth to attend tertiary education must inform tertiary education policy. People may fail to achieve their educational aspirations due to lack of agency (Kivinen and Ahola 1999; Ward 2006). In the context of this article, the youth themselves must take responsibility for their aspirations to materialise. For example, they must take the responsibility to send admission and financial aid applications (Ward 2006). While this is important, there may be other factors impeding their participation in higher learning. Clearly, it is partly their responsibility to overcome barriers to higher education. Aspiration should be accompanied by a sense of agency for one to access higher education. Thus, one must have courage to pursue higher education and put significant effort to gain access to and succeed in higher education (Conradie 2013). Aspirations are also associated with having life dreams and effort to attain those dreams. In this article, the lenses of the capability approach are used to analyse aspiration as a factor determining the youth's access to higher education. This research articulate how capability to aspire enables youth to access higher education. In the context of this article, it is demonstrated that access to the same pool of resources does not translate to similar aspirations and capabilities. Such differences in access account for the unequal educational achievements in higher education, a phenomenon that is of high interest in this research.

INFORMATIONAL AND KNOWLEDGE BARRIERS

Literature shows that most people pursue higher education because of the expected rewards (Heifetz and Minelli 2006). However, due to unemployment among the educated, the economic rewards of higher education are doubtful. This problem discourages youth from seeking higher education to some extent (Hubbard 1999). Accessing information reflecting the benefits of higher education can stimulate the individual's interest to study towards tertiary education. In this regard, career guidance programmes can provide information on the benefits of education and information regarding funding for higher education, which is especially important to stimulate interest to pursue higher education particularly among the youth (Maree 2015). Unfortunately, this kind of information is not always readily available to youth who can benefit from higher education. The availability of information and knowledge about educational opportunities also stimulates youth's interest to pursue higher education (Hubbard 1999). Bajwa et al. (2017) discovered that unavailability of knowledge on how to walk the higher education journey impedes access to institutions of higher learning. This challenge involved unavailability of knowledge regarding the available higher education institutions, post-secondary education programmes available and entry requirements into the institutions of higher learning. Evidently, young people may also lack knowledge about funding opportunities for tertiary education (Bajwa et al. 2017). Without the relevant information, reaching higher education becomes a nightmare for young people.

Research shows that young people with no or inadequate information about higher education in general are unlikely to pursue higher education. This challenge undermines the global efforts that seeks to promote youth's access to higher education. Understanding the value of higher education and how to access it generally serves as a motivation for higher education pursuit (Heifetz and Minelli 2006). While information about higher education institutions and funding opportunities for higher education is generally available online, most young people from poor backgrounds have no access to such valuable information partly due to financial barriers (Heifetz and Minelli 2006). It is also evident that youth may have access to online information but may lack knowledge of how to use such information. In this case, career guidance can play a vital role not only in ensuring that information is accessible, but in also ensuring that it can be used for the benefit of those who wish to pursue higher education (Hubbard 1999; Kabiru et al. 2013). It is therefore very crucial that young people have access to information about higher education benefits and opportunities. This can be achieved through higher education awareness programmes that can provide youth with information about career options after matric (Bridges 2005).

METHODOLOGY

This article applied qualitative research methodology to elicit data for this study. Eighteen (18) in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people aged between 14 and 35 years to understand the barriers impeding access to higher education. All the interviews were conducted with youths living in Kenneth Gardens, a low-income housing estate located in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Participants were selected through a purposive or judgmental sampling technique. The study participants included young people who were attending high school, doing grades eleven and twelve, aged 18 years and above. The second category of youth interviewed were those who were unemployed and not studying, who may or may not have finished matriculation level. The third category of youth interviewed were those already studying in higher education institutions. Since this study is qualitative in nature, data collected was analysed thematically and the NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate the data analysis process.

THE ROLE OF ASPIRATION IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The interview data indicate that young people who are attending high school, specifically those who are completing matric, are highly motivated to pursue higher education. Despite the major factors barring access to higher education, grade 12 learners had high aspirations to pursue tertiary education after matric. The results suggest that grade 12 youth aspire to pursue higher education immediately after matriculation in order to gain knowledge and skills to improve well-being. For instance, one grade 12 learner expressed powerful desire to study further after matriculation:

“Why are you even asking if I would like to go to higher education? Of course, I will be going to university next year. I am working very hard to get my marks right and I am very positive that I will succeed in my studies as I did in the previous years. I am preparing for June examination. I do not even sleep, busy studying so as to score high marks. Once the June results are out, I will then do my application. Certainly, I will be at university next year and I would like to go to the University of KwaZulu-Natal.” (Respondent No. 2, Grade 12 student).

Most of the interviewed grade 12 learners had high motivation regarding perusing higher education the following year after matric. The results suggest that grade 12 youth had higher aspirations to pursue higher education after matric regardless of the possible challenges they might face.

In contrast, most youth who were not in education and not in employment lacked aspirations to pursue higher education. The unemployed youth in particular reported key factors justifying their lack of desire to pursue higher education. According to one participant for

instance:

“There are too many reasons, but the basic one is lack of finance and I now have kids to take care of. So, I cannot really go to spend years in an educational institution without getting anything at the end of each month. Otherwise, no one would be paying for my kids’ school fees, let alone clothes and food. I really cannot go to study; instead, I should search for a job to take care of my kids [with a serious face].” (Respondent No. 11, unemployed).

These sentiments suggest that the unemployed lacked aspirations to pursue higher education. Poor motivation to study further is, to some extent, informed by perceived obstacles such as lack of funding for higher education and childcare. While grade 12 and the unemployed youth had different aspirations towards higher education, youth from Kenneth Gardens who are attending institutions of higher education aspire to pursue post-graduate education. For instance, a second-year undergraduate student at the University of Kwazulu-Natal expressed his desire to pursue postgraduate studies. He said:

“I would like to do my honours degree after completing my undergraduate degree. However, I am afraid that I may experience financial problems, though I really hope for the best. I know that getting an honours degree will increase my chances of getting a well-paying job. A Masters degree will be a bonus and I will dedicate it to my mom.” (Respondent No. 13, UKZN student).

Some youth already in higher education institutions reported that they plan to study further part-time, which was a sign for their aspirations for further education. Their aspirations were influenced by the desire to earn good income even though there were concerns over chances to secure employment after graduation. Nevertheless, youth already attending higher education institutions had obstacles such as lack of funding in their bid to study further. One would expect such obstacles to undermine the motivation to seek further education, which was the case for some young people. Overall, grade 12 youth had higher aspirations to pursue higher education in contrast to unemployed youth who generally lacked aspirations while youth already attending higher education institutions had aspirations to pursue post-graduate education.

YOUTH CAPABILITIES TO ACCESS HIGHER EDUCATION

The results indicate that access to higher education is determined by individual’s capabilities to a larger extent. It was discovered that youth with higher levels of self-confidence were more capable to pursue tertiary education. Additionally, the results shows that youth capabilities are associated with youth aspirations. In this instance, youth who were highly confident in their abilities had stronger aspirations for higher education compared to those who were less confident. High confidence coupled with capabilities enabled young people to overcome some practical barriers to access higher education. Participant No. 4 for instance expressed the role

of capabilities and self-confidence in accessing higher education:

“Oh yes, I am confident enough. However, I really have to do well for me to secure a place to study because I heard that programmes at universities get full easily. So, to be on the safe side, one has to have excellent final results. I have been passing ever since; so, I still believe in myself. I think I will pass; the only difficulty I can ever think of is the financial problem. I am certain that I will attain the adequate points needed to qualify for a place to study at university.” (Respondent No. 4, Grade 12 student).

Grade 12 learners were highly confident in their abilities to matriculate and thereafter access higher education. Accordingly, university students demonstrated their capabilities to survive higher education challenges and achieve academically. Based on these results, capabilities are essential for access and success in tertiary education. Nevertheless, unemployed young people generally lacked self-assurance in their capabilities, which therefore undermined their aspirations for higher education. While some participants showed confidence in their capabilities, they were concerned about funding barriers to access higher education.

FUNDING AS A HARD BARRIER

This study discovered lack of funding as a major factor impeding many young people from accessing higher education. Lack of funding was reported as a key obstacle preventing youth from attending tertiary education institutions. For many, lack of funding made transition from matric to institutions of higher learning extremely difficult. As expressed by most participants, lack of funding was cited as the main barrier to access higher education:

“It is pretty hard financially for me to get tertiary education [with a sad face]. My only option right now is to become a police-woman for the love of protecting the community, especially women, since Kenneth Gardens is one of the places perceived as unsafe. However, the idea of being policewomen has been propagated by my family and I ended up loving it too.” (Respondent No. 7, unemployed).

As expressed by the above participant, accessing higher education without financial support from the family can be extremely difficult. These results demonstrate that access to higher education is largely determined by finance, and lack of finance impedes many young people from accessing higher education. Notably, had it not been these financial obstacles, most young people would have accessed education beyond high schooling. Unemployed youth were particularly financially constrained to participate in higher education and advocated for funding support for higher education studies. Similarly, the study found that grade 12 youth were concerned about that they may experience financial challenges which may impede them from attaining higher education.

BARRIERS TO ADMISSION TO INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Youth residing at Kenneth Gardens also experienced numerous challenges in applying for acceptance in institutions of higher learning. As a result, most were found unable to gain acceptance by institutions of higher learning. In particular, those from poor families and under-resourced schools struggled to navigate the application process for admission to higher learning institutions. The cost of application to higher learning institutions was also reported as a challenge for some young people whose parents were unable to financially support their applications. It was also discovered that parents who never attended tertiary education were unable to provide substantive application support to their children. While most grade 12 participants acknowledged that they might experience challenges on the application process, they were generally positive that they would meet the university or college entry requirements. On the other hand, the unemployed had no courage to even attempt application to higher education institutions mainly due to lack of funding and poor high school academic results as remarked by one participant below:

“Although I would really like to go to the university to study Social Work, I am not sure if they would take me. Apart from that, I cannot afford the fees. I also think my application may not be accepted because of my matriculation results. Well, my results are not that bad, but I heard that universities demand more than what I obtained. People are encouraging me to upgrade, but I think I no longer have the time to do that; I am getting old. The only option that remains is for me to try to apply for a place at colleges, though lack of finance is still a real challenge.” (Respondent No. 12, unemployed).

These remarks indicate that youth have many challenges to overcome on their way to pursue higher education. They often experience twin challenges related to admission and financial barriers. Those young people who managed to access higher education acknowledged the role of parents and teachers who provided assistance on the admission application process.

LACK OF ASPIRATION: A SOFT BARRIER TO ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The results shows that aspiration is a major soft factor which determines access to higher education. It was discovered that lack of aspiration is a critical barrier impeding youth of Kenneth Gardens from accessing higher education. In this regard, aspiration is deemed an important aspect that propels young people to pursue higher education. Thus, in the absence of aspiration, accessing higher education becomes difficult. Interestingly, aspirations among the youth are affected by various factors including funding, career guidance, and even social environment. Some young people expressed that they are not motivated to pursue higher education due to several reasons. Accordingly, lack of courage to pursue higher education was

reported:

“I feel it is useless to even worry about making it to university or college. I feel discouraged, and when people talk about education, I nearly cry. Only if someone kills me, then I will have a break. First of all, I do not have the financial means to go to study. The worst part is that no one is willing to help me. It is now five years since I finished matriculation. I just gave up hoping to get a job. Apart from that, I am also responsible for taking care of my son and there is no reason for going to higher education institution [with a sad face].” (Respondent No. 8, unemployed).

Most unemployed young people living at Kenneth Gardens expressed hopelessness and poor motivation to attend higher education. One participant, for instance, indicated that there is no value of higher education:

“My brother, the world has changed. In the past, we knew that if you had a diploma or degree, you would certainly get a job. Today, it is something different; people with certificates like you are jobless. So, I can just imagine if I can go to university now for three or four years and when I finish, I do not even get a job. So rather than wasting my time pursuing higher education, I think of searching for a job or start a small business.” (Respondent No. 10, unemployed).

Challenges experienced at high school level also reduced interest to pursue higher education among a number of young people residing at Kenneth Gardens. Such challenges negatively affected the academic achievement of grade 12 youth, and consequently hindered their progress to higher education due to disqualification:

“My brother, I do not want to lie. I am struggling to pass my exams even at this stage, how much more at university? Maybe studying is not for me. I do not see myself going to university because I am not gifted just like other kids. I have been struggling from one grade to another. I do not think I can make it at a tertiary institution. I am praying for a job next year and make money. I really do not think university is for me and I do not want to be stressed by that. I hope my mom will understand because she really wished for me to study next year; unfortunately, I won't”. (Respondent No. 5, Grade 12 student).

The results indicate that the unemployed participants lacked aspiration to pursue education beyond matric. Based on the participants' remarks, poor aspiration is shaped by hard barriers such as lack of funding which often discourages youth from attempting admission to higher education institutions. Instead of perusing higher education, most young people invest their energies in taking care of their children.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies (Finnie 2012; Glater 2017; Pierszalowski et al. 2018; Scanlon et al. 2020) have attributed lack of access to higher education to barriers related to financial constraints, which is considered a “hard barrier” in this study. The findings of these studies concur with the findings of the current study, which found that some youths were unable to access higher

education owing to financial issues. The current study further suggests that the youth, especially those from poor families, were too financially hindered to participate in higher education. This finding also concurs with the results of previous studies which discovered lack of funding as a barrier to access higher education (Forsyth and Furlong 2000; Glater 2017; Scanlon et al. 2020). Based on the capability approach (Gasper 1997; Sen 1993), financial barrier (which is considered a “hard barrier” in this study), is what constrains the youth from accessing external opportunity (higher education), even if they have the capabilities to pursue higher education. The findings of this study also indicate that the youth who are financially constrained are likely to lack the motivation to pursue higher education.

This study found lack of aspiration as a key barrier impeding the young people from accessing higher education. In this study, lack of aspiration is considered a “soft barrier” impeding access to tertiary education by the youth. There are various factors that negatively affect the aspirations of the youth regarding higher education. This study finding shows how critical capabilities are for the youth in accessing higher education. The majority of youth, particularly the unemployed, are unable to access higher education owing to the lack the aspiration as the current study evinces. While the youth at the matriculation and university levels generally had higher aspirations than the unemployed youth. Young people may have rights, freedoms and even support (for example, bursaries, financial aid, scholarships) to access higher education, but cannot achieve better well-being if they are not capable as understood in the capability approach (Sen 1993). In this regard, the youth displayed inadequate capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004); thus, they could not pursue higher education. Therefore, poor aspiration emerges as among the key obstacles preventing the unemployed youth from accessing higher education. Therefore, this study avers that no previous studies made this discovery.

The barriers to higher education can be understood through the lenses of Sen’s capability approach. In his analysis, Sen (1993) indicate how capabilities support aspirations. It is stated that aspirations are not only shaped by the feelings individuals, they are also influenced by the social environment of individuals (Sen 1993). Accordingly, the capability to aspire of the unemployed youth is shaped by various factors such as lack of funding and general increase in unemployment. As understood in Nussbaum (2001)’s capability approach, numerous external conditions undermine young people’s internal capabilities to exercise functionality in accessing higher education (Gasper 1997). These external factors, in turn, constitute a barrier that prevents the youth from accessing higher education. In the presence of these undermining factors, the aspirations of the youth towards higher education diminishes, and access is consequently undermined.

This study discovered numerous barriers that impedes young people from accessing higher education. While there are generally many barriers to access higher education, this current study suggests that young people living in Kenneth Gardens faced two key barriers apart from the lack of aspiration. These barriers are unavailability of funding and the failure to meet the entry requirements of higher education institutions. Lack of funding often pose the commonest problem for most youth in their bid to access higher education. Kirk and Day (2011) confirm that the young people from poor families generally lack funding to finance higher education. Furthermore, these young people are not informed about higher education funding opportunities and application process despite their eligibility and capability to pursue higher education. This evidence thus suggest that young people may have unrealised higher education aspirations due to factors such as funding barriers and poor academic performance at matriculation level.

Youth from disadvantaged school backgrounds are unlikely to meet higher education admission requirements. The results of this study also attest that youth who attended disadvantaged schools, who are normally from poor families, had lower aspirations and had lower academic achievement at high school level. Similarly, above half of the grade 12 learners who applied to study at higher educational institutions after matriculation were disqualified mostly based on poor academic performance at matriculation level (Statistics South Africa 2011). The youth lack the capabilities and competencies to access higher education, a phenomenon highlighted by the capability approach. In this instance, the youth can only achieve what they are capable of achieving academically and given that internal conditions (capacity or ability) allow them to achieve academically (Nussbaum 2001; Sen 1993). Their capabilities are shaped by numerous issues including schooling system, family issues and personal attributes as understood in capability approach.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the barriers impeding the youth's access to higher education. Lack of aspiration was found as a soft obstacle barring the youth from participating in tertiary education. Unavailability of funding and failure to meet the entry requirements of tertiary education institutions are some of the hard barriers preventing the youth from accessing higher education. The results suggests that youth, particularly those from poor families, should be supported to realise their educational aspirations. This research proffers two major recommendations that are geared towards stimulating aspirations to pursue higher education among the youth. Firstly, support should be geared towards the establishment of career support initiatives at high school level and within the existing local institutions and organisations to stimulate youth aspirations for higher education. Secondly, relationships amongst universities, colleges, community

organisations, and schools should be developed for the provision of adequate career-related information to youth.

This research has numerous implications for educational programmes, policy, and practice. The research article addressed the pressing issue of the youth's access to higher education and the role of aspiration in determining access to higher education in South Africa. This research article comes at a time when access to higher education, particularly by marginalised groups, has become the subject of debate, contestation, and public engagement owing to the #Feesmustfall campaign launched by university students across the country. While the campaign highlights the practical barriers impeding admission to an institution of higher education, such as financial barriers and institutional culture, this research provides some perspective on a different aspect of accessing higher education-aspiration. It provides a different perspective from which to engage with the barriers to higher education in South Africa. It provides insights into the way in which three categories of youth (those in Grade 12, those not in school or higher education, and those in higher education) relate to the possibility of attaining higher education and the role of aspiration in making that possibility a reality. The results of this research therefore impact several stakeholders including civil society, educational bodies, higher education institutions, and the Department of Higher Education. The evidence presented here suggests that the youth face constraints in accessing higher education by both "hard barriers" (such as inadequate funding and failure to meet university or college entry requirements) and "soft barriers" (which is the lack of aspiration). Therefore, any form of intervention to improve access to and participation in higher education should seek to address both hard and soft barriers. For instance, while the Department of Higher Education should continue to evaluate its practices and the effectiveness of interventions; such efforts should take into consideration the identified soft barrier as it undermines access to higher education. The Department of Higher Education and higher education institutions should collaborate with civil society organisations to develop community-based initiatives that can build youth aspirations for higher education. This type of collaboration could potentially improve academic outcomes for young people and their access to and success in higher education. Overall, the results of this research could provide policy makers in higher education, civil society, and the youth themselves with a better understanding of the role of aspirations in pursuing higher education by young people.

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