

ARTICLES

Transiting from rural high school to university: The challenges of getting into an appropriate degree programme

Giliana Mulalo Maxwell

Department of Psychology
University of Venda
gilianamm@gmail.com

Pilot Mudhovozi

Department of Psychology
University of Venda
Pilot.Mudhovozi@univen.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Transiting from rural high school to university is stressful enough, but enrolling into a suitable degree programme is even more demanding in this era of heightened competition for places at institutions of higher learning. Thus, the purpose of this study was to find out how rural high school leavers get admitted to tertiary institutions and how they go about choosing their degrees. A phenomenological qualitative design strategy was adopted for this research. This methodology facilitated the exploration of rural first year students' adaptation experiences at university and it also facilitated the highlighting of some of the issues affecting them in getting a place for tertiary studies. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study which was coupled with focus-group interviews for data collection while thematic content analysis was used to determine the transitional experiences of the participating students. The results of this study indicate that there is hardship in getting into a suitable degree programme and this is more dominant among learners from rural areas than among those from urban areas. The study further revealed that challenges such as limited spaces in higher institutions, not meeting minimum selection requirements as well as

economic challenges are more widespread among learners from rural areas. It is envisaged that the findings of the study will assist University Faculties and Heads of Departments to better understand the transitional experiences of rural school leavers.

Keywords: high schools, learners, phenomenology, rural area, transition, university.

Enrolling for a degree at higher institutions of learning is one of the most important future pathways in the life of any learner. However, choosing a degree and being admitted into an intended degree programme is not as smooth as it is thought to be. For most school leavers, the transition is the most complicated, frustrating and stressful process to deal with, particularly for school leavers from rural areas. According to Santrock (2001), the transition to university is a very crucial period in school leavers' academic path which involves a significant amount of flexibility and often causes distress. Transitions between institutions can serve as turning points for youth (Kinney, 1993; Seidman & Sabine, 2004; Weiss & Bearman, 2007).

In South Africa, the majority of matriculants are usually from poor backgrounds and are usually unable to access higher education due to poverty, poor elementary and intermediate education backgrounds, lack of information, distance from urban centres or educational hubs, and the historical apartheid discrimination tendencies still present in some tertiary institutions (Wange-Ouma, 2012 in Denhere, 2013). Some researchers have revealed that black matriculants from poor communities are unable to access Higher Education because of: poverty, in particular lack of financial resources, lack of information, poor education, weak support systems and low motivational backgrounds (Chapman & Boylan, 1990).

Rural school leavers tend to experience difficulties in searching for and enrolling into their intended degree programmes (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Although some learners pass with outstanding results, they spend at least a year at home unable to get a place at a higher institution of learning (Marrett, 2000). Learners from rural areas face challenges such as limited spaces in higher institutions, not meeting minimum selection requirements as well as economic hardship in their search for a degree programme (Weiss & Bearman, 2007).

To make matters worse, rural youth tend to be less academically prepared for college than urban youth. They generally have lower SAT scores and have less access to advanced preparatory courses which prevents them from getting into competitive colleges (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996). Rural school leavers who manage to get into college often have difficulties attaining high academic achievement even though intellectually they are no different from their urban peers (Gibbs, 1995).

According to Gibbs (1995), low achievement scores among rural youth is chiefly due to limited high school course offerings and poor preparation for college. These learners often state that their high school coursework was not challenging enough

and did not prepare them adequately for tertiary level education. High school faculty and guidance counsellors voice similar concerns (Gibbs, 1995).

For most rural learners, choosing a career rests on a notion of both cultural and gender difference beliefs, such as nursing being for females and the engineering field being for males (Cowher, 1994). Community factors also influence decisions for youths to pursue higher education. Furthermore, rural youth are less likely to have contact with college-educated role models, and there are also relatively fewer jobs in rural communities that require a college education (Cowher, 1994). Peers often discourage rural youth from getting into higher learning institutions because they do not see the benefit of higher education or they realize that their friends will probably not return to the community after college (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996). Moreover, better paying, higher-skills jobs requiring a college education are more available in urban communities than rural communities.

It is a given that lack of information and advanced communication tools, such as the internet, play a role in limiting information access about application procedures and choosing good careers on time. As a result, many learners end up enrolling in wrong or unintended degree programmes just for the sake of avoiding sitting at home doing nothing for a year or more (Meece, Irvin, Petrin & Scarfft, 2009).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to find out how rural high school learners choose their degrees after getting admitted to tertiary institutions. The objectives were to find out the challenges they face in order to get enrolled into a degree programme, the application and admission processes until they are registered in an institution. Another objective was to find out how informed they were about the university environment during their secondary level education as well as to make recommendations on intervention strategies to assist learners from rural areas in finding places in tertiary institutions

METHODOLOGY

Research design and setting

Qualitative, phenomenological research design was employed in the study. The study focused on issues experienced by participants during their search for a degree. The qualitative research approach allows the researcher to gain first hand holistic information about the experienced phenomenon (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2011; Cresswell, 2003). Quantitative research approach was not used since the study needed to find out experiences which need in-depth and more holistic information than numerical data (Walsh, 2001; Maree, 2007). The study was

conducted in Thulamela Municipality of the Vhembe District in Limpopo province, South Africa. The participants were drawn from one university and one FET College in Limpopo.

Participants

In all, the sample for this study consisted of nine tertiary students from a university and a FET College. The nine participants included six university students and three FET College students. Of the nine participants, three were males and six were females and purposive sampling was used to select students who were first year students in university and FET College.

Procedure

Data was collected from focus group discussions and the data was audio recorded with the written consent of the participants and observational notes were taken. According to De Vos et al., (2011), Walsh (2001), and Kumar (1999), focus group interviews allow the researcher to elicit first hand holistic information from the participants. Participants were asked to discuss issues and difficulties of enrolling at the institutions where they were studying.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using qualitative thematic-content analysis. According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000), this analysis is entrenched in the identification of themes of qualitative material often identified by means of coding schemes. Themes from the transcribed data were identified. The data was analysed in two phases. The first phase was carried out immediately after data collection and a tape recording was listened to and responses transcribed into a text document. The second phase entailed repeated reading of the data and frequently listening to the tape recording in order to identify responses to questions. The combined reading of the data and listening to the recordings yielded ideas that were written down.

From the listened and transcribed data, the following themes were generated:

- The duration learners sat at home after matriculation before finding places at a tertiary institution.
- How students manage to get admission into tertiary institutions.
- Perpetual factors responsible for enrolling for an unintended degree.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the study was conducted during the participants' spare time, permission had

to be obtained from them. The goal of the study was explained to the participants together with possible advantages and disadvantages of the study for both the researcher and the participants. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions before consenting to participate in the study and the freedom of withdrawal from the study was also disclosed. Permission to tape record participants' consent was requested and consent forms were signed before the study commenced (De Vos et al., 2011). The participants were assured that all information pertaining to the study about their details was kept confidential and any information that could potentially lead to their identification was kept anonymous and no harm would come to them as a result of the study.

RESULTS

The main themes that emerged from the study were: the time taken after matriculating before being admitted to a tertiary institution; how students manage to get admission to a university and the extenuating factors behind pursuing unintended degrees. These themes and subthemes are presented and discussed in the paragraphs that follow:

The duration of stay after matriculating before being admitted

It was found that not all students who pass grade 12 go straight to university or colleges the year after matriculation. Four of the participants reported to have spent at least a year or two at home before getting into university. Some had spent as much as three years before being admitted to a degree programme and their verbatim is captured below:

'I was very excited when i find out that i matriculated with bachelor, the sadness came when i went to UJ and i was told that i will not be admitted because i did not pass well'
(Participant 6)

'I applied to many universities and in most of them I was told that I don't qualify for the degree I wanted; it was a tough and bumpy journey for me for the rest of three years'
(Participant 1).

'In 2011 I applied at the University of Venda and I didn't get space. I spent the whole year just roaming around the streets' (participant 3)

'Myself I didn't know how to apply to the university to study and I just went to the university with my friends, when they submit their statements of results I submitted mine too and I was told that I qualify to study at the university' (Participant 9).

The participants' statements above correlate with Marrett (2000), who states that some learners pass with outstanding results but spend at least a year at home because

they have not secured a place for study at a higher institution. Lack of information and access to advanced communication tools such as the internet play a role in limiting access to information about application procedures and choosing appropriate careers on time. As a result, these learners end up enrolling in a wrong or unintended degree programme just to avoid sitting at home for a year (Meece et al., 2009).

How students manage to get admission into a degree programme

Only 4 out of the 9 participants managed to get admission on time. That is, they were admitted easily for their degrees. The rest did not manage to get admitted. For those who were admitted, they indicated that they were assisted either by a person already at the university, parents or they applied through their schools. For those who were not admitted, they stated that they didn't apply for admission in good time; some applied but didn't get responses from the preferred universities. The majority of the participants, even those who applied in time, reported that they were not pursuing their preferred degrees. They substantiated their situations as follows:

'Myself I didn't apply for myself, it was my uncle who just came back with the forms and asked me what I want to do at University. I said law and then He said Ok. He applied for me and I just received the admission letter' (Participant 5).

'Ey myself I went to the university after receiving my grade 12 results, it was very hot and we stood on the queue for late applications for the whole day. It was not easy just to get the application form. I remember I wanted to study BSc Environmental Sciences but pity it was full and I was forced to take BSc Agriculture' (Participant 7).

'Honestly, most of us are attending to the university we didn't want to attend to. Like myself I wanted to go to University of Limpopo, unfortunately though I applied in time, I was not admitted and I was forced to go to University of Venda just to be studying anything' (Participant 4)

PERENNIAL FACTORS BEHIND DOING UNINTENDED DEGREES

Not applying for admission in advance

The first factor that is perpetuating getting into unintended degrees is the fact that many school leavers do not apply on time to their targeted institutions and most of them do not also apply to the nearest institutions. This is illustrated by the following statements:

'Myself I didn't apply in advance because normally I didn't want to study here. I only came back from Gauteng when I realised I am not getting admitted and its then that I came to my home university for the sake of not staying at home' (Participant 3).

'I didn't apply at all. I just came here in January with my friends when they were submitting their statements and I just submitted mine as a try not intentionally. And I was told that I qualify for Environmental Sciences, I didn't wanted to do it at all and I never knew what it was all about' (Participant 5).

The above find synergy with the following extract from Molapisi (2009) 'The first challenge was to find acceptance in the university because I hadn't applied the previous year and the universities were full'. According to Molapisi (2009) this extract showed that failure to apply to the universities in time may result in distress of its own.

Limited places in academic programmes

This is seen as the most dominant factor at many higher institutions. Many academic programmes admit a limited number of students per year and many students end up just getting registered into any degree to avoid doing nothing at home. The following statements illustrate this finding:

'I came here for nursing, but I was told that it's already full, then I just apply to do BSc Agric since there was a space' (Participant 1).

'I loved Environmental sciences since I was a child but now I am doing Agricultural Science, I applied on time but when I arrived at the university I was told that Environmental science is full' (Participant 4).

'The same applies to me, I applied to study BPharm at university of Limpopo but I was told I am on a waiting list because the programme was full already. I was told that I will be allowed to register if one of the applicants admitted does not register' (Participant 2).

From the study it was found that scarce skills academic programmes have limited space and can accommodate only few students.

Not meeting minimum admission requirements

Another factor leading to students doing unintended degrees is that they don't meet the minimum admission requirements for their intended degrees. Five participants stated that they were doing unintended degrees because they didn't qualify for the ones that they preferred. Below is what they said:

'I was very happy when I received a conditional acceptance letter from the institution, it said that my admission will be finalised on receipt of my final grade 12 results.

Unfortunately when I get my results I realised that I didn't pass life sciences well and at the institution they told me that because my Life Science is level 3 I won't study Nursing since they need level 4 and above' (Participant 1)

'Yoh! The most disappointing moment is when you are told that you don't qualify for a course because of subjects or because your APS-score is below average. I experienced it and now I am doing a degree I was not looking for only because I had no choice' (Participant 3)

'Myself I qualified for my degree but the problem was competition on APS score, I had only 34 points and the top 30 students who were selected were having 38 points and above' (Participant 6)

This correlates with Gibbs' (1995) findings, that low achievement scores among rural youth is chiefly due to limited high school course offerings and poor preparation for college. Rural students often stated that their high school coursework has not been challenging and did not prepare them adequately for tertiary level education.

Lack of information

Another perennial factor and a challenge to rural high school learners in choosing a wrong degree, is the scarcity of information about the application processes and information about the university degrees. From the study, it is evident that many learners from rural areas lack information about university level education systems. This supports the report by Meece et al. (2009), in which they state that lack of information can be a barrier to higher education access. For example, rural youths lack the 'road maps' necessary to access colleges. Two participants claim that much of the information they got about universities, was about leisure and the fun of the university environment. The following bear testimony to the above:

'Myself I was partially informed about the university environment, all I was told is that university is fun, you have the freedom of doing whatever you like the time you like because your parents are not there. But the application process and the nature of study I was not informed fully.' (Participant 2)

"It was not easy for me to get information about what to study at secondary so that I can do Medicine. I also didn't know the universities I should apply if I need to study medicine." (Participant 7)

'Just like me I did History and Geography while I intended to study engineering courses and at universities they told me I need Physical science and Maths for me to do any engineering field' (Participant 8)

Social and familial expectations

Results from the study revealed that most students do an unintended degree due to social or familial preferences. In most instances parents dictate the kind of degrees for their children and expect their children to pursue such degrees. This is evident by the participants' answers below:

'When I was growing my mother used to tell me that I have a tender heart, and I am very caring and as such I am suited by doing Nursing or by being a doctor' (Participant 6).

'Yah it is true that culture plays a role on determining our careers, for example when i told my family that I want to be an Agricultural expert they said I am mad, How can I do agriculture because is more of masculine' (Participant 4).

'You can't do engineering, no one in our family is an engineer so who are you to be different from your brother and sister. I am a teacher and your sister is also a teacher. Better do teaching or social worker' (Participant 2).

This is consistent with Cowher (1994), who states that for most learners, choosing a career rests on a notion of both cultural and gender difference beliefs such as nursing is for females, engineering is for males etc.

DISCUSSION

This study has established that rural school leavers face difficulties when trying to get into a degree programme. It has also emerged from the study that some participants spend some years at home before being admitted to study at a tertiary institution. These findings are consistent with those of Marrett (2000) and Seidman & Sabine (2004) who state that lack of information and less access to advanced communication tools, such as the internet, play a role in limiting access to information about application procedures and choosing the right careers in time. As a result, these learners end up enrolling in wrong or unintended degree programmes just for the sake of at least doing something at the university. Some end up losing hope in the process and start looking for jobs, which can be difficult with only a grade 12 level education.

In many universities there are a limited number of vacancies for many programmes which makes it hard for many rural high school leavers to get admitted. Challenges faced by many students include not meeting the minimum academic admission requirements for the degrees of their choice, which leads to most of them getting registered in degrees they were not intending to follow in the first place.

Financial difficulties also play a role in hindering rural school leavers from getting information about university procedures. With good finances, these school leavers would be able to travel to nearby institutions to get information on their intended

degrees. Not having access to upgraded communication information technology, such as smart cell phones and computers, as well as inability to use internet also hinder them from accessing information from universities. Nowadays, many universities are using technology to advertise, inform or even communicate with communities. This correlates with Meece et al., (2009), who state in their research that lack of information can impinge access to higher education.

CONCLUSION

As three themes emerged from this study, it is a telling fact that a lot needs to be done to educate rural learners on career choice. The fact that many learners are doing unintended degrees rather than the degrees they preferred due to lack of information of the application process, late applications, limited places in higher institutions as well as not meeting the minimum requirements for the candidates' intended degrees is sheer wastage of human resources. There is a need for vibrant consolidated career guidance in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since rural based learners still lack crucial information about tertiary institutions, it is recommended that rural teachers of grade 12 be trained and well versed on the information gadgets for helping their students well in advance on how to apply to tertiary institutions. In addition, the schools themselves should have accessible equipment to facilitate the whole excise around application and choosing a degree programme right in the schools. Being sure of a career choice while learners are still in school is very challenging and advice from the parents, teachers as well as professional institutions is needed. For example, career guidance counsellors can be very beneficial to secondary school learners. It is further recommended that the South African Department of Education should strengthen the career guidance programmes in rural areas and that further research be done in the other rural provinces of the country.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

We acknowledge that this sample was drawn from one province and hence is limited. However, we maintain that useful information was obtained from the representative participants in Limpopo.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES



Giliana Mulalo Maxwell is a PhD student at the University of Venda. He completed his BPSYCH and MA Psychology degrees at the University of Venda in 2007 and 2014 respectively. His main research interest includes Psycho-education of youths; Trauma as well as developmental psychology.



Professor Pilot Mudhovozi is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Venda. His research interests include counseling and educational psychology, and HIV and AIDS

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