

Promoting fairness in access to higher education in an unequal society: The Student Equity and Talent Management Unit

Authors: Jennifer Koen, Rakhee Naik, Megan Reeves, Arthee Roopnarain, Simangele Lekhuleni, Brett Bowman & Zena Richards

Quality education is advanced as key to South Africa's progression towards increased employment opportunities, improved standards of living for the majority, and greater social cohesion and equality among citizens. Furthermore, there is growing recognition that higher education plays a central role in a country's socio-economic development and advancement to global competitiveness. However, owing to the inequities entrenched by the system of apartheid, many of South Africa's citizens still do not have the opportunity to access higher levels of education and the consequent improved employment prospects. There is a significant need to develop the "capabilities of the historically disadvantaged to take advantage of the opportunities that democracy, openness and the economy afford" (NPC, 2011b, p.412).

It has been argued that failure to access higher education, and furthermore, to succeed in higher education, is associated, as much, with a lack of familiarity with, and capacity to navigate the system, as with academic capability (Conley, 2008). An increasing concern for South African universities is the lack of preparedness of students for university study and university life, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Wilson-Strydom, 2010).

To meet South Africa's development needs, it has been argued that there needs to be an increase in the number of South Africans, particularly young black South Africans, accessing, and succeeding at, higher education. Furthermore, a focus on scarce skills and professional qualifications in the fields of science, engineering and technology (SET), which can contribute directly to infrastructural improvement and economic development, is imperative.

As part of the local higher education sector's response to these challenges, The Student Equity and Talent Management Unit (SETMU) based at the University of Witwatersrand hosts projects which aim to increase access to higher education among South African youth, to encourage and support studies in the fields of science, engineering and technology, and to contribute to equity and transformation in higher education. SETMU runs a number of programmes which seek to prepare young South Africans, both academically and psycho-socially, for university life.

SETMU hosts the Targeting Talent Programme/Talent Development Programme (TTP/TDP) which works with learners from all over South Africa, who demonstrate academic potential, to encourage university access and success. Unlike many programmes, TTP/TDP does not focus on remedial activities but rather on supplementation and enrichment and on enhancing opportunities for talent development. The programme has strongly emphasized a transformation agenda that enables previously disadvantaged learners to pursue careers, historically reserved for an elite few. This strategy ultimately aims to foster the development of future educated generations, thus working towards redressing the inequalities created under apartheid and enabling the South African economy to emerge as a global competitor. Furthermore, SETMU supports grade 11 and 12 learners from non-traditional feeder schools to universities, through academic supplementation and mentorship, to access higher education, through the Go to University to Succeed (GUTS) Programme. SETMU, through the Carnegie Bale Scholarship Programme, also supports black female students, both financially and psychosocially throughout four years of undergraduate university study in the fields of science and engineering.

Background & Introduction

In the eighteen years since the dawn of democracy in 1994, South Africa has made indisputable progress towards overcoming the injustices of apartheid through the constitutional entrenchment of fair statutory rights, a fairer allocation of resources, and improved access to education and basic services. However, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with the majority of its citizens living in poverty and still unable to benefit from the fruits of democracy (NPC, 2011; World Bank, 2012).

In 2011 the National Planning Commission (NPC) released a *Diagnostic Report* on the challenges facing South Africa and the impediments to achieving a truly unified, democratic, non-racial and equitable society in which all citizens have access to the opportunities that are due to them. The NPC (2011) identified eliminating poverty and inequality as key strategic objectives. Although the high levels of poverty and inequality are rooted in the discriminatory policies of South Africa's apartheid history, the NPC (2011) noted that they are perpetuated by vast unemployment and poor educational outcomes. Thus investment in education and people's capabilities is considered a critical component in the country's overarching drive towards the elimination of poverty and social inequality. The NPC has highlighted the need to develop the "capabilities of the historically disadvantaged to take advantage of the opportunities that democracy, openness and the economy afford" (NPC, 2011, p.412).

While a range of educational outcome measures has been shown to impact these root causes of many social problems, a higher education qualification has been identified as robustly protective against unemployment and its various correlates (NPC, 2011). At an individual level, higher levels of education have been linked with increased individual income, improved standards of living, access to better employment opportunities, and improved health outcomes. Higher education is also increasingly recognised as critical to economic development (Pillay, 2011; Reddy, 2004). Furthermore, in order to meet the scientific, industrial, infrastructural and innovation development needs of the country, there is a need to increase the number of competent and qualified professionals in these areas through focusing on access to, and throughput in the science, engineering and technology (SET) fields.

Although the number of enrolments at tertiary institutions in South Africa has doubled since 1990, the national participation rate in higher education remains low, at a meagre 16 % (Council on Higher Education, 2010). Furthermore, of those individuals accessing higher education, 30 % drop out at first year level, and, another 20 % drop out in their second and third years of study (Letseka & Breier, 2008). It has been estimated that one in three university students and one in two technicon students dropped out of their respective studies between 2000 and 2004 (Letseka & Breier, 2008). Only about 44 % of students graduate from higher education institutions. With a drop-out rate of over 50 %, a challenge facing the South African higher education sector is not just access to university, but success at university (Letseka, 2009). These low graduation rates are an impediment to the development goals of the country, and are in many ways reflective of the socio-economic and structural injustices which continue to plague our country (Wilson-Strydom, 2011).

Against the backdrop of the challenges faced by the country in overcoming poverty and inequality, this paper presents a programmatic approach to contributing to broader social justice goals through the promotion of access to, and success in, higher education by talented young people.

In South Africa, universities, as social institutions, arguably have an obligation to contribute to the overarching national objectives of development, transformation and equity (NPC, 2011; Wilson – Strydom, 2011).

Although access to higher education is no longer discriminatory along racial lines, most higher education institutions require applicants to achieve certain minimum standards in order to gain entrance into various fields of study. In order to be accepted to study courses in the SET fields, learners must achieve relatively good results in their school leaving exams. However, many of the schools serving the majority of South Africa's population are historically disadvantaged, and, despite a more equitable distribution of educational investment, largely perform poorly academically, fail to provide learners with the requisite literacy and numeracy skills and grossly under-prepare learners for university (Nair, 2002; NPC, 2011). Although legally desegregated, schools, in many respects, remain racially segregated, de facto, as a result of historical socio-economic disadvantage. Learners attending historically black schools are less likely to meet the entrance requirements for higher education than those from historically white or private schools and this may be an impediment to achieving equity goals at a societal level (Essack & Quayle, 2008). Furthermore, individuals from disadvantaged schools may struggle with the academic demands of university courses, thereby compromising the likelihood of their success.

It has been argued that increasing access to university, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, without making provisions to increase the likelihood of success, is in fact perpetuating social injustice (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). Without the support in place to facilitate success, students drop-out of university, or are academically excluded, without a qualification but bearing the burden of student debt and likely damaged self-esteem (Wilson –Strydom, 2011).

In response to these challenges, various universities have implemented 'access' or 'bridging' programmes, as alternate routes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to meet the necessary requirements for entrance into university courses (Essack & Quayle, 2008). Such programmes have however been criticised as deficit-focused, locating problems with individual students, rather than resulting from unjust social structures (Smit, 2012). Furthermore, it has been argued that "the deficiency model of labelling black students has the potential not only to stigmatise black students as inferior but also to impede the ability of these universities to critically interrogate the relevance of their academic programs to the incoming student group" (Mabokela, 2000, 147). In focusing on past inequities, students in such programmes may experience a sense of stigma, or inferiority (Essack & Quayle, 2008). It is increasingly acknowledged that in order to be successful, programmes which seek to address the gap in university-preparation, should focus rather on the strengths of individuals (Smit, 2012).

The provision of support to first-year university students is certainly important. However, given the challenges experienced by tertiary institutions of under-prepared students and the crises in the South African school system, there is convincing argument that South African tertiary institutions have a critical role to play in the preparation of students for higher education while they are still at school (Christie, 2008 in Wilson-Strydom, 2010).

University readiness

Beyond the challenges regarding access to higher education, research has shown that failure to succeed in higher education is associated, as much, with a lack of familiarity with the university environment and its institutional culture, as with academic capability (Conley, 2008). An increasing concern for South African universities is the lack of preparedness of students for university study and university life, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Wilson-Stydom,

2010). It has been argued that there is an important distinction between university *eligibility* and university *readiness* – therefore, despite students meeting the access requirements they may still not succeed as a result of not being ready.

University readiness refers to the “level of preparation a student needs in order to enrol and succeed- without remediation” at a tertiary institution (Conley, 2007, p. 5). University readiness comprises of the following four components:

- Key cognitive strategies - the “practiced behaviors that become a habitual way of working toward more thoughtful and intelligent action”, including: intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, analysis of data, reasoning, argumentation and proof, interpretation, precision and accuracy and problem solving (Conley, 2007, p. 13).
- Key content for subject areas – the understanding of key content in a particular subject area through utilisation of key cognitive strategies.
- Good academic behaviors – including self-monitoring skills and study skills which are necessary for success at university. Furthermore, these include: the ability to evaluate understanding of current work, the ability to identify when assistance is required, time management, note taking etc.
- Contextual skills and awareness - This component refers to the student’s ability to associate their cultural backgrounds to the culture of university being able to interact with a diverse group of individuals within a university setting.

In addition to the major concern regarding financing higher education, a lack of competency in the above components of readiness may be associated with failure or drop-out.

The Student Equity and Talent Management Unit (SETMU)

The Student Equity and Talent Management Unit (SETMU) based at the University of Witwatersrand hosts projects which aim to increase access to higher education among South African youth, to encourage and support studies in the fields of science, engineering and technology, and to contribute to equity and transformation in higher education. In line with the commission’s recommendations, and a fundamental belief in human potential, SETMU seeks to identify and build on existing talents among young people, frequently in disadvantaged communities.

SETMU acknowledges the notion that while innate abilities are important, the opportunities provided by society are crucial to the development of talents (cf. Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius & Worrell, 2011). SETMU embraces a fundamental belief in human potential and aims to facilitate access to opportunities for talent development among young South Africans, who may otherwise not have utilised their potential. SETMU runs a number of programmes which seek to prepare young South Africans, both academically and psycho-socially, for university life.

The Targeting Talent/ Talent Development Programme

SETMU coordinates the Targeting Talent/Talent Development Programme (TTP/TDP) ¹. The TTP/TDP programme, in its 6th year of implementation, is a pre-university enrichment programme which aims to increase the academic, social and psychological preparation of academically talented learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds for admission to, and success at, South African

¹ The Targeting talent Programme (TTP) and the Talent Development Programme (TDP) are essentially the same programme but have different titles according to donors thus the difference in name is noted. The primary difference between the two programmes is with regard to one of the selection criteria. The Targeting Talent Programme (TTP) recruits learners only from disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas the talent Development Programme focuses on academically talented learners irrespective of economic status.

selective universities. In this way, TTP/TDP seeks to contribute to the national transformation agenda and is grounded in the University's strategic imperative to further equity goals.

The programme hosts three contact sessions for learners annually over a period of two/three years². Two of these sessions are focused on academic supplementation, and one on academic enrichment. The academic supplementation sessions primarily seek to enact social justice by helping learners, primarily from disadvantaged backgrounds, to improve their school performance and thereby compete on an equal footing with more privileged learners, for access to higher education. The academic enrichment session, in addition to providing learners with academic support, aims to help learners gain insight into subject content not covered in school, to instil a good work ethic of studying, to motivate and to prepare learners to navigate the university culture. In 2012, 610 learners were part of the programme. Of these, 338 grade 12 learners graduated from the programme in 2012.

The contact sessions provide learners with key content, or knowledge in subject areas that first year students are expected to have – mainly in science, engineering and technology disciplines. There is also a strong emphasis on the learners' personal development. Learners participate in a range of social activities which are designed to encourage them to achieve a work-life balance and to explore development outside of formal study. Learners are encouraged to participate in cultural activities such as dance and music appreciation, and a variety of sporting activities. Furthermore, in drawing learners from different backgrounds and parts of the country, the TTP/TDP provides these young people with the opportunity to experience diversity and to learn about other cultures from their peers. This also helps them to adapt to the multicultural environment of university life.

Learners are further encouraged to develop self-reflexivity (a critical component of self-monitoring and awareness skills) through reflecting on their participation in the programme and presenting their experiences in public fora or writing TTP/ TDP newsletter articles.

The programme also includes a significant mentoring and life-skills education component. During the contact sessions, learners are mentored by university students (Resident Assistants), several of whom have come through the programme themselves. The Resident Assistants stay with the learners during the programme. Evaluations suggest that this model of mentorship by university students, is not only beneficial to the learners, but also to the personal development of the Resident Assistants.

Career Guidance

Despite the TTP/TDP learners high aspirations for their future, many are uncertain of what particular career paths entail. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently do not have access to qualified professionals in various fields. A careers day event for all grade 11 learners is hosted annually during the academic enrichment contact session, held in June/ July. The aim of the event is to provide learners with information and exposure to various career interests and study opportunities. Emphasis is also placed on providing learners with university application, enrolment and funding information which will assist them in applying to tertiary institutions and securing funding for their studies. It is envisioned that the information received by the learners will assist with their career choice decision making and enable them to access higher education opportunities. Through providing learners with access to these opportunities, it is hoped that this will enable the learners to become professionals who will contribute to their communities

² This is dependent on the cohort model that is utilized. Learners are recruited for participation either in Grade 10, or Grade 11, and are part of the programme until they are in Grade 12, when they graduate from the programme.

Research training

A central component of the TTP/TDP's enrichment activities offered to learners is research training. Research literacy and research skills are central to success at higher education in most, if not all disciplines (Conley, 2003; 2007). However, learners rarely leave school with an adequate understanding of research and the necessary skills to support them in tertiary education. The TTP/TDP curriculum aims to expose learners to research skills in order to prepare them for this aspect of higher education.

Over the course of three years, learners in the TTP/TDP receive training in social research methods of data collection (including constructing questionnaires and conducting interviews) and analysis (basic quantitative and qualitative analysis). In addition, learners are taught about the ethics of research, what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, and the basics of referencing and acknowledging others' intellectual property. Learners frequently enter higher education with limited understanding of the basics of research and important academic practices like referencing and avoiding plagiarism (Conley, 2007).

As part of their training, working as teams in their schools, learners are required to select and describe a community and to conduct a community needs assessment, using the skills of data collection and analysis which they have been taught in the social research classes. Learners present their needs assessment describing their process of data collection and analysis, and then determine and evaluate possible solutions to the needs identified. In their final year in the programme, learners select one of the identified needs and plan and implement a proposed solution. They then report on the process of implementation.

In addition to furnishing the learners with basic research skills, the research course is scaffolded to help learners to develop key cognitive strategies and critical thinking-skills that have been linked to university success (Conley, 2003; 2008). The social research curriculum helps learners to become information literate through encouraging and guiding them to access information from a variety of sources and to assess the quality, reliability and relevance of information gathered. Learners develop skills needed to identify the main points of an argument in a source and to integrate information from different sources into a coherent line of reasoning.

In requiring learners to explore real-world issues through a research project, the course seeks to encourage curiosity, open-mindedness and the ability to consider different points of view on an issue. Learners learn to understand issues in context, to identify and define problems, to design feasible strategies to answer questions and to develop potential solutions to the identified problems. The implementation phase of the practical, in particular, is designed to enhance problem-solving skills in encouraging them to anticipate possible procedural complexities in carrying out a project, and to identify methods for overcoming these.

During the course of their community projects, learners submit drafts for assessment and are expected to improve their work on the basis of feedback received. In this way learners develop the capacity to accept and engage with constructive criticism.

The research curriculum is designed to enhance learners' analytic skills through raising an awareness of various research methodologies and methods of analysis and be able to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each. Through lectures and their community project, learners are taught the skills of generalising but also identifying biases and fallacies, and to understand the difference between summary and description, and interpretation and analysis. The course encourages learners to compare and contrast various perspectives on an issue, to use multiple methods and resources to

analyse a problem and to identify limitations of information collected and of the conclusions which can be drawn.

The social research course also affords learners the opportunity to practice and develop good communication skills in requiring them to present information logically and coherently, in both written and oral formats; to present information objectively where necessary; to use information to support an argument and provide reliable high quality information in a coherent line of reasoning.

After the programme

SETMU is currently tracking TTP/TDP graduates in the hope of improving and evaluating the programme. The first cohort of learners, who were part of the programme from 2007-2009, should ideally be in their third year of study, in 2012. In terms of the information gathered to date, in 2012, 89.21% of tracked TTP/TDP cohort 1 graduates are currently enrolled in a higher education institution, with 37.10% progressing as they ideally should. Furthermore, since 2010 there has been an increase in the number of students from this cohort progressing through tertiary institutions from 71% of the cohort in 2010 to 89% in 2012.

Graduates enrolled at tertiary institutions were asked to indicate their performance over a three year period. Results indicate that over the 2010 and 2011 period, the majority of TTP students passed their academic year (73% and 75% students enrolled in each year of study respectively). While a few students indicated that they had had to repeat courses over the 2010 and 2011 period, provided that learners enroll and successfully complete their university careers, even if not within the allotted time frame, still contributes to the development of future generations of educated individuals able to contribute towards redressing the inequalities of the apartheid regime.

Despite programmes such as TTP/TDP aiming to contribute to national transformation, students often experience obstacles which hinder their progression towards enrolling or successfully completing their degree. A lack of funding for tertiary studies in South Africa is noted to be a major hindering factor to students accessing higher education. This is more so from low income families who are often caught in a cycle of poverty (Lam, Ardington, Branson, Goostrey, Leibbrandt, 2010). Many students (approximately 70%) who enroll at tertiary institutions come from low income socio-economic backgrounds (Letseka, 2009), and a lack of funding for tertiary studies is a prominent reason for many students dropping-out of higher education.

Most of the TTP/TDP learners report relying on receiving funding through bursaries or loans to pursue their studies. A wide variety of funding is available for students entering tertiary institutions. However, not many gain access to, or are even aware of such funding options, which often results in students having to leave their studies, even if they are coping psychologically and academically. Furthermore, financial difficulties are likely to put pressure on students which might compromise their academic performance and psychosocial wellbeing. The TTP/TDP offers learners access to a clearinghouse of bursary information, and makes the options for funding available to learners for higher education explicitly known during contact sessions. In addition, learners are provided with guidance in applying for bursaries and completing university application forms.

Support to educators

Over and above the learner contact sessions held three times a year, SETMU also aims to provide educators within the various communities across South Africa the opportunity to enhance their level of knowledge and thus redress past inequalities. Mathematics and science educators from schools participating in TTP/TDP, in the mathematics and science field are invited to participate in the educator programme. The aim of the workshop is to enrich the mathematics and science curriculum taught by educators to learners. Educators receive input on effective methods of teaching these

subjects by experts in the field. The workshop provides an opportunity for educators to develop their own innovative approaches to teaching concepts, and is a platform for educators to network and exchange academic ideas and to share their experiences of teaching with other educators. It is intended that through the workshop educators will enhance their teaching of difficult content and be empowered to support their learners in improving their performance in mathematics and science. The educators also share their knowledge with others and further contribute to improving the curriculum and academic performance at their schools. Educators and schools play a vital role in producing quality education which contributes to the development of learners who may play leading roles in changing their communities.

The Go to University to Succeed (GUTS) Programme

The GUTS programme supports the aspirations of 73 learners selected from five schools in Orange Farm, Gauteng (Aha-Thuto, Jabulile, Lakeside, Leshata and Raphela Secondary School). Orange Farm is an underdeveloped area and most of the learners come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. These learners need academic and social support to access higher education, given that their schools are largely under-resourced and many of them will be first-generation university students. The programme offers them mentoring and tutoring sessions to both inspire the learners to study further and assist them to achieve their academic goals.

These mentoring and tutoring sessions help learners to achieve the results necessary to gain access to university and help them to develop the skills necessary for them to cope with, and succeed at, university. Furthermore, by exposing learners to mentors and tutors who come from backgrounds similar to theirs, and who have already succeeded in accessing university, GUTS learners are encouraged, motivated and inspired to achieve success. This is one of the key aims of the programme, as is evident in a statement given by a GUTS learner, “... *It encouraged us as learners of different schools and backgrounds to have goals in life and strive to be the best in our lives and...Do everything in our will and power to succeed.*” Another learner reiterated that seeing other learners from their schools go forward and study further has inspired them to pursue higher education, “...*It has shown us that we need to push ourselves... I learned a lot from previous GUTS learners...*”

The GUTS programme takes place every Saturday morning at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). By exposing learners to a university environment, it is believed that the learners will be increasingly familiar with the university environment and be able to cope better when they pursue their tertiary studies. The mentoring sessions are hosted by Wits University students. It is believed that, by affording learners the opportunity to engage with current university students, they will be able to gain insight into the university culture, an important aspect of succeeding at university (Conley, 2007). GUTS informs learners about how to access university, including application procedures, entrance requirements and, crucially, how to fund their studies.

The biggest obstacle to learners accessing university is their lack of finances (Letseka, 2009). Information regarding financial options on how to pay their university and residence fees is invaluable to the GUTS learners as all of them are from economically disadvantaged households. Sixty-five percent of the GUTS learners reported that their lack of finances would most likely prevent them from accessing university. The programme assists learners in this regard by informing them of possible bursaries and financial assistance options available to them.

The GUTS programme’s mentoring sessions, and the workshops it facilitates, are underpinned by the philosophy of the “Habits of Mind” (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p.1). A “habit of mind” is a “disposition toward behaving intelligently when confronted with problems, the answers to which are not immediately known” (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p.1). The “habits of mind” are those actions, which are

consistently applied by successful people. The “habits of mind” include 16 behaviours (Costa & Kallick, 2000) which are:

- being persistent, managing impulsivity,
- being empathetic and respectful towards others,
- thinking flexibly,
- thinking metacognitively,
- aiming for accuracy, thinking critically,
- being able to learn from past mistakes,
- communicating clearly,
- being creative,
- appreciating what you have,
- being responsible for your actions,
- finding humour in difficult situations,
- learning continuously,
- thinking interdependently
- and being aware of all of your senses .

The “habits of mind” are closely linked with the factors, which have been found to predict success at tertiary institutions (for example see Harman, 1994; Herbert & Reis, 1999). Therefore, the GUTS programme aims to develop learners both socially and academically, in order to ensure that they are capable of accessing and succeeding at university despite their environmental circumstances.

The GUTS programme, although smaller than the TTP/TDP, has a significant role to play in the lives of many previously and currently disadvantaged learners. GUTS serves to instil a belief in its learners that university is not for a select few, and that despite their circumstances they are able to access university. The programme supports and develops learners academically, ultimately aiming to assist them in accessing university and overcome the current socio-economic and historical disadvantages with which their families have had to contend.

The Carnegie BALE Scholarship Programme

The Carnegie Bale scholarship programme, based at the University of the Witwatersrand, aimed to promote access to and success at higher education institutions for academically talented black females from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programme, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, provided female students in the field of science and engineering with financial, academic, social and psychological support from their first year of study through to honours level.

In addition to providing financial support to these students, the programme offered a mentorship component which involved primarily academics based at the university. This equipped the students with psychological and social support needed to succeed in their studies . Furthermore, academic support was provided to BALE students who required assistance. This allowed them the opportunity to maintain and improve their academic performance. The Carnegie Bale scholarship programme, through the support provided, contributed to the national transformation agenda by providing previously disadvantaged females the opportunity to access and succeed at a higher education institution.

The scholarship programme has graduated two cohorts of students since its inception. Twenty young women were recruited to be a part of the programme, with two students currently being

hosted by the programme. In addition to the twenty students selected, two mainstream students were provided with the resources needed to fund their honours year of study in the Faculty of Science. Currently, 61% of these students have obtained their undergraduate degree in the fields of science or engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand. It is envisaged that through the current model of the programme, future generations of black female students in the fields of science and engineering benefit from the opportunities provided by the scholarship thus encouraging an increase in the number of skilled professionals within South Africa who are enabled to assist in furthering equity goals within the country.

Challenges

Evaluating the efficacy of the programmes, particularly the GUTS programme and its mentorship focus, in terms of quantitative measures as demanded by donors has been a significant challenge. In many respects the impact of programmes such as those run by SETMU are intangible and difficult to quantify, but are nevertheless significant in the lives of programme participants and beneficiaries. Another challenge constantly grappled with by the unit is defining and assessing the notion of talent potential among applicants to the programmes. Furthermore, establishing selection criteria which adequately take into account the contextual factors which might negatively impact on a learner's performance but still acknowledge academic merit and achievement, and do not perpetuate existing inequities, is an ongoing challenge.

Conclusion

South Africa faces enormous challenges in terms of ensuring equity, access to, and success in, higher education. SETMU's aim in working towards social justice in access to higher education has been positively received by stakeholders, and has assisted certain learners to access higher education opportunities. However, the issues faced in this arena are beyond a single-university solution. Partnerships between institutions need to be developed and significant reform in education more broadly is imperative.

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