




# The Impact of Basic Education Curriculum Gaps on Meeting Tertiary Education Admission Criteria – A Case of South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Access to higher education is often hindered by curriculum gaps in secondary education, where misalignment between school curricula and university admission requirements leaves many students underprepared and ineligible for their desired programs. This qualitative study set out to explore ways in which curriculum gaps negatively impact students' ability to meet admission criteria, aiming to highlight systemic challenges and propose solutions to bridge the divide between secondary and higher education. 4 teachers, 2 university administration officers, and 4 learners who seek entry into the university from different high schools were purposively sampled for semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews, and the data were thematically analysed in this study. The Critical Social Theory served as the lens through which this whole discussion in this study was addressed. The study identified significant misalignment between high school subjects and the prerequisites for tertiary education programs, particularly in STEM and professional fields. The study revealed that a lack of guidance on subject selection and inadequate preparation for standardised assessments further compound the problem, leaving students ill-equipped to meet competitive admission criteria. It is recommended that stakeholders address curriculum gaps that require systemic reforms, including aligning secondary education content with university requirements, improving career guidance, and equipping schools with adequate resources. These measures will ensure that all students have equal opportunities to access higher education and pursue their career aspirations regardless of background. The study contributes to existing literature on improving equitable access to higher education opportunities by addressing this issue.

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## Publication History

Received:

13<sup>th</sup> March, 2025

Accepted:

9<sup>th</sup> June, 2025.

Published:

15<sup>th</sup> July, 2025.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum Gaps, Higher Education Access, Admission Criteria, Educational Inequality*

## INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a critical gateway to socioeconomic mobility, yet disparities in curriculum design often create barriers for students seeking admission to higher educational institutions. Curriculum gaps refer to the misalignment between what is taught in schools and the knowledge and skills required for academic progression, particularly concerning admission into high schools, colleges, and universities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 97–140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>.

These significant gaps contribute to unequal educational opportunities, limiting students' preparedness for standardised tests and competitive admission processes.<sup>2</sup> Admission criteria vary across educational institutions, often encompassing academic performance, standardised test scores, and prerequisite coursework.<sup>3</sup> However, when curriculum content does not align with these requirements, students, especially those from underserved communities, face challenges meeting the expectations set by admission offices.<sup>4</sup> Studies indicate that students from schools with insufficient resources and outdated curricula are less likely to meet the academic benchmarks necessary for higher education entry.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between curriculum content and admission criteria is crucial in understanding these disparities. When curricula fail to cover essential subjects or skills required for entrance exams, students are disadvantaged, impacting their ability to compete with peers from more well-resourced schools.<sup>6</sup> Research suggests that the implications of curriculum gaps extend beyond admission challenges, affecting students' overall preparedness for university-level coursework and their likelihood of academic success.<sup>7</sup> Underserved communities, including low-income and rural populations, are disproportionately affected by curriculum disparities. These students often attend schools with fewer advanced placement courses, outdated instructional materials, and limited access to experienced educators.<sup>8</sup> As a result, they struggle to meet admission requirements and perform well on standardised tests, further exacerbating educational inequities.<sup>9</sup>

Empirical studies and case analyses illustrate the tangible consequences of curriculum gaps on admission rates. For example, a study by Chingos found that students from schools with insufficient college preparatory curricula were significantly less likely to enrol in four-year institutions.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) data indicate that disparities in curriculum offerings contribute to lower college acceptance rates among historically marginalised groups.<sup>11</sup> Addressing curriculum gaps requires a multifaceted approach involving educational reforms, policy adjustments, and institutional interventions. Potential solutions include curriculum standardisation, targeted educational funding, teacher training programs, and enhanced academic support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>12</sup> Policymakers and educators are crucial in ensuring that curricula align with contemporary admission standards and adequately prepare students for post-secondary education.

This study synthesises existing literature, empirical research, and policy discussions to provide a comprehensive view of the impact of curriculum gaps on meeting admission criteria. By highlighting the consequences of these gaps and exploring possible interventions, this research aims to inform educators, policymakers, and stakeholders about the necessary steps to bridge curriculum disparities and foster equitable educational opportunities.

<sup>2</sup> William H Schmidt et al., "The Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality: An International Perspective," *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 7 (2015): 371–86.

<sup>3</sup> Michael N. Bastedo et al., "What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Holistic Review? Selective College Admissions and Its Effects on Low-SES Students," *The Journal of Higher Education* 89, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 782–805, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1442633>.

<sup>4</sup> Sean F Reardon, "The Widening Income Achievement Gap," *Structure of Schooling: Readings in the Sociology of Education*, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> S. Fischer and C. Stoddard, "The Effects of State Exit Exams on High School Graduation and Postsecondary Outcomes," *Education Finance and Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 31–62.

<sup>6</sup> Ivy Morgan and Ary Amerikaner, "Funding Gaps 2018: An Analysis of School Funding Equity across the US and within Each State.," *Education Trust*, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> D. T. Conley, *The Common Core State Standards: Insight into Their Development* (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> H. Richard Milner, "Beyond a Test Score," *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 6 (September 3, 2012): 693–718, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934712442539>.

<sup>9</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (October 1, 2006): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035007003>.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew M. Chingos, "Class Size and Student Outcomes: Research and Policy Implications," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, no. 2 (March 29, 2013): 411–38, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21677>.

<sup>11</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *The Condition of Education 2020* (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Darling-Hammond et al., "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development."

## Main Research Question

- To what extent do curriculum gaps in secondary education affect students' ability to meet university admission criteria?

## Sub-questions

- What specific curriculum gaps hinder students from qualifying for their desired higher education programs?
- How do these curriculum gaps affect students from different socioeconomic backgrounds?
- What are the perceptions of educators and admission officers regarding the alignment of secondary education curricula with university requirements?
- What strategies can be implemented to address curriculum gaps and improve students' readiness for higher education?

## Objectives of the Study

- To identify and analyse curriculum gaps that impact students' eligibility for university admission.
- To assess the influence of socioeconomic factors on students' ability to meet admission criteria.
- To examine the perspectives of educators and admission officers on the preparedness of secondary school graduates for higher education.
- To propose recommendations to bridge curriculum gaps and enhancing the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

By thoroughly exploring these objectives, this study aims to enrich the ongoing discourse surrounding educational policy reform and curriculum development. It seeks to ensure that secondary education is not only responsive to the needs of students but also effectively equips them with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in higher learning environments. Doing so contributes valuable insights that can lead to more innovative and relevant educational practices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum gaps and misalignments make it difficult for students to choose or be placed in the desired tertiary education programmes in South Africa.<sup>13</sup> According to Kriz et al. those gaps are not usually specified because it is not commonly the case that students come with incomplete subjects (as per the stream requirements in high schools), but they are incomplete for the desired university programme.<sup>14</sup> Kickert et al. elaborate that incompleteness refers to the fact that a prospective student will have half of her subjects qualifying her to be accepted for the commerce programme while the other half of her subjects qualify her for the criminology programme.<sup>15</sup> In other words, such a situation makes that very student almost qualify for the two programmes with incomplete credits, and that makes him/ her not be acceptable in both, as Mantashe puts it.<sup>16</sup> Students from different socioeconomic backgrounds get affected by this problem differently because some rely on obtaining a tertiary degree to change their poverty situation back at home.<sup>17</sup>

Students from poor backgrounds get more frustrated when they face rejection from universities, while those from wealthy families are less affected due to the fact that they can live better without a

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<sup>13</sup> P Vinish, Prakash Pinto, and Rio D'Souza, "Framework for Identification of Curriculum Gaps: A Systematic Approach.," *Journal of Engineering Education Transformations* 35 (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Anton Kriz et al., "Teaching-Practice as a Critical Bridge for Narrowing the Research-Practice Gap," *Industrial Marketing Management* 92 (January 2021): 254–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.02.017>.

<sup>15</sup> R. Kickert et al., "Curricular Fit Perspective on Motivation in Higher Education," *Higher Education* 83, no. 4 (April 19, 2022): 729–45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00699-3>.

<sup>16</sup> Lunga Mantashe, "Do Universities Have the Articulation of College Programmes in Mind When Reviewing Their Academic Curricula?," *Journal of Vocational, Adult and Continuing Education and Training* 7, no. 1 (October 31, 2024): 24, <https://doi.org/10.14426/jovacet.v7i1.392>.

<sup>17</sup> Mantashe, "Do Universities Have the Articulation of College Programmes in Mind When Reviewing Their Academic Curricula?"

tertiary degree.<sup>18</sup> According to Johnson the misalignment of secondary education curriculum with the university requirements leads to painful outcomes as students get unfairly limited in terms of university admission while having obtained good grades from their high school studies.<sup>19</sup> Li and Xiong also argue that the problem of secondary education curriculum not aligning with the tertiary education requirements means that the basic education system does not communicate well with the higher education system.<sup>20</sup> According to Li and Xiong that non-communication between the two systems is bad because, at the end, it harms the progress of students as they end up being rejected from universities or any tertiary institutions.<sup>21</sup> In other words, similar to Johnson, Li and Xiong seem to suggest that basic education curriculum designers must constantly check with the higher education curriculum advisers whenever they create subject streams in their respective secondary schools.<sup>22</sup>

However, although Mantashe; Kriz et al mention the issue of two systems communicating sufficiently, but they do not state what channels of communication must be used and what amendments should be made to help the already affected victims.<sup>23</sup> On one hand, secondary schools boast about higher pass rates and are celebrated by the Minister of Basic Education.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the very same students who were celebrating for passing well at secondary schools face difficulties when it comes to entry requirements in their desired university programmes.<sup>25</sup> It is at this point that this study argues that this situation of misalignment and contradictions in curriculum calls for an immediate solution because it adds to the discomfoting uncertainties of life. That is why Vinish et al. summarise this whole discussion as matters tempering with students' readiness for higher education.<sup>26</sup> This study turns the argument of scholars like Kriz et al, Mantashe, as well as Heiskala to shift from intrapersonal students' issues of non-readiness towards curricular non-readiness, which is a more significant problem than intrapersonal students' issues.<sup>27</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the Critical Social Theory (CST) as its theoretical framework. According to Giroux CST stresses ideas of emancipation, development, and transformation acquired through a fair process of respectful deliberations.<sup>28</sup> Collins *et al* narrate that the emancipation of any nation from barriers to success cannot be possible until that nation gets ready to transform the status quo.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Cherubini argues that although development in any nation is always desirable, if victims of an oppressive system do not show interest in transformation, it becomes impossible to either develop or improve.<sup>30</sup> In other words, this theory's conceptual framework interlinks emancipation, transformation,

<sup>18</sup> María Elena Oliveri, Robert J Mislevy, and Norbert Elliot, "After Admissions: What Comes next in Higher Education," *Higher Education Admission Practices: An International Perspective*, 2020, 347–75.

<sup>19</sup> R. Johnson, "Instructors' Perspectives on Misalignment of Secondary and College Business Curriculum" (Walden University, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Xiaomeng Li and Wei Xiong, "Exploring Factors Influencing Alignment Between Curriculum Standard and English Exam Content.," *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research (EJER)*, no. 113 (2024).

<sup>21</sup> Li and Xiong, "Exploring Factors Influencing Alignment Between Curriculum Standard and English Exam Content."

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, "Instructors' Perspectives on Misalignment of Secondary and College Business Curriculum"; Li and Xiong, "Exploring Factors Influencing Alignment Between Curriculum Standard and English Exam Content."

<sup>23</sup> Kriz et al., "Teaching-Practice as a Critical Bridge for Narrowing the Research-Practice Gap"; Mantashe, "Do Universities Have the Articulation of College Programmes in Mind When Reviewing Their Academic Curricula?"

<sup>24</sup> Yolanda Mpu and Emmanuel O Adu, "The Challenges of Inclusive Education and Its Implementation in Schools: The South African Perspective," *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 2 (2021): 225–38.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Heiskala et al., "Persistent University Intentions: Social Origin Differences in Stopping Applying to University after Educational Rejection(S)," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 85 (June 2023): 100801, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2023.100801>.

<sup>26</sup> Vinish, Pinto, and D'Souza, "Framework for Identification of Curriculum Gaps: A Systematic Approach."

<sup>27</sup> Kriz et al., "Teaching-Practice as a Critical Bridge for Narrowing the Research-Practice Gap"; Mantashe, "Do Universities Have the Articulation of College Programmes in Mind When Reviewing Their Academic Curricula?"; Heiskala et al., "Persistent University Intentions: Social Origin Differences in Stopping Applying to University after Educational Rejection(S)."

<sup>28</sup> Henry Giroux, "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis," *Harvard Educational Review* 53, no. 3 (1983): 257–93.

<sup>29</sup> Virginia Naidoo and Collins Onoriode Potokri, "Female School Leaders and the Fourth Industrial Revolution in South Africa," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*. 15, no. 10 (2021): 162–80.

<sup>30</sup> L., Cherubini, "Understanding Experience Through Critical Reflection and Expression," *Social Science and Humanities Journal (SSHJ)* 8, no. 01 (2024): 3374–80.

and development as processual elements acquired through respectful deliberation. In the African context, this theory aligns with the debates around the issue of barriers to quality education in South African schools' curriculum/curricula. As scholars like Barros *et al* would argue, emancipation hereby refers to being free from any factors that serve as barriers to accessing higher education/ admission to universities.<sup>31</sup> According to Green, any nation that fails or does not change its mindset toward progress cannot develop to its full potential because it lacks the necessary mindset for achieving the desired quality of education.<sup>32</sup>

The relevance of this theory for this particular study is marked by three factors; (a) the need to transform the curriculum that imposes limitations to accessing higher education levels in the South African system, (b) the need to develop the South African basic education to the level that it speaks to the higher education in terms of having a curriculum that is aligned with university programs, and (c) emancipation of those learners who become victims of the misaligned system of education who then become rejects when they complete matric (grade 12). These are the deeper issues that inform this study and impact the South African community within the education system. Therefore, this study seeks to be the means of respectful deliberation between the tertiary education system and basic education curriculum designers/ advisors to effect some transformational developments in the school curriculum in order to increase access to universities.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews, whereby 10 learners from different high schools were purposively sampled. Those learners were purposively sampled in the sense that they all suffer from an inability to access universities and further their studies, and their reason is that the subjects they did at school are mixed in a way that does not match the degrees that they want to pursue. Since they were in different places, the method of communicating with them was via WhatsApp, through which the questions (this study's sub-questions) were texted to them after the study had been explained. The researchers explained the focus of the study to the prospective participants and acquired their written consent before allowing them to participate in the study. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and the participants had the right to withdraw at any time they felt no longer comfortable with the process.

Under the POPI Act participants in this study were solemnly assured that their identity would be totally concealed, with all their private information.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in this study, all participants are anonymised and safely referred to as participants (P). Seeking permission from the participants to participate in this study was secondary because the first step of seeking permission to do this research study was already obtained from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC). Upon thorough examination of the proposal, TREC granted the ethical clearance certificate with reference number TREC/804/2024: PG, which helped in introducing researchers to the participants during data collection and seeking their consent.

Having the confidentiality principle observed through anonymisation in this study was a priority to prevent any possible harm to the participants. Anonymisation also prevented the potential conflict of interests in this study because all participants stated that there might be dangers to them if their identities or the identities of their alma mater schools were to be revealed/ exposed. Data collected through interviews in this study was thematically analysed to draw the commonality of experiences throughout the areas of concern from all participants and see if the data collected are exhaustive or not. For issues of trustworthiness, reliability, validity, integrity, and relevance, this study adopted a few principles. Those are, (a) the study must be current and include real people living in this real world, (b) the study must rely on the current data about the real phenomenon, (c) the data must be collected through reliable methods and be safely protected, (d) the study questions must be relevant to the current

<sup>31</sup> Carina Joane Villareal Barroso, Zenas B Paloma, and Mariz Rochelle Sedon, "Blended Learning, Challenges, and Its Effects to Heis during Covid Pandemic: A Systematic Review," *Res Militaris* 13, no. 2 (2023).

<sup>32</sup> Bill Green, "Understanding Curriculum as Practice, or on the Practice Turn(s) in Curriculum Inquiry," *Curriculum Perspectives* 42, no. 1 (April 26, 2022): 77–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-022-00160-0>.

<sup>33</sup> "Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPIA)," Government Gazette § (2020).

issue that is the subject of this study, and (e) the target audience of the study must be people with authority to transform or change the status quo. For further strengthening the trustworthiness and reliability, researchers hereby allowed the participants to use the language of their choice and respond in the method of their choice (written / verbal), which maximised honest interaction.

For further emphasis on the quality, relevance, and trustworthiness of this study, a triple-layered interpretation approach in data analysis has been applied. According to Ntshangase *et al*, a triple-layered interpretation approach encompasses three layers of interpreting data.<sup>34</sup> For instance, (a) data can be interpreted concerning the written text as it is written, (b) data can be interpreted with reference to context at which the phenomenon occurs, and (c) data can be interpreted with reference to the relevance of studying the impact that a particular phenomenon impacts people.<sup>35</sup> This study incorporates the triple-layered interpretation approach throughout its discussion, and that is helped by the CST employed in this study, as it will be discussed in the section below.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are hereby recorded as they are from the participants, which comes after the table that briefly reflects the profile of all participants. The table itself is created such that it still complies with the principle of confidentiality and anonymity as assured by the researchers to the participants. That means, participants are still represented as P1, P2, P3 and so on in the table below. The brief that can be said is that the research locale must be understood as two provinces of South Africa, namely Limpopo and Eastern Cape. However, the problem of curricular misalignment as a hindrance to access to tertiary education institutions is countrywide as learners apply for admission in various colleges and universities after completion of matric/ grade 12.

**Table 1: Participant profiling**

Participants	Occupation	Locale
P1	Teacher	Limpopo
P2	Teacher	Limpopo
P3	Teacher	Eastern Cape
P4	Teacher	Eastern Cape
P5	University admin officer	Eastern Cape
P6	University admin officer	Limpopo
P7	Post matric learner	Eastern Cape
P8	Post matric learner	Limpopo
P9	Post matric learner	Eastern Cape
P10	Post matric learner	Limpopo

The section below shows the responses of participants (P’s) to the relevant/ specific questions as outlined in the introduction of this study. To avoid tautology in the participants’ responses, this section puts together similar responses, hence one can observe (P1, P2), (P3, P4) and so forth.

**P1, P2:** *“Curriculum gaps are created by subject streams that are offered in high schools, like placing mathematics with subjects like languages, history and so on, while at the same time putting physics with economics, languages and arts. At the same time, you find that the university program demands mathematics to go with physics, biology, languages, and Life orientation, while Economics would go with accounting, consumer studies, and languages. Then the matriculants find themselves not eligible for admission into any program, those are what causes hindrances in terms of acceptance/ admission into higher education programmes. These gaps create a situation whereby learners get rejected by universities and colleges, and that diminishes the hope of obtaining qualifications that will aid in job seeking. The implication thereof is that learners from poor backgrounds end up forced to*

<sup>34</sup> Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase, Mapule Yvone Segooa, and Shonisani Cydna Ntshangase, “The Inevitable Pressure Between Progression And Knowledge Impartation,” *International Journal Of Humanities Education and Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2024).

<sup>35</sup> Ntshangase, Segooa, and Ntshangase, “The Inevitable Pressure Between Progression And Knowledge Impartation.”

*leave schooling altogether and go find low-paying jobs. To us, as teachers, this situation is frustrating because we end up seeing our best learners turning into despair and not becoming the best educationally qualified citizens. Strategies to better the current situation must include the collaboration of tertiary institutions' curriculum advisors with the schools' curricular advisors."*

**P3, P4:** *"Those curriculum gaps are not necessarily gaps but misalignments between high schools' curricular setting and higher education curriculum programmes. The arrangement of subjects at the high school level tends not to be in line with what the university requires as a prerequisite to a particular university programme. For example, one finds that the university offers a BSc degree with requirements like pure mathematics, physics, languages, agriculture, and biology, while learners from school have mathematics, arts & culture, economics, languages, and history. So, that mismatch results in the learner being rejected for the BSc programme regardless of having obtained good high school grades. Those from poor backgrounds end up destitute and are forced to leave schooling. Most youth who become victims of the situation are those from poor backgrounds because they also forfeit educational sponsors that were ready to financially support them. Both teachers and administration officers from the university feel that this situation is bad because we cannot help in this whole situation, and it is our children who suffer rejection. The only strategy is that our schools' curriculum advisors must communicate with the university programme designers and advise schools accordingly with the correct understanding of what the university programmes require."*

**P5:** *"In my experience, learners from high school happen to have subjects that misalign with programme requirements, and that is what creates a gap in terms of university or college admission. So, you find that an applicant has all 7 subjects, but they are so cluttered than what is required for a particular degree program. These gaps/ misalignment of subjects affect learners badly because they face rejection and do not pursue their desired university programmes. Some learners end up not performing well in programmes they get admitted into because it was never their first choice; they just took it because they accidentally qualified for it. Those who rely on sponsors end up losing those sponsors. This is bad for us administrators because it is we who give those rejection letters/ notices to applicants. I think there must be constant communication between higher education and basic education; perhaps this whole situation might be curbed."*

**P6:** *"Although I know nothing much about curriculum, having subjects that do not serve as the prerequisites to the programme which one applied for rejection happens. So, sometimes the school curriculum setup does have issues that sometimes serve as a hindrance to university/ college access. Some learners miss the opportunity to be university students, and the opportunity to further their studies gets shut down because sponsors/ bursaries withdraw when they get rejected. Only those from wealthier backgrounds get to pursue their dreams outside of furthering their education. Those who have dreams of being perhaps the first graduate in the family lose that opportunity and end up finding jobs that do not earn them as much as their dream jobs. For any admin officer, it is a painful situation to issue letters of "we regret to inform you that your application for ... was unsuccessful"; no person loves delivering bad news. I do not know what can be done to help in this case because it seems like principals and basic education curriculum advisors do not want to talk with the universities/ colleges and find a common understanding."*

**P7, P9:** *"Gaps are that some of us find that we have half of the subjects required in a particular university programme, and that means the other half disqualifies us from that programme. This situation of having half the prerequisites makes one not worth enrolment into that particular programme, and this serves as a common hindrance for students like me who had good grades from matric. Learners from poor families suffer humiliation because people at home do not understand that you passed matric with good results, and yet you do not get admission into the university programme of your choice. That humiliation affects everyone, it is just the case that it hits hard on you if you are from a poor background because it is coupled with the end of hope to be the first graduate of the family. This changes the perceptions of our teachers in the sense that some now know that it is not only underperforming learners who get to have gap years of staying at home or never get to further their studies. Maybe the basic education curriculum advisors, principals, and teachers must talk with the universities/ colleges before they give us subjects to study in high school. If our schools create subject*

*streams that align with what the university/college requires, chances of accessing higher institution programmes can be improved, and few applicants would be rejected.”*

**P8, P10:** *“This thing of curriculum gaps that make post-matric learners be rejected in their application to university programmes is annoying because you will be told that you do not have all the subjects required to enrol for that degree/ course while you passed all subjects given to you in high school. So, the curriculum gaps victimise us (learners) who have no way of knowing for sure what the correct subjects to choose are. While rich families always have various options, poor families do not even get to understand why someone gets rejected from different universities after passing the matric with bachelor’s qualification results. At the same time, having no access to furthering your education means that you will end up just having a poor job to keep life moving and not afford the life you desire. This must be a traumatic experience even for our teachers and university admin officers because we are their children, and no parent wants to see his/ her children suffering from rejection in higher education institutions. The only advice I can give is that schools need to have serious conversations with the universities before creating subject streams and implementing them into their curriculum.”*

These results reveal the following themes (i) misalignment of the high school curriculum and university/ college programmes’ requirements create gaps and hindrances in terms of admission into higher education admissions, (b) the lack of access to higher education deeply frustrates learners from poor backgrounds than those from wealthy families, (c) all parents including teachers and administration officers desire to see learners successful and this situation of application rejections in different universities/ colleges pains them, (d) basic education subject/ curriculum advisors have not taken any action to collaborate with university curriculum advisors towards solving this problem of misalignment between school curriculum and tertiary education programmes. All these themes emanate from the textual, contextual, and substantive interpretation level of the data collected from participants, and seemingly they all tie this discussion into saying that there must be a proper collaboration between tertiary institutions and high schools. This study also argues that since the problem is between high schools’ throughput and tertiary institutions’ entry, the problem can be solved if both basic education curriculum advisors and universities/ colleges curriculum advisors must a common understanding. In fact, this whole problem would not have arisen if there was constant and effective communication between schools and universities/ colleges.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study holds that the curricular misalignment between basic education and higher education programmes hinders access to tertiary studies for most learners in South Africa. Hence, this study provides suggestions that can be employed to curb the continuation of this systematic problem; (i) institutions of higher learning must not only reject student applicants when it is time to apply to programmes, but they must play an advisory role to the basic education curriculum advisors, (ii) there must be workshops whereby higher education curriculum specialists meet and advise basic education curriculum advisors, (iii) subject advisors in high schools must be part of the workshops whereby entry requisites (school subjects) are discussed in line with the higher education programmes offered in tertiary institutions, (iv) access to higher education and training must be considered as the part of the South African constitutional right to education, and all limitations to that right must be minimised/ eliminated, and (v) the goal for all South African educators, whether it be in basic education or higher education, must be towards increasing educational quality than mere literacy that ends at grade 12/ matric.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study was conducted with the sole aim of seeking to improve the South African system of education from basic levels (grades 10 to 12) of education to the higher levels/ tertiary. Curricular misalignment between high schools and tertiary educational programmes tends to block access to higher education, and this frustrates learners who have passed with good grades in high school, as they are rejected by universities. The findings show that learners work hard in high school, hoping for easy access to university after completing matric, but to their surprise, they become victims of these

misalignments and become rejects. Findings also showed that these misalignments are the result of curriculum advisors lacking knowledge of the higher education system, although they know that in the end, learners must further their studies through acceptance into university programmes. Therefore, this study argues for the developmental transformation of South African basic education towards aligning with the tertiary education programmes so that access to colleges and universities will be less stressful than it currently is. Recommendations are put forth in order to reshape the basic education curricular advisory towards a proper liaison with the higher education advisory to at least have a clear meeting point and help learners against unfair rejections. The hope is that through the debate aroused by this study, there will be a proper line of deliberations that will lead to understanding learners' education needs and satisfying them through opening access to universities and colleges.

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