Access and success in higher education: fostering resilience in historically disadvantaged students in South Africa

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Abstract
Purpose – This qualitative study interrogates the barriers that historically disadvantaged higher education students in South Africa face when it comes to access and success. It specifically explores the challenges black students encounter in gaining epistemic access within the South African higher education system.

Design/methodology/approach – This research draws upon empirical data collected from a mixed-methods research project conducted at six higher education institutions. It focuses on issues of epistemic access and success within humanities and sciences faculties. The dataset comprises interview transcripts involving 34 student and ten staff cases. Thematic analysis, aided by MaxQDA software, was meticulously conducted to extract and synthesise meaningful themes, crafting comprehensive narratives.

Findings – The study uncovers multifaceted challenges, including difficulties in understanding the admission process, financial barriers and language proficiency issues, faced by disadvantaged students when accessing universities and transitioning from basic to higher education. The research emphasises universities taking proactive measures, such as providing comprehensive early support, identifying at-risk students and collaborating with schools to prepare prospective students better. It advocates for the potential of resilience theory in addressing social justice issues related to access and success for these students. Furthermore, the study recommends developing inclusive curricula and underscores the need for universities to actively support disadvantaged students academically and socially.

Originality/value – This research departs from the conventional focus on physical access to universities, introducing a more comprehensive perspective that emphasises epistemic access as a pivotal aspect of higher education. Drawing on empirical data, it sheds light on the obstacles faced by disadvantaged students during the transition from high school to higher education while also exploring their resilience strategies.

Keywords Higher education, South Africa, Resilience, Social justice, Disadvantaged students, Epistemic access

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
The quest for transformation in South African higher education has been underpinned by the core objective of ensuring equitable access and success for all, regardless of one’s race, gender, or socioeconomic background (Council on Higher Education, 2022). The cornerstone of this endeavour is the concept of educational equity, advocating for standardised educational excellence. In an ideal world, quality education should be readily accessible to students from diverse backgrounds, encompassing a spectrum of socioeconomic statuses, races, genders, and religious beliefs (Alam, 2023). Educational equity fundamentally asserts that every individual, irrespective of their personal attributes or circumstances, deserves equal access to quality education and educational opportunities.
Despite strides in physical access to higher education, achieving epistemological access remains a significant challenge for historically disadvantaged South African students. Kelly-Laubscher et al. (2018) highlight stark graduation rate disparities between black and white students. Only 20% of African and 24% of coloured students complete degrees within the stipulated time, compared to 44% of white students. This indicates that while marginalised groups have increased access to higher education, graduation rates have not improved proportionally. Low retention and graduation rates perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities and hinder individuals who do not complete their degrees (Kelly-Laubscher et al., 2018).

This pervasive issue can be aptly described as a social justice concern, compelling universities to reassess their social justice practices. Higher education, historically, has been associated with middle-class values (Alam, 2023; Cross and Atinde, 2015; Shrivastava and Shrivastava, 2014), posing a challenge for students from black, especially rural and township areas, who do not necessarily resonate with middle-class culture. This disconnect often leads to favouritism towards students with higher socioeconomic status, rendering those from disadvantaged backgrounds underprepared and, in some cases, as victims in the academic sphere. Furthermore, limited access to quality higher education can perpetuate cycles of poverty and hinder social mobility.

While previous research has predominantly concentrated on the experiences of disadvantaged students after their entry into university (e.g., Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2021; Ives and Castillo-Montoya, 2020), there exists a significant gap in understanding how their pre-enrolment experiences impact their academic success. Pre-enrolment experiences encompass various factors, such as familial background, high school experiences, the decision-making process leading to university enrolment, the choice of university, and expectations regarding the university environment. By acknowledging the unique capital and experiences that historically disadvantaged students bring, universities can initiate resilience training and create an enabling campus culture that fosters resilience—a critical factor in enabling student success.

Traditionally, resilience was seen as an innate human trait (Modesto-Lowe et al., 2021). However, recent research defines resilience as a dynamic, malleable process (Modesto-Lowe et al., 2021) that can even be taught (Modesto-Lowe et al., 2021; Rieckert et al., 2021). While prior studies extensively analyse the social, cognitive, and coping aspects of resilience (Rieckert et al., 2021), it is essential to go beyond identification and focus on creating measurable interventions. Research indicates that developing resilience can mitigate stress and boost academic performance, especially among historically disadvantaged students.

The quality of any university significantly hinges on its commitment to supporting its most vulnerable students (Astin et al., 2010). However, universities often align themselves with middle-class values, emphasising individualism. Success in this context is perceived as a personal achievement rather than a collective endeavour to level the playing field, particularly for marginalised groups. Historically disadvantaged students often face challenges in a predominantly middle-class university environment, where their social and intellectual capital may not align with prevailing norms. Research indicates that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may encounter academic obstacles due to the influence of middle-class values within universities (Bourdieu, 2020; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). Nevertheless, some of these disadvantaged students exhibit resourcefulness and effectively leverage their social capital (Cross and Atinde, 2015).

There is a clear need for universities to prioritise understanding the experiences and social capital of historically disadvantaged students to promote equity and social justice. Existing evidence consistently demonstrates that only a minority of students from such backgrounds achieve academic success, with the majority facing failure or dropping out.
Therefore, as we contemplate the introduction of resilience education for disadvantaged students in universities, we must address a fundamental question: What enables certain students to succeed against all odds? Answering this question can establish a framework for effectively teaching and nurturing resilience among the majority of these students who grapple with academic challenges.

In this context, this research paper aims to explore three key research questions:

**RQ1.** How do pre-enrolment experiences impact the ability of historically disadvantaged students to navigate the higher education landscape?

**RQ2.** How have historically disadvantaged students successfully navigated the academic environment, and what factors contributed to their ability to overcome significant challenges?

**RQ3.** In what ways have universities actively fostered resilience among such students to support their academic journeys?

**The conceptual landscape**

Despite post-1994 interventions aimed at promoting transformation in higher education, South African institutions grapple with persistent barriers to transformation. Central to these transformation efforts is the challenge of access and success for students. Existing literature (Council on Higher Education, 2022) has highlighted both progress and areas requiring improvement in South African higher education. While significant strides have been made in providing physical access to higher education for historically disadvantaged individuals, challenges in achieving epistemological access persist.

Furthermore, there seems to be limited recognition and understanding of higher education as a “public good,” as observed by Walker (2018) and Singh (2001). Nonetheless, developments in both physical and epistemological access to higher education carry profound implications for the discourse surrounding higher education as a “public good.” Many historically disadvantaged students enter higher education but do not complete their programs, potentially limiting their contribution to the public good. The Department of Education (1997) outlined four purposes of higher education aligning with the public good: (1) meeting individuals’ learning needs and aspirations, (2) addressing society’s development needs, (3) fostering enlightened, responsible citizens, and (4) contributing to knowledge creation, sharing, and evaluation.

These purposes aim to balance individual and societal needs while nurturing a democratic society and a globally competitive economy. This balance can be achieved by addressing factors contributing to epistemological access. However, access, especially for black African students, lacks adequate interventions to ensure success in historically less inclusive university environments. Despite improved physical access, achieving epistemological success remains a significant challenge.

In South African higher education, student groups include native, international, and refugee students. Yet, the legacy of apartheid continues to affect native South African students, perpetuating inequalities even post-apartheid (Mdepa and Tshiwula, 2012). Native South African higher education students originate from two distinct backgrounds. The first group comprises privileged students who attended well-funded, predominantly white “former Model C schools.” These schools offer quality facilities, qualified teachers, and active parental involvement, positioning higher education as a means to maintain privilege.

The second group consists of historically disadvantaged students, a central focus of this study, mostly coming from resource-limited backgrounds. Their pre-higher education experience reflects underfunded, poorly managed schools with limited parental involvement.
Historically disadvantaged students, as defined by Cross and Atinde (2015), have faced marginalisation due to factors such as poverty, gender, and attending under-resourced rural schools. Government loans, like NSFAS, primarily fund this group, with higher education seen as a path out of poverty. Wilson-Strydom (2011) argued that increasing access without improving success chances risks perpetuating social exclusion within higher education, emphasising the need for financial, academic, and social support.

This perspective aligns with Fraser’s (2009) belief that a just society must distribute wealth, resources, and opportunities equitably to alleviate poverty and social inequalities. We contend that a just higher education system should ensure equal resource allocation and opportunity access for all students.

We emphasise the importance of comprehensively understanding the diverse contexts and backgrounds of higher education students to design effective strategies and structures for their academic success. Some student cohorts face significant challenges due to universities’ lack of insight into their unique circumstances. Institutions often fail to provide necessary support, opting for one-size-fits-all approaches, neglecting the specific needs of minority and underprivileged groups. This oversight and homogenisation of support services risk perpetuating and exacerbating inequalities, leading to what Cross and Atinde (2015) describe as an “epistemological deficit”.

Theoretical framework
This research seeks to understand and actively address the persistent inequalities and social injustices within the South African higher education system, particularly those impeding epistemological access for historically disadvantaged students. To accomplish this, we have adopted two interrelated theoretical frameworks: social justice and resilience.

Social justice theory
Several scholars, including Rawls (1971) and Fraser (2009), have significantly shaped and advanced social justice scholarship. In this study, we draw upon the insights of Fraser, whose approach is particularly relevant for comprehending the intricate social justice issues in South African higher education. Fraser’s framework synthesises three core concepts: the politics of recognition, the politics of redistribution, and participation parity. In contrast to approaches that frame social justice solely as a matter of either recognition or redistribution, Fraser (2009) asserts that both are essential and neither alone is sufficient.

The politics of recognition pertains to how individuals or groups are acknowledged within specific spaces, while redistributive justice focuses on the reallocation of goods previously distributed unequally (Fraser, 2009; Lamont, 2017). Fraser envisions a society where proper recognition and redistribution efforts lead to participation parity (Fraser, 2009). This framework proves invaluable in understanding enduring inequality issues in South African higher education, stemming from historical misrecognition and unequal resource distribution. Certain students face barriers that hinder their full participation due to past injustices, ultimately limiting their contributions to the nation’s economy. This study acknowledges these social justice issues within higher education and explores how resilience theory can potentially address and improve these challenges.

Resilience theory
While it is acknowledged that some individuals or students exhibit inherent resilience, adapting and rebounding within challenging systems with minimal support (Modesto-Lowe et al., 2021), recent scholars have challenged the narrow conceptualisation of resilience as an innate individual trait (Jeans et al., 2017). They argue for a broader understanding of resilience
encompassing adaptive, predictive, and transformative capacities. In addition to adapting and bouncing back in adverse circumstances, resilience should include the ability to predict challenges and transform one’s approach.

Understanding these capacities of resilience is crucial for designing effective support systems in higher education, especially in addressing students’ challenges. South African universities should move beyond perceiving resilience as solely an inherent trait and instead incorporate it into the curriculum. This would empower students to grasp the broader concept and practical applications of resilience, particularly its predictive and transformative aspects. These dimensions of resilience can proactively anticipate challenges related to epistemic access and develop coping mechanisms to overcome systemic and institutional barriers. Such efforts ensure equitable access to higher education and combat educational inequalities.

The role of capitals in student success
Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural reproduction (2020) highlights how social inequalities persist across generations, including within the education system. It argues that the education system often favours and perpetuates the cultural, economic, and social advantages of dominant social groups while disadvantaging those from marginalised or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This can lead students from marginalised communities to feel out of place within higher education, contributing to lower success rates.

However, recent scholars like Cross and Atinde (2015) challenge this notion, asserting that some students from low socioeconomic backgrounds develop assets that enable them to navigate successfully in university settings. These assets, termed compensatory capital by Yosso (2005), encompass aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, social, and resistance capitals. Despite initial assumptions of lacking necessary capital, marginalised students possess compensatory capital that goes unrecognised. Some students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve success against the odds, making it essential for universities to identify and teach these skills and highlight the value of compensatory capital to other students who may not naturally possess them.

This study employs a theoretical framework encompassing social justice, resilience theory, and the recognition of compensatory capital to understand and address the challenges faced by historically disadvantaged students in South African higher education. These theories offer insights into the complex interplay of factors affecting epistemological access and student success, ultimately contributing to the ongoing discourse on educational equality and social justice.

Methodology
This study draws its empirical data from a comprehensive mixed methods research project conducted by the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies in collaboration with the Council on Higher Education (CHE). The broader research encompassed six distinct higher education institutions, emphasising students’ epistemic access and success, particularly in the humanities and sciences faculties.

Data for each case study were collected from various sources, including (1) Institutional policy documents and reports; (2) Statistical data from 2016 to 2020, covering metrics such as student enrolment, gender, race, graduation rates, and success rates; (3) Interviews conducted with final-year undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds within the targeted faculties; (4) Discussions held with academic staff, support personnel, and administrative staff.
Purposive sampling was employed in this research, focusing exclusively on undergraduate students and staff from the humanities and science faculties. Student selection criteria were meticulously structured, primarily targeting black South African students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their concluding year of study, particularly those from quintile 1, quintile 2, and township schools. Additionally, students actively enrolled in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) program were included. Significantly, the study placed emphasis on students who had demonstrated academic proficiency by advancing to their final year, whether it was the third or fourth year of their undergraduate journey. Regarding staff selection, the criteria focused on those who had direct interactions or worked closely with the students under investigation.

Data for this study
This study primarily utilised data collected from a single research-intensive institution, which was historically categorised as a white university. Following the advent of democracy, this institution has expanded its admission policy to include historically disadvantaged students. This case study involved 54 participants from both the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Science, with a particular emphasis on 34 historically disadvantaged students. The research strictly adhered to ethical guidelines throughout its execution. The process involved importing interview transcriptions, generating individual cases for the 34 students and ten staff members, conducting an in-depth analysis of the transcriptions, and establishing ten distinct codes for each group to initiate the development of thematic elements. The thematic analysis was facilitated through the use of MaxQDA software, which allowed for the extraction of meaningful themes from the codes and student transcripts, ultimately resulting in the creation of comprehensive narratives. Please note that this paper utilised data generated and analysed as part of a bigger project at the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, where the MaxQDA software was employed for metadata analysis.

Limitations
This was a small-scale study with no intention to draw generalised conclusions. Instead, our aim was to conduct a thorough and in-depth exploration of the challenges of access and success for historically disadvantaged students. Further, it is important to note that the data were not originally collected to address the specific research questions outlined in this paper. Rather, these research questions emerged during our extensive analysis of the data, which was initially collected for the purpose of writing a report for the CHE.

Findings
This section addresses the social justice challenges in higher education access and success. It highlights strategies employed by resilient students for success, university support interventions, and the potential for cultivating resilience in individuals lacking these traits.

Accessing higher education
While a slight majority (56%) of disadvantaged students reported relatively easy university access, some faced admission challenges and rejections from preferred institutions. Universities’ selective admission processes left students perplexed, as they lacked clarity on acceptance criteria, leading to disparities in acceptance and rejection experiences. As described by one student:
I applied at two universities, so the preliminary results like the ones we use for Grade 12 were accepted at both, and the first university was like waiting for the final results and they put me on the waiting list and also the second university was like we will respond after your matric results but for now you are accepted so when they came out our results, the December results uh, the first university kinda rejected me and I was like okay then I went to the second and I was accepted (Student participant).

Nel et al. (2012) observed that universities should try to forge relationships with schools to equip both learners and staff on the expectations of enrolling students. Despite some ongoing challenges, the research concerning access to education indicates a consistent increase in black student enrolments. The numbers rose from 54,611 in 2005 to 811,884 in 2015, according to the CHE (2022). Funding was also a barrier for students to apply to universities of their choice. One participant commented:

Like it took me steps back to say, you know what, you are inferior, you’ll never go to varsity and even if you study hard, you won’t get funding as easily. And while other learners were applying during the course of the year to various varsities, I did not have funds to apply. So that on its own was like a big disappointment to me to say people are applying to varsity, and you are there, you are not applying. Even though you are doing good, but you are not applying (Student participant).

An understanding of the choices, influences, and home circumstances of students should inform and equip university leadership with strategies to make universities accessible as well as secure the long-term success of the university.

Experiences of transitioning from basic to higher education: expectations versus reality
Students entered university with diverse expectations. Those who expected a high school-like experience faced additional challenges due to being unprepared for the transition. Nel et al. (2012) stress the importance of stronger school-university connections, advocating for comprehensive early support, identifying at-risk students, and preparing prospective ones. Jeans et al. (2017) also suggest that high school students proactively develop skills to anticipate and tackle university challenges.

As observed by one student:

My expectations were: I thought at university it would be easy to make friends, but it is so different, and I don’t need to be this person that they know. But it was totally different like I had to fit in to have friends, it was different from what I expected (Student participant).

Some positive perceptions about university were also informed by advice from their high school teachers. While the advice helped them to gain courage as they pursued high school, it was misleading in terms of expectations of university life:

This is your last push, this is your last push to have a nice life and then for me it was like okay now I would have gained, or rather I would have … if I had excelled in Grade 12, therefore I would excel even in university, so that was my imagination of how university life would be, that I’m going to ace everything, that I’m going to have a smooth sail and all that and then in terms of res life and all that, I’ll have my own freedom and then I can do what I want in the time that I stay there (Student participant).

Students noted substantial pressure during the transition to higher education, consistent with research highlighting challenges, especially for underprivileged students (Thomas et al., 2017).

One participant alluded to false hope informed by university brochures and advertisements:
I expected it to be more inclusive. And I also liked because on TV on the university brochures on magazine you see this unity and inclusiveness amongst students among like, in the university communities, so I expected unity and also inclusiveness (Student participant).

Previous research often overlooked pre-enrolment experiences, particularly among formerly underprivileged students. Understanding their choices, influences, and expectations is essential for both university planning and student preparedness. Prior experiences greatly influence future ones. Nel et al. (2012) emphasise that a successful transition from school to university is critical for academic success.

Challenges commence with the transition process itself. Studies (e.g., McMillan, 2013; Thomas et al., 2017) reveal that many students, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are ill-prepared for university demands. Unfortunately, universities often lack resources and support. McMillan (2013) identified these challenges, including academic difficulties and increased workloads, recommending clear guidance for transitioning students. In our study, most students found the high school-to-university transition challenging, feeling thrust into unfamiliar territory and often facing a “sink or swim” situation. One student commented:

So, it took me time to adapt, and it was very hard to adapt. And things were harsh but then as time moved on, I started adapting to do the lifestyle at the university. I started managing my things and everything was starting to go as planned (Student participant).

Taking a long time to adapt also has dire consequences for academic success. Even though the students experienced hostility that slowed down their integration into campus life, they knew what an inviting university should look like. Some participants appreciated meeting people from differing backgrounds. They observed that while they may be intimidated by some people who think negatively about certain groups of people, others are accommodating, wise and helpful in encouraging introspection and working towards personal growth. It was not only the academic experiences that scared them away but there was also a challenge on the social side as several participants commented on a lack of confidence with how to dress, paired with insufficient resources to buy other clothing, lack of know-how in using the access cards and insufficient confidence to approach people. One participant made this comment:

I was scared. Really. In terms of clothing-wise, you know, like you are raggedly dressed, and people are looking fine, and you are just looking around, you don't even know how to use a student card to access the labs. And you don't even know how to approach people. Like you'll be like, oh hello, and then this person looks at you and then you are like, oh my God, I just hope they respond nicely and calmly. Ja so, I was scared. I don't want to lie (Student participant).

Academic experiences
The use of English as the language of instruction, even for non-English speakers, was identified as a significant challenge in terms of how students engage with and respond to questions. This is what one student had to say:

So, the challenges that I came across when I got to the university that the type of language that they the lectures use especially in English classes because in a way, I don't think they really catered for us students who use English as first additional language. So, at first, it is very difficult for me to understand the terms and the concepts that they were using, because I was used to the simpler kind of English the one that we were exposed to and advanced, the concepts are very, very, very deep and so confusing (Student participant).

The issue of language as a barrier to success was also explained by one of the academic staff members:
Well language is a problem and not just a problem it is a major problem especially academic language. Like I said earlier that the majority of the students that we had got at the School of Education come from the low socioeconomic backgrounds and they come from township schools where English is not their first language. So, they do not have complete command of the English language let alone you know the academic English and or language that is required of them when they are at varsity. And that is a problem, and which is why some of these kids decided that they want to decolonise the education at the university because of language (Academic staff member).

Challenges related to language competence in higher education and their impact on academic achievement have been explored in previous studies, as noted by Cross and Atinde (2015). Many students face difficulties in achieving language competence, which is crucial for building confidence in conceptual understanding. Proficiency in the multifaceted conceptual skills demanded by higher education, including theoretical thinking, applying knowledge creatively, critically engaging with academic literature, and academic writing, is often more accessible to English-fluent students, as English is the predominant language of instruction in South African higher education. However, for those struggling with language proficiency, it poses a significant conceptual and practical barrier. Additionally, students' communication skills during higher education classes are influenced by their prior high school experiences and backgrounds, with some disadvantaged high school attendees finding it challenging to engage equally with peers from affluent high school backgrounds during lectures. This is what one student had to say:

And with the lecturers, I find some of them too fast especially coming from a township school, but when you go and consult afterward, it’s much better. Moreover, at first, it was difficult to listen and take notes as the lecturers seemed too fast, and then as years went by, I started mastering the technique (Student participant).

Another student noted that high school learning often involved rote memorisation, which posed challenges during the transition to higher education. The highly structured, teacher-led approach in schools, often described as “spoon-feeding” by the Rural Education Access Programme, complicates the shift to a more independent university setting. This transition entails reduced personal contact with lecturers, less explicit guidance, and increased student decision-making autonomy. It necessitates significant self-regulation, autonomy, and independence within the campus as a learning space (Cross and Atinde, 2015). These challenges largely stem from the misalignment between high school and university environments. This is what one participant said “the school was not so well resourced . . . we had no laboratories, [no] computers, and we also lacked teachers who could teach such subjects” (Student participant).

Resource shortages in basic education hinder higher education access. Historically disadvantaged, black, and rural communities often have underfunded schools with under-qualified teachers. These schools neglect to foster essential skills like independent learning, resourcefulness, and time management. Additionally, some participants believed that certain high school teachers negatively impacted their academic engagement. One participant commented:

In my community, I think most of the teachers who were teaching there, it’s either they hated their job, or they did not want to teach there at all. Sometimes learners in the classrooms we used to teach ourselves. [The teacher] would just get into class . . . and then just write notes for us on the board (Student participant).

Succeeding against the odds
Despite the negative experiences, most of them tended to overlook the challenges and focus on the bigger picture of their ability to access a prestigious university. Despite the odds, most of them were proud to be part of the university community:
‘Every time I would arrive on campus I would be like, okay, I’m in this university. That’s what happened on a daily basis. Oh it’s cool, oh I’m in this university’ (Student participant).

Despite the university’s alienating nature, participants in this study aimed to find a positive perspective. They developed survival strategies, such as forming social circles with peers from similar backgrounds, to navigate a potentially alienating environment (Yosso, 2005).

I had friends as I told you. Like most of my friends I met them at a taxi rank because we used to travel together to the university, coming from the taxi rank, walking past a bridge. And most of us our experiences were the same. We came from backgrounds, economic situations which were not ideal. So, having them in my life really changed me because they helped me to adapt. They were there for me, and they helped me to cope with my fears as well, like the fear of failing, the fear of being not accepted fully, that social steps of diversity (Student participant).

University interventions
The interviewed students appreciated universities’ efforts to enhance their experiences but believed further improvements were necessary. The Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) was praised for supporting students’ well-being and success, aligning with Murphy et al. (2020) argument that skill-building spaces can enhance core academic outcomes. One participant commented:

Well, with the CCDU they used to have those programmes where they would teach you how to manage your time, because I used to be very bad at managing my time. So, you know I would go for the trainings to know how to manage my time and also like how to keep mental health in a good, you know space all the time and they would also have those seminars of exam stress you know when exams come, people become so stressed. Ja, so they had so many programmes that were so beneficial to me (Student participant).

Respondents also found the writing centre valuable for academic development. These centres were seen as crucial in enhancing academic success. One student noted the staff’s assistance in academic writing, including argument formulation and coherence.

Summary of the main results
How do pre-enrolment experiences impact the ability of historically disadvantaged students to navigate the higher education landscape? The impact of pre-enrolment experiences on historically disadvantaged students’ ability to navigate higher education is profound. These students often grapple with unanticipated challenges during the transition from high school to university, stemming from a lack of preparation and unrealistic expectations. Misleading information from high school teachers and university brochures can set them up for a rude awakening. Language proficiency can also pose a significant barrier, as English is typically the primary language of instruction in higher education. Moreover, resource shortages and underfunded schools in disadvantaged communities leave students ill-prepared for the demands of university life.

How have historically disadvantaged students successfully navigated the academic environment, and what factors contributed to their ability to overcome significant challenges? To address these challenges, universities must build stronger connections with schools, offer comprehensive early support, and provide clear guidance for transitioning students. Historically disadvantaged students who have successfully navigated the academic environment often attribute their accomplishments to resilience and the formation of supportive social networks with peers from similar backgrounds. Despite the initial unfamiliarity, they take pride in being part of the university community and develop strategies to thrive, including seeking assistance from university resources like the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) and writing centres.
In what ways have universities actively fostered resilience among such students to support their academic journeys? To further bolster resilience, universities should adopt proactive strategies such as inclusive curricula, robust partnerships with schools and civil society, mentorship programs, resource provision, and involving historically disadvantaged students in governance and leadership roles. By implementing these transformative measures, universities can help these students not only overcome obstacles but also contribute meaningfully to society while fostering a more equitable higher education environment.

Generally, the study underscores the importance of moving beyond reactive measures. Institutions should focus on proactive and transformative strategies to advance social justice. This includes designing measurable interventions to promote resilience. Practical approaches include (1) developing inclusive curricula that actively engage students from historically marginalised backgrounds; (2) establishing strong community, school, and civil society partnerships to address real-world student challenges; and (3) providing mentorship and resources for students to overcome obstacles and contribute to society. Additionally, involving historically disadvantaged students in governance and leadership roles is essential for universities to enhance their transformative capacities.

Conclusion
Despite South Africa’s progress in expanding physical education access since the end of apartheid, challenges in epistemic access persist, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These challenges hinder black students’ success as they navigate socioeconomic and cultural complexities during the school-to-university transition. Socioeconomic and cultural conditions significantly impact higher education success. Inadequate resilience strategies and support systems for students transitioning from disadvantaged school systems exacerbate dropout rates and hinder contributions to the labour market (Letseka and Maile, 2008). Therefore, fostering resilience among disadvantaged students is crucial. Incorporating resilience education into the curriculum and enhancing support structures like writing centres, counselling services, language training, and peer learning can boost their success.

Interventions should begin in high school, ideally. Universities can offer bridging programs outlining essential competencies for disadvantaged students to enter university. Establishing partnerships between universities, schools, and communities is vital to prepare students comprehensively for academic and workforce demands. Universities should recognise diversity and tailor support to different student groups, addressing their unique needs and providing relevant skills for success in higher education.

References


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