

BARRIERS TO LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: SOME PHOTOVOICE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

South Africa underwent political reform in 1994 from an apartheid government to a democratic state. Former white universities, known for their high standards and academic excellence, experienced an influx of black students who previously were excluded from these institutions. This article reports on a study which investigated the extent of learning barriers that previously disadvantaged black students at a renowned higher education institution experience, and endeavours to determine the learning support they need in order to succeed academically. A qualitative approach was followed and data were gathered by means of focus group interviews and participants' photo portfolios. The data were interpreted with reference to recent perceptions on adult learning, particularly in the African context. Implications for higher education in general are indicated.

Keywords: learning barriers, higher education, previously disadvantaged students, student support, academic coping skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1994, South Africa underwent major political reform from apartheid to democracy. This impacted on all population groups and resulted in a shift in the social orientation of black youth (Tyson & Stones, 2002; Everatt, 2002; Möller, 2005; Ganagakis, 2004): all the authors mentioned in parenthesis here consistently report that black adolescents value academic qualifications as a means of escaping traditional black working-class labour and the constraints deriving from the heritage of oppression. Formerly whites-only universities, known for their high standards and academic excellence, consequently experienced an influx of black students who were previously excluded from these institutions. In the current dispensation, the only admission criterion for universities is the m-score, which is a rating scale where points are allocated according to marks obtained in each Senior Certificate subject passed. The sum of these points determines a person's m-score. Although black students admitted to universities obviously have to comply with the prescribed m-score, there are remnants of a past characterised by social deprivation and mediocrity in education. These barriers, which include a lack of funds needed to purchase study material, language barriers, and the fact of being exposed to inner-city conditions, hamper black students' achievement at tertiary level, thus perpetrating the social inequity and educational imbalances of the past.

This study investigated the extent of the learning barriers experienced by selected black students at the University of Pretoria, and endeavoured to determine the learning support these students need if they are to succeed

academically. We followed a qualitative approach and obtained data by means of focus group interviews and participants' photo portfolios. In our qualitative research, we began our investigation with a proverbial clean sheet, and allowed themes and categories to emerge from our field work. These themes and categories were then subjected to a literature control for the purposes of establishing the theoretical basis for our findings. In our data interpretation we were acutely aware of our own privileged background and endeavoured to reflect continuously on possible subjectivity on our part. Thanks to our close relationship with the participants, and our intimate knowledge of their life worlds, we could counteract own subjectivity and managed to deal emphatically with the data which they provided. Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the designated committee in the Faculty of Education. Each participant conceded by signature to participation in our research project.

2. EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

2.1. Mode of investigation

Since our research aimed at an in-depth understanding of the learning barriers experienced by socially deprived higher education students, we chose the qualitative approach for our research. Prior to our research, we had been introduced to the particular strengths of the “photovoice” method in highlighting social problems in particular. We therefore decided to use this method, and combine it with focus group discussions and narratives. The photovoice method involves participants being issued with cameras, and encouraged to take pictures of people or things that are intimately connected with the research topic.

In setting up our research, we used a step-by-step guide to facilitating a photovoice project as compiled by Olivier, Wood and De Lange (2009). The steps were incorporated into three sessions as follows:

Session 1: Orientation

Ten black students (four female and six male) from non-affluent backgrounds were purposively selected and asked to participate in the project. We explained our research project and emphasised the confidentiality of the research findings, as well as the participants' informed consent and voluntary participation. All the selected students expressed their eagerness to participate. The photovoice method was subsequently introduced to the participants, and we emphasised the fact that visual investigation is a powerful method of learning and creative work. Together with the participants, we decided on the following “prompt” for taking the pictures: *Take pictures of the barriers to your learning at the university.* The students were encouraged to have a free hand, and to take pictures of anybody or anything they associated with a barrier to their learning. The session ended with a practical exercise. We

had acquired five disposable cameras (each of which could take 27 pictures) and asked the participants to team up in pairs to share a camera. Each participant then had the opportunity to practise using the camera by taking a picture of their partner. A week was given for taking the pictures, and arrangements were made for the next session. Cameras were handed in as arranged, and the films were developed prior to the following session.

Session 2: Exhibition

The second session involved the students exhibiting their pictures by pinning them up (participant by participant) in a lecture room. Each participant then had the opportunity to discuss his or her pictures as depicting real barriers to learning. During these discussions, we took preliminary field notes. The pictures showed a wide array of artefacts and people: computers, study books, photocopying machines, students, socialising, traffic situations, and home environments. It was clear that each participant was seriously involved in the project. All group members enthusiastically took part in the ensuing discussions. At the end of this session, each participant was asked to pick the one picture which depicted their most serious barrier to learning, and to write a narrative of about 300 words about that picture. The participants were asked to submit the narratives within one week.

Session 3: Wrap-up

The participants gathered again in the same lecture room and were given the opportunity to briefly present their narratives to the group. Not all participants did this, but all narratives were received, with the theme picture attached. The session closed with snacks, and an assurance was given to the participants that they would be personally involved in scrutinising our interpretation of the data.

2.2. Data analysis and interpretation

2.2.1. Background information on participants

Ten students took part in the study, six males and four females. Five students live in hostels on the campus, while four students rent rooms in various suburbs. One student lives with his little sister in a township. Four students attended former model C schools that is, former white schools, while the other six students attended schools in rural areas. It is also interesting to note that the four students who had attended former white schools scored higher marks than their counterparts (who lived in rural areas).

2.2.2. Themes and categories

The participants' narratives provided us with rich and valuable data. A surprising aspect of their feedback was that the extent of overlap was minimal

the ten participants had ten distinguishable points of focus in their discussion of the chosen pictures. In what follows, we shall firstly provide a brief synopsis of each participant's narrative, followed by a brief account of the themes and categories that emerged concerning the learning barriers experienced by this group of socially deprived black university students.

A. “DESK CALENDAR” (Female participant 1)



The picture is minimalistic, and simply depicts a blank desk calendar. In commenting on this picture, the participant stated that at university everything seems to be doubling, except time. The work load doubles, compared with high school. This shift is physically and mentally overwhelming, and can influence grades badly.

If you do not have proper time management skills, you can end up dropping out of university because at some point you start procrastinating your work and you end up always catching up because you were left behind.

Our chosen topic for this submission was 'lacking time-management skills'.

B. “TVSET AND DVD PLAYER” (Female participant 2)



The picture shows a TV set on a table, seemingly in a residence room. Also shown are a DVD player, a number of CD disks, a remote and a calculator. Some snacks can be seen on the adjoining cupboard.

The participant commented that most black students come from very disadvantaged backgrounds, with very little prior exposure to electronic media. When placed in a hostel, they get “rooms with undressed bed, shelves, cupboard and a chair”. They just have a blanket and their own clothes. This already makes them feel inferior.

One of the worst thing they will pair you with a roommate who brings a TV and a DVD to his/her room that is unfamiliar to you. This makes you feel small and less confident about yourself.

Our chosen topic for this submission was 'feelings of inferiority'.

C. “DISCUSSION” (Female participant 3)



The picture shows two female students, one white and one black, in discussion in a lecture room. The participant commented that black students come from communities where they were mostly exposed to only one language, also in their schools. At university, proficiency in English is essential. Black students experience problems in following lectures and text material properly. Perhaps more importantly, they have problems in expressing themselves to their peers and lecturers about their problems. This often leads to them being given incorrect guidance. Friends also often lack proper language skills. Some students still stereotype each other (black white), which leads to a reluctance to consult each other.

The other problem is that, during class presentation, black students cannot give presentations because they are scared and shy of making mistakes. This reflects badly on their marks and their confidence, so they end up losing their concentration and not focusing on their studies.

In this case, we decided on 'inferior language skills' as an appropriate topic.

D. “BED IN HOSTEL ROOM” (Female participant 4)



This picture indicates a bed in a hostel room, with colourful duvet and cushions. There is a kettle on the window sill and a DVD player on a shelf. An apparently expensive reading lamp is on the study table and a variety of decorations are on the wall. In discussing this picture, the participant mentioned that students come from varying backgrounds and are randomly placed in rooms. A disadvantaged student can thus be placed with somebody from an affluent background, with a beautiful bed and with everything that makes life comfortable, such as a kettle, dishes and an iron.

You start feeling intimidated by your roommate, her room is a more comfortable one and more like home, and you find out that you cannot even afford to have a comfortable room. You start feeling depressed whenever you are in your room.

Our chosen topic was 'hostel peer pressure'.

E. “PHOTOCOPIER” (Male participant 1)



The picture shows a student photocopying pages from a textbook. The participant comments: “Being a varsity student I was suppose to study freely and enjoy my academic years”. This is, however, not the case. The student comes from a poor background, and must get by with restricted funding. This is particularly problematic regarding textbooks. These are expensive, and often change by semester. Funds to buy these books are either not available at all, or are inadequate (the bursary is too small).

I end up copying the textbook from my fellow students and this does not help because much of the information is omitted, and this make me perform poorly in my studies at university. This really affects me, because sometime I have to sacrifice myself and not buy something to eat with the money that I am given for food at school...

The problem is aggravated by the fact that copying textbooks is not allowed. ... if ever I may be found out it is possible that I will be expelled. To be financially unstable make my life and my academic future to in danger every time I enter the varsity gate.

We considered 'textbook finances' to be an appropriate topic.

F. “INTERNET ACCESS” (Male participant 2)



The picture displays a student apparently hard at work at a computer work station. The participant mentioned that he tries his utmost to stay in contact with school and other friends. “I am also meeting a lot of new friends and that compounds the time that I already spend on the internet.” 'Facebook' is a popular medium for communicating with friends:

This service includes a chat window, but is primarily used to display photos and add comments etc.

My problem, though, is that too many of my friends and family stay a great distance away from me.... The mere fact that I can chat to anyone I haven't seen in a number of years makes me feel rather happy...

We opted for 'socialising on the internet' as a suitable topic.

G. “CARE-GIVING” (Male participant 3)



The photo shows the participant studying at a dinner table. In the background a young teenage girl is sitting against a corrugated iron wall; this appears to be a temporary dwelling. The participant comments:

My life is very much divided into two parts; there is my academic and my role as guardian to my little sister who is everything to me. There are things that I know that my late mother would like her to achieve and I want to help her become a responsible person to the best of my ability.

The participant leaves home every morning at 05:00 and is back home at 19:30 in the evenings. His little sister prepares dinner after having done her homework. He helps her with this further on in the evening, although by then he feels very tired.

Providing for a teenager is not an easy task because there are things which she needs that I must provide for her like clothing, food, school trips, Sunday school trips and others.

The student works at weekends (both Saturdays and Sundays) and tries to make ends meet.

Our chosen topic for this submission was 'care-giving challenges'.

H. “TRAVELLING BY TRAIN” (Male participant 4)



The picture shows a suburban train leaving the station.

This participant maintained that most students usually don't experience travelling to and from campus as a learning barrier. For many students with unstable financial backgrounds, however, transport is a real challenge:

Trains are fully packed in the mornings and also in the afternoons also so we always stand all the way from Mamelodi to Pretoria standing with people pushing from all corners of the train and the moment I get to campus I am so tired that I can't even concentrate in class, the same applies when I have to get home in the afternoon so when I get home I am tired to the extent that I can't even study.

'Transport problems' seemed to be a suitable topic for this narrative.

I. “SELF-DISCIPLINE” (Male participant 5)



This participant opted for the discussion of two related pictures, which show a) a student apparently working diligently on his laptop on a study task, and b) a student sitting at a desk with his study books, but being physically pulled away by a fellow student.

The participant lamented the fact that he tends not to realise the value of planning:

I plan to study for a certain text, suddenly my chum comes and wants me to go with him to watch movies, because of the deficiency of self-discipline, I go.

Consequently, the student often writes tests unprepared, and fails. Yet the student realises the importance of self-discipline clearly:

Self-discipline in most cases determines a person's future and a way forward. Mostly self-discipline is like a root of a person and if the person doesn't have solidified roots, he/she cannot stand tall and speak out for themselves or prevent themselves from any danger. Self-discipline helps a person to be what they are and helps with decision-making.

The obvious topic in this case was 'lacking self-discipline'.

J. “FAMILY PROBLEMS” (Male participant 6)



The picture depicts four people (apparently three teenage girls and the participant) in what appears to be a small, cluttered sitting room.

As background information, the participant mentioned that his father passed away the previous year, leaving him with no support or money to study. His older brother immediately turned on him and stated that his days of being the “chosen one” were over. The brother then convinced the participant's mother to use the money which the father had set aside for his son's studies to build extensions to their home. When the university opened, the participant's brother-in-law stepped in and provided the money for registration.

What is disturbing me is I don't feel welcomed in the family am always thinking about the fact that my mother abandoned me. This makes me feel that I am not important. Am useless I don't deserve to live.

'Lacking family support' appeared to be an appropriate topic in this case.

We had a close look at these ten topics, and found that two broad themes emerged: study barriers and context barriers. We therefore categorised the topics as follows:

THEMES	CATEGORIES
Study barriers	Self discipline Self esteem Time management skills Language skills Resources
Context barriers	Care giving Family support Transport

2.2.3. Summative remarks

In our view, the participants' feedback was detailed and enlightening. As far as study barriers are concerned, it is clear that students from socially deprived backgrounds struggle with the self-discipline they need to dedicate their time to their studies and maximise their opportunities. However, even if they do overcome this problem, the lack of proper study planning skills and problematic language barriers definitely stand in the way of these students doing well academically. Interestingly, these problems are certainly not confined to students from socially deprived backgrounds. It would be informative to know what percentage of the broad student population is bogged down by the same problems. However, the two remaining categories of study barriers as indicated in the table (a lack of self-esteem and resources) are particularly true of socially deprived students and constitute serious impediments to their studies.

Not unexpectedly, it would seem from some of our participants' narratives that context barriers to learning can be serious, to the extent that one can only be amazed at participants' tenacity and academic survival skills. Given the deprivations and responsibilities mentioned by our participants, it is clear that

their succeeding in graduating will be a momentous feat.

In the following literature control, we were guided by our identified themes and categories.

3. LITERATURE CONTROL

Chickering (1993) identified a gap in the literature on the general development of students. He explains that “[W]ithout a developmental philosophy at the core of the college, it can become a dispensary of services, a training ground for jobs that may not exist, or a holding tank for those not sure what to do next. Institutions that impart transferable skills and relevant knowledge, bolster confidence and creativity, and engender social responsibility and self-directed learning are needed more than ever” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993:44). Chickering (1993) anchored his “vector theory” (as will be alluded to further on) in both Erikson's (1959) premise that identity formation is the main challenge for adolescents and young adults, and Pascarella's (1991) model; this model claims that the background of the student, as well as pre-college characteristics, together with the structural and organizational characteristics of the institution combine to influence the quality of student effort and therefore academic success (Chickering, 1993:455).

Chickering (1993) identified seven vectors as representing student development. These vectors can be seen “...as maps to help us determine where students are and which way they are heading” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993:34). These vectors are not regarded as steps: students can move along them either at different rates or concurrently. Rather than a step, each vector represents a “higher” level of functioning and “...brings more awareness, skill, confidence, complexity, stability and integration” (ibid.). These vectors are: 1. developing competence; 2. managing emotions; 3. moving through autonomy toward interdependence; 4. developing mature interpersonal relationships; 5. establishing identity; 6. developing purpose; and 7. developing integrity.

From this developmental philosophy, the first three vectors are of particular importance for our research, because the themes of study and contextual barriers, with their related categories (see our data analysis table), are situated within them as follows: (1) “developing competence” (language barriers) (2) “managing emotions” (self-esteem, care-giving, resources, family support and transport) and (3) “moving through autonomy toward interdependence” (self-discipline and time management).

3.1. Vector 1: Developing competence (in study management)

This vector forms the foundation from which the other vectors could develop and is particularly linked to study-related difficulties. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993:45) developing competence consists of intellectual skills,

physical and manual skills, and interpersonal skills. For the purpose of this study, the emphasis will be on intellectual skills (the other skills did not feature as barriers in participants' responses).

Given the interrelatedness between language proficiency and academic ability, the lack of language skills, as identified in our study, is located within the first vector. In South Africa the majority of parents, pupils and teachers perceive English as the gateway to global opportunities and, as a result, many pupils complete their education through the medium of English (Howie, 2003:14). This also explains why black parents increasingly choose to remove their children from nearby historically black schools (township schools and far rural schools) "... because they are looking for quality education in former Model C schools" (Msila, 2005:173). These schools are formerly white schools with English as the medium of instruction. Despite the fact that English is the mother-tongue of less than ten percent of the South African population, it remains the preferred language of instruction. The fact that it is not widely spoken at home (Howie, 2003:1, 2) aggravates the problem of students' inability to cope with English - students read slowly and they do not understand the study material. Their competence in reasoning skills, organising skills and mathematical skills is low (Zulu, 2004:37) and the lack of English language skill compounds these academic difficulties. One of the emerging topics from our research was "inferior language skills". In the discussion, the participant mentioned the fact that black students are not sufficiently proficient in English, which results in academic difficulties and a widening of the communication gap between black and white students.

3.2. Vector 2: Managing emotions (about challenging living circumstances).

This vector proposes that emotions be faced, acknowledged and accommodated in such a way that they are not allowed to impede on the student's emotional well-being. "Development proceeds when students learn appropriate channels for releasing irritations before they explode, dealing with fears before they immobilize, and healing emotional wounds before they infect other relationships" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993:46).

The black student is confronted with many emotional issues. During the discussion of the pictures, one participant mentioned that she lives "in two worlds". Being at university, students socialise according to the norms and values of the dominant culture that controls the educational institution (Getz, 2000). Existing values and customs are questioned, and students incorporate new experiences into existing ones in order to establish their own worldview. Black students are inevitably confronted with cultural biases and are compelled to negate their own culture in favour of the prevailing culture at former white universities. This shift in the value system and social orientation of black youth is confirmed by various researchers (Tyson & Stones, 2002; Everatt, 2002; Möller, 2005; Ganagakis, 2004) and can lead to emotional

alienation from family members. It also sensitises black students to socioeconomic differences (the “haves” versus the “have-nots”) and this, in turn, further serves to estrange them from their home environment. The contrast between the two worlds can be overwhelming, leading to emotional turmoil and a marked lack of self-esteem.

3.2.1. Self-esteem

In Sedlacek's (1987) article: “Black students on White campuses: 20 years of research”, an article which is still of great relevance, the author lists various studies which found that the way black students feel about themselves is related to their adjustment and success at white institutions or, in the case of South Africa, former white institutions. He maintains that this aspect of self-concept – the extent of seeing oneself as part of an institution, or as identified with it – is a common thread, and one which runs through the literature on black students' self-concept over the past few decades. Fraser and Killen (2005:33) also found that students who feel a strong personal connection with their learning institution are likely to be more motivated and to study more effectively. Liu (in Lourens & Smit 2003:169) also confirms that student satisfaction is very much related to student retention and is the key to academic drop-out. Lack of self-esteem was also singled out in the empirical section of the present study as being a barrier to learning. One participant specifically referred to the correlation between academic success and self-esteem, when she maintained: “[O]ne will never be successful at university once you have lost confidence in yourself.”

Similar findings are listed in other studies: currently, the dominant culture of former white universities still controls the majority of these institutions in this country and, as a result, institutional and cultural racism, even though it may be unintentional, continues to exist. As Hendrich and Schepers (2004:261) declare: “If our students are to be more successful learners, more emphasis must be placed on the affective components of learning.” Gregory and Hill (2000:495) agree that, in addition to systematic factors explaining academic performance, other individual factors such as poor study habits, academic preparation and student self-esteem should also be considered.

3.2.2. Care giving

It is an unfortunate reality in South Africa that increasing numbers of children are heading households as a result of abandonment by or the death of a parent(s) (Chabilall, 2004). This is yet another challenge that some black students face. As one of the participants said in his narrative, he is constantly worried about his young sister's safety, and he has the added responsibility of earning enough money to provide for their needs.

3.2.3. Resources

In a study on the future expectations of black adolescents (Kamper, Badenhorst & Steyn, 2009), the authors state that black youth "...not only value academic qualifications as a means of exchange in the labour market, but also as an escape route from traditional black working-class work. Many aspire to occupations in traditionally white-dominated fields". Tertiary education is therefore perceived as a doorway to financial and personal success. University studies are an expensive commodity since these involve, apart from the study material itself, participation in student activities, and accommodation. It is not surprising that Yorke (in Lourens & Smit, 2003:169) has identified financial difficulties as one of the primary causes of dropping out among full-time students. Similar findings are listed by Botha, Du Plessis and Menkveld (2007:2), Stanton-Salazar, Vásques and Mehan (2000:214) and Gregory and Hill (2000:494). Lack of financial resources can also be regarded as an emotional issue, since it creates anxiety and stress. One of the participants mentioned that she cannot concentrate in class simply because she is always thinking about the things she cannot afford.

Since academic success often evades students from poor backgrounds, Dass-Brailsford (2005:575) chose academic achievement as an indicator of resilience amongst black students, as "...it is easily measurable and increasingly sought by poor families in South Africa". Where other societies may see academic success as an ordinary developmental task, in a country such as South Africa, where the majority of students come from deprived backgrounds in terms of resources and quality education, academic success is difficult to attain. The causal relationship between finance and academic success cannot, therefore, be overestimated. The majority of participants link their lack of finances to some aspect of academic failure for example: purchase of textbooks, inability to furnish bedrooms in residence, or not being able to afford laptops.

3.2.4. Family support

Although the literature does not give prominence to family support as a requirement for academic success, it is a significant issue for black students. Families often make sacrifices, especially financial sacrifices, so that they can send someone to university. When this support is withdrawn for some reason, this may well cause emotional turmoil. One of the participants remarked that he does not have the courage to ask his family for money, so he would rather continue his studies without textbooks or other essentials.

3.2.5. Transport

South Africans mainly use taxis and trains as their primary means of transport. These services are generally hazardous and over-crowded. Accidents, especially involving taxis, are common, and crime is rampant on trains. The

participant who mentioned transport as his main barrier has been robbed on several occasions, and also missed a test because of the unreliability of these transport services.

3.3. Vector 3: Moving through autonomy toward interdependence (time management and self-discipline)

It should be noted that the population group in this study consists of a group of people with a particular history that has impacted on their collective self-esteem (Kamper, Badenhorst & Steyn, 2009). The laws and policies of the former political dispensation manifested in a loss of academic self-confidence, specifically because of the quality of education to which the majority of South Africans were exposed. The relevance of this vector is therefore situated in the word “autonomy” and in the following quotation from Chickering and Reisser (1993:47): “A key developmental step for students is learning to function with relative self-sufficiency, to take responsibility for pursuing self-chosen goals, and to be less bound by others' opinions.” For this reason, therefore, the barriers “self-discipline” and “time management” are significant.

3.3.1. Self-discipline

Researchers regard these two personal skills (self-discipline and time management) as indispensable for academic success. In Fraser and Killen's (2005:33) study of successful students the picture emerges of a self-motivated, hard-working student who can learn independently, prepare properly for examinations and who has chosen a course of study wisely. The study also emphasises the fact that self-discipline and self-control should be regarded as two important variables impacting on students' performance. Zulu (2004) also points to these variables as part of the make-up of a successful student. One of the participants said that he would rather spend time with his friends or watch a movie, even when he knows that he should prepare for tests. He admits that lack of self-discipline leads to failure, but cannot seem to do anything about it.

3.3.2. Time-management skills

Participants made the point that they seem to fritter their time away with socialising and playing around on the internet. In terms of its relatedness to Vector 3, time management can be seen as a competence which certainly needs to be developed in black students. Time management is a skill widely associated with success, and is mainly acquired in a structured and disciplined educational environment. Given the prevailing teaching and learning culture in the majority of rural and township schools, this skill is unlikely to form part of the academic make-up of many black students. This, in turn, will result in universities struggling to meet the demands of growing numbers of students who enter higher education with limited skills (Lourens & Smit, 2003: 169).

It is evident from these findings that the understanding of “academic support” needs to be revised and adjusted. Although supplementary and compensating programmes and training sessions are important, an inclusive mindset needs to be adopted. An inclusive mindset regards the institution as being responsible for accommodating the challenges that students face and does not hold the student responsible for conforming in order to “fit in” with the culture of the institution.

4. CLOSING REMARKS

When reflecting on our photovoice project with our student participants, we cannot but experience a deeply felt empathy coupled with admiration for the way in which they manage to persevere, in spite of the learning barriers they have to cope with, and which they so strikingly brought to the fore, both visually and verbally. These learning barriers range from fundamental study barriers (lack of finances and resources) to intense emotions caused by feelings of inferiority (when comparing themselves with the more affluent students) or genuine fear (about how they have to care for those at home, or the fear of failing in their studies for domestic reasons). Added to these are the tensions caused by constantly having to choose between peer pressure and one's own conscience. We were particularly impressed by our student participants' resilience in coping with these barriers. In fact, their perseverance is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that our students are functioning in the lower three vectors of Chickering's seven vectors of student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

What, then, can we learn from this South African case study on learning barriers in higher education? We concluded that HE institutions with diverse socioeconomic student populations cannot restrict their efforts towards achieving student equity by simply providing study bursaries. Far more is involved and needed: universities have a pressing, non-negotiable developmental task that will involve a composite institutional guidance programme on study planning and contextual coping skills. We shall leave open the question whether attendance of such a programme should be obligatory or optional both have merits and disadvantages to be considered at an institutional level. That said, the fact is that only through the suggested student guidance programme will HE institutions succeed in really developing their students' potential, and empower them to move to the highest vectors of student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993): establishing their own identity, and developing a sense of purpose and integrity, with all the implied benefits for the students themselves and society.

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