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Recruitment and Retention of Students in Developing Countries: An Overview

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This document presents an overview of the social, economic, environmental and institutional barriers that affect student retention and recruitment in the Global South. The purpose of this document is to present information on recent trends and to demonstrate potential strategies to improve the institutional capacities of universities to effectively recruit and retain students.

The different factors affecting an individual's decision to enter higher education include socio-economic barriers and public perception. As median incomes and home equity decrease and tuition increases, the ability for students to self-fund higher education diminishes. There is also an increasing re-evaluation of the price individuals and parents are willing to pay for a university education due to **shifting interest in Massive Open Online Course (MOOCs) & online education**. Public perception is also shifting in regards to the value of a college degree; this is due to increased media coverage and legislative attention surrounding the macroeconomic impact of student debt. Moreover, the need for a return on the investment on higher education causes individuals to seek evidence of successful results (e.g. employability) to justify the financial investment.

There are two types of barriers to accessing higher education: **first chance barriers** (socio-economic) and **second chance barriers** (practicalities arising from returning to education or young people taking a non-traditional transition route, namely family commitments, responsibilities, types of courses available and the Higher Education selection processes).

Poor economic conditions are a key obstacle to student retention in higher education. For example, in South Africa the number of economically active individuals, who are unemployed, is rising and current savings stand at insufficient levels; therefore, the state is unable to finance the investment required to keep economic growth and job creation in line with population growth. This creates two problems: Higher Education institutions are **unlikely to receive government funding** to improve education and due to decreasing state subsidisation of students (currently standing at 48%) on top of increasing class fees, students and their parents/guardians cannot afford to pay/carry the debt.

The **proximity of the institution and financial costs of attending** are two key issues that serve as barriers to student recruitment in developing countries. For example, Vanessa Brown lives in town Balaka, Malawi and needed to fund the cost of her daughters lodging with a local family within walking distance from the secondary school; however this will not be a viable option for everyone.

Research indicates that the **first year of university is critical** for student retention as the majority of students that decide to drop out, do so during the first year. Statistics also suggest that students need a longer time-frame for degree completion than the typical three to four years set at the undergraduate level.

Student retention rates are also affected by student performance and the **student's ability to prepare academically** for studies at university level. Moreover, research indicates that institutions have not been successful in the implementation of an outcomes based system. This could be a result of: a lack of training and experience of teachers in the primary and secondary school sector, lack of materials and/or poor communication at management level.

Long-term health conditions can serve as a significant barrier to accessing higher education as these conditions and their required medical care **may prevent many students from continuing full time education**. In particular, HIV/AIDS can prevent students from staying onto full time education; this is a growing concern as most students at university are aged 19 to 29, an age group in which HIV/AIDS is most prevalent.

Research demonstrates that in order to increase retention, students should pursue a course that interests them. Currently **one-third** of students are not studying their first choice course, making it difficult to sustain a level of captivation, engagement and curiosity. Moreover, non-traditional students still represent a largely untapped market. To help recruit these students into higher education, convenient course scheduling, assistance in the financial aid process and counseling service must all be provided.

Effective strategies for recruitment should involve **direct interaction** with prospective students in order to increase enrolment. To widen access, it is suggested that institutions develop highly flexible degree programmes, so that the needs of working professionals are met. Admission standards could be lowered; although, this would increase enrolment and thus revenue and potentially lower grades/standards and impact the institution's ranking and profile. Reports like the 'HE Access: Evidence of The Effectiveness of Uni Access Strategies and Approaches' published to the Sutton Trust on May 2014, recommend various methods that institutions can utilise to increase enrolment and retention, such as the development of financial and mentoring strategies.

Factors affecting access to higher education

Geography	Traveling distance/the proximity of HE institutions can dissuade individuals from progressing into Higher Education, especially students wishing to live at home
Family Commitments	As the number of mature students continues to grow, so does the diversity of personal circumstances. Institutions need to be more flexible and creative: such as part-time courses, work based or distance learning courses and childcare support.
Socio-economic inequalities	The Learning for All report (SFC, 2005) states: 'The perception alone that admission processes and recruitment practices of certain institutions aren't equitable (especially for medicine and law) is a disincentive to apply' due to their deprived backgrounds. Potential solutions - contextualised admissions and targeted resources towards primary/secondary school students in deprived areas in order to develop aspirations and improve levels of attainment
Labour market and graduate prospects	Employability affect participation in higher education. Fear that debt impacts the disadvantaged disproportionately and are increasingly evaluating whether the value of HE, in terms of graduate prospects justifies the price to be paid.

Good, consistent and conscience study methods/habits (i.e socialising, attending classes, hours put into independent study) are very important for academic success and can increase a student's motivation to finish university. Student diversity is also important in maintaining motivation. Students need to feel like they fit in; therefore, institutions need to accommodate all ethnicities and religions and this must also be reflected in the staff.

The nature of **admission procedures and the institutions policies affects retention rates**: open processes result in a 70% retention rate while selection processes result in a 97% retention rate.

General research trends demonstrate that **attrition rates are higher for mature full-time students while retention rates are higher for undergraduate students** in the U.K. The causes of attrition and retention in Higher Education were categorised by Lenning, Beal and Sauer 1980 as academic matters, motivational and personal considerations, financial difficulties and general dissatisfaction with the course.

There are a wide array of academic theories that address the role of social environments in retention. Tinto's theory of integration (1975) argues that the 'level of academic and social integration predicts the students persistence or withdrawal from the school'. Similarly, Thomas (2012) argues that '**the creation of a sense of belongingness and engagement are critical to promoting retention**'; therefore, institutions should create an environment that is responsive to the cultural diversity of its students. However, some experts suggest that it is solely up to the students to have the behaviour and attitude to succeed in a university setting. Austin's theory of involvement argues 'The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to their academic experience' determines whether or not the student decides to terminate his/her studies.

Suggested strategies highlighted to increase retention by promoting engagement and belonging include: **supplementary instruction, peer mentoring and psychological counseling**.

The University of Pretoria in South Africa demonstrates a successful employment of this strategy. They discovered an effective an institutional module which 'employs a **three pronged approach**'. The model focuses on:

1. Improvement of first year student experiences
2. Promotion of a faculty led approach
3. Integration of students into the university academic and social life: students receiving comprehensive academic, psychological and financial support

As a result of research on the effect of engagement and belonging on student retention, the Top-Up Project was founded as an initiative to support African students at Edith Cowan University. The project contains three components: one-to-one peer mentoring, compulsory plenary sessions and a walk in option. The initiative had relatively successful results with **over 90% of the students who participated in 2015 remained enrolled on their course**.

All case-studies appear to emphasise the value of peer-mentoring schemes and pastoral care in increasing 'connectedness and engagement.

About the Author

Njomeza Blakcori is a politics, sociology and eastern studies student at University College London. She started working as an intern for Professors Without Borders in the fall of 2018. Njomeza believes that education is an indispensable tool for helping mobilize rural developing communities to enforce positive political change. For this reason she continues to eagerly support and assist the work of PROWIBO.

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