



Access Denied: Examining the Pitfalls of Enrolment Mechanisms in Higher Education

Kholofelo MARUMA

College of Law, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

*Corresponding author: 67244882@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Abstract

Open and distance learning signifies instruction delivered remotely, emphasizing accessibility, flexibility in curriculum, and structural adaptability. These systems typically consist of interconnected elements including a guiding mission, program offerings, instructional methods, learning resources, communication channels, support services, student body, educators and experts, administrative structure, infrastructure, and assessment processes. Each year, the academic journey for South African students becomes a topic of discussion due to the disparities in enrolment opportunities. Approximately 615,429 learners successfully complete Grade 12 (matric) annually. However, only 25% of these individuals gain admission into higher learning institutions. Out of the remaining 75%, about 10% actively seek employment opportunities, with only 5% securing internships or temporary positions not permanent jobs. Alarming, this leaves 70% of matriculants marginalized, facing limited prospects for further education or employment. This systemic exclusion often pushes many towards paths that include social challenges, including crime. This paper seeks to uncover the flaws in enrolment systems and propose strategies to address these critical issues

Keywords: Higher education, enrolment system, matriculation statistics, south africa education, admission challenges.

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Introduction

Modern higher education is widely regarded as a primary catalyst for social mobility, innovation, and economic progress for both individuals and society as a whole (Kamanzi et al., 2021). Therefore, guaranteeing fair and equitable access to these institutions is not merely a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for maximizing human potential (Rawls,

1971). However, despite this noble objective, the very mechanisms designed to govern entry-specifically, enrolment and admissions processes—often create unintended barriers that perpetuate existing inequalities and exclude talented prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Tight, 2023). Instead of acting as a vehicle for meritocracy, these systems can become a means for social reproduction, where inherited advantages are valued more than individual merit (Espinoza-Bravo & Cabezas-Cabezas, 2024).

This study aims to critically examine the various pitfalls inherent in higher education enrolment mechanisms, from biased academic assessments to financial and structural obstacles that impede a diverse pool of applicants. Conventional admissions tools, such as standardized tests and academic grades, are frequently criticized for their inherent cultural and social biases (Zwick, 2007). Although these tests are intended to measure readiness, they often favor those with the financial means to access expensive tutoring and preparation resources (Franklin et al., 2023). Furthermore, an overreliance on high school GPA can fail to account for significant disparities in school quality and the socioeconomic contexts in which those grades are earned (Borgen et al., 2025).

Beyond academic metrics, the application process is often riddled with less visible barriers, including bureaucratic labyrinths, a lack of accessible information, and intimidating social dynamics (Coughlan & Lister, 2018). First-generation students and those from marginalized communities often lack the necessary social capital and familial support to navigate this complex process successfully (Sarkar & Ghosh, 2024). These challenges are compounded by steadily rising application fees and other financial demands, which effectively exclude many qualified individuals regardless of their academic achievements (De Los Reyes & Uddin, 2021). Consequently, a system that should promote meritocratic access instead serves to maintain inequality, limiting the diversity and richness of experience that are crucial for a dynamic and innovative learning environment (Salimi et al., 2024). Therefore, this research will investigate how various higher education enrolment mechanisms, both intentional and unintentional, fail to meet their stated goal of promoting equitable access. Through a systematic literature review and conceptual framework analysis, this study seeks to identify and categorize the key barriers, highlight their implications, and propose pathways toward more inclusive and just reforms.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a multiple case study design to deeply examine the challenges within South Africa's higher education enrolment systems. This methodology is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of various stakeholders, including prospective students, university admissions staff, and educational counselors. The use of a multiple case study design, focusing on a diverse range of institutions (e.g., public universities, private colleges), allows for rich comparative analysis, revealing both common pitfalls and institution-specific issues within the enrolment process (LePeau et al., 2025). Data collection relies on three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with individuals who have direct experience with the enrolment process to capture their personal narratives and insights (Justice, 2022). Concurrently, official documents such as admission policies, online application portals, and institutional reports will be systematically analyzed to identify formal rules and underlying systemic biases (James-MacEachern, 2018). Finally, direct observation of application workshops, orientation sessions, and registration desks will provide a contextual understanding of how policies are implemented in practice and the unwritten rules that govern the process (Lang, 2000).

The collected data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, a rigorous qualitative method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Squires, 2023). The process will begin with transcribing all interview recordings and field notes. Next,

the researcher will engage in an iterative process of coding the data, identifying key concepts and recurring ideas. These codes will then be organized into broader themes, such as "bureaucratic complexity," "financial barriers," and "institutional capacity limitations." The thematic findings from each case study will be synthesized to draw comparisons and build a comprehensive narrative about the systemic flaws in higher education enrolment (Karami & Yousefi, 2024). This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how multiple factors intersect to create the access challenges highlighted in the literature, providing a solid foundation for proposing actionable solutions (Mishra & Dey, 2022)

Results and Discussion

To address the challenges in the higher education enrolment system in South Africa, several strategic recommendations are proposed. Firstly, the Department of Higher Education should consider increasing the intake capacity of Open and Distance Learning institutions like UNISA to accommodate up to one million students. This would significantly alleviate the pressure on traditional universities and provide more opportunities for matriculants. Secondly, the pass mark in secondary schools should be raised from 30% to 50%, and the concept of condonation should be eliminated to better prepare students for higher education. Additionally, integrating ODL methods in primary and secondary schools can help familiarize students with distance learning platforms, ensuring a smoother transition to higher education. The Department of Basic Education should also make computer literacy mandatory from Grades 1 to 6 and train learners to use applications utilized by ODL institutions from Grade 7 onwards. Finally, leveraging mobile applications and ICT in education can enhance accessibility and learning outcomes, particularly in a multilingual society.

Conclusion

The current enrolment mechanisms in South Africa's higher education system present significant barriers to many matriculants, leaving a large portion of the youth marginalized and without prospects for further education or employment. By increasing the capacity of ODL institutions, raising academic standards in secondary education, and integrating technology and distance learning methods from an early stage, South Africa can create a more inclusive and effective education system. These measures will not only improve access to higher education but also equip students with the necessary skills to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The successful implementation of these recommendations requires a collaborative effort from the Department of Higher Education, the Department of Basic Education, and other stakeholders to ensure a sustainable and equitable education system for all.

Conflicts of Interest

Declare conflicts of interest or state

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