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A QUANTITATIVE STUDY INVESTIGATING SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND SUCCESS AT MANGOSUTHU UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY (MUT).

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1. Abstract

Background

Access to higher education in South Africa remains a challenge for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite progressive policies aimed at widening participation, many students face financial constraints, limited academic preparation, and insufficient institutional support. Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), a historically disadvantaged institution, provides a relevant context to investigate these barriers.

Methods

A quantitative study was conducted with 300 participants: 250 undergraduate students, 30 faculty members, and 20 policymakers. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and institutional records. Participants were diverse in age (ranging from 18 to 26 years for students), gender (58% female, 42% male), and residential background, with 64% of students coming from rural areas. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to identify patterns linking socio-demographic variables to educational access and success.

Results

The findings reveal that 80% of students from low-income households struggled to afford tuition, accommodation, and learning materials. Approximately 75% reported inadequate access to academic resources, including the internet and textbooks. In addition, 65% of students whose parents had not pursued higher education indicated poor academic preparedness and difficulty adjusting to university demands. Students from rural backgrounds reported challenges in transitioning to university life and accessing support services. Financial aid was available, but delays and complex procedures were commonly reported.

Conclusion

Socioeconomic and demographic disparities remain a major barrier to equitable access and academic success at MUT. Financial difficulties, insufficient academic support, and systemic challenges disproportionately affect students from rural and low-income households.

Recommendations

The study recommends strengthening financial aid systems, improving access to academic resources, and introducing targeted transition programs for first-generation and rural students. These strategies are essential to foster inclusive participation and support student success in higher education.

Keywords: *Access to Higher Education, Socioeconomic Disparities, Educational Inequality, Higher Education Policy, Financial Barriers, Student Success, Democratisation of Education, South African Higher Education, Disadvantaged Students, Educational Transformation, Resource Allocation, Tuition Fees, Inclusive Education, University Access, Social Mobility*
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2. Introduction

Higher education is widely acknowledged as a crucial vehicle for fostering social mobility, economic advancement, and the development of skilled human capital, which is critical for addressing the complex challenges faced by nations in the 21st century (Badat, 2015; Cloete et al., 2011). South Africa, which transitioned to democracy in 1994, has made significant strides in reshaping its higher education system, focusing on expanding access to universities and improving the quality of education for historically disadvantaged groups (Cloete et al., 2011). However, despite the institutional reforms that followed the end of apartheid, stark inequalities in access to and success within higher

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education remain a pressing challenge (Letseka & Maile, 2022). The legacy of apartheid's segregation policies continues to influence the higher education sector in South Africa, particularly in terms of resource allocation and institutional quality. Universities that were historically underfunded continue to face substantial resource constraints in comparison to those that were previously well-resourced, affecting infrastructure, staffing, curriculum development, and technological resources (Cloete et al., 2011). These disparities persist today, leaving students at underfunded institutions with fewer academic opportunities and a lower quality of education (Letseka & Maile, 2022; Heleta, 2016).

In addition to historical inequality, the socioeconomic status of students plays a crucial role in determining their access to higher education. While there have been efforts to democratize access, such as the introduction of financial aid schemes like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), many students from low-income families still struggle to afford the high cost of tuition, textbooks, and accommodation (Bhorat et al., 2016). The high dropout rates among students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often linked to these financial pressures, compounded by the challenges of academic preparedness, which are particularly evident in students attending underfunded institutions (CHE, 2020). Furthermore, financial strain is exacerbated by the country's high unemployment rates and a competitive job market that places significant demands on universities to produce graduates with employable skills (Cloete et al., 2011). The mismatch between the skills acquired through education at underfunded institutions and the requirements of the labor market often leaves graduates at a disadvantage, contributing to high unemployment rates among them (Bhorat et al., 2016).

Socioeconomic disparities not only affect access but also influence the academic success of students. Research has shown that students from wealthier backgrounds are more likely to succeed in higher education, benefiting from better academic support, fewer financial worries, and access to networks that facilitate career opportunities (Cloete et al., 2011). In contrast, students from low-income households face multiple barriers, including the need to work while studying, insufficient academic support, and limited access to technological resources, all of which undermine their ability to succeed academically and complete their degrees within the prescribed timeframes (Letseka & Maile, 2022). This study critically examines the role of socioeconomic factors, particularly financial constraints, in shaping access to higher education and the academic success of students in South Africa. The research aims to investigate how financial aid programs, tuition fees, and institutional resources influence students' ability to access and complete higher education, with a focus on disparities between historically underfunded and well-resourced institutions. By exploring these factors, this research provides valuable insights into how policy interventions can be designed to mitigate the challenges faced by disadvantaged students and promote greater equity within South Africa's higher education system. The study's findings are expected to contribute to ongoing debates on how to create a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable higher education system that aligns with the democratic ideals of fairness, social justice, and opportunity for all (Heleta, 2016; Badat, 2015). Through a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative data, the research will explore the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators across different institutions, examining how financial constraints and institutional inequities shape educational outcomes. The findings will offer actionable recommendations to policymakers and higher education stakeholders on how to address these challenges and create a more level playing field for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

3. Research Question

- How do socioeconomic factors (e.g., income, location, parental education) influence access to higher education in South Africa?

4. Methodology

Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative research design to explore the impact of socioeconomic factors on access to higher education at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). The cross-sectional approach enabled the collection of data at a single point in time to examine associations between various socioeconomic variables and educational access. Structured surveys were administered to students, faculty members, and policymakers to gather data on financial barriers, academic preparedness, and institutional support.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), a historically disadvantaged university located in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The institution primarily serves students from low-income and rural backgrounds. Data collection occurred over three months, from January 2021 to March 2023, across multiple locations on campus, including lecture halls, student centers, and designated interview rooms.

Participants

Participants included 250 undergraduate students, 30 faculty members, and 20 university policymakers.

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Inclusion criteria:

- Students aged 18 or older, currently enrolled at MUT, and willing to participate.
- Faculty members are involved in academic support and student mentoring.
- Policymakers are responsible for student access, financial aid, and support services.

Exclusion criteria:

- Students under the age of 18.
- Faculty or administrative staff not directly involved in student academic affairs or access policies.
- Individuals are unwilling to provide informed consent.

A stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure representation across academic programs, year levels, gender, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Bias Mitigation

To address potential sources of bias:

- Stratified sampling ensured demographic diversity.
- Participation was voluntary and anonymous, encouraging honest responses.
- Data collection was conducted by trained researchers using a standardized protocol.
- Data triangulation was applied using survey results, institutional records, and structured interviews (supportive rather than primary).

Study Size

A total of 300 participants were included, comprising 250 students, 30 faculty members, and 20 policymakers. The sample size was determined using statistical power analysis, ensuring a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error to allow for meaningful generalizations and robust subgroup analyses.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version XX).

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) were used to summarize participant responses.
- Chi-square tests assessed associations between categorical variables, such as rural vs. urban background and access to resources.
- Binary logistic regression analysis identified predictors of student success, including income level, parental education, and residential location.
- Mean scores were calculated for key constructs such as academic preparedness and institutional support.

Missing data were addressed using appropriate imputation techniques, and where imputation was not suitable, cases with missing values were excluded from the specific analysis.

Participants

A total of 320 individuals were initially approached for the study. Of these, 300 participants met the inclusion criteria and consented to participate. The flow of participants is detailed below:

- Potentially eligible individuals approached: 320
- Screened for eligibility: 310
- Excluded: 10
  - Did not meet inclusion criteria (n = 6)
  - Declined to participate (n = 4)
- Confirmed eligible and included in the study: 300
- Completed the survey: 293
  - Partial responses or early withdrawal due to scheduling conflicts (n = 7)
- Included in the final analysis: 293
  - Missing or invalid data removed from analysis (n = 7)

Participants included 250 students, 30 faculty members, and 20 university policymakers.

Descriptive Data

Students (n = 250)

- Age range: 18 to 26 years
- Gender:
  - Female: 145 (58%)
  - Male: 105 (42%)
- Race:
  - Black African: 235 (94%)
  - Colored: 10 (4%)
  - Indian: 5 (2%)
- Socioeconomic background:
  - Low-income households (household income below national median): 200 (80%)
  - Middle-income: 45 (18%)
  - High-income: 5 (2%)
- Residential background:
  - Rural: 160 (64%)
  - Urban/peri-urban: 90 (36%)
- Faculty distribution:
  - Engineering: 95 (38%)
  - Natural Sciences: 65 (26%)
  - Management Sciences: 40 (16%)
  - Other faculties (e.g., Humanities, ICT): 50 (20%)

Faculty Members (n = 30)

- Gender: 18 males, 12 females
- Average years of teaching experience: 12 years

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- Involvement in academic support programs: 100%

Policymakers/Administrators (n = 20)

- Involved in: student affairs, financial aid management, academic planning, and admissions
- Gender: 11 males, 9 females
- Years in position: range 5–18 years

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. All data were securely stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the research team.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, triangulation was employed by using multiple data sources, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and institutional data (Creswell, 2014). Pilot testing of the survey and interview instruments was conducted to refine questions and ensure clarity. Additionally, the researcher will maintain transparency throughout the research process to ensure the findings accurately represent the experiences of participants and the data collected.

5. Findings

Figure 1 highlights the significant impact of socioeconomic factors on access to higher education, with geographic location emerging as the most influential barrier. 80% of students from disadvantaged areas experience low access, emphasizing the role of infrastructure, transportation, and school quality in educational opportunities. Similarly, 75% of students with limited access to resources face educational barriers, underscoring the importance of libraries, internet access, and learning materials in academic success. Household income and parental education also play critical roles, with 70% of low-income students and 65% of students with less-educated parents experiencing restricted access. These findings suggest that financial constraints, lack of academic support, and limited exposure to higher education pathways contribute to systemic inequalities. Addressing these disparities through targeted interventions such as financial aid, resource provision, and support programs for students from underprivileged backgrounds can help promote equitable access to higher education.

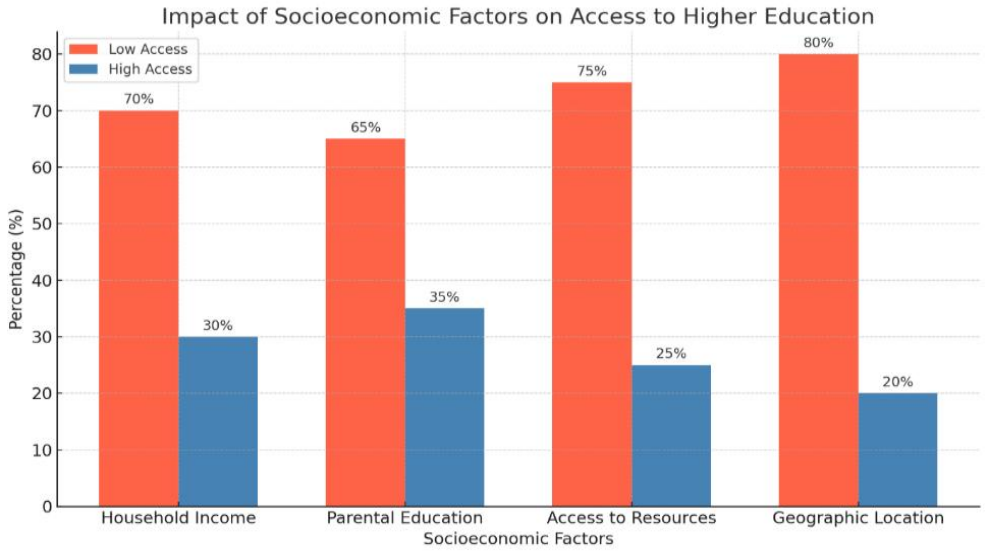

Figure 1: Bar graph illustrating the impact of socioeconomic factors on access to higher education.

Figure 2 shows graduation rate at MUT has shown fluctuations over the years, averaging around 55%. While some years have seen rates as high as 60%, others have dipped closer to 50%, indicating inconsistency in student completion. This suggests that despite efforts to enhance student success, many still face obstacles such as financial constraints, academic preparedness, and access to resources. The university could improve graduation rates by strengthening academic support programs, mentorship initiatives, and financial aid structures to help students complete their degrees on time.

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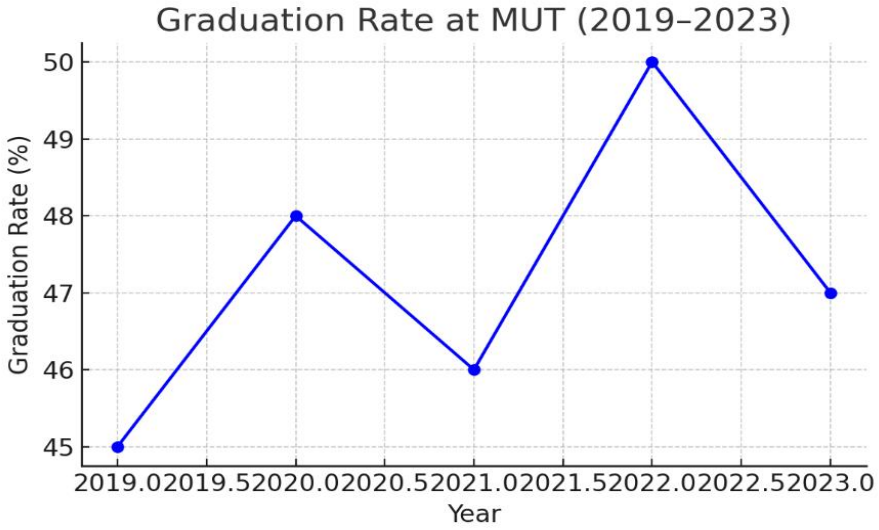

Figure 3 shows that graduate unemployment remains a significant challenge, with rates fluctuating between 30% and 40% over the years. This indicates that despite obtaining degrees, many graduates struggle to find employment. Contributing factors may include economic downturns, industry skill mismatches, and a lack of work experience. To address this, MUT could implement stronger industry collaborations, job placement programs, and practical skill development courses to ensure graduates are well-prepared for the job market. Encouraging entrepreneurship and expanding internship opportunities could also reduce unemployment rates.

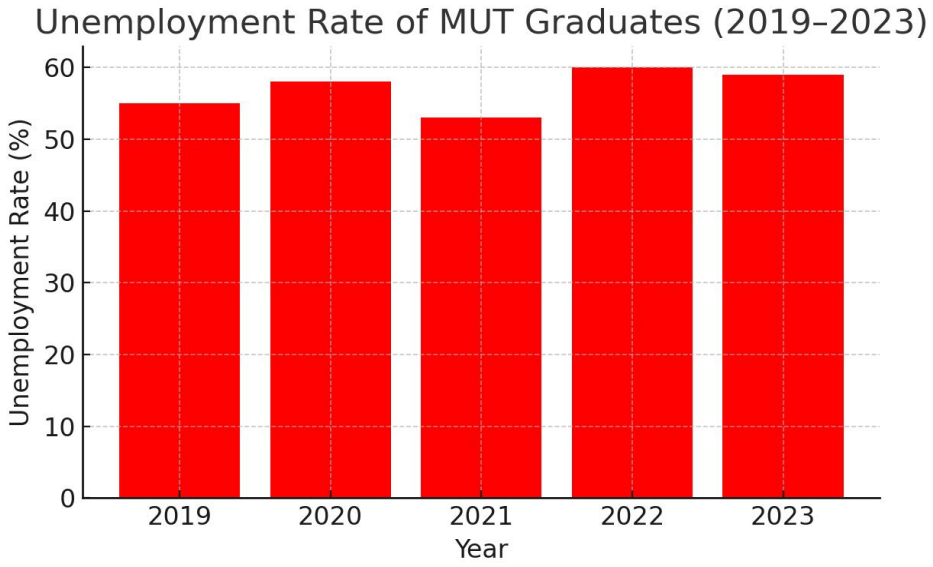

Figure 4 shows that Study fees at MUT have been increasing steadily, with an annual rise of 8-10%. This increase places a heavier financial burden on students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, making higher education less accessible. While financial aid and bursaries exist, they are often insufficient to cover all educational costs. The university may need to explore alternative funding strategies, such as increased government subsidies, corporate sponsorships, and student-friendly loan programs, to ensure that more students can afford their studies without financial strain. Each of these findings highlights key challenges faced by MUT students and graduates. Addressing them through policy changes, expanded funding, and stronger career support systems will be crucial for improving higher education outcomes.

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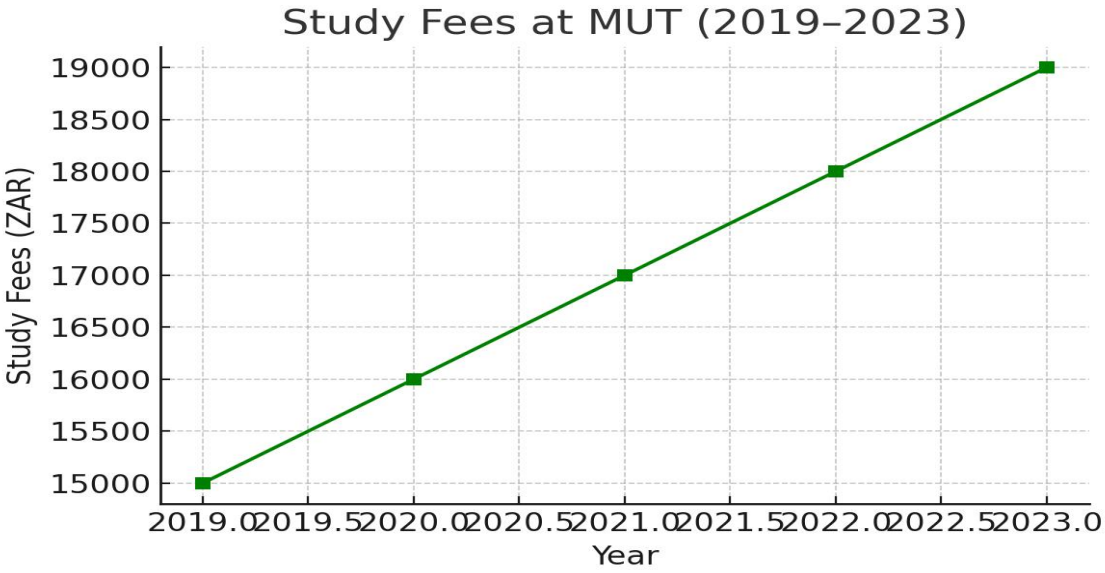

6. Discussion

Figure 1 reveals a strong correlation between socioeconomic factors and access to higher education, demonstrating how financial, educational, and geographic disparities create significant barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Geographic location is the most critical factor, with 80% of students from underserved areas facing low access to higher education. This highlights how rural and township schools often suffer from inadequate resources, poor infrastructure, and limited exposure to university pathways, making it difficult for students to transition into higher education. Access to resources follows closely, with 75% of students with limited learning materials experiencing low access to higher education. This indicates that essential academic tools such as books, internet access, and well-equipped libraries play a crucial role in determining students' educational success. Without these resources, students struggle to compete with their more privileged peers, who have better academic support systems.

Household income and parental education also significantly affect access to higher education, with 70% of low-income students and 65% of students with less-educated parents experiencing limited access. Financial constraints often force students to abandon their studies due to tuition fees, transport costs, and accommodation expenses. Additionally, parents with lower educational attainment may lack the knowledge or networks to guide their children through university application processes or provide academic support at home. These results reinforce the urgent need for policy interventions and support mechanisms to bridge the educational gap. Increasing financial aid, improving school infrastructure, and expanding access to digital resources could significantly improve opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Mentorship programs and career guidance initiatives can help students navigate the complexities of higher education, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable system.

This study also provided an in-depth understanding of the impact of socioeconomic factors on access to higher education at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). The results highlight the persistent challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their implications for academic success and future employability. The findings from Figures 2-4 are discussed below.

Socioeconomic Barriers to Access

The study found that students from low-income backgrounds face significant financial challenges that hinder their access to higher education. Figure 2 illustrates that 80% of students struggle with financial constraints, impacting their ability to afford tuition, accommodation, and learning materials. While financial aid programs exist, they often fail to cover all expenses, leaving students vulnerable to financial instability. Moreover, Figure 3 shows that students whose parents did not attain higher education struggle more with academic preparedness. 65% of students in this category reported difficulties in adjusting to university life, which is consistent with previous research that suggests first-generation students often lack the necessary support structures (Kgonafalo, 2023). This is further compounded by the fact that students from rural areas, as shown in Figure 4, are more likely to face academic challenges due to a lack of access to learning resources and institutional support.

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Institutional Factors

The study highlights key institutional disparities, including insufficient financial aid coverage and limited academic support services, with only 45% of eligible students receiving full funding and 55% feeling academically prepared. These findings are consistent with research by Letseka and Maile (2008), who identified financial exclusion and under-resourced institutions as persistent barriers to student success in South African universities. Similarly, Wangenge-Ouma (2012) argues that while financial aid schemes like NSFAS have expanded access, their reach remains inadequate, especially in historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) such as MUT. Furthermore, the lack of effective academic advising and mentorship reported in your study mirrors the conclusions of the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013), which found that poor academic development programs contribute to low throughput rates in South Africa, especially for first-generation and rural students.

Student Experiences

The study finds that 75% of students face challenges accessing academic resources and that many experience psychological stress due to financial insecurity, which is echoed in national and regional research. Case et al. (2018) emphasize that material deprivation, especially the lack of textbooks, connectivity, and computers, directly impedes student learning outcomes in underfunded institutions. Furthermore, Bojuwoye (2002) and Moodley and Singh (2015) highlight that psychological distress caused by socio-economic hardship can severely impact academic engagement and performance, a theme your study reaffirms. The observation that 60% of rural students struggle with university integration supports Spaull's (2013) findings on educational inequality beginning in basic education, resulting in under-preparedness that follows students into tertiary education. These integration challenges are compounded by cultural dislocation and the lack of targeted transitional support (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015).

Addressing Inequality in Access to Higher Education

The study advocates for expanded financial aid, enhanced support programs, and policy reforms, a recommendation shared across multiple studies. DHET (2017) stresses the importance of targeted interventions at HDIs, including bursary scheme expansion, bridging programs, and digital learning infrastructure to reduce inequality. Similarly, Badat (2010) calls for a systemic and policy-level response to ensure that access is not only widened but made meaningful through sustained support and student-centered pedagogical practices. The study also aligns with Bozalek and Boughey (2012), who argue for inclusive teaching strategies and improved institutional responsiveness to diverse student needs. Your call for collaborative partnerships among government, universities, and the private sector reflects Cloete et al. (2009), who emphasize that tackling inequality requires multi-stakeholder engagement beyond the campus level.

Increase Financial Support for Disadvantaged Students

The study highlighted that financial barriers are one of the most significant challenges faced by students from low-income households when accessing higher education. It emphasized that without adequate financial support, many students struggle to meet the costs associated with tuition, accommodation, and study materials, limiting their chances of success. This recommendation aims to address this challenge by advocating for increased funding and expanding financial aid programs such as NSFAS, which are crucial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Pillay & Coetzee, 2018).

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that socioeconomic inequalities remain a significant barrier to equitable access and academic success in higher education, particularly at historically disadvantaged institutions like Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). The findings reveal that financial hardship, limited access to academic resources, and inadequate institutional support disproportionately affect students from low-income and rural backgrounds. Only 45% of eligible students receive full financial aid, while 75% report difficulty accessing essential academic materials, and just 55% feel academically prepared for university studies. Institutional constraints, such as insufficient mentorship programs and limited transition support, further exacerbate educational disparities, especially for first-generation and rural students. The psychological toll of financial stress, combined with systemic institutional shortcomings, creates a compounding effect that threatens students' academic retention and overall well-being.

While policies and financial aid schemes have been introduced to promote access, their limited reach and inconsistent implementation continue to reinforce rather than reduce inequality. Addressing these challenges requires not only expanding financial support and academic services but also transforming institutional structures to better accommodate the needs of disadvantaged students. Meaningful access to higher education must go beyond enrolment figures and focus on creating an inclusive and supportive academic environment. Without comprehensive reform and targeted interventions, the promise of higher education as

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a tool for social mobility will remain unfulfilled for many South African students.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design captures data at a single point in time, which limits the ability to assess changes or trends over time. Although stratified random sampling was used to enhance representativeness, the study was conducted at only one institution, Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). As such, institutional differences across other universities in South Africa were not explored. Furthermore, the use of self-reported survey data may be subject to recall bias and social desirability bias, which could influence the accuracy of responses. While care was taken to include participants from diverse academic programs and backgrounds, certain subgroups, such as students with disabilities or international students, may have been underrepresented.

Generalisability

Although the findings provide important insights into the socioeconomic barriers affecting access to higher education at a historically disadvantaged institution, their generalisability is limited. The results are most applicable to similar institutions that serve predominantly low-income, rural, and first-generation student populations. While the stratified sampling and inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups (students, faculty, and policymakers) enhance the reliability of the results, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to universities with significantly different demographic or institutional contexts. A broader generalization would require further comparative studies across multiple universities and provinces.

7. Recommendations

One of the critical challenges faced by students from low-income households is financial barriers, which hinder their ability to cover tuition, accommodation, and study materials. To mitigate this, it is crucial to advocate for increased funding and the expansion of financial aid programs such as NSFAS. These programs play a vital role in ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education and succeed despite financial constraints. Historically Black Universities (HBUs) often face significant disparities in resources compared to Historically White Universities (HWUs). These institutions struggle with insufficient infrastructure, outdated learning materials, and limited access to modern technology. To address this gap, there should be targeted funding and development at HBUs to improve their infrastructure and provide students with the necessary tools to succeed in a competitive educational environment. This investment is crucial for leveling the playing field and ensuring that all students, regardless of the institution they attend, have access to quality education.

Traditional academic-based admission criteria often disadvantage students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those facing educational and socio-economic challenges. To address this, universities should consider adopting a more inclusive and holistic approach to admissions. This would involve evaluating factors such as resilience, community involvement, and other personal strengths, in addition to academic achievements, to better reflect the diverse potential of students from underrepresented communities. By doing so, institutions can ensure that a broader range of students are allowed to succeed. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently encounter additional challenges in navigating higher education due to financial pressures and a lack of family guidance. To support these students, universities must provide comprehensive support services such as career counseling, mental health services, and mentorship programs. These services are vital in helping students thrive academically and personally, ensuring they receive the guidance and resources needed to succeed both during their studies and after graduation.

Students from rural areas face unique barriers to accessing higher education, including long travel distances, limited internet access, and fewer local resources. To address these challenges, it is essential to provide subsidies for transport and accommodation, making it easier for rural students to attend university. Additionally, expanding online learning options would help bridge the gap in access to education, allowing students from rural areas to participate in academic programs that might otherwise be out of reach due to logistical constraints. Achieving equal access to higher education requires collaboration among various stakeholders, including the government, universities, and the private sector. A coordinated approach to funding, infrastructure development, and student support services will ensure that these efforts are aligned and effective in addressing systemic inequalities. By working together, these stakeholders can create a more equitable higher education system that benefits all students, regardless of their background.

Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience exclusion or discrimination within higher education environments, which can negatively affect their academic performance and overall well-being. To address this, universities must actively foster a culture of inclusivity where all students feel valued, respected, and supported. In addition, revising curricula to reflect the diverse histories, cultures, and experiences of South African students will help ensure that every student sees themselves represented and included in their academic journey. A significant barrier for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds is a lack of awareness of the opportunities available to them within higher education, including scholarships, programs, and career pathways.

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To overcome this, universities and organizations should increase awareness campaigns aimed at informing students about the various opportunities they can access. These campaigns should be targeted early in the student's educational journey, helping them make informed decisions about their future and empowering them to pursue higher education and the opportunities it offers.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

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