

## Rural Education Access Programme

# FACTORS THAT FACILITATE SUCCESS FOR DISADVANTAGED HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

An investigation into approaches used by REAP, NSFAS and  
selected higher education institutions



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## **Rural Education Access Programme (REAP)**

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An Associate Body of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

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## FOREWORD

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The Rural Education Access Programme's (REAP) mission is to provide Higher Education opportunities for marginalised rural youth and to provide holistic, yet tailored, developmental support so that these young people may overcome inherent economic, academic and social hurdles in order to realise their potential. Through the development and empowerment of skilled, community-conscious graduates, REAP reduces poverty and makes a contribution to securing peace, socio-economic justice, development, freedom, dignity and integrity for the individual South African and the community.

REAP has pursued this mission since 2001. Preceding bursary programmes of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference provided more than 12 years of experience for REAP to build on. REAP embarked on this research project - *Factors that facilitate success for disadvantaged Higher Education students* - informed by our understanding of the particular and many needs of marginalised students and aware of the many students struggling to realise their aspirations in South African universities. Through this report we seek to contribute to the debate and actions of people, programmes and institutional leadership intent on enabling success for academically able yet educationally, economically and socially deprived young South Africans. These young people, who have struggled against the odds to achieve matriculation in challenging circumstances, deserve attention, opportunity and support to enable their success. Our country will be the richer for their contributions!

We thank all those who participated in the project – students, institutional and NSFAS staff members, reference group members and the Research and Academic Development team, (Sharman Wickham, Gonda Coetzee, Barbara Jones and Tracy Bailey) whose rigorous enquiry was matched with sustained enthusiasm. We are especially grateful to Irish Aid (in particular Annalize Fourie) not only for funding the project, but also for engaging with it along the way with passionate interest. Irish Aid sustained REAP in the early years and the Programme and REAP graduates are evidence of Ireland's contribution to the development of South Africans.

Supporting disadvantaged students is our special commitment. We know many others share this commitment. We trust that this research report will help to inform us and others how better to provide opportunities and support that will enable successful and rewarding study. Sufficient numbers of successful graduates are imperative for the well being of South Africa!

*Glenda Glover*  
*June 2008*

We want to highlight to the reader that in this report, the term 'disadvantaged students' is used as a shorthand to refer to an array of 'disadvantaging factors' that impact on the ability of poor, rural youth to access and successfully complete higher education studies. Such factors arise as a result of poverty and impoverished early educational backgrounds, as well as in the perspectives, mindsets and institutional architectures of the dominant global society. We recognise that the use of the term 'disadvantaged students', and indeed other common terminology used, may be misleading insofar as it has the effect of placing the challenges explored in this study at the door of the individual students themselves, and does not give expression to the fact that we believe in the inherent value of human beings and their endeavours. As such, we are committed to continuing to grapple with the language used to talk and write about these issues, and to being more conscious of and alert to the need to address language in future research briefs.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report documents the findings of a research study conducted in South Africa between April 2007 and May 2008 by a small team of researchers under the auspices of the consultancy Research and Academic Development. The study was commissioned by the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) and funded by Irish Aid. Drawing on primary data written up as case studies conducted in five higher education institutions<sup>1</sup> as well as selected literature on student access, retention and throughput, this report highlights factors that impact on the success of disadvantaged students in the higher education sector. In effect, two key questions are addressed:

1. What are the factors that facilitate (and inhibit) access to and completion of higher education studies by disadvantaged undergraduate students?
2. What recommendations can be made for improving access to and completion of such studies for these students?

In each of the five case studies, the research team interviewed a range of academic teaching and support staff and staff engaged in student services. The undergraduate students sampled in this study were REAP students, who thus had NSFAS loans as well as being supported by the REAP programme, and students who were not supported by REAP but had NSFAS loans. Data was also collected from REAP staff, board members and volunteers.

The report outlines a complex combination of factors - financial, academic and socio-cultural – representing a multiplicity of challenges for disadvantaged students, and argues for a package of needs to be taken into account when designing adequate support for these students.

Chapter One of the report provides the background to, motivation for and purpose of the study, framing the context for the following chapters, which focus on a range of factors that contribute to success. In sketching the background to this study, recent changes in the higher education sector are outlined along with key difficulties related to student access, retention and throughput. The challenges presented by diverse student populations, and the difficulties higher education institutions face in coping with them, are reflected in the high dropout and failure rates in higher education systems, particularly in the first year of study, not only in South Africa but also in countries around the world.

Of the increasingly diverse range of students entering higher education in South Africa, this study focuses on and speaks to a category that has been termed, for convenience, 'disadvantaged' students. The key elements of disadvantage were identified as:

- Geography (specifically, students from rural areas),
- Financial resources (which often goes hand-in-hand with geographic disadvantage),

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<sup>1</sup> The five institutions visited included two universities, a university of technology which had been formed after the merger of two former technikons, and two comprehensive universities, which had formed as a result of mergers between universities and technikons.

- Schooling (where students have often attended under-resourced, low performance, typically ex-DET<sup>2</sup> schools),
- Language (where the language of tuition in the higher education institution may be a second or even a third language for the student), and
- Other socio-cultural factors which may prevent students from being adequately prepared for, and able to participate effectively in, tertiary studies.

In sketching the background, Chapter One of the report refers to a number of previous studies drawn on by the research team, including those conducted by REAP and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) as well as the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) and the Council of Higher Education (CHE). Key findings from these studies indicate that students who receive sustained support on the REAP programme are more likely to complete their studies in a shorter time, that a rural background may have a negative influence on student success, and that inadequate financial resources are one of the most important reasons cited for students dropping out of university.

Useful theoretical understandings of student retention and throughput found in the literature include those by Tinto (1993) who writes that the extent to which a student is able to integrate academically and socially depends, in part, on his / her pre-entry characteristics (prior schooling, family background, skills and competences, aspirations and goals). In addition, the research team drew on the work of Bitzer and Troskie-De Bruin (2004:121) who argue that academic integration is enhanced via positive interactions and relationships with institutional staff, while social integration depends on the student's involvement in extra-curricular activities and interactions with peers.

The literature also points to the role of higher education institutions, and the higher education sector as a whole, in promoting or inhibiting student success. From this perspective, the emphasis is not so much on the unpreparedness for higher education of disadvantaged students, but rather on *the unpreparedness of the institutions themselves*. The problems of a 'clash of cultures' between traditional higher education institutions and new cohorts of disadvantaged students within the South African context have been well documented by Stephen (2003) and Mandew (2003).

In Chapter Two of the report, the findings from the five case studies related to financial factors are synthesised. This data confirms the findings of previous studies in demonstrating that disadvantaged students from distant and rural areas face a particular set of financial challenges in the higher education environment as a result of their geographic and socio-economic circumstances. While the research team found that a number of systems, mechanisms and interventions are being implemented in response to students' financial needs, these are not always unproblematic.

Students' financial challenges begin with the need to pay the application fees charged by each institution - a very real barrier which may either exclude disadvantaged students from higher education altogether or preclude them from applying to more than one institution. Registration and tuition fees are an even greater financial barrier. While the state-funded NSFAS loan covers these fees at many institutions, if students apply late, they may not be able to access financial aid

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Education and Training: i.e. schools previously reserved for black Africans under the apartheid dispensation.



for the first semester or even for the entire first year of study. Inability to pay these costs at the end of the first year results in students being excluded from re-registering. Coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, these students typically do not have access to information about institutional processes regarding registration and application for financial aid, so disadvantaged first-year students very often submit late applications.

Once application, registration and tuition fees have been paid, there are still a range of other financial challenges facing students such as having to find affordable accommodation in an unfamiliar city environment, financing meals and transport, and, to some extent, textbooks and equipment, with very limited financial resources or knowledge of how to manage their finances. Researchers noted that it is not just their own finances that affect disadvantaged students: concern about financial problems at home also reduce their ability to concentrate on their studies.

Another key finding highlighted in Chapter Two relates to the variation in the way NSFAS funds are disbursed by individual higher education institutions. It was found that in many cases the funds do not provide full financial cover for students, leading to ongoing contestation as to whether NSFAS loan allocations should be larger, and cater more comprehensively for fewer students, or whether they should be smaller and offer wider access.

The stress students experience in relation to meeting the variety of financial needs outlined in Chapter Two can and does impact on their academic achievement and leads to social alienation. This illustrates the complex way in which financial circumstances interweave with other aspects of student success. Sufficient financial resources to enable students to live above mere survival mode, and fully engage both academically and in campus life, can thus be considered a vital underpinning condition for academic and social integration, and ultimately student success.

Chapter Two also describes how REAP works with NSFAS to assist students to access the state study loan and, in addition, supplements the NSFAS loan with an access package, a grant tailored to their students' most critical financial needs: facilitating registration, the purchase of books and technical equipment, travel and a small monthly subsistence allowance for meals and / or accommodation and basic toiletries. REAP students interviewed reported that this small grant had made the difference between success and failure for them, as they would otherwise not have been able to make up the shortfall not covered by the NSFAS loan.

It was found that REAP support not only facilitates the process of accessing the NSFAS loan and guaranteeing payment of the university registration fee, but the good relationships that develop between REAP student advisors and staff in the financial aid departments of the institutions help to smooth the way should students experience financial problems. Finally, the REAP model of financial assistance was reported to be effective in that it requires students to manage the grant responsibly by way of a properly drawn up personal budget, to report on their expenditure to REAP, and to plan ahead by requesting grant payments timeously.

Financial assistance provided by the higher education institutions to needy students is usually done through their own bursary schemes which tend to be aimed at high achievers. In addition to institutional bursaries, financial aid departments reported that companies offer large numbers of bursaries every year for disadvantaged students who do well in their studies. Here again, communication of these opportunities to disadvantaged students and timeous application are critical.

It became clear to the research team that because of the interaction financial aid staff in institutions enjoy with disadvantaged students, they appear to be much more aware of the kinds of problems faced by these students, including academic and social / personal difficulties, than many of the other staff interviewed. They could, therefore, and, in many cases do, play an important role in referring students to academic and other institutional support where these are indicated.

Chapter Three of the report goes on to describe the factors found to facilitate academic integration of disadvantaged students in the higher education environment. Once again, similarities between the primary data collected in the five case studies and those found in the literature are identified. A major factor in student dropout, cited by students of all race groups almost equally, is their poor academic and social preparation for tertiary education in school, and inadequate academic teaching and learning support in universities. Other major factors that disadvantaged students experience, that relate more to their background, are having to study in a second or third language, to which rural students in particular may have had little exposure, and being the first generation in their families, and perhaps even in their communities, to enter higher education. This means that students' families do not have the educational capital or resources to assist their integration or support them in their academic studies.

Both the literature and this report argue that under-preparedness should not be viewed as simply a deficit that students bring to higher education, since universities are often equally unprepared for the demands of their new student populations. Undoubtedly, those students who are well-prepared for the transition into higher education enjoy a greater advantage over those who are not. The ease and speed with which they can settle down to their studies and to their new environment impacts profoundly on their success in their first year, when they are most likely to drop out of the system. A range of academic competencies that students require to succeed in their studies were articulated by both academic and support staff at the institutions visited for this study. Prime amongst them is being independent, both academically and personally. This means students need to be able to work unsupervised, be independent thinkers and manage and prioritise their studies in relation to other aspects of their lives.

Interviewees confirmed that competence in the language of tuition is critical in developing students' conceptual confidence. In other words, the complex conceptual skills that higher education demands, such as being able to think at a theoretical level and apply knowledge to new and different situations, are more easily achieved by students who are fluent in the language of tuition. Similarly, the vital ability to engage critically with academic literature and write academically is greatly facilitated if the student is accustomed to the language. Language confidence was also seen to be a significant factor in students having the courage to approach their lecturers for assistance.

South Africa's legacy of under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers, especially in historically disadvantaged black and rural communities, means that the competencies associated with independent learning, including time management, are often not sufficiently addressed in schools. Indeed, both REAP and NSFAS students spoke of being "spoon-fed" by their teachers at school, which had made their transition to higher education so much more difficult.

REAP staff and volunteers pointed out that, growing up in a rural environment, REAP students lack exposure to written and spoken English, which impacts on their language competence at university. Resources such as books, magazines and

newspapers are generally inaccessible to the families of these students. Similarly, many disadvantaged students do not have access to information technology such as computers and the internet; nor would they have televisions in their homes. These resources fulfil an important educational function in exposing young people to the outside world, as well as to different careers and the world of work.

In terms of student selection criteria and processes, it was found that REAP makes use of its own selection criteria for applicants to its programme, financial neediness being the most important criterion. Having found that academic achievement is not the most reliable indicator of potential to succeed in higher education, REAP has included broad criteria and indicators based on their experiences with students, including leadership abilities, behavioural and attitudinal qualities and, especially, internal drive and motivation. In addition, rather than selection being purely a paper exercise, as usually found in higher education institutions, REAP staff interview short-listed candidates which allows for a more in-depth profile to be obtained.

One of the key factors identified in facilitating student success is correct course selection: many students drop out because the course does not match their expectations or their interests. In order to make informed career choices for themselves, young people need to know about different careers and be aware of their own natural aptitudes. Moreover, in order to follow their favoured field of study at university, they need to have taken the correct subjects at school. The challenge is that young people are forced to make course decisions when they may have very little information about, or experience of, different fields or careers. This is intensified for the rural student who often has even less access to resources and information. While a few students reported that the careers guidance offered at their schools had been good, a repeated refrain from many others was that there had been no, or very inadequate, careers guidance at their schools.

In the institutions included in this study, careers guidance and associated tests were commonly found to be available only to those students who are already registered, rather than to prospective students. Where careers advice and testing is offered to prospective students, this service is usually for the students' own cost.

The research team found that a variety of assessment methods, in addition to senior certificate results, are used by institutions to ascertain an applicant's knowledge and application of mathematics, understanding and use of language and even an applicant's capacity to think analytically and critically. Some of these are described in the full report. In some cases, these initial assessments are conducted not only to assess whether a student can enter the university, but also to identify students who need to be channelled into academic development programmes, such as foundation or extended programmes.

Data collected in this study suggest that orientation programmes can play a major role in helping students adjust to their new academic and socio-cultural environments and, in this way, improve student retention, throughput and success. It is significant, however, that many of the students interviewed, across all five institutions in the sample, reported that they had not attended orientation sessions. The majority of these were non-REAP, NSFAS students, as most REAP students had been encouraged to attend these sessions by their student advisors. Among the reasons students gave for not having attended orientation were that they simply had not known about it or that, at that time, they had been struggling to sort out practical issues such as registration, accommodation and financial aid.

It is argued that for orientation to be an effective development strategy, it should extend beyond the traditional one-week period into the first semester, or even the whole of the first year. In addition, orientation programmes were seen to be of particular value when integrated into academic programmes and implemented by faculties.

Chapter Three goes on to describe academic support interventions that address issues around student retention, progression and success. These were found to vary widely in the study sample. The academic development units found in one form or another at all these institutions tended to be at the heart of institutional academic support and development, and generally encompassed alternative access programmes, staff development, tutor training, curriculum development and targeted academic development workshops for students. Although much of the support work was centralised, there were also degrees of decentralisation across campuses and faculties. This means that some faculties or departments have their own academic support programmes, modules or interventions, whereas, in other cases, these are provided directly by the academic development unit.

As is found in the literature, a degree of contention was noted amongst interviewees as to the relative advantages and disadvantages of the centralised model of academic support and development versus the decentralised or faculty-based model. These viewpoints are outlined in the body of the report. While institutions visited appeared to have good intentions with regard to academic support, a major difficulty reported was the lack of funding. Problems with funding were reported to operate at two levels: support from the Department of Education (DoE) and internal funding allocations. With regards to the former, it was reported that, at times, the nature of academic development programmes have been shaped more by DoE funding decisions than educational logic - particularly with regards to funding for foundation support. Regarding the latter, it was reported that the manner in which tertiary education cuts the funding cake tends to favour teaching, learning and research, activities perceived as being the core business of the university, rather than academic support.

While each of the institutions included in the study provides foundation or extended programmes, the structure and implementation of these varied. It was reported that changes in DoE funding have resulted in extended learning programmes gaining prominence over foundation programmes. In some cases, these are simply an extension of the first-year mainstream course over two years. More effective responses consist of mainstream coursework coupled with relevant development components such as language and academic literacy, study skills and so on. It is argued that these programmes are best situated within academic departments so that they can be tailored to specific subjects, but also linked to a central academic development unit where teaching staff can be appropriately trained and support can be given for curriculum development initiatives.

In addition to foundation and extended programmes, targeted forms of support are also offered on mainstream academic programme for first-year students. Again, these often relate to language and academic literacy. Data collected in the study suggest that stand-alone, short modules are least effective in meeting the needs of many disadvantaged students. Integrated programmes that are built into the curriculum were thought to be, at least in principle, more beneficial as they are likely to be more flexible, targeted and contextually relevant. In addition, because this support is embedded in the curriculum, disadvantaged students are not singled out as being deficient in some way, so there is no associated stigma. It is argued, therefore, that innovative teaching practices and examples of integrated curricula -

often isolated in certain departments and championed by individuals – need to become institutionally embedded practices.

REAP also provides a number of academic support workshops, such as on study skills and time management for its students, which they are required to attend as part of the REAP support programme. These were reported to be tailored to students' specific needs.

Tutorials provide useful additional forms of support for students who are struggling to access and integrate new knowledge. As with other forms of support described in this chapter, tutorials seemed to be most commonly offered to first-year students and varied from being formalised, compulsory, well-structured aspects of the academic programme to being voluntary classes not taken seriously by students. Where tutorials were supplementary and aimed at weaker students, they were sometimes perceived negatively, resulting in poor student attendance. Examples of innovative tutorial models and systems encountered are included in the full text of the report.

Examples of peer support and mentor programmes were also found in this study. Where peer support was formalised, there were well-developed training programmes for the mentors. In addition, formalised peer mentorship programmes were reported to operate in a number of residences where senior students assist less experienced students with personal, social and academic issues. Mentoring by academic staff was also encountered as a formalised system of support in some academic departments,

In order to be able to provide timely and appropriate academic support, institutions need to be able to identify at-risk students at an early stage, to track and monitor their progress, and to evaluate the effectiveness of support systems and programmes offered. This study found, however, that tracking and monitoring systems were generally poorly developed at all levels of academic and support provision across the institutions in the sample. On the other hand, REAP student advisors actively monitor individual students' progress as every student needs to be accounted for to REAP's funders. Not only do the student advisors provide a personal, 'open-door' service as well as have regular, scheduled telephone communication with their students, they also visit their students on campus three times a year and track their academic progress in all their courses.

Many qualifications, especially professional qualifications, require students to complete a period of in-service training or work placement before they graduate. These programmes not only enhance students' employment prospects, but also assist in producing a pool of high quality, work-ready graduates for the professions. In-service training was found to be most successful when the programme was structured, where there were formal institutional structures to assist students find suitable placements, and where there were clear agreements between the institution, the organisation hosting the student, and the student. It was found, however, that students at the institutions in this study were generally required to find their own in-service placements, which was often difficult. In some cases, this delayed graduation. The idea of student success, as introduced in Chapter One, is thus broader than just academic throughput.

Chapter Four of the report highlights the range of socio-cultural challenges for disadvantaged students who often feel homesick, lonely and alienated in an unfamiliar higher education institution, where the majority of staff and other students do not speak their language and / or dialect and where being poor and rural means that they stand out and are sometimes stigmatised. In addition, disadvantaged

students may not be able to afford to participate in some of the social and leisure activities that their better-off peers enjoy. In this way, their chances for social integration are lessened which, in turn, may affect their academic integration.

The research team noted that those students in the study sample who had obtained residential accommodation, reported that they had been able to form friendships and settle in more quickly than those in private accommodation off-campus. This was especially so in those residences which enjoyed support networks and peer mentoring systems. On the other hand, peer pressure to socialise posed a challenge for students in the residences. Achieving a balance between their academic and social activities requires that students learn to be responsible in managing their newfound freedom and independence.

Students interviewed in this study also reported being deeply affected by problems at home, which made it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies. This chapter, however, highlights the personal characteristics and attributes considered to be important mediating factors in overcoming obstacles in achieving both academic and social integration; willpower, determination and self-motivation being prime amongst these. Indeed, it is these sorts of qualities, including leadership qualities, that REAP looks for during its selection process.

The range of institutional support services found to be available in the institutions included in the sample generally fall under the portfolio of student services and include counselling, health services, student development (in the form of life skills workshops such as planning and goal-setting), careers guidance and career development /employability workshops and services. It was noted that interviewees in student support services reported experiencing significant financial constraints and, therefore, capacity constraints. Such constraints limit these units in terms of expanding their services or even improving delivery, and need to be taken into account when assessing them. In addition, it was emphasised that student support services were not specifically targeted at 'disadvantaged' students; support staff argued that their services were available to the entire student population equally, not just certain sectors.

By and large, there was reported to be reasonably good internal cohesion and referral between the departments of financial aid and counselling services, and to some extent between financial aid and the academic support and development units within the institutions sampled, although these relationships were uneven. On the other hand, there were no formalised systems of referral or institutional linkages between academic departments or faculties and these services. Moreover, lecturers reported that large class sizes prevented them from getting to know students personally, so not many referrals were made by academics. These referrals were, therefore, largely informal in nature and tended to take place on an individual and *ad hoc* basis. This lack of cohesion resulted from the assumption held by both academic and support staff that because the services were available, students would make use of them whenever they needed to do so. The separation of academic departments (and thus teaching and learning within these departments and faculties), from student services means that integrated, coherent institutional responses to student needs were not possible. It is noted, however, that many staff expressed deep commitment to assisting students and reported examples of good student support practices, although these were again individually driven.

Orientation is used as a platform where student services market and promote themselves to new students. In addition, these services are advertised on institutional websites and on campuses by means of posters and banners that identify specific

events and workshops. Support services staff maintained that there was a high level of student awareness of what they provided and, the fact that they were stretched to capacity most of the time, indicated to them that students were making use of these services.

Nevertheless, very few of the non-REAP NSFAS students interviewed were aware of the student support services. There was a widespread belief that services such as counselling were socio-culturally irrelevant and there was reportedly a stigma associated with certain services and those who make use of them. Student counsellors reported that language also played a significant role in disadvantaged students' willingness to use these services, as it can be difficult for them to articulate their problems, particularly in English. By contrast, REAP students were much more aware of these services and quite a few reported having used them. This disparity could be partly attributed to NSFAS students' poor attendance at orientation and to the active role that REAP student advisors played in promoting the services.

The data collected suggests, therefore, that it is not enough to simply have support systems in place and expect students to make use of them; rather, student support services need to take greater cognisance of diverse social and cultural issues in the types of support that they offer and that affect students' use of these support services, and to provide these services in students' home language, where feasible. They need to reflect an institutional culture that is inclusive of and accessible to the entire, diverse student population and marketing of these services needs to reach out to this diverse population, to increase their awareness and use of these facilities. This requires that institutions acknowledge disadvantaged students as a grouping distinct from their traditional white student intake, and identify their challenges and needs as they manifest in the particular higher education institution. Furthermore, integrating awareness of these services into the curriculum rather than viewing them as 'add-ons', would also go a long way to de-stigmatising them and making them more familiar.

In addition, because socio-cultural factors impact on disadvantaged students' academic and social integration, academic development and support services need to be interlinked and complement each other. Thus, support systems need to act as an holistic, interrelated network of services to prevent at-risk students falling through gaps and they need to be creatively re-conceptualised into a new institutional strategy. In addition, ways need to be sought to overcome possible staff resistance to different ways of doing things

By virtue of having a clear understanding of the socio-cultural backgrounds of its students, the sorts of challenges that confront them when entering higher education institutions and an understanding of the individual higher education institutional environments where they are studying, REAP student advisors are well positioned to be proactive as well as responsive to their students' needs, and thus facilitate their integration. Indeed, none of the students interviewed believed that they would have made it through university without this support from REAP. The personal advice and counselling that REAP student advisors offers its students plays an important role in addressing and reducing their feelings of alienation.

The higher education institutions in this study all had some form of tracking, monitoring and evaluation of their student support services, although this tended to be for their own internal reporting purposes and to inform future planning for the individual units, rather than for institutional change. There were, therefore, no institutionally coherent, integrated support systems to address the holistic academic and social integration, development and progress of disadvantaged students. It is

suggested that strategic tracking, monitoring and evaluation of support services could more easily enable such systems to be put in place.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, distils and synthesises key conclusions, recommendations and suggestions from this study. It begins by looking at the gaps between good intentions and experienced reality – in other words, between institutional vision and mission statements and the data reported by staff and students. It is clear that while intentions are good, both those of individuals and institutions as a whole, institutional systems and processes are not yet sufficiently in place to address the needs of disadvantaged students. The gap between vision and mission, on the one hand, and implementation and practice, on the other, remains an enormous challenge and one that cannot be solved quickly by the higher education institutions themselves.

Meeting the challenges described in this report requires wide dissemination of the report and intensive discussion on the issues highlighted, the active engagement and intervention of ambassadors for disadvantaged students – individuals and organisations such as REAP – and the development of on-going partnerships in both the schooling and higher education sectors.

This report argues that the disadvantaged student often faces a greater number of challenges at the same time than the more advantaged student. In addition, the complex interplay between the three umbrella factors – financial, academic and socio-cultural – is highlighted. The data also suggests that the related challenges are likely to be felt more intensely; especially if there is not immediate support for the student. These conclusions mean that a range of support services is required for disadvantaged students and that these need to be accessed timeously. In other words, there is a need for an institutionalised response; not fragmented responses provided by concerned and generous individual staff, by individual programmes or projects or external organisations such as REAP, but a coherent set of well coordinated responses structurally embedded within the institution and well communicated to both academic staff and support staff and to the students themselves.

In addition to encompassing the three umbrella areas, an institutionalised response requires close linkages between the various areas of support offered. In order to address the challenges faced by disadvantaged students, these students need to be identified at the point of entry, prioritised for residential accommodation, provided with mentors within the first week of the academic year, targeted for proactive communication about orientation and support services and then tracked and monitored.

It is also argued that an institutionalised response is one that requires endorsement at all levels – from the executive staff to those involved at management and delivery levels – as well as a clear understanding of the approach used and the various services offered. Unless academic and support staff are aware of all of support services and how to access them, students are less likely to be referred to services as required.

An institutionalised response, such as described in this report, requires an on-line business intelligence system that will provide a diagnostic and planning tool for the institution as a whole. Business intelligence systems facilitate the identification, tracking and monitoring of particular student groupings and are invaluable for ongoing institutional research and development initiatives.



Sophisticated tracking and monitoring programmes require not only capital outlay but also the training of staff who need to understand their value and purpose and to have the skills required to make good use of them; not only at the stage of inputting data but also, critically, at the stage of analysis so that conclusions can be drawn and strategic intentions decided.

The final sections of Chapter Five provide recommendations for addressing challenges in the areas related to financial, academic and socio-cultural factors. Beginning with the financial challenges, the report points to three levels at which careful thought is required: the institutional level in the higher education sector, the level of the individual disadvantaged student in these institutions, and the institutional level in the schooling sector. Recommendations for improving academic and social integration for disadvantaged students include those relating to the provision of opportunities for careers guidance, programmes for students' orientation to university life and institutional support systems, credit-bearing tutorials, residential accommodation for rural students, mentoring and counselling programmes and increased participation in student life.



# CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO, MOTIVATION FOR AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This report documents the findings of a research study conducted in South Africa between April 2007 and May 2008 by a small team of researchers under the auspices of the consultancy Research and Academic Development. The study was commissioned by the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) and funded by Irish Aid. Drawing on primary data written up as case studies conducted in five higher education institutions as well as selected literature on student access, retention and throughput, this report highlights factors that impact on the success of disadvantaged students in the higher education sector. In effect, two key questions are addressed:

1. What are the factors that facilitate (and inhibit) access to and completion of higher education studies by disadvantaged undergraduate students?
2. What recommendations can be made for improving access to and completion of such studies for these students?

This first chapter of the report provides the background to, motivation for and purpose of the study, framing the context for the following chapters, which focus on a range of factors – from the financial to the academic and socio-cultural – that contribute to success.

In sketching the background to this study, recent changes in the higher education sector are outlined along with key difficulties related to student access, retention and throughput. The following section, the motivation for the study, explains the initial reasons for the study and provides for an understanding of the ways in which it has attempted to build on the findings of previous research studies undertaken in order to confirm and to extend their findings.

Throughout the report, attention is given to the dynamics between disadvantaged students and higher education institutions. In other words, the findings suggest that the extent to which students are either *integrated into* or *alienated from* the institution is critical in understanding their success in the sector. The report, therefore, highlights the ways in which disadvantaged students' own backgrounds and experiences prepare them for their higher education experiences *and* the ways in which the higher education institutions respond to, support and mediate the higher education experience enjoyed by these students. In this way, a critical and dynamic relationship between the institutions and the students is emphasised. In addition, critical and dynamic relationships *within* the institutions and *between* the institutions and other key stakeholders, including the Department of Education (DoE) and the schooling sector, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and organisations such as REAP are highlighted. The importance of establishing supportive collaborative partnerships is given particular attention.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### 1.2.1 Changes in the higher education context

It is generally acknowledged internationally that higher education has a critical role to play in a nation's economy and society through the development of general and specific skills and competencies, and through knowledge production. For South Africa as a developing nation, increasing participation in higher education is a critical strategy for addressing the skills shortage, high unemployment rates and poverty. At the same time, South Africa faces the ongoing challenges of transformation to an equitable society. For us, therefore, increased participation in higher education needs to be coupled with an increase in access to and successful completion of higher education by disadvantaged students.

In the past, higher education – and particularly university education – was seen as the preserve of a small elite. It was accepted that university students would form a minority within the broader population and that, overall, these students would be (usually male) youth from the upper and upper-middle socio-economic classes, who would undertake their studies in a full-time, residential capacity and in a pre-determined period. 'Success' was defined in the academic sense as a student's ability to progress through and adequately complete the intended course of study. Only those students who exhibited a natural 'fit' with the higher education system would be granted access and succeed. Those who did not fit the mould were expected to make other educational choices (Bitzer 2005:172; Bitzer 2003:164)<sup>3</sup>.

Over the past few decades this view of higher education, in terms of who can participate and succeed, has been turned on its head. The demands of knowledge-based economies for research and specialised skills have placed higher education at the heart of strategies for economic and social development. It is no longer appropriate for higher education to serve a minority elite. Rather, there is a drive towards increasing access to and participation in higher education across all sectors of society. As a result, higher education systems and institutions have had to come to grips with much more diverse student populations than previously, including increasing numbers of women, people of colour, people with disabilities, and people from poor socio-economic backgrounds. The emphasis on lifelong learning is also seeing increasing numbers of mature, part-time and returning students.

These new and diverse student populations bring with them a range of needs and challenges in relation to the higher education experience. These challenges, and the difficulties higher education institutions face in coping with them, are reflected in the high drop-out and failure rates in higher education systems around the world, particularly in the first year of study. These circumstances have led many observers to note that ideas about what constitutes student 'success' must be reconfigured. As Bitzer argues: "A new view of what constitutes quality and success in higher education has become imperative – one that accommodates increased student diversity and considers processes that contribute to holistic student development" (2005:172).

The South African experience reflects these international developments and, of course, has its own contextual features. Over and above the drive to expand higher education, there has been considerable political pressure since 1994 to transform the system along the lines of race, gender, class and disability, with a particular emphasis on increasing access to higher education for these categories of students.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for literature sources.

However, as we have discovered over the past fourteen years, providing access to higher education is no guarantee of success; indeed, statistics over this period have shown increasing drop-out and failure rates, especially amongst black and disadvantaged students. As Liz Thomas reminds us:

... simply providing *access* to further learning in tertiary education is insufficient. If we are to genuinely widen participation in post-compulsory education, then *access and student success* must both be viewed as essential components (Thomas 2002:1, author's emphasis).

Furthermore, the transformation of the higher education landscape has meant that many institutions have been required to merge, giving rise to new mega-institutions, which are endeavouring to create new identities for themselves. In some of these institutions, understandable tensions have arisen as the status, roles and functions of 'comprehensive universities' and 'universities of technology' are identified and developed and programmes and services rationalised. These developments have put an added strain on staff and resources at all levels.

The financial constraints under which higher education institutions operate often mean that staff have to 'do more with less'. Increases in student enrolment may impact negatively on class size, and lecturers' time spent pursuing sources of third stream income, including partnerships, may impact on their own timetables and availability, and, ultimately, on teaching and learning activities.

It is within these contexts that higher education institutions are trying to address the needs of their diverse student populations, with greater or lesser degrees of success.

### **1.2.2 Difficulties around access, retention and throughput**

Despite initiatives by government, higher education institutions, foreign donors and local civil society to improve access and retention in higher education, current statistics indicate that only limited progress has been made. An article in *The Cape Times* (16 January 2007)<sup>4</sup> paints a shocking picture of the attrition rate of learners in the school system, resulting in a significantly small proportion being in a position to pursue studies in higher education:

Almost 1.3 million children started school in 1995. By 2006, only 740 000 (47%) of these children had made it as far as grade 12. Of those who wrote grade 12 exams, 351 503 passed, and only 85 830 obtained a university exemption. These 85 830 children – those who can realistically expect to progress to further studies – constitute 5% of the children who started school in the first year of a democratic South Africa.

These numbers continue to decline, with 2007 recording an even lower national senior certificate pass rate (65,2%) than the previous year. Furthermore, despite the largest-ever grade 12 cohort sitting for the final examinations, 376 fewer pupils passed with university endorsement than in 2006. The Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, herself, noted that: "This is a worrying decline as we need to increase the number of candidates for entry to higher education programmes."<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, for those students who do achieve the required grades to gain entry, prospects for success at the higher education level are low. The Minister of

<sup>4</sup> George Boinamo. 'Back slapping while children of democracy are failed by the school system'. *Cape Times*, 16 January 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Statement by Naledi Pandor, Minister of Education, on the release of the 2007 senior certificate examination results. 28 December 2007. DoE website: [www.education.gov.za](http://www.education.gov.za)

Education explained in her budget speech to parliament in May 2005 that a cohort study of students entering higher education institutions in the year 2000 indicated that less than 40% of the sample would graduate<sup>6</sup>. These findings are corroborated by figures from other sources, which suggest that approximately half the country's undergraduate students may drop out before completing their degrees and diplomas<sup>7</sup>.

It seems, therefore, that more than funding for institutional costs is required to translate an educational opportunity into a sound qualification, marketable skills and a changed life path for South Africa's youth.

### 1.2.3 Parameters of 'success' and 'disadvantage'

Although academic throughput is one aspect of student success, the quality of graduates is equally important. For the purposes of this report, quality is considered to be implicit in the notion of success in higher education. Thus, as suggested by Bitzer (2005), success is viewed as an holistic concept, encompassing academic achievement and personal growth. Successful graduates should, therefore, not only be employable, but also well-rounded, responsible citizens who are able to make a positive contribution to society.

Of the increasingly diverse range of students entering higher education in South Africa, this study focuses on and speaks to a category that has been termed, for convenience, 'disadvantaged' students. REAP has suggested this term as indicating a particular category of students, who are selected onto their programme, who experience a range of complex 'disadvantaging' factors. A REAP student advisor described the concept as follows:

Disadvantage is firstly the school that the REAP student comes from. It would be under-resourced. The student would never have touched a computer. Also the instruction: some of the students learn English in Zulu, [] even maths. The level of professionalism of the teachers...the level of the academics...[there are] very, very poor academics relatively, if you know the other side of the coin, the schools like Bishops and the private schools. When you look at those schools, you see whoa, what a huge difference! Then it's also the home life, where the students come from. Some of the students, not all of them, will come from a home where there is no electricity, where they have to study by candlelight. Some of them have to work after school, fetch water, wash dishes and stuff like that. So the time for studying is quite limited. There is also the burden, or the social issues, where you find the students are constantly worried about the health of their parents. In some cases they are orphans. [There are other cases] where there's just poverty, you know, where the student doesn't know where the next meal is coming from. So that, for me, altogether, makes up disadvantage.

The research team, after discussions with REAP staff, identified the following key elements of disadvantage as:

- Geography (specifically, students from rural areas),
- Financial resources (which often goes hand-in-hand with geographic disadvantage),

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<sup>6</sup> DoE website: [www.education.gov.za](http://www.education.gov.za)

<sup>7</sup> 'Shock varsity dropout stats', *Mail & Guardian*, September 22 to 28 2006.

- Schooling (where students have often attended under-resourced, low performance, typically ex-DET<sup>8</sup> schools),
- Language (where the language of tuition in the higher education institution may be a second or even a third language for the student), and
- As well as other socio-cultural factors which may prevent students from being adequately prepared for, and able to participate effectively in, tertiary studies.

As a result of these disadvantaging factors, these students, it is argued, are most at risk of dropping out or failing and, therefore, it is important to understand the ways in which higher education institutions best support them. Although this study acknowledges that 'disadvantage' is a relative term, and that *all* undergraduate students entering higher education institutions face a broad spectrum of challenges, it is argued that disadvantaged students typically experience not only *greater numbers* of problems and challenges at any one time, but also *more profound* problems and challenges, especially in their first year of study. An in-depth understanding of these problems and challenges provides pointers to those areas where additional support is required. As will be seen in this report, there is a complex interplay between factors that support success for disadvantaged students. From these a package of needs can be identified for which a coherent, integrated strategy of institutionalised support is required.

### 1.3 MOTIVATION FOR THIS STUDY

While the background to the study described above provides a broad picture of the higher education context, the motivation for the study lay in previous studies undertaken by REAP, NSFAS, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Council for Higher Education (CHE).

#### 1.3.1 Findings of a 2002 REAP evaluation

The need for this study was initially suggested by the findings of an evaluation of the 2002 REAP cohort. Here, it was found that students who received sustained support on the REAP programme were more likely to complete their studies in a shorter time, which indicated that the programme was facilitating success.<sup>9</sup> It was considered important to explore this finding further by analysing the approaches to support provided by REAP, NSFAS and a sample of higher education institutions.

#### 1.3.2 Findings of a 2002 NSFAS study

A 2002 NSFAS study analysed drop-out rates among NSFAS-funded students attending historically advantaged and disadvantaged technikons, and found that "the dropouts were more likely than graduates to be from rural areas. About half (50%) said that their family lived in a rural area in their last year of study compared to 37% of graduates" (Budlender 2002:37). This finding suggests that a rural background may have an influence on student success, and it therefore needs to be better understood.

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Education and Training: i.e. schools previously reserved for black Africans under the apartheid dispensation.

<sup>9</sup> Freeth, R & Ngidi, W 2006. *Tracking the 2002 REAP Cohort - an assessment of the throughput rate of students taken onto the Rural Education Access Programme in 2002*. Internal report.

### 1.3.3 Findings of a recent study by the HSRC and the CHE

An analysis conducted by the HSRC and the CHE<sup>10</sup> into South Africa's university drop-out rate, cited inadequate financial resources as the main reason for students dropping out of university (80% of respondents), and that this was a significantly greater factor for African and Coloured students than for White or Indian students. Financial constraints were found to manifest particularly in students having difficulty affording registration fees, accommodation, meals, books (including materials and equipment) and travel costs.<sup>11</sup> Related financial factors, such as lack of a quiet space to study, living far from campus and pressure from their families to leave their studies in order to support them financially, also contributed significantly to student drop-out.

### 1.3.4 Additional challenges considered in this study

In addition to the factors mentioned above, this study considers further challenges many disadvantaged students face, ones that may be even more difficult to address. These include a history of poor and under-resourced schooling; a lack of personal, family and community awareness and experience of the higher education environment; and the 'access gap' that disadvantaged students have to bridge, such as becoming proficient in the language of instruction. This combination of factors represents a multiplicity of challenges and a package of needs to be taken into account when providing adequate support for these students.

### 1.3.5 Theoretical understandings of student retention and throughput

The theoretical understandings of student retention and throughput offered in the literature<sup>12</sup> were also of interest to the research team, both in the earlier preparation phase and in the later analytical work undertaken, as some of these provided useful theoretical lenses through which to understand the data collected.

One approach to understanding students' successful retention and progression through higher education is their academic and social integration or 'fit' with the institution, as suggested by Tinto (1993). The extent to which students are able to integrate academically and socially depends, in part, it is argued, on their pre-entry characteristics (prior schooling, family background, skills and competences, aspirations and goals). Academic integration is enhanced via positive interactions and relationships with institutional staff, while social integration depends on the student's involvement in extra-curricular activities and interactions with peers (Bitzer & Troskie-De Bruin 2004:121). The student's experience of academic and social integration, in turn, impacts on their intentions and commitments, both with regard to earning a degree and to the particular institution (Lourens 2006:1).

The literature also points to the role of higher education institutions, and the higher education sector as a whole, in promoting or inhibiting student success. From this perspective, the emphasis is not so much on the unpreparedness for higher education of disadvantaged students, but rather on *the unpreparedness of the institutions* for these types of student. The problems of a 'clash of cultures' between traditional higher education institutions and new cohorts of disadvantaged students within the South African context have been well documented. For example, David Stephen (2003) refers to the post-1994 elections period that saw an influx of previously disadvantaged students into the higher education system:

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<sup>10</sup> 'Dropouts – in their own words', *Mail & Guardian*, November 16 to 27, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Budlender, D in *REAP/SSACI Evaluation 2006*, p9, Rebecca Freeth.



These institutions were no longer the domain of the brightest and best as the new students had very different expectations and goals from the (predominantly) white predecessors. The majority of these institutions appeared to be unaware of the magnitude of the change and had made no plans to meet them ... Given the disparity of needs and expectations between the two environments, culture clashes were inevitable (Stephen 2003: 35,44).

Martin Mandew (2003) gives us an idea of how disadvantaged students experience the traditional higher education environments, especially those of the historically white institutions in the country:

From a numbers perspective, the increased access and increasingly diverse student population, especially in the well-resourced historically white institutions, bodes well for the future, and is to be commended. However, it also exposes the fault lines inherent in the hegemonic institutional culture and ethos, the seemingly fossilised identities of institutions, as well as the under-preparedness of some of the institutions to welcome and receive historically excluded and new categories or types of student populations – factors which cannot be fathomed from a purely quantitative point of view. The result is that most of the new student populations find the institutional culture, ethos and campus climate not only unwelcoming but also outright hostile. In this case, it becomes very difficult for them to feel a sense of belonging or to develop a sense of 'ownership' of the institution. ... The feeling of being treated as intruders is bound to impact on the new students' engagement with institutional issues, their involvement in campus life and, most importantly, on their ability to succeed academically and, by implication, on retention rates. The institution is seen and engaged with primarily as a site of struggle, because of the sense of marginalisation these students perceive and/or experience. (Mandew 2003:73-74)

Thus, from this perspective, difficulties in academic and social integration may lead students to feel marginalised and alienated, impeding progression and success. This report makes key recommendations for ways in which to shift higher education institutions from being "sites of struggle" to environments that overtly recognise and are more inclusive of their changing student populations, so that disadvantaged students may become better integrated into these environments.

#### **1.4 THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

As already indicated, difficulties associated with access, retention and throughput have been noted by a variety of researchers and other stakeholders for some time. Over the years, governmental and non-governmental initiatives, as well as initiatives at institutional, faculty and departmental levels within the higher education system, have been established to assist previously disadvantaged students. NSFAS is an innovative and successful state funding scheme, which was established in 1999 to be a major provider of financial support in this regard.

REAP is an example of an organisation that works to address disadvantage in a broader and more holistic sense. Established in 2001, REAP assists carefully selected matriculants "from poor rural communities to access higher education."<sup>13</sup> "Matriculants from these communities are usually unable to access higher education due to poverty, poor education, under-resourced schooling, lack of information, distance from urban centres or educational hubs, and the historic discrimination of apartheid."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> REAP mission statement.

<sup>14</sup> Freeth, R & Ngidi, W 2006. *Tracking the 2002 REAP Cohort - an assessment of the throughput rate of students taken onto the Rural Education Access Programme in 2002*. Internal report.

REAP achieves this through a partnership with NSFAS and by providing a small non-refundable grant that may be used for books, equipment, travel, food, accommodation and/or other expenses associated with full-time study. REAP also provides an holistic support programme, aligned with the undergraduate life cycle, consisting of:

- Regular toll-free telephone and face-to-face advice and counselling sessions with dedicated student advisors
- A developmental approach encouraging students to solve their own problems
- Semester workshop programmes to assist students develop social and academic skills
- Information and support on HIV/AIDS
- Work preparation workshops for senior students
- Liaison with institutional student services
- Peer group mentoring, and
- Academic performance monitoring and feedback.

While staff at REAP acknowledge that some components of their support are better developed than others, the 2002 tracking study of a REAP cohort concluded that “students supported by REAP, even for a short while, have considerably better prospects of graduating than the general student body, albeit with extended periods of study.”<sup>15</sup>

This study takes the REAP approach as an important departure point in order to:

- Identify factors that facilitate and inhibit success for disadvantaged students
- Identify gaps in support currently offered to these students at REAP and at five selected higher education institutions
- Identify areas of overlap in support offered
- Develop recommendations for improved support, and
- Identify areas for the development of potential partnerships between organisations such as REAP and higher education institutions.

It is hoped that the conclusions provided and recommendations made in Chapter Five will be taken up for discussion and possible implementation not only by REAP and NSFAS, but also by other NGOs and by key stakeholders including the DoE, the schooling sector and the private sector. Given the complexity of the challenges documented in this report, collaborative partnerships – both within higher education institutions and also between these institutions and other stakeholders - will need to be identified and/or extended in taking forward many of the recommendations made. It is hoped that the recommendations will assist partners at all levels to frame strategic interventions and develop creative new responses in addressing the challenges described in Chapters Two, Three and Four.

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<sup>15</sup> Freeth, R & Ngidi, W 2006. *Tracking the 2002 REAP Cohort - an assessment of the throughput rate of students taken onto the Rural Education Access Programme in 2002*. Internal report.

## 1.5 PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

While a more detailed description of the research methodology is contained in Appendix B, for contextual purposes a brief outline is provided here. The primary data was gathered by three researchers who visited five institutions in different provinces in the second semester of 2007.

The five institutions visited included two 'traditional' (unmerged) universities, a university of technology that had been formed after the merger of two former technikons, and two comprehensive universities, which had formed as a result of mergers between universities and technikons.

Of the two 'traditional' universities included in the study, one was an historically white institution driven by a strong Afrikaans culture. Since 1994, it has adopted a dual-medium policy of tuition to accommodate non-Afrikaans speaking students, especially black students. The other university, which has always served historically disadvantaged communities, has a largely black student population, consisting of African and 'Coloured' students, enrolled predominantly from within the province it serves. Although both these institutions had relatively stable management structures as neither had undergone mergers, both were forging and developing new identities in response to changing student populations and the other new imperatives in the higher education sector.

While the difference in background is evident in various aspects of institutional life, it is important to note that neither a history of serving a white elite nor a history of serving disadvantaged communities guarantees that these institutions facilitate success for the increasing numbers of disadvantaged students they now serve.

The university of technology that was included in the study was spread over seven campuses. The two main campuses, previously the main campuses of the former technikons, attracted different student populations: one a larger proportion of rural, black students and the other a more urban and multi-ethnic student population. Despite it having been seven years since the merger, staff interviewed indicated that they were still struggling to come to terms with the changes and that there were strong contestations around institutional identity.

Although both the comprehensive universities selected for this study had been involved in mergers two years prior to the commencement of the project, differences in the way in which these were being handled meant differences in their impact. One institution, in particular, was struggling to establish a coherent academic identity. This struggle was exacerbated by changes that took place prior to the merger, including an incorporation and changes in language policy. The four campuses of this newly formed comprehensive university, because of their previous very different natures, resulted in diverse student populations.

While stresses associated with diversity were also evident in the other comprehensive university, particular attention is being given to the implementation of uniform practices and standards across all of its seven campuses. This institution draws students predominantly from within the province it serves - from the urban area in which it is located and from the surrounding rural areas. It tends to attract students with low matriculation results (often falling below the points threshold commonly used for admission to tertiary institutions) and many from impoverished, rural schools.

In each of the five institutions, the research team interviewed a range of academic teaching and support staff and staff engaged in student services (including financial aid and counselling services). Some interviewees were heads of units and departments, but generally those people who were selected dealt directly with students.

The undergraduate students sampled in this study were REAP students, who thus had NSFAS loans as well as being supported by the REAP programme, and students who were not supported by REAP but had NSFAS loans. These (non-REAP) NSFAS students<sup>16</sup> in the sample were selected, as far as possible from the information provided, from rural backgrounds, although some proved to be from peri-urban areas, largely from townships surrounding cities or towns. Students interviewed ranged from those in their first year through to those in their final year and all were undergraduates, except for one disabled, post-graduate, honours student.

## **1.6 THE STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT AND ITS KEY THEMES**

This introductory section of the report has raised some of the key themes that play out in the following chapters of this report – integration and institutionalisation being two of these.

The concept of integration is employed in two ways in this report. Firstly, the need for students to become integrated, both academically and socially within higher education institutions, if they are to succeed, is highlighted. Secondly, the complex and overlapping nature of the challenges faced by disadvantaged students – financial, academic and socio-cultural - indicates the need for an integrated response by the institutions. Thus, for a student to succeed, it is proposed that the following conditions need to be met:

- A student needs sufficient financial resources to enable her/him to move beyond mere survival mode and engage effectively with the learning process
- A student needs to be able to engage meaningfully in institutional and discipline-specific academic discourses, and
- S/he needs to be able to participate in a range of institutional social activities and form sound relationships with staff and peers.

These three areas - financial, academic and socio-cultural - form three umbrella categories and are dealt with independently in Chapters Two, Three and Four. Each of these chapters draws on data documented in highly descriptive case studies of the five individual institutions in the sample. The challenges, reported by staff and students, are synthesised, and a number of tried and tested responses and solutions are presented in these chapters. While much of the data in the case studies indicates ways in which the support offered by REAP, NSFAS and the higher education institutions contributes to student success, much of the data also illustrates how students are inhibited in achieving their goals.

Analysis of the case studies indicates that student integration in higher education institutions requires not merely individual or institutional responses, but the institutionalisation of support. The final chapter of this report, Chapter Five, argues that it is not sufficient – nor sustainable – for individual staff members to take notice of disadvantaged students and provide them with support. Neither, it is argued, is it

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<sup>16</sup> Hereafter referred to as NSFAS students for brevity's sake, although REAP students also receive NSFAS loans.

sufficient for an institution to provide different forms of support without these being institutionalised – foregrounded in vision and mission statements, embedded in policy frameworks and in planning and budgeting processes, interlinked with each other and with the academic faculties and departments, proactively and widely communicated both internally and externally, and monitored and evaluated. The data suggests that individual, fragmented institutional responses and support for disadvantaged students need to be fundamentally re-thought within a broader frame developed in terms of a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by this target group. In making these arguments, the report highlights key areas for strategic interventions and collaborative partnerships.



## CHAPTER TWO: FINANCIAL AND RELATED FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the financial and related challenges facing disadvantaged students entering higher education, as reflected in the literature and in the primary data collected in this study. A number of systems, mechanisms and interventions are being implemented in response to these needs in various sectors, but these are not always unproblematic. Those that concern this report, namely the state-funded National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), the REAP programme, and the responses by the institutions sampled in this study, are therefore examined in terms of their provision as well as problems and gaps. It will be seen that many of these systems and interventions are making a significant contribution to student access and completion. Even so, they may not go far enough and if students do not have adequate financial resources to meet both their basic needs and for being able to study effectively, this impacts negatively on both their academic achievement and social integration. The findings presented in this chapter indicate that for students to succeed in their studies, let alone in the broader sense of personal development and employability, they need to be able to function above the level of mere survival.

The literature<sup>17</sup> emphasises that the prime and most obvious reasons for students' early withdrawal from higher education programmes are financial difficulties. Researchers at the Institute for Access Studies note key ways in which financial pressures impact on poor students in the United Kingdom (Thomas *et al* 2002:5). Three of these are: *absolute* lack of money, debt and fear of debt; *comparative* lack of money in relation to previous income levels, and in relation to peers not in higher education; and part-time employment which diverts time and energy from studies. While financial hardships on their own may not be sufficient cause for student withdrawal, and should not be viewed in isolation from academic and socio-cultural factors, it has been suggested by Bourn (2002:16) that they can "easily lead to problems of achievement, by provoking anxiety and reducing the time available for study and socialising, which in turn might persuade the student to withdraw". In this way, financial hardship can impact on academic achievement and social integration and lead to feelings of isolation and alienation.

The state-funded NSFAS loan provides a considerable annual sum to public higher education institutions for financial aid for disadvantaged students, but, as shall be seen, the way these funds are disbursed by individual higher education institutions does not always provide full financial cover for disadvantaged students. This will be described in more detail in section 2.3 following.

A South African study conducted for NSFAS by Budlender *et al* (2002), confirmed that financial constraints were the main reasons (bar academic exclusion) contributing to students' withdrawal from higher education in this country: affecting their ability to afford registration fees, accommodation costs, meals, books (including materials and equipment) and travel costs. Thus, although tuition fees may be covered by NSFAS funding, disadvantaged students still need to meet these other

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Bourn 2002; Connor *et al* 2004; Hall 2001; Shobrook 2003; Stephen 2003; Thomas 2002, 2006.

expenses which, although relatively small, may present an insurmountable obstacle for them. The purpose of the top-up grant provided by REAP, as part of their support programme, is intended to plug some of these financial gaps for needy students.

## 2.2 FINANCIAL CHALLENGES FACING DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

The primary data collected in this study confirms the findings of the abovementioned studies and demonstrates that disadvantaged students from distant and rural areas face a particular set of financial challenges in the higher education environment as a result of their geographic and socio-economic circumstances. Typically, these financial challenges affect their access to and continuation of their studies in the following ways. Firstly, in terms of access, the application fees charged by higher education institutions are a very real barrier to many disadvantaged students, which may exclude them from higher education altogether or preclude them from applying to more than one institution.

Secondly, registration and tuition fees are an even greater financial barrier. The NSFAS loan may cover these fees at many institutions but, if students apply late they may be unable to access financial aid for the first semester or even for the whole first year of study, if all the funding has already been allocated. Inability to pay these costs at the end of the first year results in students being excluded from re-registering. Coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, these students typically do not have access to information about institutional processes regarding registration and application for financial aid, so first-year students very often apply late. A social worker from one of the institutions in the sample explained:

There are those who realise after they get their matric results that they want to come and study. They are waiting for their results, and for money. Sometimes their parents just put them on a bus with a suitcase and R500 and [believe] the university will take care of them. When they arrive they are sent to me and I am sitting with this person and I don't know what to do with them. And then I must do all the investigation because they are not informed. I must find out what their 'M'<sup>18</sup> score is, the family background, if there is money, if they can apply for a NSFAS loan... Sometimes we put him back on the bus, because he is just roaming around and there is no possibility...

Disadvantaged students' lack of knowledge about higher education will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, as one of the socio-cultural factors that affect their success.

Thirdly, it was found that most students from rural areas did not have family or friends near the university with whom they could stay or who could offer them any financial support. These students, who may have come from the security of a small community, arrive in an unfamiliar city environment, often having to find and finance their own accommodation, meals and transport, and, to some extent, textbooks and equipment, with very limited resources or knowledge of how to manage their finances.

It is not just their own finances that affect these students: concerns about financial problems at home also reduce their ability to concentrate on their studies. For example, instances were encountered of students who were worried about how their orphaned siblings at home were coping financially. Furthermore, REAP reported cases of students who had dropped out of their tertiary studies to find employment so

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<sup>18</sup> The number of 'points' derived from their matriculation results, which are used as criteria for entrance into higher education institutions and courses.



as to help support their families after the death of the breadwinner. Thus financial security, in terms of their own studies and daily needs, as well as knowing that their families are sustaining themselves financially, is essential for students to be able to concentrate on their studies and succeed.

### **2.3 NSFAS SUPPORT**

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is the single largest provider of financial aid to students in state higher education institutions in South Africa and is therefore critically important in providing financial access to higher education for large numbers of financially needy students who would otherwise not be able to afford it. This contribution, however, can never be enough to meet the full scope of the need so the responsibility falls to individual institutions to determine the size of the awards according to their student population profile. Thus, although institutions make financial aid allocations according to prescribed means tests, they have the discretion to allocate funds according to different line items such as accommodation and registration fees. This means that there are wide variations in financial aid practices among institutions, depending on the numbers and economic profile of their student populations that require such assistance, and that awards are more comprehensive in some institutions than in others. For instance, the NSFAS loan may cover the registration fee at some universities, but not at all institutions. It was also found to cover residence fees at four of the institutions in the sample, but not for first-year students, who are most at-risk of dropping out, at one institution. Generally, non-residential accommodation was not covered by the loan, which resulted in an added financial burden for those who applied late, when the residences were already fully booked. Furthermore, although the NSFAS loan does make some allowance for the purchase of textbooks, this is not always sufficient, which is problematic for those students who cannot make up the shortfall. There were also complaints that the NSFAS living allowance was not only insufficient, but that it was sometimes paid out very late by financial aid departments, even as late as the end of the term, which caused students much personal hardship.

Students are expected to make up these shortfalls in financial aid one way or another, but many cases were encountered of students who could not. This is well illustrated by a first-year NSFAS student, as follows:

You have to survive with whatever you have and wait until the next deposit that you're going to get from home. NSFAS is only tuition and books so the food money comes from home. For someone like me it's very tough because money is a serious issue for me. I can't ask for money. Even when I've run out it's hard for me to pick up the phone and say; "Hey guys, I've got no food." So I just sit and wait and wait until the day comes. Even if it means starving, I have a serious problem when it comes to asking for money. I don't think it's pride. For instance, at home, my mother is the only person working. So, whatever decisions I make, I first think; "Eish, this poor woman, she's already got enough on her plate." So the least I can do is just be patient and wait for her. When she's fine she'll give me whatever it is.

Institutional financial aid staff were sympathetic to the financial difficulties NSFAS students face, by virtue of the loans not being sufficient to cover all their needs, but they emphasised that the NSFAS fund was limited and that they did their best within these limitations. Indeed, it was reported that there is ongoing contestation as to whether NSFAS loan allocations should be larger, and cater more comprehensively for fewer students, or whether they should be smaller and offer wider access.

Other issues were encountered to do with the way institutions divided up the money allocated to them from NSFAS and how they administered the loan. The first of these relates to the need for a family contribution, which is calculated according to income. Although the principle of expecting families to make a commitment towards their children's education may seem sound, a number of students in the sample expressed anxiety about being able to afford the family contribution, and about being excluded from continuing their studies if they could not. For example, in one case, a student reported that her father had remarried (her mother had died some years previously) and had a new family to support. The student was living with her grandmother and was not supported by her father, yet her loan allocation had been calculated by taking her father's income into account. Because she was not able to meet the outstanding fees, the student was on the verge of dropping out. In another case, it seemed that the large number of dependants being supported by the declared household income had not been factored into the loan calculation, which again meant the family contribution could not be met. Although these students' concerns were very real, it must be noted that official forms may not be easy to understand, especially for the uninitiated, and unfamiliar English terminology may result in misunderstandings when filling them in. It would seem, therefore, that every effort should be made to ensure NSFAS application forms are as simple as possible, and that financial aid staff should assist students to fill them in correctly.

Secondly, a need for the NSFAS loan to cover student expenses during in-service training was identified, as the stipend they earn from the companies where they are placed is not always sufficient to cover their accommodation and travel costs, especially if they are working in another city. This may cause them not to complete their in-service training, and thus not graduate.

Thus, despite the positive impact the scheme undoubtedly has, certain aspects of the way the loan is structured and administered within institutions may actually militate against students succeeding in their studies.

It must be noted that students are not always aware of the finer points of how the NSFAS loan works. For example, one student interviewed was extremely worried about her fee payments, as her father's recent death had left her family without an income. She was not aware that the financial aid could be readjusted according to her family's changed financial circumstances. Consideration could therefore be given to ways in which information about the loan is communicated to applicants, especially as language can be a significant barrier to understanding.

One way in which students can alleviate some of their financial concerns is through partial conversion of their NSFAS loan to a bursary, should they pass all their courses; however, the way in which the loan is converted to a bursary was not consistently well understood by the students interviewed, and it was clear this could also be better communicated to those who receive financial aid.

## **2.4 REAP FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

The REAP support model is aimed specifically at economically disadvantaged youth, "the poorest of the poor", to quote one of their regional representatives. REAP works with NSFAS to assist students on the programme to access the state study loan and, in addition, REAP supplements the NSFAS loan with an "access package"<sup>19</sup>. This is a grant tailored to their most critical financial needs: facilitating "registration, the

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<sup>19</sup> REAP Annual Report, 2006/07, p8.

purchase of books and technical equipment, travel and a small monthly subsistence allowance for meals and/or accommodation". This also allows students to buy basic toiletries for personal hygiene, such as soap and deodorant, which was found to be important for their social integration with their peers.

The research team found that the REAP model is effective for several reasons. Firstly, by facilitating the process of accessing the NSFAS loan and guaranteeing payment of the university registration fee, students' stress in this regard is considerably reduced. As one of the financial aid officers observed, until the financial issues at the beginning of the academic year are sorted out, it is difficult for students to give proper attention to their studies. Secondly, good relationships that develop between REAP student advisors and staff in the financial aid departments of the institutions help to smooth the way should students experience financial problems.

Thirdly, the small grant offered by REAP was reported by all the students interviewed to have made the difference between success and failure for them, as they would otherwise not have been able to make up the shortfall that was not covered by the NSFAS loan. Finally, the REAP model of financial assistance was reported to be effective in that it requires students to manage the grant responsibly by way of a properly drawn up personal budget, to report on their expenditure to REAP, and to plan ahead by requesting grant payments timeously. This was confirmed by a financial aid officer at one of the institutions in the sample who went so far as to say that, in his experience, these financial controls, together with the holistic support REAP provides, seems to have the effect of making REAP students more responsible and accountable and to ensure that they perform better academically than other students from similar circumstances.

Despite the benefits of the REAP grant, REAP students mentioned certain problems that they had experienced. These related to their understanding of the extent of the REAP financial support and the process for grant payments. In terms of the former, a number of REAP students reported that, when they were first recruited onto the programme, they had been under the impression that REAP would provide a full bursary, only to discover upon arrival at the institution that they would need to apply for a NSFAS loan. This seems to happen despite the grant being fully explained to all students when they are accepted onto the programme. With regards to the payment process, complaints were that this was slow, although funds are transferred to a student's account within a week of the request being made. It thus appears more a matter of students not fully understanding REAP systems and processes, and financial systems and processes generally, than of inherent flaws in the implementation of the REAP programme. This emphasises the importance of clear, meaningful communication to prevent such misunderstandings occurring.

## **2.5 INSTITUTIONAL ROLES IN FACILITATING FINANCIAL AID AND RELATED SUPPORT**

Higher education institutions play an important role in providing formalised financial support, mainly through their financial aid services departments. Less formalised financial support may be offered through discretionary funds or even by individual staff members who may assist particularly needy students by giving them money out of their own pockets.

### 2.5.1 Financial aid services

The main task of financial aid services is to manage and administer financial assistance for needy students, primarily NSFAS loans but also other bursaries, scholarships and merit awards.

Those financial aid staff interviewed seemed sincerely committed to helping students and were sympathetic to their difficulties. One said:

Some may think I am mad but I always get satisfaction from helping needy students, sometimes we go the extra mile...yesterday again a past student came to me, people remember you. Even when they start working, they come back and say hello.

Because of the sorts of dealings financial aid staff have with disadvantaged students, they appear to be much more aware of the kinds of problems they face, including academic and social/personal difficulties, than many of the other staff interviewed. They were also much more aware of disadvantaged students being a definable group in the student population, although they may have used different terms of reference, such as “needy” students. They therefore play an important role as the first port of call for these students. Furthermore, because the difficulties experienced by disadvantaged students impact directly on their academic achievement, and thus affect their chances of obtaining continued financial aid, the relationship that financial aid staff have with the rest of the institution is pivotal for referring students to academic support and other services, such as counselling, when necessary. Indeed, it appeared that financial aid staff were a significant source of referrals for students who presented with problems. There were, however, no formalised institutional linkages between financial aid departments and other areas of student support, and it seems that this would be a strategic area for institutions to explore.

Despite the genuine willingness of many financial aid staff to assist these students, the registration process was reported to present many problems for the NSFAS students in the study, who did not have the extra support of REAP staff to smooth the process. This is an area where definite improvements might be made at some campuses. As already mentioned, students who registered late were unable to access financial aid if all the available funding for that semester or that year had already been allocated. Where students were required to register before their NSFAS loan was approved, they reported struggling to raise the registration fee, although in some instances arrangements were made for students to register while still waiting for confirmation of their loan application. In one institution, bureaucratic and complex application processes caused considerable stress, particularly for first-year students. This was exacerbated by their unfamiliarity with the language of the institution, making the process even more confusing for them. For example, a student reported:

Even the simplest thing as the registration [for financial aid], the filling of the forms. Their forms are so complicated. No-one sits with you and explains, ‘this is what you do and how you do it.’ You go back with the forms and they tell you; ‘No, this is wrong’; they are going to reschedule the date. Sometimes they even kick people out because they keep rescheduling them and by the time they come back they are closing off the registration date. And once they are closed they are closed, whether they rescheduled you or not.

At this same merged institution, where coherent systems had not yet been established across the different campuses, registration was reportedly “chaotic”, with students having to wait in long queues, sometimes for days. Some staff were perceived as being unsympathetic, even rude, and there was confusion among first-year students as to what the NSFAS loan covered and what it did not. At this

institution, the loan was only partial and no allocations were made for first-year student accommodation.

At one of the traditional universities in the sample, students reported that their applications for financial aid were only approved well into the first semester and the uncertainty of their financial status caused them severe distress during this period, when they were also dealing with a number of other difficulties in an unfamiliar environment.

In contrast to the difficulties alluded to above, one of the comprehensive institutions in the sample was attempting to deal with institutional changes, resulting from its merger, in an integrated fashion, and the financial aid department was actively trying to accommodate first-year students. This is described in the textbox below.

### **Integrated institutional response to first-year registrations**

The NSFAS loan at this institution was said to cover tuition, textbooks and accommodation for the first semester (a first semester pass mark of 60% was required for funding of accommodation in the second semester) for first-year students who qualified. The availability of financial aid and the department's services are widely promoted through posters, brochures, a call centre, and at open days. In addition, information is shared with faculties, the SRC and staff who deal with student recruitment.

The entire registration period is dedicated to assisting first-year students (returning students are required to register at the end of the previous year). A certain proportion of NSFAS funding is set aside for possible late applications and students meet with financial aid staff by appointment, to avoid long queues. Extra, temporary staff are employed during this period, to assist, which was explained as follows:

During the appointment we take them through the contract, how it must be repaid, things like credit balances that will be sent back to NSFAS, and so on. We give them the exact amount we are going to pay. We give them a letter saying we are going to pay so much for your tuition, your books and your accommodation. We look if there are mistakes on the contract so that they can sign and everything, and then we send them away. The thing is we don't want them to queue, because then they miss classes. That's why they come for a fifteen-minute appointment (support staff, financial aid services).

Furthermore, the institution intended to engage in an outreach promotion of its financial aid services to schools in 2008, to enable prospective students to make informed decisions before they applied to the institution.

As financial aid is so critical to student access to and success in higher education, the quality and efficiency of financial aid service and delivery is vitally important. Thus, where these processes are more transparent, user-friendly and streamlined, students are able to settle down to their studies more readily. It would thus seem strategic for financial aid departments to elicit ongoing feedback from their clients, the students, for the purpose of regularly evaluating and improving their services. This, however, was not common practice among the institutions in the sample.

### **2.5.2 Arrangements for student accommodation, travel, food and textbooks.**

The majority of students interviewed happened to live in university residences, although staff in the institutions identified a shortage of residential accommodation as a common problem.

The interviews confirmed that suitable, safe, affordable accommodation close to or on the university campus was the ideal for students to be able to study effectively and access the universities' resources, such as libraries, computer centres and student support services. The institutional residences were reported to fulfil this function by and large, although the students interviewed reported varying experiences of living in residence, describing both advantages and difficulties. On the one hand, advantages reported - in addition to easy access to campus resources - were that first-year students, in particular, found it easier to socialise and adjust to campus life. On the other hand, common problems reported were high noise levels, which made it difficult to study at times, rooms that were uncomfortably small for sharing, the high price of residence meals and a lack of cooking facilities. Some of the students in the sample also reported that, especially in their first year, they had felt socially alienated by being labelled as poor by their relatively better-off peers in residence, although this abated in continuing years.

Specific safety concerns were raised about some residences at the different institutions. For example, women students interviewed at one of the universities were worried about the lack of security and reported that men were able to walk around freely in the women's residences. Their concerns were exacerbated by the recent murder of a woman student in one of the residences. Safety and security issues were also mentioned in relation to off-campus residences; problems ranged from petty theft within residences to more serious crime in the surrounding area, which made it unsafe to be on the streets after dark. Where institutions provided shuttle services between the main campuses and off-campus residences, students were able to work in the library and access other facilities after lectures and then travel home safely after hours.

Racism was identified as a problem in the traditionally segregated residences of a university in the sample, although it was reported that these residences were in the process of becoming desegregated. Nevertheless, students in this sample generally shrugged off instances of racism they had encountered, saying that these had not affected them too seriously.

It would seem, however, that the benefits of residence life generally outweighed the disadvantages. The research study team heard many accounts of disadvantaged students hounding campus accommodation services on a daily basis at the beginning of their first year, trying to obtain a space in residence, while temporarily sharing overcrowded rooms on or off campus. This could continue for weeks or even months. The alternative, that of trying to find alternative accommodation, was especially difficult for first-year students, who were unfamiliar with the city, and they generally reported paying higher rentals for poorer accommodation. There were reports of these students living in very unsuitable conditions, often considerable distances from campus. In addition, because the university shuttles did not service these areas, these students would face additional risks travelling home at night, should they need to remain on campus to study or attend classes. Several cases were encountered of these students having to walk considerable distances every day because they could not afford the taxi fares.

It is therefore imperative that, because students tend to be most at-risk of failing in their first year, disadvantaged first-year students be given priority for residential accommodation. It was suggested by a REAP student advisor that first-year REAP students should be “guaranteed” a place in the university residences, as, coming largely from rural areas, they were especially vulnerable. It was acknowledged that places would need to be reserved timeously.

Where NSFAS loans made allowances for meals and textbooks, these funds were loaded onto the student’s loan card and could not be accessed as cash. In four out of the five institutions sampled, students could only use their cards at commercial campus outlets. It was widely reported, however, that these establishments were very expensive by comparison with off-campus supermarkets, which meant that these funds very soon ran out. As a result, there were many reports from both students in the sample as well as staff interviewed, of students being forced to go hungry and how this affected their ability to study. This was poignantly illustrated by a NSFAS student as follows:

You can’t go to class if you are hungry. Food is not needed by the stomach, but by the whole body, especially the brain. So you cannot perform in class if you are hungry. NSFAS can pay us fees for our studies, but if I am hungry I cannot pass.

Textbooks were also reported to be more expensive at campus bookshops than off-campus ones. As students cannot access the funds as cash, they are precluded from buying books second-hand from other students. While staff in institutions explained that this was a form of security against students spending the funds irresponsibly, some students expressed extreme frustration at seemingly being penalised by the system and went so far as to say that they felt they were being discriminated against for having a NSFAS loan. It would seem that the current system is short-sighted and that more creative solutions need to be found.

Although these sorts of difficulties were reported mostly by the NSFAS students, isolated reports of REAP students suffering such hardship were also encountered. When these REAP students approached their student advisors for assistance, however, they were fortunate in that a solution could usually be found. This is a support safety net that NSFAS students do not have.

### **2.5.3 Additional institutional financial support**

Individual institutions do provide additional financial assistance to needy students through their own bursary schemes, but these tend to be aimed at high achievers. Furthermore, those students whose academic performance may be compromised as a direct result of the sorts of financial constraints already described, may not meet the academic criteria for these bursaries. The process may thus become self-defeating if it ultimately favours those who are relatively more advantaged.

In addition to institutional bursaries, financial aid departments reported that companies offered large numbers of external bursaries every year for disadvantaged students who were doing well in their studies. These opportunities need to be communicated to disadvantaged students, such as REAP’s, and REAP staff to actively pursue.

Individual institutions are also responsive to their students’ financial needs through targeted interventions. For example, one institution operated a university loan fund for final-year students who had been achieving well academically but who were unable to register because of outstanding balances on their fees account. The loan was offered on condition that these students seek support from student services in

areas such as study methods, personal budgeting and so on. This system was reported to work well as the students would repay the loan once they were working.

Another example is of a fund operated by the SRC of the university of technology in the sample, where a portion of its own budget is earmarked to assist first-year and continuing students who are unable to pay registration fees.

A series of targeted interventions aimed at students in desperate financial circumstances had been set up by the social worker at one of the traditional universities in the sample. These are illustrated in the textbox below.

### **Financial safety nets for needy students**

The social worker explained that students frequently came to her “the colour of that wall, and I can see they are starving and can’t even concentrate on what I am saying.” She gives them food vouchers, that have been donated by a local supermarket chain, and instructs them to see her again the following week, when they have had something to eat. “It is terrible to be so hungry, or to live off a loaf of bread and some milk. Once they are eating proper meals – fruit and veggies and some meat or fish - it is incredible to see how their marks improve. Their colour changes and their eyes are bright, and now I can talk to them.” She supervises this expenditure closely and only issues vouchers for another month once she has checked and approved all their till slips. She argued that, in this way, these students learn a certain degree of financial responsibility.

In addition, her office offers part-time employment opportunities for students who have small outstanding amounts owing on their fees accounts. She explained that she had many companies on her books offering such work and that she negotiated a reasonable hourly rate with them, to prevent the students being exploited. She placed students according to their field of interest or study and worked out a financial plan with each one individually, according to their earnings, to enable them to pay off their fees arrears as well as have a small monthly allowance for their own personal expenditure.

Where students owed larger amounts, she might advise that they take leave of absence for six months or so and work fulltime during this period to pay the arrears, under her supervision. In such cases, she reported that students generally showed great commitment and worked hard as she had given them hope, and “because they have still got their dream”. The benefits of such arrangements were reported to be numerous. Not only were the students able to repay their debts and stay in the higher education system, but they also learned how to manage their finances, gained work experience that they could add to their CVs, as well as experienced significant personal growth. This was seen to be of particular value to rural students with little experience of how to work with money or of the formal work environment.

This is an example of how effective a broader response to student needs can be. It should be noted, however, that these interventions had developed out of one individual’s passion for her work and were not an integrated institutional response. It was, therefore, not clear how these interventions would be continued when she retired.

There were also examples at all the institutions sampled of individual academic staff being very aware of the sorts of financial difficulties their students face. Other than



referring them to financial aid departments, these individuals were only in a position to help students in an *ad hoc* fashion, usually by giving them small amounts of money out of their own pockets. One of the support staff involved with in-service placement explained her experiences of the sorts of financial difficulties students faced as follows:

The [academic] results we get are often not genuine because the students have these other issues affecting them. There is a broader effect as well. Being a campus that is so separate in terms of where the residences are, where some of the campuses are, just that travelling in between becomes a problem. I've got to be very careful where I set up a presentation with a company because sometimes students from one of the other campuses can't get there just because they don't have the taxi fare. I'll give you another example. My brother is a lecturer in architecture here and he says that he's got some students who will work throughout the night in the architecture studios, doing their drawings et cetera. They rush off to the gym in the morning to shower and they come back to class, hardly having had a meal in between. The reason they are doing that is because they can't afford to go up and down to where they stay or wherever. So basically they camp here. And he says they are excellent students, they are doing everything; but when you see them in the morning you know that this child has not slept, he has not eaten.

In contrast, it was reported that other academics were ignorant of their students' financial circumstances, either because of their large class sizes and teaching loads which prevented them from interacting with their students at a personal level, or because they considered this the domain of institutional financial and support services.

A financial aid officer reported that very poor students were often overwhelmed by the seemingly enormous loan provided by NSFAS, not realising how carefully it has to be managed just to cover the absolute minimum, and that it was easy for them to overspend. He recommended that it be institutional policy for all students receiving financial aid or bursaries to attend workshops on financial management and/or budgeting to assist them in managing their finances.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

Finances are the most tangible and critical factor facilitating disadvantaged students' access to higher education and completion of their studies. Although the NSFAS loan goes a long way towards assisting them in this regard, there are still financial gaps, that may be relatively small in the overall picture, but that can make the difference between students completing their studies or dropping out. The stress students experience in relation to these financial concerns can impact on their academic achievement and lead to social alienation. This illustrates the complex way in which financial circumstances interweave with other aspects of student success. Sufficient financial resources to enable students to live above mere survival mode, and fully engage both academically and in campus life, can thus be considered a vital underpinning condition for academic and social integration, and ultimately student success.

Where students are able to access funds to fill these gaps, such as through REAP, their ability to cope with their studies was reported to be vastly improved. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to establish the full extent of financial difficulties experienced by student populations with NSFAS loans, which are not receiving other bursary support, to provide an institutional understanding and acknowledgement of how financial disadvantage plays out in a student's life. This would enable the

development of holistic institutional solutions, such as external funding partnerships, rather than isolated or individual responses to students' financial difficulties. The alternative, that of students dropping out of higher education and NSFAS losing any possibility of recouping these loans, is a waste of human and financial resources.

Although the student population of South African higher education institutions would be very different without the financial aid infrastructure that currently prevails, nevertheless this is not sufficient on its own to guarantee study completion. Academic factors – the students' educational capital, higher education expectations and academic support – clearly also play a major role and these are discussed in the next chapter of this report, Chapter Three.

## CHAPTER THREE: ACADEMIC FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As has been previously argued, the ease with which students become integrated into the academic environment is directly related to their success. It is apparent, however, that there is a degree of mismatch between disadvantaged students' backgrounds and experiences and the requirements of higher education that presents specific challenges to students' academic integration. A range of academic support is provided by higher education institutions and organisations like REAP, as responses to some of these challenges. This chapter sets out to examine the interrelationship between students' preparedness for higher education, academic requirements of higher education institutions and courses, and aspects of support that facilitate (and inhibit) students' academic integration and success.

The background to this chapter highlights key findings in the literature with respect to academic factors that impact on retention and throughput, and contrasts the preparedness of disadvantaged students for higher education, on the one hand, with institutional preparedness for dealing with them on the other. These concepts provide a framework for understanding and interpreting the primary data gathered in this study.

A major factor in student drop-out, cited by students of all race groups almost equally<sup>20</sup>, is their poor academic and social preparation for tertiary education in school, and inadequate academic teaching and support in universities. Other major factors that disadvantaged students experience, that relate more to their background, are having to study in a second or third language, to which rural students in particular may have had little exposure, and being the first generation in their families, and perhaps even in their communities, to enter higher education. In this scenario, their families do not have the educational capital or educational resources to assist their integration or support them in their academic studies.

The literature reflects this and speaks of students being largely unprepared for the demands of higher education. It emphasises that, especially in their first year, students find it difficult to adjust to the higher education environment; in particular, the shift from the regimented school environment which is usually characterised by imposed discipline and supervision, to the higher education environment which is characterised by greater independence, free time and self-discipline. Because of the poorer quality of schooling they receive, disadvantaged students tend to lack the range of academic skills (e.g. study skills, time management) demanded by higher education. They are also likely to struggle if their English is poor, especially since most of the work is carried out in English (Stephen 2003:45-46). Furthermore, poor English proficiency makes the absorption of academic or discipline-specific ideas that much more difficult (Stephen 2003:46-47). Mantz Yorke describes the challenges of the transition to higher education as follows:

The move into higher education presents students with new challenges regarding learning. Some find that it takes time to make the switch from a school-level programme, in which their learning is highly structured, to a learning

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<sup>20</sup> 'Dropouts – in their own words', *Mail & Guardian*, November 16 to 27, 2007

environment in which they have to take greater personal responsibility. For those entering via access courses in which their learning benefited from warmth and supportiveness, the more distant character of higher education can come as a shock...It is easy to see in these transitions the potential for discouragement and academic failure. (Yorke 2002:12)

In summary, the key academic competencies identified in the literature as vitally important for undergraduate success, are being able to think and work independently, time management, appropriate study skills, and proficiency in the language of tuition.

A counter argument, however, is that under-preparedness should not be viewed as simply a deficit that students bring to higher education, since universities are equally unprepared for the demands of their transformed student populations. Thus, Thomas *et al* (2002:4) argue that the content of higher education curricula, and the way in which these are taught, need to be adapted to meet the needs of new kinds of students:

[Bourdieu] concluded that working-class students are less successful, not because they were of inferior intelligence, but because the curriculum was 'biased in favour of those things with which middle-class students were already ex-curricularly familiar' (Thomas et al 2002:4).

To this end, Thomas *et al* (2002:4) provide the following overview of elements of academic practice considered effective in providing holistic student development:

- Supporting students across the lifecycle, but prioritising the first year for identifying 'at risk' students and providing support. Both research and experience have shown the so-called 'lifecycle approach' to student support to be effective. Thomas and colleagues describe the approach and its benefits as follows:

The student lifecycle approach has the following main stages: pre-entry advice and guidance, admissions and induction, first term/semester, moving through the course and employment/progression. This approach benefits students in that it offers them a comprehensive and consistent form of provision: 'The lifecycle approach enables institutions to develop their provision of support in line with individual student need, rather than institutional practice' (Action on Access, 2002). (Thomas et al 2002:12-13)

- Student induction into the expectations of higher education beyond the traditional one-week orientation period into the first semester, or even the whole of the first year
- Prioritising institutional resources for first-year students
- Developing diagnostic approaches to inform the provision of learning support
- Curriculum development including the introduction of learning skills, information about student services, employment and careers education and the development of new subject areas into existing programmes to encourage participation by under-represented groups
- Outreach work to develop students' academic skills and to promote institutional engagement in this regard
- Re-introducing personal tutors who take on a more structured and proactive role
- Less emphasis on early summative assessments in favour of formative assessments

- Supportive and developmental ways of dealing with failing students, e.g. summer schools for revision; providing students with alternatives such as transfer to another course, rather than withdrawal, and
- Staff pedagogical training to meet the needs of greater student diversity.

These elements of good practice provide useful pointers for examining the provision of academic support and development for disadvantaged students at the higher education institutions in this study.

The literature indicates that there is a complex relationship between the various factors that impact on academic integration and student success. The relationship between these factors can perhaps best be understood by examining the match or mismatch between student preparedness, institutional preparedness, and the array of support systems and mechanisms that mediate the fit between disadvantaged students and the institution. It could also be expected, that because of the complexity of these factors and their interrelationships, support systems and mechanisms would need to be coherent and follow an integrated approach. These aspects are thus foregrounded in the remainder of the chapter, but firstly, the ways in which disadvantaged students' educational and home backgrounds prepare them for higher education, in terms of the academic competencies required of undergraduate students, will be discussed, drawing on the primary data from this study.

## **3.2 PREPAREDNESS OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **3.2.1 Academic competencies required for success**

Undoubtedly, those students who are well-prepared for the transition into higher education will have a greater advantage over those who are not. The ease and speed with which they can settle down to their studies and to their new environment can impact profoundly on their success in their first year, when they are most likely to drop out of the system.

A dean at one of the institutions visited, writing in a faculty newsletter, pointed out the typical challenges that first-year students face, that speak directly to their under-preparedness:

One's first year at university is generally the toughest that one will be facing in one's entire tertiary education. There are so many things to adapt to: the freedom from teachers and prefects, the absence of bells and whistles marking time, the huge size of the university, the distractions of a new social life, the workload and the very different style of instruction that is involved. All of these can be very challenging for new students and, sadly, many get into difficulty in the first few months of their studies and never recover. Students who struggle during the first year, however, seldom do so because they lack the brainpower to succeed, but rather because of poor learning methods, poor work habits (caused by many things) and a reluctance to ask for help when they clearly need it.

It is noteworthy that the writer expresses the commonly held assumption that students should be able to recognise when they have a problem and seek the appropriate help, whereas, as will be discussed in the next chapter of this report, there may be multiple, complex factors that prevent or inhibit them from doing so.

Under-preparedness, in terms of "poor learning methods" was confirmed by both staff and students in the sample, as impacting significantly on student success. For

example, students who reported that they continued to study as they had at school (memorising or rote learning) were, unsurprisingly, not coping. Two students interviewed stood out as seeming to have fallen into their studies with ease and enthusiasm; they reported no difficulty adapting to a different way of studying, and were excelling academically. Strikingly, they maintained that they had under-achieved at school, but it can be conjectured that this may have been because their learning style had been less compatible with the school examination system than with expectations in higher education.

A range of additional academic competencies that students require to succeed in their studies were articulated by both academic and support staff at the institutions visited. These are difficult to prioritise, because they are so interrelated, but perhaps prime amongst them is being independent, both academically and personally. Academically, this means students need to be able to work unsupervised and be independent thinkers. In their personal sphere, first-year students who are able to cope with their newfound freedom and independence, are responsible in the way they manage their studies and are able to prioritise their studies along with other issues in their lives, are much more likely to achieve better grades than those who do not have such coping skills.

Secondly, it is believed that competence in the language of tuition may go a long way in developing students' conceptual confidence in their academic discipline. Thus the complex conceptual skills that higher education demands, such as being able to think at a theoretical level and apply knowledge to new and different situations, would be more easily achieved by students for whom the language of tuition is not an issue. Similarly, the vital ability to read and engage critically with academic literature, in order to write academically sound assignments and essays, is greatly facilitated if the person is accustomed to the language. Language confidence, which will be discussed in more detail in section 3.4.5.3, was also seen to be a significant factor in students having the courage to approach their lecturers for assistance, which was reported to be a major step towards succeeding in those subjects for many students.

The findings confirmed the importance of an array of related academic competencies associated with studying at the level of higher education, as claimed by the literature. One of these was identified by both students and staff as time management. For example, many students reported that they quickly became aware of how poorly they were managing their time in the first semester of their first year (not being able to prioritise their studies and not being able to keep up with the volume of work) and this prompted them to think differently about how to approach their work in the second semester. These changes in approach included preparing for lectures, attending all classes, revising the lectures daily rather than "cramming" at the last minute, and generally putting more effort into their studies.

It was also claimed that students need to have a clear idea of what is expected of them academically, especially in terms of being able to understand examination questions and how to answer them, and understanding the requirements of assignments. Students, themselves, frequently raised the issue of struggling to understand examination questions and of obtaining poor marks as a result. This point also speaks to the necessity for lecturers to provide adequate explanations and guidelines, as well as for students to acquire an academic discourse, which is often more difficult for those who are not English (or Afrikaans) first-language speakers.

Having outlined these key requirements for academic success, as identified in the primary data, it becomes imperative to understand in what way the educational and family backgrounds and experiences of disadvantaged students prepare them for

these requirements. These are what Tinto (1993) refers to as students' pre-entry characteristics, which, he argues, affect their academic and social integration.

### **3.2.2 Preparation at school**

Although it is clearly the responsibility of schools to ensure that they are offering the best possible primary and secondary education to their learners, the reality is that South Africa has a legacy of under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers, especially in historically disadvantaged black and rural communities. For example, comments passed by an Information Technology lecturer and a Science lecturer, were that for students to be adequately prepared for their respective courses, they need a basic level of computer literacy and, in the sciences, to have practical, hands-on experience of laboratory work. The majority of schools, however, and especially rural schools, simply do not have the infrastructural resources or sufficiently qualified staff to teach these components. Indeed, it was pointed out by REAP volunteers, that schooling is so poor in some rural communities that any potential which learners may have is masked by a lack of opportunity to express it, and they are simply unable to progress beyond secondary school as a result.

It is noteworthy that a number of lecturers interviewed across the different institutions in the sample, blamed a poor schooling system for what they perceived as the poor quality of students entering higher education. They contended that students lacked foundational competencies in literacy and numeracy, let alone higher order cognitive competencies, and that this was an endemic problem. They were thus reluctant to label rural or black township schools as being particularly problematic in this regard. A common complaint from lecturers was that the language competency of undergraduate students was generally of an unacceptably low standard, even for those who were studying in their first language. This was overwhelmingly attributed to poor schooling, across all sectors.

It is significant that such higher education discourses attribute the responsibility for perceived deficiencies in the schooling system to the Department of Education (DoE) to rectify. Those expressing this view maintain it is not within the scope of higher education to address these issues. Although this attitude may be partly explained by large teaching loads for lecturers in certain departments and very real internal and external pressures for change experienced by higher education institutions and their staff, it nevertheless illustrates how certain higher education discourses can appear to perpetuate an elitist ethos: in other words, that students are expected to adapt to institutional requirements rather than the institution attempting to adapt to the needs of its students.

The associated academic competencies of how to study, time management, and independent learning that have already been mentioned, are not commonly addressed in schools. Indeed, both REAP and NSFAS students spoke of being "spoon-fed" by their teachers at school, which had militated against them acquiring these skills and had made their transition to higher education so much more difficult. A few of the students interviewed felt they had been adequately prepared for higher education at school, but they were very much in the minority.

### **3.2.3 Preparation at home**

REAP staff and volunteers spoke of how REAP students, growing up in a rural environment, lacked exposure to written and spoken English, which impacted on their language competence at university. Resources such as books, magazines and newspapers, that people in more urban settings, and especially those who are

financially better off, may take for granted, were generally inaccessible to the families of REAP students. Neither are there public libraries in rural areas, so REAP students would not have had the opportunity to read for pleasure, to keep abreast of world events, or to develop their English language skills.

It is self-evident that many of these disadvantaged students would not have access to information technology such as computers and the internet; neither would they have televisions in their homes. These resources fulfil an important educational function in exposing young people to the outside world, as well as to different careers and the world of work. At one institution, the Head of Engineering noted that rural children lack exposure to technologically advanced toys that teach scientific principles. A third-year NSFAS mechanical engineering woman student explained this lack of exposure to technology, especially its gendered bias, as follows:

Even the place where you grew up, it does count sometimes, because another problem I had was people were asking questions about car engines, because most of the time you study about engines, those parts. So I wasn't exposed to those types of things. In rural areas you don't get time to go and watch people fixing cars and stuff. You have to cook, you have to clean, you have to do a lot of things and then you end up getting tired and you just sleep after. So I didn't have knowledge of, I didn't actually know anything about the car engine. [ ] Yes it is a disadvantage because even now, most people from rural areas, they won't know much about things like that, they don't really get time to do those things, especially women. Okay guys do know a lot of stuff, but women – women are expected to do everything in the house and then they won't really allow you to go and stay with your brother while he is fixing whatever. They will ask you: what are we going to eat?

Thus, the backgrounds of many students from rural areas do not allow them the same level of preparedness for higher education as their more economically advantaged peers.

As is commonly the case with disadvantaged students, and especially those from rural areas, the majority of REAP and NSFAS students in the samples were the first in their immediate families to have had the opportunity to enter higher education. The consequence of this is that these students do not have role models who can help them make sense of their new environment or who can assist them in their studies. Thus, although most students interviewed reported that their families were very supportive of them, they had very little understanding of how difficult higher education was and how hard they had to work just to pass. For example, a blind final year student who had managed to complete his qualification in the minimum time, despite having to overcome considerable obstacles, claimed that his family nevertheless kept nagging him about when he was going to finish: "They expect university to be easy and that I will just pass everything."

Having identified key ways in which disadvantaged students may be academically under-prepared for higher education requirements, the next section of this chapter report examines the preparedness of the higher education institutions in the research study sample, and REAP, for dealing with these issues.



### 3.3 PREPAREDNESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

It has been argued that viewing disadvantaged students as being under-prepared for higher education in certain respects, a 'deficit' approach, is elitist and unhelpful, and that the preparedness of higher education institutions for these students should also be considered. This viewpoint was echoed by a staff member in the Academic Development Division at one of the comprehensive universities in the sample, in which there were deep divisions relating to conflicting identities in the merged institutions. She felt that although the institution had certain mechanisms and programmes in place to assist disadvantaged students, more fundamental institutional transformation was necessary in order to truly meet the needs of these students.

I am actually advocating the move from 'under-prepared students' to 'under-prepared institutions'. I use that quite a lot. I'm not getting there yet, let me tell you. It's a dangerous thing to say. But that is true. The institution needs to transform. That's also the move over the years and we were there as well where we fully focused on the student initially. I think it was sort of okay-ish at that stage to say well, we're taking the student, we're developing the student up to a point where he can now cope with the demands of what we want at university: to [now] say well, it's not just the student but we also somehow have to transform what we do. (Author's insert).

Institutional preparedness for disadvantaged students requires a range of co-ordinated and coherent structural mechanisms, in order to offer holistic support and development throughout the student lifecycle. Nevertheless, the literature points to the necessity for institutional resources to be prioritised for first-year students and this was found to be the case at the higher education institutions in the sample.

The first of these institutional responses occurs at the stage of student selection and admission, followed by appropriate course selection, orientation, mechanisms for identifying 'at-risk' students, academic support and development, and preparation for the world of work.

#### 3.3.1 Institutional student selection and admission

Institutional selection and admission mechanisms are important tools for trying to ensure that only those students with the potential to succeed are admitted to the university and the selected field of study. Criteria for admission may vary from institution to institution as well as between faculties within the same institution, so that a number of both REAP and NSFAS students in the research study sample reported that they had been refused admission to some universities but accepted by others.

The notion of 'potential' is a tricky one as it is increasingly recognised that school marks and even Grade 12 results may not be very reliable predictors of academic success. For instance, a longitudinal study of the 2002 REAP cohort<sup>21</sup> showed that just under 50% of the graduates had obtained a matriculation pass of M1200 or above, but the extent to which their marks had varied above this point did not seem to have impacted significantly on the pace of their progress towards graduation. Indeed, an academic development staff member argued that a student's rank in a school is probably a more useful indicator of ability than grades, as the quality of a grade is highly variable across schools and provinces. His experience indicated that

<sup>21</sup> Freeth, R & Ngidi, W 2006. *Tracking the 2002 REAP Cohort - an assessment of the throughput rate of students taken onto the Rural Education Access Programme in 2002*. Internal report.

weak students from good schools, who were only able to qualify for the foundation programme, were unlikely to succeed, whereas a student who had done well at a weak school was likely to be able to use foundation support and go on to do well at university. He explained that if a student has struggled academically, despite coming from a well-resourced school with high educational standards and good academic support, s/he is unlikely to succeed at university.

Assessments at the point of entry to higher education are, therefore, vital as proper assessment and retention are inextricably linked. A variety of assessments may be used, in addition to senior certificate results, to ascertain an applicant's knowledge and application of mathematics, understanding and use of language (English or Afrikaans) and even an applicant's capacity to think analytically and critically. Some of these are scaffolded tests (such as that used in the University of Cape Town's AARP<sup>22</sup> test), which measure students' ability to learn.

At one of the institutions in the study, students who score above a certain minimum on the initial entrance assessment, but lower than that required for admission, are referred to the Centre for Research and Assessment. Here, they are assessed further and a profile is developed for each student based on how they perform on a test (which includes arithmetic and language dimensions), on their matriculation scores as well as other relevant factors. These initial assessments are conducted not only to assess whether a student can enter the university, but also to identify students who need to be channelled to academic development programmes, such as foundation programmes. There are some courses that require all applicants to undergo assessment, whereas others only assess students who do not meet the minimum requirements. Assessments may thus be used for selecting prospective students to appropriate courses, for recommending students for an extended learning or foundation programme, or for extra language or reading support.

Psychometric testing may also be routinely used as was done by the Faculty of Health Sciences at one of the comprehensive universities in the sample, to try to ensure the best 'fit' of student for the course, although this is expensive to administer.

Despite the use of these tests, a number of academic staff across the institutions in the research study sample expressed the opinion that their institutional admission requirements were too low. It was also acknowledged, however, that to raise the criteria would exclude mostly disadvantaged students. This poses a particular 'double bind' situation, but indicates a definite area for further attention.

Related to this was an interesting observation that the new government funding formula for higher education institutions that emphasises throughput might press faculties to make more considered decisions around who they admit to their courses, and amend their admissions criteria. Again, this might be an area for future research. These points do, however, draw attention to the necessity for at-risk students to be identified at the point of entry to higher education, and that mechanisms for supporting them and monitoring their progress should be in place to ensure that their chances of success are maximised.

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<sup>22</sup> Alternative Admissions Research Project.

### 3.3.2 REAP selection processes

REAP regional representatives are local volunteers, based throughout the country, who recruit rural, economically disadvantaged youth, with the potential to succeed in higher education, to apply to be on the programme. REAP uses its own criteria to select candidates from the pool of applicants; financial neediness being the most important of these. REAP has also found that there is not always a direct correlation between academic achievement at school and in higher education, and their criteria therefore include other broad indicators, based on their experiences of their students, including leadership abilities, behavioural and attitudinal qualities and, especially, internal drive and motivation<sup>23</sup>. In addition, rather than purely a paper exercise, as conducted by most higher education institutions<sup>24</sup>, REAP interviews the short-listed applicants, which allows for more in-depth profiles of the candidates to be obtained. This selection process is not always a guarantee of success, however, although REAP's throughput rate appears to be significantly higher than the national average<sup>25</sup>. REAP regional representatives, who were interviewed for this study, suggested that the REAP selection process could be improved by using simpler English on the application form, as one or two of the items had been found to confuse applicants and, as a result, jeopardise their chances of selection.

Although selection and admission mechanisms are important in providing a starting point for enabling academic success, the next step is for students to enrol on the right course. This is a decision that many disadvantaged students are not properly equipped to take, as shall be seen in the next section.

### 3.3.3 Course selection

One of the key factors in student success is correct course selection and many students drop out because the course does not match their expectations or their interests. Thus, students who reported that they were enjoying the courses they were studying, and were able to envisage an exciting career for themselves, seemed much more motivated to succeed. In order to be able to make informed career choices for themselves, young people need to know about different careers and be aware of their own natural aptitudes. Moreover, in order to follow their favoured field of study at university, they need to have taken the correct subjects at school. The challenge is that young people are forced to make course decisions when they may have very little information about, or experience of, different fields or careers. This is intensified for the rural student who often has even less access to resources and information. Sound careers guidance in schools, as part of the curriculum, would clearly go a long way towards addressing this challenge.

There were a few students who reported that the careers guidance offered at their schools had been good; however, a repeated refrain from many others was that there had been no, or very inadequate, careers guidance at their schools. Furthermore, information on the need to take specific subjects at school in order to be admitted to certain fields of study at university may not be conveyed. As a consequence, some students reported not being able to register for the course of their choice because they had not taken the required subjects in Grade 12, while a few had made uninformed and inappropriate course choices. In many instances, students reported only having made a choice when they were standing in the registration queue, basing

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<sup>23</sup> REAP Annual Report 2006/7, p11.

<sup>24</sup> Certain programmes were found to also conduct interviews as part of the selection process, such as for the Thuthuka bursary scheme, described in 3.4.5.3.

<sup>25</sup> REAP Annual Report 2006/7, p4.

their choice on hearsay from other registering students or because the name of the course sounded right. Others chose courses that were popular among their friends at school, such as accounting, or because they believed it was a lucrative career, such as engineering.

There were, of course, a number of students interviewed who had made good career choices for themselves, were enjoying their studies and were doing well. In some cases, it was a career the student had aspired towards for years, while, for others, it was more luck than informed choice and planning. A few students interviewed felt trapped in the wrong course because they did not know what the alternatives were, or if they would be allowed to change courses and retain their student loan or the REAP grant. Such students appeared deeply unhappy and demotivated and were not succeeding in their studies as a result.

The REAP selection process is not designed to offer students guidance around career choice, as the regional representatives can only provide limited input when they distribute application forms to schools in their areas: it assumes that students have already made choices by the time they apply to the programme. The REAP selection process requires that students name a first and second course choice and they are only accepted onto the REAP programme should they pursue one of those two choices. The rationale is that they will have greater motivation to succeed if they study courses in which they are interested – one of their first two choices. In reality, however, the regional representatives, who are the first point of contact with high school students, described a situation where students decide on their top two choices in a fairly arbitrary manner; as one representative said: “they close their eyes and stick a pin in a pinhole.” In addition, regional representatives commented that students often choose quite divergent fields, indicating that they are uncertain about their general area of interest. It was pointed out that these young people need careers guidance much earlier than at the point of leaving school; preferably before grade 10 when they have to make subject choices for senior certificate.

In the face of students’ unpreparedness for making informed career choices, the literature suggests that institutions need to provide prospective students with clear information about course options and content. This should include, for example, details about module content, the amount of time that will be required, ancillary financial costs, assignments, methods of assessment, learning outcomes and employability prospects (Bourn 2002:23; Shobrook 2003:4). With regard to wrong course selection: “Recent research has shown that dissatisfaction with a course because it does not correspond to what was expected by the student is a major contributing factor to student withdrawal ... This is particularly the case in engineering, as the subject is not taught at schools. Students arriving on an engineering degree do not always understand what will be expected of them or what to expect from it ...” (Shobrook 2003:3-5).

So, how prepared are higher education institutions for assisting first-year students to make correct course choices? In some instances, systems were in place at registration to advise students, such as using trained senior students or specific departmental staff. However, from the institutions sampled, it appears that careers guidance and associated tests are commonly only available to students who are already registered, rather than to prospective students. Where careers advice and testing is offered to prospective students, this service is usually for the students’ own cost whereas it is free for registered students. The exception in this study was one of the comprehensive universities that offered careers testing, guidance and planning to both prospective and registered students. Should an applicant not meet the entry requirements for a course, s/he would be referred for careers counselling and a

different course or an extended learning programme would be recommended. The rationale for this testing was explained as follows:

Placement [is important] in two ways: the one, in the right field of study because almost always students coming from these really rural areas know about engineers, about social workers, about lawyers and teachers, you know, and that's all they want to do. So they come here and they say, "I want to be an engineer", or "I want to be a lawyer", or whatever. So that's the first thing – helping the student to be placed in the appropriate field of study, but also placed in the appropriate programme. In other words, we are looking at engineering that the student should do, but maybe not starting off with a degree but starting off with a foundation programme, or putting the student in an extended degree programme, or, now that we've merged, rather do a National Diploma in Engineering. So that type of placement also becomes crucial. (Support staff, Academic Development Division).

It would seem, therefore, that offering careers guidance only after a wrong choice has been made is somewhat illogical. Although it is understood that many institutions have neither the staff nor resources to offer comprehensive careers counselling services to all prospective students, it is argued that some form of careers counselling would not only maximise their chances of making a correct course choice and improve throughput rates, but also prevent the unnecessary heartache and sense of personal failure that students experience when they make the wrong choice. The point was emphasised by one of the financial aid staff interviewed: careers counselling should be mandatory for students who apply for bursaries to ensure that they are on the correct career path, so that this does not become a factor in them dropping out.

### **3.3.4 Orientation**

Orientation is a vital aspect of preparing students for higher education, especially as academic difficulties are reported to manifest predominantly in the first year when most exclusions and drop-outs occur. Orientation programmes can play a major role in helping students adjust to their new academic and socio-cultural environments and, in this way, improve student retention, throughput and success.

It is significant to note that many of the students interviewed, across all the institutions in the sample, reported that they had not attended orientation sessions. The majority of these were NSFAS students, as most REAP students had been encouraged to attend these sessions by their student advisors. Among the reasons students gave for not having attended orientation were that they simply had not known about it, but primarily because they were struggling to sort out practical issues in the first few weeks such as registration, accommodation and financial aid.

Students who had not attended orientation acknowledged that this had put them at a disadvantage. On the whole, those students who had attended orientation confirmed that it had been useful, although not all agreed with this view. Useful aspects of orientation reported included becoming acquainted with the layout of the campus and of where various facilities and services were located; being provided with the opportunity to meet some of their lecturers; meeting other students doing the same course and making new friends; being introduced to certain academic terminology; and learning what was expected of them in higher education. Orientation into residence life included being inducted into the rules and functioning of the residence, as well as their rights and responsibilities. Thus orientation is aimed at enhancing both academic and social integration for first-year students.

Orientation programmes were found to vary widely across the institutions sampled, from faculty-based programmes to more generic, institutional programmes. Generally, the formal sessions of the programme included both life skills and academic aspects. Most institutions also used orientation to introduce students to the institutional support services, such as counselling, academic support services and student health services. At one campus, the local police was also invited to advise students on safe and unsafe social practices, which parts of town were unsafe as well as the damaging effects of the different narcotic drugs that were popularly available and what they looked like.

A fun approach to orientating first-year students to the campus(es) and facilities was taken by certain academic departments at one of the comprehensive universities in the sample. Variations on the theme included dividing students into groups and sending them off around the campus to look for information such as a particular place, the name of a street, and even the price of a beer! The students reportedly had great fun, made new friends and learnt where everything was at the same time.

The use of senior students, who were specially trained as peer facilitators to assist new students during orientation, was another example of an approach to orientation that was reported to work well. Peer facilitators primarily assisted students in the first week of orientation with registration and choosing their subjects, and they also introduced new students to all the campus services and support services, showed them around the facilities and explained the cultural, social, sporting, recreational and political clubs and societies. The second week of orientation at this traditional university was devoted to presentations and workshops on academic and career topics, as well as on personal and social adjustment. A special orientation programme is arranged for part-time students, something that was not mentioned by the other institutions sampled, but is clearly of importance.

A significant point raised by a REAP student interviewed was that while helpful, orientation is a once-off event and *continuous* orientation is needed in the first year. This echoes Thomas *et al* (2002:4) who propose that for orientation to be an effective development strategy, it should extend beyond the traditional one-week period into the first semester, or even the whole of the first year. This point will be picked up a little later in this section. Other suggestions were that REAP assist students with careers choices during orientation and before registration; and that orientation should be made available in two or three blocks, so that if a student should miss the first block s/he would still have an opportunity to attend another, even if this is only an abridged version.

An innovative orientation strategy to address the problem of poor student attendance was being developed at one of the traditional universities in the study sample. The Success Week was aimed at attracting students through more creative marketing and by making the presentations more relevant and interesting. One of the aims of the Success Week was to engage families in providing their own support network for their child who was studying. An orientation manual was to be provided for students and their families and posted on the institutional website, and advisory/help desks were to be set up in each faculty to assist students make informed career choices before registering. Furthermore, a year long, extended orientation programme, the "first-year experience", had been approved and was to be integrated into the curriculum in the next phase of development.

While the principle of drawing students' families into the university experience, so that they can provide understanding and support, is sound, the reality for rural disadvantaged students is that it is unlikely their parents will be able to afford to

attend orientation. For those students who have only one or no parents, or who live with their grandmothers, family participation is highly unlikely. Orientation programmes, therefore, need to be realistic and accurately targeted at the needs and circumstances of students. In order to do this, institutions need to acknowledge that the category of disadvantaged students exists, to profile this group at their institution, and to be responsive to their package of needs.

In addition to the new orientation programme for first-year students at this institution, as described above, the Director of the Student Development Unit explained that a Career and Academic Success programme was also being developed for senior/final year students. Based on the U.S. "senior capstone experience", it will be faculty-based and consideration was being given as to whether it should be credit-bearing. Although some aspects of the programme were being considered for piloting in 2008, it was explained that it would most probably only go on stream in 2009. This extended orientation experience echoes the important principle of holistic student development, noted by Thomas *et al* (2002).

Finally, orientation programmes were felt to be able to be of particular value when integrated within academic programmes and implemented by faculties. Such programmes can provide disadvantaged science students with practical exposure to the subject, through an introduction to laboratory work, for example. Similar introductory programmes can be implemented for engineering students, to orientate them to the subject and introduce them to fundamental concepts that underpin the subject, to which some disadvantaged students may not have been exposed. A caution, however, is that such programmes will need to be timetabled creatively, as students frequently claimed that their already full timetables make it very difficult for them to attend additional support programmes.

Once students are fully registered and have commenced their studies, other institutional academic support systems and mechanisms come into play to assist academically vulnerable students. These mechanisms, systems and targeted interventions at the institutions visited, and the extent to which they provide an integrated support structure to disadvantaged students, are discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

### **3.3.5 Academic support and development**

Academic support and development is provided by higher education institutions to address issues around student retention, progression and success. These vary widely in their scope and approach.

#### *3.3.5.1 Academic development units*

Academic development units, in one form or another, existed at all the institutions in the sample. They tended to be at the heart of institutional academic support and development and generally encompassed alternative access programmes, staff development, tutor training, curriculum development and targeted academic development workshops for students. Although much of the support work was centralised, there were also degrees of decentralisation of academic support for students across the different campuses. This means that some faculties or departments have their own academic support programmes, modules or interventions, whereas, in other cases these are provided directly by the academic development unit.

A certain degree of contention was encountered around a centralised model of academic support and development versus a decentralised, faculty-based model. Arguments for a decentralised model were that academic development unit staff do not necessarily have the subject matter expertise in the different academic disciplines; that faculty-based academic development officers report directly to the Deans who can ensure that the faculties' priorities are followed; and that funding could be better spent by employing more lecturers in faculties, than on staff in a centralised unit. Faculty-based models were reported to allow for the greater integration of foundation<sup>26</sup> /support programmes into mainstream academic programmes. The counter argument, however, was that decentralised academic development can become fragmented, uncoordinated and unevenly implemented across faculties, and may lack the necessary support and expertise needed for ensuring the quality of curriculum development and teaching practice. Moreover, a centralised structure, some argued, offers a platform for advocating change and a forum for staff who are trying to adapt and change their practices.

At a traditional university in the sample, it was reported that there used to be a centralised academic development unit, but that this had closed down and academic development officers are currently based in individual faculties where they provide curriculum development, staff development and direct remedial support to students. It was also reported that the current system was being restructured in order to create a central structure to co-ordinate support in the faculties, thus incorporating elements of both centralised co-ordination and decentralised implementation.

### *3.3.5.2 Foundation and extended learning programmes*

Higher education institutions all provide some form of foundation or extended programmes as alternative access routes for students who display potential but are assessed as not being fully academically ready to enter mainstream university programmes. These students are potentially the most at-risk of failing without this additional support. Those students who fulfil the requirements of these programmes are subsequently accepted onto mainstream academic programmes.

The structure and implementation of foundation and extended programmes varied across the different institutions in the study sample, but changes in funding structure from the Department of Education seem to have resulted in extended learning programmes gaining ascendancy over foundation programmes. However, extended learning programmes that are simply an extension of a mainstream first-year course over two years, seem the least effective form of support. The most effective consisted of certain mainstream coursework, coupled with relevant development components such as associated foundation work, language and academic literacy, study skills and so on. These are best situated within academic departments so that they can be tailored to specific subjects, but linked to a central academic development unit where teaching staff can be appropriately trained and support can be given for curriculum development initiatives. In some instances, the extended learning programmes were generic within a certain field, such as commerce, allowing students to split off into different course options afterwards. A more holistic system of assessment was also recommended at this level to allow students the opportunity to demonstrate a range of abilities.

A good example of an integrated approach to foundational provision was encountered at one of the comprehensive universities visited. This is described in the textbox below.

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<sup>26</sup> See 3.4.3.



### **An holistic approach to extended learning programmes**

The foundations programme unit at this university employs lecturers to teach on the extended programmes of specific departments, and the lecturer reports to both the head of that department and the head of the foundations programme unit. The unit appoints staff in a joint process with departments to ensure that lecturers, who are orientated to teaching and academic development, are appointed.

The unit has developed an extended programme that contains elements of both foundation and extended programmes, following a middle path between them. It incorporates as much foundational provision as possible, including content-based as well as personalised support. The head of the unit explained that: "Research has shown that giving more time without more support is not the answer. The modern tendency is to say that we need more time plus more support, not necessarily more work". He argued that foundational support was most effective if it was properly integrated, both horizontally and vertically.

He explained horizontal integration as being between both subject content and academic support elements; for example contextualising a communications course within a particular field, rather than simply providing a generic course. But horizontal integration should also take place between different subjects, rather than keeping them in separate silos. For example, both chemistry and mathematics work with the concept of ratios, but explain them very differently and students may not realise the similarities. Similarly, the same terms may be used in both physics and chemistry, but may have different meanings, or different terminology may be used for the same concept. He emphasised that this was extremely confusing for students and detrimental to their understanding of the work. His unit addressed this by facilitating meetings between lecturers in different disciplines so that they could work together in a coherent fashion.

Vertical integration referred to how foundation work was integrated into mainstream work. The Head of the unit maintained that, if each department managed the foundation components themselves, then they could ensure that their mainstream curricula follow on from the foundation programme/ support modules, rather than there being a dislocation between the two. On the other hand, however, this could limit horizontal integration.

The personal development aspects of the extended learning programmes included "non-academic", life skills modules, as well as mentoring and counselling, providing an integrated and holistic overall approach.

Institutions visited appeared to have good intentions with regard to academic support, but a major difficulty reported was the lack of funding. Problems with funding were reported to operate at two levels: support from the DoE and internal funding allocations. With regards to the former, it was reported that at times the nature of academic development programmes have been shaped more by DoE funding decisions than educational logic - particularly with regards to funding for foundation support. Regarding the latter, it was reported that the manner in which tertiary education cuts the funding cake tends to favour teaching, learning and research, activities perceived as being the core business of the university, rather than academic support. Academic support thus tends to be de-prioritised and, it was

alleged, to be the first to receive funding cuts when these are made. This was explained by one of the academic staff interviewed as follows:

If you do research in a certain discipline, you will get more money than if you do research in terms of academic support or academic development. It's not really the core business of any of the universities. I always talk about us as the stepchildren – you get the last little bit that's left and if they need to cut the budget, they'll first cut us before the academics. Well, that's the core business in a certain way, but what is core is debatable. To me support is just as important as the core business of the university.

This interviewee made the argument that both foundation programmes and extended programmes should be offered; foundation programmes are needed by weaker students to allow adaptation and proper preparation for the mainstream course, whereas stronger students can be helped in extended programmes.

The students interviewed who were on a foundation or extended programme confirmed that these had definitely assisted them to accommodate to the academic demands of the university. Despite initial reservations about having to do an extra year, and the possible stigma attached to this, they felt that these programmes had benefited them and they were then in a better position to cope with the mainstream programme. A NSFAS student who had been advised that he would need to go onto the foundation programme of the course he had chosen, recounted how he had decided to do a different course rather than spend an extra year studying, with the associated cost. He explained, however, that he regretted this decision, as he was not enjoying what he was doing and was failing anyway. This emphasises how important it is that institutions explain the long-term benefits of such programmes to registering students and try to de-stigmatise them, to enable students to make properly informed decisions about their studies and futures.

### *3.3.5.3 Targeted academic support programmes*

More targeted forms of support are offered on mainstream academic programmes and, like those already described, are also aimed primarily at first-year students (except for work-related support programmes).

As with all support programmes, institutional systems for identifying at-risk (and disadvantaged) students should be in place to ensure that those who need support can and do benefit. As mentioned, Thomas *et al* (2002:4) recommends that institutional outreach systems are in place to develop students' academic skills and to promote institutional engagement in this regard; and that there are diagnostic approaches, based on tracking and monitoring data, to inform the provision of learning support. The extent to which such approaches are being followed in the institutions in the study sample are related to the findings in the remaining sections of this chapter.

Firstly, challenges that students face in respect to language are addressed. As already emphasised, fluency or familiarity with the language of tuition in the institution is considered vital for students to achieve their potential. A lack of facility in the language of instruction was seen to impact on a student's performance in a number of ways. At the most basic level, disadvantaged students who struggle to express themselves in English find it more difficult to be assertive, such as in the face of institutional bureaucracy around registration or course selection. This also manifested in these new students not having the confidence to approach their lecturers for help, particularly in the first semester of their first year. Not only were they unsure of how to express a problem in English, but in many cases they also

struggled with understanding the lecturer's response. However, as these students develop confidence in understanding and speaking the language, they become more assertive and able to approach their lecturers more easily. A frequent complaint from REAP and NSFAS students interviewed, and one that was corroborated by lecturers, related to the difficulties they experienced in understanding test and exam questions, which resulted in them performing badly. This difficulty was expressed by even final-year students at one of the institutions in the sample, which raises questions about academic literacy support at this institution. Language competence not only makes it easier for students to understand abstract concepts, but may also increase a student's confidence to engage in more complex conceptual theorising. So, on many levels, a student may be under-achieving because s/he is struggling with language issues.

In response, institutional academic literacy support programmes are targeted at addressing specific student needs such as academic reading and academic writing. Academic literacy tends to be built into foundation and extended learning programmes. In addition, students who achieve below a certain score on admission assessments are usually required to complete various literacy modules.

In some cases, academic literacy programmes are stand-alone or extra-curricular, in that students are merely encouraged to attend these as extra classes. In other cases, faculties integrate these programmes into their curricula. Some lecturers felt that stand-alone, short modules were inadequate in meeting the needs of many disadvantaged students, whose knowledge of English may be only rudimentary. Integrated programmes that are built into the curriculum were thought to be, at least in principle, more beneficial as they can be more flexible, targeted and can be made contextually relevant. In addition, because this support is embedded in the curriculum, disadvantaged students are not singled out as being deficient in some way, so there is no associated stigma. A further advantage of faculty-based programmes is that interventions can be targeted at problem areas in particular subjects or courses. It was pointed out that faculty-based courses and programmes would need to be continually evaluated in order to diagnose problem areas and remain relevant. Tracking and monitoring systems, therefore, would need to be in place. These, however, were generally found to be poorly developed at all levels of academic and support provision across the institutions in the sample.

Some disadvantaged students at the dual-medium university in this study were faced with the additional challenge of Afrikaans as the predominant language on campus, a language with which they were even more unfamiliar than English. Furthermore, certain lecturers were reported to revert to Afrikaans from time to time in English classes and, in some cases, classes were too small to be offered in English at all. Afrikaans was also the language of communication in most of the residences, which these students reported found to be initially alienating, but on the whole, the students sampled at this institution were philosophical about the situation and several were positive about the opportunity to learn Afrikaans as they felt it would give them an added advantage when seeking employment. A definite disadvantaging practice within this institution was that a significant proportion of English-medium classes were held in the evenings, which made it very difficult for students who lived off campus to attend them.

Issues around language support highlight areas of mismatch between university practices and the needs of disadvantaged students. For example, a large number of lecturers in the study sample expressed frustration at the poor level of academic English among their students, but they themselves were too overburdened by their academic responsibilities to do anything other than perhaps refer them to remedial

classes. An academic development staff member noted that English is not the first language for most students and so they are “automatically disadvantaged because their first language is not recognised in classroom interaction, so it is not being used as a resource in classroom discussion or group work activities”. She argued that some progress had been made here but that it “is not being recognised that different languages can be used as strengths. That is one example of how students are disadvantaged, not only because of what they are perceived not to have, but what they do have is not seen as valued”. Thomas *et al* (2002) also argue that this sort of institutional hegemony should be addressed by adapting higher education curricula to meet the needs of new kinds of students. Indeed, it was suggested by an academic development staff member, that a starting point in better aligning curricula with students’ needs would be to review successful foundation programmes and incorporate the key elements into mainstream curricula.

Although many innovative teaching practices and examples of integrated curricula were found at the institutions visited, these tended to be isolated in certain departments or championed by certain individuals and were not institutionally embedded practices. Precisely because of the difficulties lecturers face in teaching very large classes and classes of very diverse students (such as knowing at which level to pitch their teaching), it was suggested that teaching and learning should be prioritised in universities. This could be stimulated through creating teaching and learning fora, encouraging staff to attend teaching and learning conferences and through placing greater emphasis on teaching and learning in staff performance appraisal systems. It was reported by a staff member of an academic development unit, however, that lecturing staff in some quarters deny the existence of a changing student intake with different needs and strongly resist changing their teaching practices to accommodate these needs:

There is still a lot of resistance from lecturers to change the way they are teaching to accommodate the new profile of students. The students that are coming in need a lot more support. Their motivation is different as well. They haven’t been prepared for higher education. The education minister has said that she is not preparing students for higher education, she is preparing them for life. So the responsibility for preparing them for higher education falls on us. That’s the resistance that is coming in from lecturers, is the fact that they are making assumptions about the skills of the students, the competencies of the students, the knowledge that they are coming in with, and their assumptions are totally incorrect.

A range of other related academic support was offered by institutional support services in the form of workshops on topics such as time management, study skills or study methods, goal setting, planning etc. Support staff acknowledged, however, that these workshops are generally not well attended. Responses from NSFAS students interviewed indicated that those who knew about these workshops were reluctant to attend them as there was a perceived stigma attached, while others did not even know about them. Another reason for poor attendance could be that first-year disadvantaged students, in particular, may not even know they have a problem or know where to go for help. This will be discussed further in the following chapter, in terms of socio-cultural factors that impact on student success.

A staff member involved in the delivery of these programmes at one of the institutions argued that attendance is good when the workshops are requested by academic staff. Even so, she said, students do not take the workshops as seriously as they should due to a lack of involvement from academic staff. Ways were being sought to establish greater collaboration with academics so that they not only attend the workshops but are also encouraged to explore ways in which these skills can be built

directly into the curriculum. Her comment was, “If the academic person says ‘this is the way’, then the students tend to do it. So it’s more powerful really from their side than from us.”

REAP runs workshops for its students on similar and related topics to those offered by institutional support services. REAP students are required to attend these as part of the REAP support programme. These were reported to be tailored much more to the students’ specific needs than the generic workshops offered by student support services. (Institutional student support staff emphasised that their services were aimed at all students equally, and not to any particular group.) While there may be overlaps in the topics covered in REAP and institutional workshops, REAP students reported that REAP workshops were much more useful than the latter, and were motivational, engaging and invaluable in assisting them succeed in their studies. REAP student advisors reported that, in certain instances, they negotiate with institutions to run specific workshops tailored to REAP students’ needs and, in this way, rationalise resources.

The importance of disadvantaged students developing the kinds of academic competencies highlighted in this chapter should not be underestimated. Once students start achieving good academic results, this becomes self-reinforcing - “nothing succeeds like success”. REAP students, for instance, claimed that the constant motivation they received from their student advisors and from the workshops impacted significantly on their attitude to their work, and made them keep going and try harder when they were going through a rough patch. On the other hand, disadvantaged students who struggle and do not have these forms of support and development, become demotivated and their lack of academic progress erodes their confidence.

Thomas *et al* (2002) point to more integrated, inclusive and holistic curricula and staff pedagogical training as elements of academic practice that are considered effective for more well-rounded student development. The Thuthuka Bursary programme as it is being implemented at a comprehensive university in the sample is an example of how such practices can work. It is described in the insert below.

### **Thuthuka Bursary Fund for B.Com Accounting students**

This is an equity transformation initiative of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) offering bursaries to severely economically disadvantaged B.Com Accounting students from schools in townships and rural areas. The Fund is operating in six universities in the country and in this example the first cohort of students were in their third year.

Students are selected for their potential to succeed, which requires a range of different criteria to be used. Selection is based on applicants’ grade 11 school results, their scores on the AARP mathematics and literacy test and, finally, through an interview. Attributes relating to potential that the interview panel look for, are applicants’ motivation and commitment; a positive attitude; and a willingness to learn and grow. It should be noted that these are similar attributes that the REAP interviews assess.

This was a rare example of a programme that not only offered structured support over the full four-year student lifecycle, but it was also aligned with the cultural orientation of the students and, in addition, emphasised the social dimension of academic studies. It also tried to give students a vision. The Accounting lecturer

interviewed spoke of these aspects as follows:

You must give them a vision and you must give them something, a feeling of togetherness. There must be a feeling of: I belong to a group, and the group is important, especially when you work with black students. They come from a culture not of an individualistic: I am there all by myself. They are much more than us, as white people, having that sense of: we must belong and the group is important. So we try and use that to the advantage of the programme.

A special orientation programme for first-year students starts three weeks before the university opens, to give them time to get used to their new environment before the academic programme begins. Each group of six or seven students is allocated a mentor, a second-year student who speaks the same language and who helps orientate them to the campus and campus life. Academic orientation includes an introduction to accounting and statistics and, again, second-year students are appointed as tutors, to assist them in tutorial sessions as well as more informally in the residence. It was reported that these tutors also provided other useful tips, such as how to read academic texts and effective study methods.

Continued academic support is provided through extra classes and tutorials each week, and through weekly tests "which is just a practice test to exercise their exam techniques". Regular workshops for the students are also held with Student Counselling and Career Services and with the Academic Development Division. The programme has high expectations of the students, foregrounding excellence, professionalism, developing themselves and others, giving back to the community etc., throughout the programme. There is also a strong emphasis on employability, through getting the students into part-time vacation work from their second year onwards.

This programme thus sets out to ensure that all the students' needs are adequately supported in an integrated fashion, but the onus is also on them to work hard and take responsibility for seeking assistance when they need it.

Of particular importance is that this programme is holistic; it is sensitive to the culture and language of the students; it makes extensive use of peer mentors and peer tutors; and it extends over the full four-year degree. Research into this programme could offer valuable insights into how student support could be integrated into the curriculum, and thus into a more holistic approach to learning.

Although such an intervention appears to be an excellent model for higher education practices, it was cautioned that large-scale staff development to facilitate the integration of academic skills and life skills into mainstream curricula is a long and ambitious project. Institutional commitment and engagement at a systemic level is thus key to the development of integrated, holistic approaches that address the needs of all disadvantaged students.

An example of an holistic approach to academic development for at-risk programmes and groups at the level of academic departments, was being developed by the Academic Development Division at the same university through their "literacies and learning development" work.

### **Integrated academic development for at-risk modules and programmes**

The rationale is that the ‘access’<sup>27</sup> students are taken care of via the foundation and extended programmes but, as the staff member put it, “what about the rest?” According to him, the other 95% of students who are in the mainstream are also struggling to get through their courses, from first-year through to PhD level, so the programme focuses its attention on those areas where there is poor retention or throughput. The division works in conjunction with an institutional planning and research unit that identifies at-risk modules or programmes as well as bottlenecks in the system. The deans also play an important role in identifying the at-risk groups, that include disadvantaged students:

We have always been doing that, but the old Learning Centre – remember there is no Learning Centre anymore, with the merger we are now called the Academic Development Division – we’ve always looked at improving reading, improving writing, study skills, those type of things, but we are getting the opportunity now to really focus on that because it was always in-between and *ad hoc*. With the foundation and extended degrees we can start integrating that, because that’s the ideal, if you can really integrate that. So now we are at a point where we can say: seeing that we can focus on this, let’s look at how we can start working in partnership with faculties, with departments, with lecturers, looking at redesigning curriculum, integrating into the curriculum and stuff like that. We still run generic study skills workshops, for example, because there is still a need for it. But we would rather run the study skills in conjunction with the lecturer, or train the tutors in mind-mapping so that they can work with the students within context. So we’re looking at an integrated type of intervention, in the first place. But also looking at specific groups. You mentioned the really disadvantaged groups who are usually black students, obviously. They are second- or third- or fourth-language speakers. They come into an environment they don’t know. Financially they always have difficulty. They don’t have place to stay, they have difficulty with transport and all that kind of stuff. So we are looking at groups, you know, international students, looking at English second- and first-language students as groups with specific strategies. (Support staff, Academic Development Division)

Interestingly, this is an example of how specific strategies are being developed for specific groups of students with specific needs, and at a broader institutional level than just for a discrete programme like Thuthuka, an approach that was not encountered at other institutions in the study sample.

Integration of support for at-risk groups should not be seen as the sole responsibility of higher education institutions. REAP and similar organisations, like SAICA through the Thuthuka programme, could also play a valuable role in this regard, through forming partnerships with specific institutions. For example, programmes where academic development and mentoring work closely together were believed to be particularly effective in helping students succeed. Although REAP student advisors already play a very strong counselling and mentoring role, for most of the time this is done at a distance and students reported that they were not always able to make telephonic contact with their student advisors when they needed them. REAP student advisors are well positioned to identify institutional programmes for their students, where they exist, or work together with academic departments to develop such

<sup>27</sup> Those who fall below the criteria for admittance to the first year of their undergraduate degree, but who can gain access via the foundation or extended programme.

programmes for the specific needs of REAP students and other disadvantaged students. A problem with this is that the overwhelming majority of academics interviewed were unaware of REAP and the support it offers disadvantaged students. Student advisors thus need to make themselves known to lecturers in key departments and build good relationships with them, especially where REAP students appear most at-risk. These relationships would also assist REAP in being able to ascertain, at the beginning of each year, what is expected of students doing particular courses, and textbooks and equipment that students might need during the course of the year, so as to prevent unexpected financial surprises for REAP and its students. This interaction could assist REAP students to develop good relationships with academic staff, a factor that Tinto identified as enhancing students' academic integration.

#### *3.3.5.4 Peer, mentoring and tutorial support*

Thomas *et al* (2002) point to the importance of personal tutors, who take on a structured and pro-active role in supporting students academically. Various forms of academic support were associated with peers or mentors at the institutions visited and students who were able to make use of such assistance reported being able to cope better. Peer support was found to be particularly effective, as students could relate to them more easily.

Where peer support was formalised, there were well-developed training programmes for these helpers, such as for orientation programmes. In addition, formalised peer helper or mentorship programmes were reported to be operating within a number of residences across the different institutions, where senior students assist less experienced students with personal, social and academic issues. However, it was cautioned that it is not always easy to match seniors with first-year students doing the same course. However, to overcome this problem, one of the residences had recruited specialist subject tutors to hold evening sessions on a regular basis. A mentoring programme for students living off-campus was also encountered at an institution in the study, as it had been recognised that this group misses out on much of the support offered to students in residence and that they also integrate less easily into the institutional environment. The programme was, however, experiencing challenges in being able to reach these students, although where it was doing so it was having a worthwhile impact.

Mentoring by academic staff was also encountered as a formalised system of support in some academic departments, such as in the law faculty at one of the traditional universities. This was said to work well, where students made use of the opportunity, but the lecturer interviewed reported that the weaker students were reluctant to make appointments to see her. She expressed frustration at even having to phone students' parents in order to get them to come to see her.

Tutorials are an obvious form of additional support for students who may be struggling to keep up, but these appeared to be very unevenly implemented at the higher education institutions in the sample. For example at one institution, it was explained that although some departments had been running tutorials for years, this was not so in all departments and an "institutional culture" of tutorials needed to be established at the university.

As with most support, tutorials seemed to be more commonly offered to first-year students and varied from being formalised, compulsory, well-structured aspects of the academic programme to being voluntary and not being taken seriously by students. Where tutorials were add-ons, aimed at weaker students, they were



sometimes perceived negatively, resulting in poor student attendance. The Manager of Teaching and Learning in the Science Faculty at one of the institutions visited, corroborated this, saying that foundation programme students at their distance campus did not attend want to attend tutorials as there was a stigma associated with them. These students argued that they were “not stupid” and therefore did not need to attend. It was pointed out by several academics across the institutions in the sample that, ironically, it was usually the better-performing students who attended tutorials, as they understood the purpose and the benefit of the extra tuition, whereas the weaker students, who needed the support the most, often spurned them. It was argued that the logical solution to this problem would be to make attendance at tutorials compulsory. This indicates that it should not be assumed that students are able to identify that they need tutorials or even that they understand the purpose of tutorials, especially if there is not an institutional culture of tutorials. It is therefore important that academic departments actively promote tutorials to their students and encourage them to attend.

Hence, tutorials seemed to add the most value when they were set up as formal classes with properly trained tutors, usually senior students.

Those students interviewed who had attended tutorials reported that they had found them very helpful and their marks had improved dramatically as a result. Not only was the additional academic input useful, but students usually also found it easier to ask questions of tutors than of their lecturers. However, there were exceptions to this and students at one of the institutions complained that the tutors on their programme were “rude” and unhelpful, which was why they did not attend. This seemed to be an isolated case, however, related to the less formalised, voluntary nature of the tutorials. One student explained how tutorials had helped her as follows:

People used to not attend. Most of the people used to find it useless. But I have attended all those tutors and I have seen the results. In class, in the lecture, I am shy. I've got that thing that I can't ask questions in class. But when it's a tutor, I can tell her anything I want to and I can even transfer to my own language, because we are both maybe Zulu or whatever, so we can understand one another. Like in the first test, let's say only twelve percent of the class passed, the rest failed. And in that twelve percent, it was only the students who used to attend the tutors. I was part of the twelve percent because I used to attend the tutors. And everyone was complaining: “Oh, the lecturer is not doing his job” and what what. It's not about the lecturer. The lecturer told us what to do, but we didn't do it.”

An example of a very effective programme of academic tutoring support was encountered on a foundation programme for Economic and Management Sciences. It was aimed at the most vulnerable students on the foundation programme and senior students acted as volunteer tutors. In addition to academic tutoring, individual counselling and encouragement was also given to these vulnerable students, providing a more holistic response to their needs.

Other innovative tutorial models and systems were encountered at several of the institutions visited. The academic staff member responsible for one such pilot programme emphasised the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation of tutorial programmes, to ensure that they are meeting student's needs and to ascertain their impact. A particularly effective international tutoring model, the Supplementary Instruction programme, which originates from the University of Kansas City, is being implemented at a number of South African universities, including three in the research study sample. This is described in the textbox below, as it was being implemented at one of these institutions.

### **Supplementary Instruction (SI)**

SI involves the provision of additional tutoring on courses that are identified as having a high failure rate (high-risk courses). Academically stronger students, who have previously completed the course, are trained and paid to work as facilitators, called SI leaders, and they give feedback reports to the lecturers. Their role is not to repeat the lectures but to facilitate discussions, address questions and so on. It was noted that, because peers provide the tutoring, barriers or anxiety that students may feel in addressing an authority figure are reduced. SI was reported as being “very successful” at this university, being well supported by lecturers and having a good working relationship with academic staff. It was operating on a large scale, with 70 SI leaders involved in about 60 modules, although it was not yet operational at all campuses of the institution.

However, funding constraints meant that the programme could not be expanded beyond the first year, although second-year students at this institution believed that it could be of significant benefit to them. Another difficulty with the programme was timetabling SI classes so as not to clash with other lectures times, which was not always possible.

The point is that tutorials seem to work well in offering quality academic support when they are properly structured, are formalised within the department or faculty (including monitoring and evaluation of the programme), and are run by trained facilitators/ tutors who take the programme seriously.

#### *3.3.5.5 Tracking and monitoring*

An essential component of being able to provide academic support is tracking and monitoring the progress of students in order to identify at-risk (failing) students, to ascertain the sort of support that is needed, and in order to evaluate the effectiveness of support systems and programmes. It is argued that disadvantaged students, by virtue of the challenges they face, are inherently at-risk and that institutions should have systems in place to monitor them. This sort of tracking and monitoring could inform diagnostic approaches for the development of learning support, a practice that Thomas *et al* (2002) considers to be effective in providing holistic student development.

REAP student advisors actively monitor their individual students' progress closely, as every student needs to be accounted for to REAP's funders. Not only do the student advisors provide a personal, 'open-door' service (generally by telephone) as well as having regular, scheduled telephone communication with their students, but they also visit their students on campus three times a year and track their academic progress in all their courses; from the very first tests of the year. Students who are found to be struggling academically are counselled and assisted as much as possible to improve their marks, and referred to institutional academic support programmes or other institutional support services where appropriate. However, students who fail the majority of their courses in June are given provisional status, which means they are under threat of losing their REAP grant the following year should their marks not improve substantially. This process seems to have some motivational merit, as one student reported how, when he had been told he was being made provisional, he had been jolted into reality and into taking his studies seriously, and as a result his performance had rapidly improved.

This personalised service that REAP offers is, however, impractical to implement across an entire higher education institution. Indeed, academic staff described the enormous first-year classes that they faced, often comprising hundreds of students, and their extremely heavy teaching loads. This means that they are simply unable to detect individual students who are struggling and can only assist those students who actively approach them for help. Otherwise, struggling students are only identified when marks are collated at the end of the course, which is too late if they have failed. Even when lecturers interviewed in this study were asked what the pass rates and throughput figures were in their subjects and departments, their responses were vague or they admitted they did not know. It is therefore imperative that there are institutional monitoring systems in place for picking up these at-risk students. This would also seem strategic in terms of DoE subsidies, on which student throughput depends.

Only one of the institutions visited reported putting systemic mechanisms in place to do this, and only for first-year students. This was an early identification project (based on the University of Stellenbosch model) that enables high-, medium- and low-risk individuals to be identified early in the first year. This was reportedly being piloted by a comprehensive university in the sample and is described in the textbox below.

#### **Early warning system for at-risk students**

Before they register, students are asked to complete an on-line questionnaire. The responses are analysed immediately and students are given feedback, either by a text message to their cellular phones or by email. Based on the analysis that identifies the at-risk areas, students are provided with information about relevant support services, such as financial aid or assessments to assist them make appropriate programme or subject choices.

In addition, lecturers are encouraged to conduct first academic assessments as early as possible so that students' needs and problems can be identified and strategies developed to deal with them.

As a pilot, however, the impact of the system on student throughput would still take some time to be ascertained.

Not only did the institutions have poor tracking and monitoring, but they also did not appear to have academic policies that specifically addressed the needs of disadvantaged students, and thus did not recognise them as a group of students with a particular package of needs. Indeed, despite all the evidence available clearly confirming that disadvantaged students are most at-risk of not completing their higher education studies, yet the research study found that, for the most part, institutional staff were generally reluctant to even acknowledge that such a group could or should be identified, although there were obviously individual exceptions to this. These individuals were usually the champions of innovative development programmes, although there were also many reports of *ad hoc* individual responses and "pockets of committed lecturers" who gave academic and other support to disadvantaged students.

This is not to say that the academic staff interviewed did not see the value of tracking students' progress, in order that appropriate support be provided. Indeed, one argument was that tracking should be happening at several levels: there should be pre-entry assessments that identify potentially at-risk students, ongoing monitoring of

students to pick up any problems that emerge as they progress through the system, as well as monitoring and evaluation of the institutional services that are being offered. This suggests a more coherent and sustainable approach to providing the support that is necessary to improve student throughput. Furthermore, although praiseworthy, individual responses cannot possibly be adequate to the extent of what is needed, or form a coherent response. Tracking and monitoring systems therefore need to be institutionally embedded to allow a holistic, integrated response to the support and development needs of disadvantaged students.

As discussed earlier, however, student success is more than simply academic achievement or student throughput, but about employability after they have qualified. Support for students related to in-service training and employment, at the institutions visited, is thus examined next.

### *3.3.5.6 In-service training and employment services*

Many qualifications, especially professional qualifications, require students to complete a period of in-service training or work placement before they can graduate. This in-service training was found to be most successful when the programme was structured, where there were formal institutional structures to assist students find suitable placement (for example, a graduate placement programme, either associated with the careers office or a faculty office), and where there were clear agreements between the institution, the organisation hosting the student, and the student.

These programmes are not only to enhance the job prospects of students, but also to produce a pool of high quality, work-ready graduates for the professions. The structured content of these programmes is therefore essential if they are to be of value for experiential learning. Examples of such programmes were reported to be specially developed by academics together with commerce/ industry/ the public sector and graduates. Feedback to academic departments by workplaces on the work readiness of students, especially with regard to aspects that they found to be inadequately covered in the syllabus, was also found to be very valuable.

Students at the institutions in this study were generally required to find their own in-service placement, which was not always easy. In one case, a student reported that she had made a poor choice of work placement and, as a result, she had not learned what she needed to in order to cope with the subsequent course material. She had dropped out of the course as a consequence, although she had returned the following year to complete it. It would seem that making an informed choice for in-service placement would be more difficult for disadvantaged students, who have little experience of the workplace, and they may also be disadvantaged by not having the confidence to assert their need to learn different skills. Indeed, a survey that was conducted on REAP students as part of this study indicated that many of them were anxious about how to find work placement and how to conduct themselves in the workplace. It thus seems that formalised in-service learning programmes and institutional support is vital for these students to maximally benefit from this opportunity for learning in the work context.

All the institutions in the study had formal institutional structures, such as a careers and employment office, to assist students find employment after graduating. These units ran various work preparedness workshops, such as CV writing, interview skills, careers planning and so on. In addition, some had graduate placement facilities, which offered voluntary in-service or experiential learning opportunities, or part-time/temporary paid employment opportunities. One of the institutions even

recommended that voluntary work experience should be included in student portfolios and awarded credits, as this could count in their favour when seeking employment

### **3.4 CONCLUSION: INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO FACILITATE STUDENT SUCCESS**

Various worthwhile, innovative and educationally rich academic support and development programmes were being offered at the different institutions visited (although they cannot all be mentioned in this report), demonstrating the will and the capacity of certain departments and individuals to be responsive to the needs of under-prepared, disadvantaged students entering higher education. Many of these programmes and interventions are aligned with the elements of academic practice considered effective by Thomas *et al* (2002) in providing holistic student development. However, these were largely driven by the individuals championing them which points to institutions themselves being under-prepared to deal with their growing numbers of disadvantaged students. More coherent systems, that are institutionally embedded at all levels and in all spheres, must be considered in order to address the needs of disadvantaged students more effectively.

An academic at an institution in the sample similarly expressed that the key to assisting students to succeed at tertiary studies was integration. She emphasised that this should take the form of strong, formalised links between academic development and student counselling, to facilitate easy referral, but should extend beyond the support services to academic faculties and departments: “everyone needs to take joint responsibility.” She called for individuals to come out of their silos and start engaging in student development and support in a holistic manner, where learning is defined as broader than the classroom. This would allow for a more multidisciplinary, team approach to student support and success.

The idea of student success, as it was introduced in chapter one, is thus broader than just academic throughput. The following quote from a support staff member in an academic development unit illustrates this more holistic way of viewing the development of the individual student and of their success in higher education. It also indicates the importance for academic and other support services to function in an integrated fashion in order to provide a comprehensive support network that can effectively contribute to their success.

For years and years we do research on student success, but every time we start out on a project we say well, how do we define success? I think the education department defines success in terms of whether you pass a module or not, I think it's as simple as that. Then success is also defined in terms of throughput, and throughput in terms of the three years, or three plus one or three plus two. And I think for us that is also important. We talk about throughput and success rates. The ultimate thing is when a student comes in, to give that student the optimal opportunity and chance to achieve the degree. But not just to achieve the degree. We want to see something beyond that as well, how to eventually make it out there. With the stuff we do, if we teach you to write effectively, hopefully by the time you get into your job and you need to write reports, you will fall back on the stuff that we've developed in you. If I can tell you what I see success as, well, firstly the main definition of success would be achieving personal predetermined goals. So what is my personal goal? I want a degree, I want a job. Am I achieving those goals in the first place? But for us it is also really important to have an holistic view of this. So not just to have an academic animal eventually, but to have a real person going out. I know this sounds very philosophical but that's what we're doing. Part of the stuff we do, some of these modules we run,

the one we called MAPS – mastering academic and professional skills – and there we do study skills and computer skills and we do information management and how to search for information on the web, but there's a large personal development component: how do I handle conflict? How do I handle stress? And that's not just an academic thing, that's personal development. We do emotional intelligence and things like that. For us it is important that the student develops holistically. [ ] So how do you define success in the end – purely just on academic merits, or how this person has grown as an individual? And I think both of those are important for us.

Success in higher education therefore requires that students become integrated into the university environment on many levels. However, this academic and social integration is determined by a range of factors, loosely categorised in this report as financial, academic and socio-cultural factors and, as Tinto (1993) says, that operate in their own backgrounds and within the higher education environment, and that variously facilitate or inhibit their integration. REAP is an example of an organisation that facilitates this integration and that could work even more closely with the institutions where their students are studying as part of a multidisciplinary approach

The next chapter examines various socio-cultural factors that impact on students' integration and success and how these are enmeshed with so many other factors, emphasising even more strongly how imperative it is that institutions recognise the parameters of disadvantage and of instituting coherent strategies to address them.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON STUDENT SUCCESS

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The ease with which first-year students are able to become academically and socially integrated into the higher education environment significantly affects their chances of success. The background to this chapter foregrounds the concept of social integration and its opposite pole, feelings of alienation that can arise when this is not achieved. The socio-cultural backgrounds of disadvantaged, rural students, in particular, do not prepare them for the considerably different higher education environment and, for them, the transition into higher education is even more challenging than for traditional students. Examples of socio-cultural factors and how they intersect with the practices and ethos of higher education institutions are examined, as they were found in the primary data in this study. An analysis of these factors, in turn, suggests ways in which additional support can be offered. The forms of support offered by the higher education institutions in this study, and by REAP, are explored in terms of how they facilitate or inhibit student integration. In particular, the importance of integrated support systems to provide a coherent support network and thus maximise students' chances of success, is emphasised.

This report has referred to the way in which students' success in higher education is related to their degree of 'fit' within the institution, i.e. the extent of their academic and social integration. Factors relating to integration or 'fit' play out in various ways, but disadvantaged, rural students come from backgrounds in which different values and socio-cultural systems often prevail. Their initial experience of higher education is therefore different to that of urban students and those who come from economically privileged backgrounds. There is thus a much greater gap between the socio-cultural practices of rural disadvantaged students and those of higher education institutions, than for the traditional student population of universities. Moreover, the more marginalised students are, because of the lack of 'fit, the more alienated they may feel in the institutional environment. Feelings of isolation and loneliness can contribute significantly to a student's decision to withdraw. Diane Reay and colleagues encapsulate the problems of academic and social integration of the non-traditional or disadvantaged student's experience as follows:

It is only the more privileged of the middle class students, primarily in the private sector, who experience the different contexts impinging on choice as almost seamless. While this advantaged minority are operating within spheres where the diverse influences are predominantly reinforcing rather than in competition with each other, for the majority of students there is less of a fit between educational institution and family and friends. Most are managing a degree of dissonance, and a significant minority have to cope with tensions that make choice both conflictual and problematic. (Reay, David & Ball 2001:3)

Thus, although all students face challenges in integrating socially into a higher education environment for the first time, disadvantaged, rural students face additional and greater challenges in this regard and may need more support. These challenges, as they were found to impact on the students in this study, are discussed next.

## 4.2 SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

A range of challenges related to having to adjust to a strange new environment were reported, the most prominent of which are summarised here.

The majority of disadvantaged students sampled in this study (especially rural students) reported experiencing acute feelings of social alienation and homesickness, especially at the beginning of their first year, when not only the culture of the campus environment and its people, but also the city, were still new and strange. A big challenge for rural students was that they generally did not know anybody else on campus when they first arrived, whereas those students from the bigger towns, or from schools within the catchment area of the university, often had some of their friends or other people they knew, attending the university, which made it much easier for them to adjust socially. Several rural students also reported experiencing a degree of culture shock; for example people in their rural villages all know each other and greet one another, whereas at university, people are anonymous and isolated and “nobody cares”. In addition, a student counsellor pointed out that there are cultural and sub-cultural differences between rural and city living, and that rural youth may have less access to a youth sub-culture than their urban counterparts.

This socio-cultural mismatch, or lack of ‘fit’, was emphasised by language issues, in that there were commonly differences in language usage and dialect between rural and urban communities who speak the same language. Thus, even communicating in their home language with other students may present obstacles or, at least, brand rural students as different. A student in the sample from a different province in which the institution was located, spoke of how difficult it was to not have a common language with the majority of other black students, and having to speak to them in English instead. She missed being able to communicate in sePedi, her home language, and this aggravated her feelings of loneliness and homesickness as a result. Thus, not only can English be a barrier to academic integration for these students, as discussed in chapter three, but, language issues can also impact profoundly on their social integration. This can make the transition from school to university that much more complicated and demanding.

As Tinto (1993) points out, an indication of how well students are socially integrated is their involvement in extra-curricular activities and relationships with their peers. Their adjustment to the higher education environment can therefore be facilitated by their participation in campus sport and social activities and, as the Vice- Rector at one of the institutions noted, in student societies, which enables them to find a “pocket of relatedness” or “belonging”. Only a few of the students interviewed, however, participated in sport or other organised activities. The reason given was lack of time; their academic timetables were too full and they had to devote all their spare time to their studies.

Those students in the study sample who had managed to obtain residential accommodation, generally settled in more quickly. Living in this environment made it much easier for them to form friendships than for those rural, disadvantaged students who were living in private accommodation off-campus. As one student in residence remarked, “your first friend is your roommate”. Disadvantaged students may not be able to afford to participate in some of the social and leisure activities that their better-off peers enjoy, which can lead to them feeling alienated. Indeed, some students spoke of the stigma they had experienced in residence as a result of being perceived as poor and rural, and that they stood out because they did not have money to buy the fashionable clothing that other students in residence could afford.



In time, however, they found that this became less of an issue, and these feelings of isolation and alienation passed.

Achieving a balance between sport/social activities and academic work is a challenge that all university students face, although it presents more of a challenge to disadvantaged students who generally have to work longer hours and harder to succeed and may have an array of other obstacles to overcome, just to survive. An exception was one student in the sample who was playing soccer for his residence and who was also excelling academically, despite having come from a very poor, rural community. He appeared to achieve this balance through being exceptionally well organised in terms of managing his time and prioritising his activities. He also seemed to be extremely well socially and academically integrated, a veritable 'golden boy' and a model of student success, although his personality and academic ability clearly made this easier for him than for most other students.

Students reported that peer pressure was a particular challenge for them in achieving this balance. Peer pressure to socialise seemed to be stronger in the student residences, and one student spoke of constantly having to fend off his classmates who wanted him to join them in partying or going to the rugby. Related to peer pressure, was the importance of choosing the right friends, and many students spoke of initially falling in with groups of students who were not serious about their studies. As time progressed and they started to worry about their work, they reported having to break away from such groups and befriend others who were more committed to working hard. In some instances, for disadvantaged students, joining a study group fulfilled both a social and an academic function.

Achieving this balance and succeeding in their studies thus requires all students to learn to be responsible and manage their newfound freedom and independence. This may be accentuated for rural students who have come from small, parochial communities. A counsellor pointed out that the biggest obstacle to student success was the complex maze of unfamiliar territory that they had to learn to negotiate. He reported a conversation with a student, in which he had asked: "Was this a difficult year for you?" The student had said, 'No it was not difficult, it was complicated.' This response captures what many students experience. It is not necessarily difficult but it is complicated.

Students who reported feeling the most isolated from mainstream social life on campus were those who lived off-campus, in 'digs' on their own or with people who were not students. A few instances of such students experiencing severe alienation were encountered, as a result of having to leave campus immediately after lectures, so as to get home safely before dark, and thus having no time to socialise with other students in any meaningful fashion.

An engineering lecturer reported that stereotyping of gender roles was also relevant in students' social integration, insofar as rural girls are less exposed to career options such as engineering, that are traditionally more male dominated. It was interesting to note, however, that none of the women students interviewed in this study felt that their gender had made any difference to the way they were regarded academically – in fact most of them seemed puzzled as to why the question was even asked! It would thus seem that gender discrimination in relation to academic achievement is no longer an issue for women students in higher education, at least in the institutions in this research study sample.

The literature on student progress and success suggests that students' experience of academic and social integration impacts on their intentions and commitments to their

chosen courses and institutions, and this in turn has an impact on whether they complete their courses successfully. This view was supported by the study, but students' intentions and commitments to their course of study were found to be even more dependent on whether they had chosen the correct course of study in the first place. Thus, those NSFAS students who were unhappy with their choice of study, and who did not know who to turn to for advice, or what alternatives were available to them, experienced acute feelings of social alienation. Furthermore, both REAP and NSFAS students reported that when they failed a test or exam, they would often hide the fact from their friends as they were afraid of being judged as stupid, but that this left them feeling even more socially and academically isolated. REAP students admitted to having sometimes similarly withheld from their student advisors the fact that they had failed a test, although this information had had to be revealed later.

The other major factor driving students' intentions and commitments to their studies that emerged from the primary data collected in this study, is their determination to succeed no matter what, even where their social integration is tenuous. This determination is born out of a desperate need to uplift their families and themselves and, in some instances, even their communities from their impoverished circumstances. This inner strength and determination to overcome huge challenges is an important factor in students achieving success in higher education. As one student commented, "If you want something badly enough you will make sacrifices". However, one cannot expect students to overcome these challenges through sheer willpower alone, as such an approach tends to individualise and blame students who do not succeed when there are, in fact, significant systemic factors that have been mentioned (both external to the university system, such as poor schooling, and within the university itself), that constrain their ability to succeed. Personal characteristics and attributes are nonetheless important mediating factors in overcoming obstacles in both academic and social integration; willpower, determination and self-motivation being arguably prime amongst these. Indeed, it is these sorts of qualities, including leadership qualities, that REAP looks for in selecting applicants to its programme, as their experience points to students with these characteristics having a better chance of success. Institutional strategies that actively cultivate these attributes and attitudes in students could thus arguably augment their capacities to succeed in higher education.

Aside from factors related to campus life and their own personal qualities that affected their ability to succeed, students interviewed in this study also reported being deeply affected by problems at home, which made it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies properly. It was even reported that students from rural areas, by virtue of their status associated with being in higher education, are expected to return home and play the role of mediator when family problems arise. This range of challenges that disadvantaged students face, is poignantly articulated in the REAP 2007 End of Year Progress Report:

These young people do not just deal with poverty, language barriers, social divisions, academic challenges, environmental challenges; their challenges are a whole lot more holistic. They have to deal with themselves, their dreams, their studies, their acceptance and adaptation in a strange environment with strange people, but they carry their family problems with them wherever they go (2007, p11).

As can be seen, socio-cultural factors can impact in complex ways on disadvantaged students' ability to integrate both academically and socially in the higher education milieu. In addition, academic and social integration are closely interlinked and interdependent, and therefore need to be viewed in an integrated fashion. It follows that support systems, aimed at assisting students 'fit' into the institution, should also

be integrated. How institutional and REAP support systems rise to this challenge will be explored in terms of some important principles for effective student support, as suggested by other studies.

### **4.3 INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

#### **4.3.1 Principles for effective student support**

Support systems in higher education institutions play a vital role in addressing aspects of social integration and thus enhancing students' chances of academic success. The following principles for effective student support have been suggested in the literature as follows:

- Supporting students across the lifecycle, but prioritising the first year for identifying 'at risk' students and providing support. (Thomas *et al* 2002:12-13)
- Pro-active engagement with and feedback from the target groups: "By being proactive services can not only raise awareness and become transparent to students, but they can also challenge the assumption that they only exist for students with 'problems'" (Thomas *et al* 2002:11).
- Building students' social capital in the academic, economic, social, support and democratic spheres
- Undertaking staff development in relation to dealing with diversity and the needs of disadvantaged students, among student services, support and academic staff.
- Undertaking curriculum development in order to reflect the interests and location of disadvantaged students in the academic content, and incorporating support and development (e.g. life skills, career counselling, workplace experience) into the curriculum.
- Co-ordinating and integrating the range of student support activities in the institution.
- Developing partnerships and linkages between support services and academic departments.
- Formal, institutional (as opposed to more informal, faculty or departmental) tracking, monitoring, evaluating and researching the impact of initiatives on student retention and progression, and the effectiveness of support initiatives. Progression tracking can allow integrated support.

These suggest that an effective, holistic support network can only be provided if institutions play an active role in identifying differing student needs and engaging in a variety of strategies tailored to meet these needs.

In the rest of this chapter, the various forms of support that are offered by higher education institutions sampled in this study and by REAP, are evaluated in terms of the key arguments in relation to these principles.

#### **4.3.2 Forms of support services and systems**

A range of institutional support services were available that encompass various aspects of the student lifecycle. In addition to academic support, which has already been discussed, institutions offer various forms of personal and social support. These generally fall under the portfolio of student services and include counselling, health services, student development (in the form of life skills workshops such as planning and goal setting), careers guidance and career development/employability

workshops and services. In addition, disability units dealt with specific problems related to students with disabilities, but these are separate from the other services and will not be discussed in this report, as they were not the focus of the research study.

It must be noted that student support services reported experiencing significant financial constraints, and therefore capacity constraints. Such constraints limit these units in terms of expanding their services or even improving delivery, and need to be taken into account when assessing them.

As in the case of academic support, the institutions sampled in this study emphasised that student support services were not specifically targeted at 'disadvantaged' students; support staff argued that their services were available to the entire student population equally, not just certain sectors. Although student services do need to cater for all students, support staff tended to deny the existence of disadvantaged students as a category, that face more and different challenges from the traditional student population. Despite this standpoint, a student counsellor made the contradictory assertion: "Bring in a weak student and you'll make him more vulnerable if you don't have the right support in place."

It was apparent from this study that formal support systems were especially well developed in the student residences, providing an extensive support network for these students. The mechanisms included trained peer helpers, who acted as mentors and/or academic tutors; academic and life skills workshops that were run by institutional support services; and referrals to institutional support units where needed. Furthermore, although residence life brings its own set of pressures, the contained community of residence life was reported to make social integration much easier. These benefits are particularly cogent reasons for ensuring disadvantaged, rural students are accommodated in university residences.

By and large, there was reported to be reasonably good internal cohesion and referral between departments of financial aid and counselling services, and to some extent between financial aid and the academic support and development units within the institutions sampled, although these relationships were uneven and some were more formalised than others. Thus students with NSFAS loans, for example, might be referred by financial aid staff for counselling, or a counsellor might refer a student for academic support, where this support was indicated. Lecturing staff interviewed in the research study sample seemed to be aware of the sorts of student support services offered by their institutions, but there were no formalised systems of referral or institutional linkages between academic departments or faculties and these services. Moreover, lecturers reported that large class sizes prevented them from getting to know students personally, so not many referrals were made by academics. These referrals were therefore largely informal in nature and tended to take place on an individual and *ad hoc* basis. This lack of cohesion resulted from the assumption of both academic and support staff that because the services were available, students would make use of them whenever they needed to do so. The separation of academic departments (and thus teaching and learning within these departments and faculties), from student services thus meant that integrated, coherent institutional responses to student needs were not possible, although staff expressed deep commitment to assisting students and there were many reported examples of good student support practices.

The nature and range of student services offered by individual higher education institutions are fully documented on their websites, so will not be described in any detail in this report. A comparative evaluation of these services was also not the

focus of this research study. Of more relevance here, student awareness, perceptions and use of these services will be discussed next.

### **4.3.3 Student awareness of support services**

Orientation was widely used as a platform for student services to market and promote themselves to new students. In addition, these services were widely marketed on institutional websites and on campuses, by means of posters and banners that advertised specific events and workshops. Support services staff maintained that there was a high level of student awareness of what they provided and, the fact that they were stretched to capacity most of the time, indicated to them that students were making use of these services.

However, very few of the NSFAS students interviewed were aware of these services and of those who were, hardly any had used them. In contrast, REAP students were mostly aware of these services and quite a few reported having used them. This disparity could be partly attributed to NSFAS students' poor attendance at orientation on the one hand, and the active role that REAP student advisors played in promoting these services to their students, on the other hand. When challenged about these students' seeming lack of awareness of these support services, a senior staff member in student support and development responded that such accounts were merely anecdotal and that research would need to be conducted to verify this claim.

However, it appeared from the interviews conducted with REAP and NSFAS students, that other, socio-cultural factors played a significant role in disadvantaged students' perceptions and use of institutional support services, and thus, presumably, also their awareness of them.

### **4.3.4 Students' perceptions of support services**

The NSFAS students interviewed in this study expressed mixed reactions to the support services available. With regard to counselling, a few said they would have no problem in seeking this sort of help should they need it; others said that they had not experienced the sorts of problems that warranted them seeking this kind of help; while others asserted that they would never make use of such services. Reasons given for not making use of counselling varied. Some attested to a social stigma attached to counselling, and that people believed it was only for people who had severe problems, or were suffering serious psychiatric illness. A counsellor commented, by way of example that students say, "I don't want to go because I don't want people to think there is something wrong with me". A REAP first-year student expressed how intimidated she felt just by the thought of counselling:

I am scared! People know that if you are coming to counselling you have problems. Most of the time, if you are going to counselling it's about HIV and AIDS. I'm very afraid of people asking me questions! And talking to a stranger is so uncomfortable.

Some students argued that they would rather solve their problems on their own – these included emotional, academic and financial problems - and did not even confide in their own families, while others said they would discuss their problems with their friends or family, but not with counsellors.

Perhaps most significantly, however, was the point emphatically made by the students interviewed, and some institutional staff, that it was not in the culture of black people to seek help from strangers or professionals. This was especially so if

the professional was white, but even if the professional was of the same race as themselves. This was explained by a NSFAS third-year student as follows:

I think that it's hard for anyone to come for counselling. But especially, I think it is more like a race thing. It's easy for a white person to come for counselling. Even if, in our family, when there's a problem in the family, we don't go for counselling, the family sits down together. So we are not used to that thing of going to a counsellor for advice or for motivation because even in our family we didn't go for counselling, unlike white families.

It is worth noting how extreme this resistance to outside help was; several students interviewed had recently suffered bereavements of very close family members and expressed their deep emotional trauma in the interview. They reported experiencing feelings of severe alienation trying to cope with their grief in the institutional environment, so far from family support systems, yet, despite this impacting significantly on their studies, they had not sought any form of counselling. Suggestions from the (white) researcher that they seek counselling, were politely but negatively received.

This observation is supported by David Stephen, who has the following to say about black higher education students in South Africa:

Typically, black students tend to experience higher levels of alienation ... Despite the need for counselling, black students rarely make use of counselling services offered: white counsellors are not trusted, and there is a widely-held perception that anyone who goes for counselling is 'crazy' (Stephen 2003:44).

The social worker at one institution had experienced similar resistance by students:

Black students generally don't like talking about their personal problems to other people, especially not whites. But in the hostel they will start talking to their roommate and then the roommate will realise this is something too big and will bring the person, or the hostel will refer them. The white students will come to me, but the black students won't the first time. They will be referred.

This interviewee reported that once students had met and talked to her, they would feel that she was "black enough" (although she was white and Afrikaans) and would be comfortable enough to discuss their problems with her. In many ways, she saw herself fulfilling the role of an absent mother for these young people and was deeply committed to helping them, but also to teaching them personal responsibility. She played a central role in the social support services at her institution, reportedly being the first port of call for most students seeking help, and her empathetic attitude and her age may have made her seem more easily approachable than other support staff: "If your hair is grey they will listen to you."

This 'mothering role' was reported to fulfil an important need for those students, such as first-year rural students, who are without their traditional family support systems. Formalised mentoring systems offer similar support, as well as help demystify institutional discourses and expectations for disadvantaged first-year students. REAP students have their own advisors, who act as 'big brother' (or sister), providing support but also ensuring that they take responsibility for their own lives and abide by their contractual obligations with REAP. Should institutional support systems be implemented along these lines, they may well go a long way in reaching out to disadvantaged students who need them the most.

Student counsellors believed that language also played a significant role in disadvantaged students' willingness to use these services, as it can be difficult for them to articulate the problem, particularly in English. A lack of confidence in English

may therefore be a major barrier for disadvantaged students in accessing institutional support systems, and even more so for first-year students who are also the most vulnerable. Furthermore, a student may not know that s/he even has a problem, what it is, or what to do about it. This may be especially so for a rural student who is accustomed to different forms of socio-cultural support from that on offer in higher education institutions.

Another interesting perspective on why students do not use support services is the value that is accorded these services versus the perceived value of academic learning. As the director of one unit reported, "The only learning that is legitimate in the institution is towards your diploma or degree - that comes on your certificate."

It is not enough to simply have support systems in place and expect students to make use of them because they are there. Student support services also need to take cognisance of diverse social and cultural issues in the types of support that they offer and that affect student use of these support services. They need to reflect an institutional culture that is inclusive of and accessible to the entire, diverse student population and marketing of these services needs to reach out to this diverse population, to increase their awareness and use of these facilities. Furthermore, integrating awareness of these services into the curriculum, as suggested by Thomas *et al* (2002), rather than viewing them as 'add-ons', would also go a long way to de-stigmatising them and making them more familiar and everyday for students. As a staff member in an academic development unit argued, student development needs to be about considering the full development of the student and needs to take place in the classroom as well as in the support unit; "we can't sit in our own silos and look at student development. We have to be taking hands across the institution to do that."

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, however, higher education institutions are grappling with all sorts of internal and external pressures for change, the institutions in the research study sample being no different, and merged institutions are facing particular structural complexities. These institutions are trying to come to terms with changes in identity as well as restructuring academic and support systems and programmes, in addition to changes in leadership and management. It is therefore not surprising that many academic staff, across all higher education institutions in South Africa, are unhappy with what they consider to be 'interference' in their teaching and their curricula, and are resistant to such forms of change. These sorts of tensions, between academic lecturing staff on the one hand and support and development staff on the other, therefore pose particular difficulties to integrating academic and support services and to innovative teaching practices that are aimed at developing the whole student. In order to make these shifts towards more holistic practices, therefore, institutions need to re-think their positions with respect to their students and support services need to be re-configured in line with these shifts.

REAP is able to offer a much more integrated support service to its students than was found in the higher education institutions in the research study sample. This is based on the relationship between student advisors and REAP students and is discussed in the following section.

#### 4.4 SUPPORT SERVICES OFFERED BY REAP

By virtue of having a clear understanding of the socio-cultural backgrounds of its students, the sorts of challenges that confront them when entering higher education institutions and an understanding of the individual higher education institutional environments where they are studying, REAP student advisors are well positioned to be pro-active as well as responsive to their students' needs, and thus facilitate their integration. Indeed, none of the students interviewed believed that they would have made it through university without this support from REAP. As one reported, "Support from the student advisor is more than just getting money; they find out about your experience."

The personal advice and counselling that REAP student advisors offers its students plays an important role in addressing and reducing their feelings of alienation.

##### **Personalised support for REAP students**

REAP student advisors visit their students at the university campuses where they are studying, three times a year. During this time they meet with their students to discuss their progress, offer support and advice and run workshops with them.

During the rest of the year, students are expected to phone their student advisors every month, on a toll free line, to update them on their academic progress, request financial assistance, and for advice and counselling. A student advisor described his relationship with his students as analogous to that of an older brother, providing the financial, academic and social support that their families cannot provide in these circumstances. The relationship is built on trust, arising from the student advisor's knowledge and understanding of the students' backgrounds and caring about their individual welfare and progress. This one-to-one interaction fulfils a vitally important function in providing a sense of security for the students. Counselling by their student advisors reportedly not only helps students find solutions to their problems but also directs them to additional institutional help where they needed it. It is therefore a formalised supportive, trusting relationship and provides a safety net which is not available to non-REAP students.

The majority of REAP students reported being quite comfortable receiving support over the telephone, although first-year students admitted that it took some getting used to. They found their student advisors approachable and helpful and noted that they would always assist them find solutions to difficulties. For example, one second-year student commented that her student advisor was always willing to listen to problems and was "a good ear". They reported an open relationship with their advisors and were aware of the importance of being monitored: "It is important that you have to account to them why you failed and what you are doing about it", although sometimes they attempted to hide their marks from their advisors, for fear of losing REAP financial support. This, however, served to increase their feelings of alienation, although once they had sought support and their marks improved, these feelings rapidly lessened.

Thus, students reported that they would not have made it without the moral support from REAP, and one asserted that just hearing the familiar voice of the REAP receptionist comforted her. The support helped them remain self-motivated: "Because they believe in me, it has made me believe in myself." The students had



goals and dreams which were motivating them to succeed, but having a social support network that they could trust, and feeling that there were people who cared about them and wanted them to succeed, was reported to have made all the difference when they were struggling. Although there were students who only phoned their advisors when they needed money, a student advisor said that this was understandable in the context and that, no matter what the reason for the phone call, it gave him the opportunity to monitor his students' progress.

An integral part of the REAP support approach are workshops that are tailored to their students' specific needs and address the different stages of the student lifecycle. These are well received by REAP students who were widely reported to find them very helpful and motivating. Students also commented on how these workshops had provided an opportunity for them to meet other REAP students and thus for them to socialise and make friends. Many of them expressed being proud of being a REAP student, and this sense of belonging is important in that it increases their confidence and sense of self-worth and assists with their social integration. REAP could explore this avenue to strengthen ways in which REAP students could be more supportive of each other.

REAP student advisors reported that they always made a point of encouraging their students to use the institutional support services should they need to. The student advisor had developed an active, two-way partnership with the counselling unit at one of the institutions, so that both staff in the unit and students report back to the student advisor on their progress (although the counselling itself remains confidential). In some instances, REAP student advisors negotiate with support services to run workshops specifically for REAP students, thus making use of local expertise and avoiding unnecessary overlap of services. On the whole, however, REAP did not seem to have as strong a relationship with staff in the student support services as with the financial aid staff in institutions. Support service staff therefore did not seem as aware of the REAP programme or individual REAP students, and some staff did raise concerns about possible duplication or overlap of services, although for the most part they expressed interest in working more closely with REAP.

Isolated instances of REAP students experiencing feelings of alienation were encountered, but these were far less prevalent than among the non-REAP students in the sample, and less severe, and tended to be related to individual student's attitudes and characteristics. Some students reported that, from time to time they experienced difficulty in making contact with their student advisor, which they found frustrating. A caution is that should this be a persistent problem, it could have the effect of damaging the trust between the REAP advisors and their students. It has been suggested that REAP could improve the support it offers through more systematic mentoring of first-year students by senior REAP students (this already happens to some extent) and through increased peer support mechanisms, and that this could relieve some of the pressure on student advisors.

REAP can be seen to offer a well integrated system of support to its students, which rests on the underlying principles of nurturing and developing students' individual strengths and attributes to enable them to succeed. This is achieved through regular monitoring of each individual's progress and personal support and guidance. However, student advisors admit they are over-burdened, so creative ways of enhancing support capacity should be investigated, such as through peer support and mentoring and partnering with existing institutional support services. One such suggestion was that REAP formalise its relationship with support services/counselling and negotiate for a trained counsellor or psychologist to be assigned to small groups

of REAP students. The psychologist could act *in loco parentis* when the student advisor was absent and the students would have someone familiar and immediately at hand to consult, should they need to.

#### **4.5 TRACKING AND MONITORING AND EVALUATING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT**

Tracking, monitoring and evaluation of student support services is vital to ensure an effective support system. The literature recommends that this take place on two levels:

- Tracking the progression and development of the targeted students, and
- Evaluating the effectiveness / impact of student support services and initiatives.

The emphasis for tracking student progression and development should be on identifying 'at-risk' students as soon as possible and ongoing monitoring of academic performance. "Effective monitoring and tracking of students", suggest Thomas *et al* (2002:13), "can also lead to more pro-active support." Clearly, efforts must also focus on the student's progression through and completion of the higher qualification.

The monitoring and evaluation of the initiatives themselves are important on a number of fronts, including enabling stakeholders to ascertain whether these projects are "getting it right"; to identify areas for improvement and positive change; and, to influence future policy decisions. Thomas *et al* (2002:61) note that institutions either do not engage in any form of monitoring or evaluation of their student services at all, or, when data is collected, "it is not always fed back systematically into service provision". They highlight the following as key roles for monitoring, evaluation and research in improving the effectiveness of student services and retention strategies:

- Identifying student needs
- Monitoring usage levels and type
- Ensuring the quality of services
- Feedback from students
- Assessing the impact, and
- Value for money/cost-benefit (2002:62).

The higher education institutions in this study all had some form of tracking, monitoring and evaluation of their student support services, although this tended to be for their own internal reporting purposes and to inform future planning for the individual units, rather than for institutional change. Thus, for example, feedback questionnaires from student 'clients' are used to evaluate the quality of their services as well as the extent to which the different services are used. However, staff claimed that student responses on the feedback questionnaires are not of a high quality, and therefore not very useful. As already mentioned, only one institution in the sample had an early warning system for identifying possible at-risk students. For the rest, the data from these monitoring and evaluation exercises were not fed into institutional management information systems, either to monitor the progress of at-risk students or the impact of the support services.

There were therefore no institutionally coherent, integrated support systems to address the holistic academic and social integration, development and progress of

disadvantaged students. It is suggested that *strategic* tracking, monitoring and evaluation of support services could more easily enable such systems to be put in place.

#### **4.6 CONCLUSION**

A number of socio-cultural factors have been discussed that impact on success in higher education for disadvantaged students. These factors not only indicate the challenges that students face in integrating socially and academically within these institutions, but how they view and interact with the support that is offered.

Although a range of different support services are offered in higher education institutions, these are adjuncts to the university programme and thus do not really feature on the radar of disadvantaged students, many of whom perceive them as socio-culturally irrelevant or even threatening. Thus, for these support systems to play a meaningful role in enabling disadvantaged students to significantly participate in and become integrated into university life, they need to take into account the particular package of challenges and needs of these students, as well as ensuring that support is culturally relevant to them and conducted in their home language, where feasible. This requires that institutions acknowledge disadvantaged students, as a grouping distinct from their traditional white student intake, and identify their challenges and needs as they manifest in the particular higher education institution. This can be achieved through strategic tracking and monitoring.

In addition, because socio-cultural factors impact on disadvantaged students' academic and social integration, academic development and support services need to be interlinked and complement each other. Thus, support systems need to act as an holistic, interrelated network of services to prevent at-risk students falling through gaps and they need to be creatively re-conceptualised into a new institutional strategy. In addition, ways need to be sought to overcome possible staff resistance to different ways of doing things

Some suggestions in this regard will be discussed in the final chapter of this report, Chapter Five, which follows.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This final chapter distils and synthesises key conclusions, recommendations and suggestions from this study. It begins by looking at the gaps between good intentions and experienced reality – between institutional vision and mission statements and the data reported by staff and students. This gap is confirmed by the poor pass and throughput rates in the higher education sector as well as by the drop-out rates, especially amongst first-year students, as mentioned in Chapter One of this report.

The following section considers the phrase ‘an institutionalised response’ as opposed to support frequently currently offered by individual staff, programmes or organisations. In recommending that an institutionalised approach be adopted to ensure better alignment between mission and practice and to provide for the package of challenges that often faces disadvantaged students, the report considers the requirements of such an approach including the need for a comprehensive on-line tracking and monitoring system, one that identifies at-risk students at the point of entry and ensures that they receive on-going orientation and support. Such a system will also evaluate the impact of the support offered, not only on the progress made by individual students, but on throughput rates more broadly.

The sections that follow make recommendations and suggestions related to the need for strong, sustainable partnerships within and across institutions and between institutions and a range of stakeholders including the DoE, the schooling sector, the private sector and organisations such as REAP and NSFAS. These recommendations and suggestions are drawn from the data presented in Chapters Two, Three and Four.

### 5.2 VISION / MISSION AND REPORTED PRACTICE

The complex mix of internal and external pressures facing higher education institutions in South Africa are often reflected in the vision and mission statements of the institutions. For example, one of the institutions in the study envisages itself as

a premier, embracing African city university offering a mix of vocational and academic programmes that advances freedom, democracy, equality and human dignity as high ideals of humanity through distinguished scholarship, excellence in teaching, reputable research and innovation, and through putting intellectual capital to work.

In its mission statement, this university commits itself to the following:

quality education; leading, challenging, creating and exploring knowledge; supporting access to a wide spectrum of academic, vocational and technological teaching, learning and research; partnerships with its communities; and contributing to national objectives regarding skills development and economic growth.

It is not surprising that its focus on disadvantaged students becomes somewhat lost in such wide-ranging goals.

Even where disadvantaged students are more specifically mentioned in mission and / or vision statements, institutional practices as reported by staff and students in these institutions were often not well aligned. For example, one of the institutions in the sample for this study mentions its focus on “educationally disadvantaged students and the university’s commitment to assisting such students to gain access to higher education and succeed in their studies” in its mission statement. In addition to its “focus on South Africa, Africa and the international context”, this institution’s mission statement highlights its role in “building an equitable and dynamic society” and “the attention given to the design of curricular and research programmes appropriate to the southern African context”. Ironically, a member of the executive staff interviewed at this institution was unable to describe the forms of support provided for disadvantaged students and acknowledged that s/he often resorted to providing individual assistance to the students s/he came into contact with. This response was often echoed by other staff at the lower levels of the institution as well as the students themselves.

It is clear that while intentions are good – both those of individuals and institutions as a whole – institutional systems and processes are not yet sufficiently in place to address the needs of disadvantaged students. The gap between vision and mission, on the one hand, and implementation and practice, on the other, remains an enormous challenge and one that cannot be solved quickly by the higher education institutions themselves.

It is hoped that the dissemination of the findings of this report and its recommendations will contribute to highlighting and closing the gap between institutional vision / mission and practice. It is clear that disadvantaged students are in need of ambassadors – individuals and organisations such as REAP – to intervene on their behalf, present their case and canvass for the support required to facilitate their success. In fulfilling these functions, these individuals and organisations assist institutions to fully appreciate the challenges facing disadvantaged students so that they are in a better position to identify and develop stronger institutional responses.

### **5.3 AN INSTITUTIONALISED RESPONSE FOR A PACKAGE OF CHALLENGES**

The data found in this study indicates that the disadvantaged student often faces a greater number of challenges simultaneously than the more advantaged student. In addition, the data suggests that these challenges are likely to be felt more intensely – especially if there is not immediate support for the student. This means that a range of support services is required and that these need to be accessed timeously. In other words, there is a need for an institutionalised response – not fragmented responses provided by concerned and generous individual staff, by individual programmes or projects or external organisations such as REAP, but a coherent set of well coordinated responses structurally embedded within the institution and well communicated to both academic staff and support staff and to the students themselves. This report argues that individual and fragmented responses tend to be ad hoc in nature, often unsupported by the students themselves due to the stigma attached to them and, ultimately, unsustainable.

Throughout this report, the interplay between three umbrella factors – financial, academic and socio-cultural – has been highlighted. The interdependence of these factors suggests that an integrated institutionalised response is required. In addition,

the report has highlighted that within each of the umbrella areas there is a range of sub-areas. For example, the financial needs of disadvantaged students include not only tuition fees but also money for a range of other necessities such as accommodation, transport, textbooks and equipment, sustenance, clothing and toiletries. Without funding for these items, students' financial anxieties are not alleviated and their ability to focus on their studies is compromised.

Similarly, the academic needs of disadvantaged students usually encompass a range of areas, not just reading and writing skills but broader language, literacy and conceptual issues that are often exacerbated by the disadvantaged student's lack of exposure to urban living and the more sophisticated technology taken for granted by city dwellers. The data from this study also indicates that socio-cultural factors are subtle and complex and that integration within the prevailing institutional culture enhances students' chances for success.

In addition to encompassing all the above areas, an institutionalised response requires close linkages between the various areas of support offered. In order to address the challenges faced by disadvantaged students, these students need to be identified at the point of entry, prioritised for residential accommodation, provided with mentors within the first week of the academic year, targeted for proactive communication about orientation and support services and then tracked and monitored.

An institutionalised response is one that requires endorsement at all levels – from the executive staff to those involved at management and delivery levels – as well as a clear understanding of the approach used and the various services offered. Unless academic and support staff are aware of all of support services and how to access them, students are less likely to be referred to services as required. Staff and students' lack of knowledge of existing support needs to be urgently addressed within institutions as well as by organisations such as REAP. This research study has found that traditional once-off orientation programmes often do not ensure that students gain good knowledge of support services. New and more creative forms of orientation and communication are required to ensure that information is more effectively disseminated and processed. In addition, the communication of support services needs to assist in reducing the stigma associated with many of these services, especially in the eyes of those who have had little prior exposure to them.

A comment from a staff member interviewed in the study captured something of this view of an institutionalised response. S/he said:

[This institution], like [in] every other academia, has been through massive restructuring and changes. The culture and population of students is completely different to the past ten years. Lecturing now is no longer a privilege; the occupational stresses, the workloads, the changes in curricula. Whilst I feel that the academics are grappling to deal with that, at the same time you have a new culture of students, with their own needs. ... It's not because of insufficiency on the part of academia or students who are not good enough. It's the whole organisational structure; it's transformation.

The phrase "the whole organisational structure" is what an institutionalised response focuses on.

## **5.4 COMPREHENSIVE ON-LINE TRACKING AND MONITORING SYSTEMS**

An institutionalised response such as described above requires an on-line business intelligence system that will provide a diagnostic and planning tool for the institution as a whole. Business intelligence systems facilitate the identification, tracking and monitoring of particular student groupings and are invaluable for ongoing institutional research and development initiatives.

For example, in relation to disadvantaged students, in addition to including students' results at course level, a business intelligence system would also record the support services used by individual students – the frequency and duration of this usage. This data would assist institutions in evaluating the impact of support services on individual students' results and on throughput rates within the institution as a whole. In addition, this data would assist in institutional decision-making for strategic and budgeting purposes and so support the institutionalised response to the challenges associated with disadvantage.

Sophisticated tracking and monitoring programmes require not only capital outlay but also the training of staff who need to understand their value and purpose and to have the skills required to make good use of them – not only at the stage of inputting data but also, critically, at the stage of analysis so that conclusions can be drawn and strategic intentions decided.

## **5.5 THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN ADDRESSING CHALLENGES**

As already mentioned, the challenges associated with ensuring alignment of good intentions and institutional practice are considerable and point to the need for strong, sustainable partnerships within and across institutions, and between institutions and the DoE, the schooling sector, the private sector and organisations such as NSFAS and REAP.

### **5.5.1 Partnerships within and across institutions**

An institutionalised response as described earlier in this chapter requires careful coordination of the work of departments, units and programmes. In addition, a clear strategic vision well communicated within the institution and commonly shared by the various role players is required.

Partnerships also require that thought be given to the physical layout of support services. For example, this study noted that Financial Aid Offices are often poorly located on campuses and not well positioned in relation to other student support services offered. If these offices, as the first port of call for disadvantaged students, are to provide the critical central link with other support services in a coherent system, it is recommended that their location be carefully planned so that they are easily accessible to students and close to other support services. In addition, such linkages between Financial Aid and other student support services need to be formally constituted, to allow for a coherent response.

### **5.5.2 Partnerships between institutions and external stakeholders**

Strong, sustainable partnerships between institutions and external stakeholders also require a clearly communicated institutional vision and the existence of good communication channels. While partnerships may address a range of issues - from financial factors to academic and socio-cultural – it is important that these not be



individualised ad hoc responses but ones that fit in the institutionalised response. Partnerships between institutions and between institutions and external stakeholders require careful negotiation, trust built over time and benefits for all parties, especially the students.

## **5.6 ADDRESSING FINANCIAL FACTORS**

The data in the report point to three levels at which careful thought is required in order to address financial constraints identified in the study: at the institutional level in the higher education sector, at the level of individual disadvantaged students in these institutions and at the institutional level in the schooling sector.

### **5.6.1 Resourcing higher education institutions to achieve the vision identified**

It is in the resourcing of individual institutions that the private sector may find an important partnership role in the higher education sector. In stressing the inter-relationship of students' needs, this study has highlighted a range of facilities and resources that require considerable financial outlay. For example, the shortage of safe and accessible residential accommodation has been highlighted. In addition, it has been argued that there is a need for automated tracking and monitoring systems and staff development programmes to ensure that these are used optimally. Laboratories (including computer laboratories) need to be built, equipped and maintained. Smaller contributions could be made by those partners who are able to make donations to libraries, to secure special prices on textbooks, or who can organise and run non-profit second-hand book exchanges.

### **5.6.2 Financing individual disadvantaged students in higher education institutions**

A key finding of this study (in line with the results of other studies mentioned in Chapter One) is that financial assistance is critical in facilitating not only access but also student success. This finding also needs amplification. Given this and the reported difficulties regarding students receiving, understanding and processing information on NSFAS loans timeously, it is recommended that consideration be given to waiving tuition fees for disadvantaged students. This would go a long way to ensuring that financially disadvantaged students enter university without carrying heavy burdens. Should this recommendation be taken up, clear criteria will need to be defined for the student population eligible for the fee waiver.

It is also recommended that the current requirement for students to pay application fees to each institution to which they apply be reconsidered and that a one-off application fee, centrally administered, be introduced.

Chapter Two of this report documents variations in the ways in which NSFAS loans are utilised in the higher education institutions in this sample. In essence, it was found that securing a NSFAS loan did not always have the intended effect – i.e. to relieve students' financial anxieties so that they could concentrate on their studies. Where a disadvantaged student receives financial support for access (i.e. financial support for fees) without ongoing support for the myriad of other needs, including residential accommodation and sustenance, transport, textbooks and equipment, clothes and toiletries, their energies and focus are dissipated and their chances of success are reduced. It is recommended that particular prescriptions for the use of NSFAS loans be considered to ensure that these loans cover all the areas of need and are used in their fullness.

The recommendations provided here suggest that individualised, comprehensive financial packages need to be developed for disadvantaged students and that these need support from the DoE in terms of legislation, NSFAS as a key funding provider, individual institutions, and organisations such as REAP that are in a position to provide top-up funding. There are also important roles for the private sector in supporting individual students. For example, the presentation of student cards at certain outlets could secure students prices reductions.

### **5.6.3 Resourcing schools**

Time and again in this study, staff interviewed pointed to the under-preparedness of students in general, and disadvantaged students in particular, and the additional pressures they face in working with these students. For many of these interviewees, the poor quality of education provided in schools is a key contributing factor. They argue that until the schooling sector is better resourced, it will be difficult to ensure that the quality of the student intake at universities is improved. Here again, in terms of financial support, the private sector could find an important role to play in developing the infrastructure of schools, while university / school partnerships could focus on developing the capacity of human resources.

## **5.7 ADDRESSING ACADEMIC FACTORS**

### **5.7.1 Increasing opportunities for careers guidance in schools**

The lack of careers guidance offered in schools and the implications of this have been highlighted in Chapter Three of this report. It is critical that students receive reliable information on various offerings and their requirements. It is recommended that a variety of partnerships be formed to provide for careers counselling programmes at the school level. For example, organisations such as REAP could partner with a higher education institution and visit targeted schools. Much of this work would require sponsorship from the private sector.

### **5.7.2 Ongoing orientation to university life and institutional support systems**

Although both the higher education institutions and NSFAS provide schools with information about higher education and the financial commitments involved for students, it is recommended that new communication channels with schools be explored as students interviewed in this study reported that they rarely received such information.

Given the numbers of students who also reported that they had not brought the correct documents with them when they had first arrived at the institution at the beginning of the year and / or had not made arrangements for accommodation, it is recommended that a comprehensive list of immediate requirements be sent to prospective students in schools along with the information above. This could include a map with directions about how to reach the institution from the train / bus / taxi.

It is strongly recommended that orientation not be viewed a once-off event in the academic calendar, but rather that it be an on-going and staged process to ensure that first-year students attend different events with different foci over the course of the year. Ongoing orientation services that span the student lifecycle culminating in their orientation to the world of work, is an holistic approach that could be given more serious consideration in many universities. Orientation that introduces students to the

internal logic and culture of the institution is essential. In this study, orientation was found to be particularly effective when it was faculty-based and when peer facilitators were trained to act in a mentoring capacity for new students. In addition, the inclusion of small groups of similar types of students in workshops such as those used by REAP were favoured.

Here again, the mere provision of information does not ensure that information is accessed, understood and responded to by students. While it is not suggested that students be spoon-fed or that their own responsibilities in seeking and responding to information provided be reduced, it is recommended that students not be overloaded with irrelevant information at inappropriate times and that the value and purpose of all information in resource packs etc. be explained.

### **5.7.3 Academic literacy programmes**

The implementation of traditional curricula that do not address academic literacy risk alienating disadvantaged students from academic discourses, from learning and from knowledge itself. In addition, where academic development programmes are add-ons to academic programmes, or offered as voluntary, additional support, these are often not as successful as those that are integrated into the academic curriculum. This study has confirmed that for many students learning the language not merely of instruction but of academia presents a challenge. It is recommended that academic support be integrated in the mainstream curriculum and that consideration be given to the provision of support for disadvantaged students in their home language.

In this study it was found that curricula and teaching practices that make use of a range of student experiences, languages and socio-cultural discourses assist in the academic integration of disadvantaged students. It is suggested that such approaches to teaching and learning be incorporated in formalised, institutionalised strategies and that appropriate training for all lecturing staff be provided.

### **5.7.4 Credit-bearing tutorials**

The value of tutorials that provide students with safe spaces to ask questions, to engage with foreign concepts and to test their responses is immense. In this study, it was found that tutorials function best where the tutorial system is embedded in the academic culture of the institution and when tutors, usually senior students, are well trained and supervised. It is recommended that, wherever possible, tutors and students are 'matched' so that the former provide role models for the latter and are perceived as familiar and approachable. It is also recommended that institutions explore the possibility of credit-bearing tutorials to ensure that all disadvantaged students attend these fora.

## **5.8 ADDRESSING SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS**

This study found that students that enjoyed peer support in the form of friendships with other students and those who understood the culture of the institution also enjoyed higher levels of integration in university life.

### **5.8.1 Residential accommodation for rural students**

Mention has been made in the report of the need for accessible and safe residential accommodation for students and it is recommended that an institutionalised response would ensure that all rural students are immediately accommodated in

residences where mentoring programmes are also implemented. If implemented, this recommendation would go a long way in assisting rural students to integrate in university life from the time of their arrival.

### **5.8.2 Mentoring**

Mentoring, as it was variously implemented at the institutions visited, was found to be a valuable support for disadvantaged students in that it both reduced their feelings of alienation and assisted in their integration in the institution. Peer mentoring was particularly effective in this regard, both as part of programmes in residences and during orientation and registration times.

It is recommended that organisations such as REAP consider ways of formalising and extending their current mentoring functions through the use of senior students. It is also recommended that universities, in their turn, investigate options for introducing and / or extending mentoring programmes for disadvantaged students, especially for those who live off-campus. Partnerships with the private sector should also be explored.

### **5.8.3 Participation in student life**

This study has found that students who feel that they are part of a community – rather than isolated and alone – are likely to enhance their chances of success. Integration may be fostered through sport and / or cultural activities as well as through small communities such as that established by the REAP community of students who meet with each other on a regular basis.

### **5.8.4 Counselling services and motivational workshops**

Given the numerous challenges that many disadvantaged students face – and the high drop-out rates for first-year students – it is not surprising that many of these students may go through periods of feeling anxious and demotivated. It is recommended, therefore, that counselling services and motivational workshops and seminars be provided by a variety of role players such as the institutions' own professional staff, REAP's senior students and in partnership with the private sector.

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## **APPENDIX B: SAMPLING AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

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### **SECONDARY DATA**

The REAP database was consulted to ascertain what tracking and monitoring functions it offered and to obtain data for sampling purposes. This database needs to be updated more regularly, especially with regard to first-year students who are most at-risk and certain categories need to be disaggregated into more specific categories to enable meaningful tracking to be conducted.

A number of REAP documents were consulted, including Annual Reports, internal evaluations, the selection instrument for applicants etc.

### **COLLECTION OF PRIMARY DATA**

Initial meetings with REAP staff and the Director of NSFAS yielded important background information for conceptualising and developing the research study

Several sets of primary data were collected. Firstly, a questionnaire was developed for first-year REAP students to ascertain their experiences of the REAP selection process, their expectations for the future and their expectation of the support they would continue to need from REAP (see Appendix B). Secondly, two focus group interviews were held with twelve REAP regional representatives, who are involved in the recruitment and selection of REAP applicants, in each group. Thirdly, the REAP student advisors were interviewed, to ascertain how they experienced their work, and their interactions with their students and the higher education institutions where their students were based.

Finally, three researchers conducted interviews of selected staff, REAP and NSFAS students at the selected higher education institutions; this comprised the bulk of the primary data. Individual or paired interviews were conducted with first-year students, as it was assumed they would feel less intimidated. Focus group interviews were held with second-year and continuing students.

Great care was taken in deciding the parameters for valid sampling of institutions, students and staff. However, difficulties that were largely related to obtaining current student records from REAP and NSFAS, caused the research team to have to change the institutional sample at the last minute, which in turn caused delays in setting up the visits, and also created difficulties in identifying NSFAS students to interview. As a result, the research team was able to only undertake one visit to the institutions, instead of two as intended.

Nevertheless, the data obtained has been sufficiently rich and comprehensive to enable strong conclusions to be drawn, and the research team does not feel that the research was compromised, in any significant way, by the sampling changes that had to be made.



## **SAMPLING OF INSTITUTIONS**

A number of factors had to be taken into account in selecting appropriate higher education institutions for the research study.

The first of these was enrolment of REAP students. It was decided that institutions would be selected not only on the number of REAP students enrolled, for first and continuing years of study, but on the consistency of annual enrolments and especially where the number of REAP enrolments was increasing. The assumption was that this would demonstrate a history of engagement of REAP with the institution, and that REAP had confidence in the institution.

A second factor was selecting a representative spread of higher education institutional types. Many of the merging or recently merged institutions were still comparatively unstable, in terms of unified or coherent systems, procedures and identities, and for this reason it was initially decided to select only one for the study, although this had to be changed when data on 2007 REAP students became available. Furthermore, because there was a growing trend for REAP students to favour universities over universities of technology, it was thought that three universities should be selected (one a merged institution) and only two universities of technology.

In addition, it was considered important to select institutions across a spread of different provinces, and the degree to which it was a typical case. For example, REAP enrolments per stream at universities of technology follow a specific trend where commerce, engineering and management enrolments are high. Hence universities of technology needed to meet these typical enrolment trends for inclusion.

Three possible sample combinations were discussed with REAP, based on REAP data from 2002-2006, and a sample finally agreed upon. However, when REAP enrolment data for 2007 became available, it was discovered that there were no 2007 first-year students registered at one of the institutions selected and lower than expected first-year enrolments at some of the other institutions in the sample. By the time alternative institutions had been selected, it was too late to set up the visits before the institutions closed. The final sample included one university of technology (a merged institution), two 'traditional' unmerged universities, and two merged universities, one of which had relatively high numbers of first-year and continuing REAP students.

Difficulties were also experienced in gaining access to one of the traditional universities in the sample, to the extent that much of the data could only be collected close to the end of the year.

## **SAMPLING OF STUDENTS**

Because of the limited numbers of REAP students at individual institutions, it was decided to interview as many of them as possible: a minimum of 10 first-year and 12 continuing students, the latter divided into groups of second-years and third/final-years. These were selected from the study streams for which most REAP students typically registered at those institutions. A comparative sample of NSFAS students in each institution also needed to be selected, from the same study streams and from rural areas, to meet the criteria for being disadvantaged. An important criterion in

student sampling was that there be no gender bias, so equal numbers of men and women students were selected for the interviews.

It had also been decided that the institutions should be visited twice, so as to interview the first- year students near the beginning of the year and again later in the year. It was considered that this should provide data on their progress in integrating into the higher education environment, what factors were impacting on their experiences and how these factors were contributing to or inhibiting their progress.

However, difficulties in obtaining data on 2007 REAP students prevented final decisions on institutional sampling being made timeously and even greater difficulties were encountered in obtaining data on NSFAS students. Only limited data could be obtained from NSFAS itself and, because their records were not updated with details of first-year NSFAS students, the researchers had to approach the financial aid departments at the institutions that they were to visit to try and obtain data on first-year students from them. However, this was not readily available and, as a result of all the delays, it was not possible to visit the institutions in the first semester. In the end only one visit was conducted – as early in the second semester as appointments with institutional staff and students could be confirmed.

In selecting NSFAS students for interview, the only way to try and ensure that they were 'rural' students was by their given home addresses. However, as these were the addresses of the account holders, they did not always accurately reflect the rural status of the students, who, in some cases, had been living and attending school in urban settings. In addition, telephone contact details for these students were found to be inaccurate, which resulted in it being a time-consuming exercise to make contact with and set up suitable appointments with sufficient NSFAS students. The research team had also considered that some of the NSFAS students booked for the interviews might not arrive as there was no incentive for them to do so, and thus tried to book between 10 and 12 per focus group, to allow for possible 'no shows'. Nevertheless, despite the researchers confirming these appointments the day before, there were still many who did not keep their appointments and it proved almost impossible to set up interviews with replacement students, especially as interview appointments were so tightly scheduled.

Because of particular attendance problems experienced by one of the researchers where students were protesting on the campus at the time, REAP agreed that all students attending the interviews be offered R20 towards their travelling costs and for lunch money, as a small incentive. It was believed that such a small token would not influence student responses in the interviews, which appeared to be the case.

Despite these sampling difficulties, the data was found to be sufficiently consistent across the five institutions for these to not affect the findings in the end.

### **SAMPLING OF INSTITUTIONAL STAFF**

Setting up interviews with academic and support staff at the institutions in the sample was generally straightforward and unproblematic. However, at the one traditionally Afrikaans-speaking university, it proved quite complicated to find academic staff who lectured to English-speaking classes, as they were in the minority and it was pointed out that Afrikaans-speaking lecturers had little contact with disadvantaged students.

In addition to interviewing academic staff in the departments where most REAP students were enrolled, the following categories of staff were also interviewed:

- Heads and staff of academic development units
- Academic staff involved in foundation and extended learning programmes (alternative access programmes)
- Financial aid staff
- A Dean of Student Services
- Psychological counsellors
- A social worker
- Staff in academic support, such as the writing centre, and
- Career development/counselling staff.

### **DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

It needs to be noted that the study did not pursue the relationship between HIV and Aids and student success, as this is sufficiently complex to form a separate area for research.

It should also be noted that the research team did not visit the institutional residences or speak to residence staff, as the importance of residential accommodation for disadvantaged students only started to emerge as a priority issue during the course of the institutional visits and in retrospect, when working with the data. However, quite rich data on this issue was obtained from the NSFAS and REAP students in the samples, and from institutional support staff, that foregrounded its significance and the ways in which it could be addressed.





*What I like about REAP is that they don't only look at the student on the academic side; they look at the entire psycho-social emotional side - a holistic kind of thing. (Support staff, university Financial Aid Services)*



*At REAP you get motivation workshops where you can speak out loud and express your feelings and get to know each other very well. They have been so supportive of me. If it wasn't for them, I would not be here at all. (REAP third-year student)*