



How resource constraints affect tutoring in under-resourced institutions: A case of rural institutions

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore the intersection of socioeconomic challenges and the resource limitations faced by tutoring programs in underprivileged institutions. It aims to analyze how critical factors—such as funding, access to educational materials, and the availability of qualified tutoring personnel—significantly impact the efficiency and effectiveness of tutoring initiatives. The methodology used was qualitative; the study assessed the outcomes of tutoring in challenging environments and offered a comprehensive overview of best practices and areas for improvement. The paper highlighted that tutoring programs in disadvantaged South African institutions continue to reflect apartheid-era inequalities, despite post-apartheid reforms. It discussed the unique circumstances of rural universities, where socioeconomic concerns are compounded by geographical isolation and limited access to resources. The study recommends a set of strategies designed to enhance the impact of tutoring initiatives and outlines additional resources and support mechanisms needed to help bridge the educational gap. The paper emphasizes the relevance of the Republic of South Africa's constitutional provisions and other legislation aimed at alleviating historical disparities in the education system. The study not only addresses these critical issues but also contributes to scholarship by providing a framework for understanding the intersection of policy and practice in higher education. It highlights the role of educational institutions as catalysts for change and offers insights into how they can adopt inclusive strategies to foster diversity and equity. This contribution to scholarship serves as a vital resource for future research and policy formulation in South African higher education.

Keywords: Resource, Constraints, Tutoring, Rural, Institution, Inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

Three decades after South Africa embraced democracy, the vision of equal access to quality education remains distant for students in rural areas, where persistent resource shortages continue to weaken tutoring programmes that were meant to help repair historical injustices.¹ The aspirations expressed in Education White Paper 3, calling for a unified, coordinated system capable of meeting citizens' needs and supporting national development, contrast sharply with the realities still confronting many institutions today. Scholars have observed that, although post-1994 reforms expanded access and

¹ Leonard Wertheimer, "Library Services to Ethnocultural Minorities: Philosophical and Social Bases and Professional Implications," *Public Libraries* 26, no. 3 (1987): 98–102.

achieved some progress toward equity, longstanding barriers continue to hinder meaningful transformation, especially in rural communities where isolation and underdevelopment exacerbate structural inequalities.² The combined weight of past marginalization and present-day resource deprivation has created conditions in which tutoring interventions struggle to thrive in rural institutions. Research reveals that South African higher education continues to face layered challenges ranging from limited social mobility and financial insecurity to persistent underrepresentation, which becomes even more severe in geographically remote institutions.³ These systemic pressures translate into everyday obstacles for tutors and students alike. Evidence shows that inadequate infrastructure, unclear guidance, insufficient training, and digital challenges directly weaken the effectiveness of tutoring systems. Such findings emphasize that tutoring requires more than good intentions; it needs institutional capacity, stable resources, and ongoing support elements that rural universities often lack.⁴ In this regard, rural institutions also face physical and technological shortcomings that are largely absent from urban-centred policy designs, making implementation far more difficult. For instance, reviews of rural higher education identify poor infrastructure, limited access to ICT, and inadequate support structures as significant barriers to meaningful transformation.⁵ These disadvantages begin long before students reach university, with many learners travelling long distances to schools that lack essential teaching resources. By the time they enter higher education, they are already positioned at a disadvantage, leaving rural tutoring programmes to compensate for gaps they do not have the resources to address. As a result, rural institutions are expected to achieve similar outcomes as urban universities while operating under conditions that make this practically impossible, thereby reinforcing entrenched inequalities.⁶

Generally, the growing diversity of the student population in South African higher education presents both promise and pressure for tutoring programmes. As enrolments increasingly reflect a mix of racial, cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, institutions have adopted more varied tutoring models such as peer-assisted learning and supplemental instruction. Yet, this progress is uneven. Rural universities lack the financial and infrastructural capacity to support such innovations, creating a paradox in which the institutions that most need adaptive tutoring strategies are the least able to implement them effectively.⁷ This mismatch highlights how resource disparities continue to shape students' academic journeys in profoundly unequal ways. These inequalities also carry profound implications for social justice. Wells and Manly argue that stark disparities persist between rural and urban universities, as well as between the learners they serve.⁸ Rural students face systemic disadvantages, including limited access to quality education and restricted opportunities to attend better-resourced institutions, which reflect a modern form of segregation based on geography and resources rather than explicit racial laws. When tutoring fails due to institutions lacking funding, infrastructure, and staff, it perpetuates the patterns of exclusion that a democratic

South Africa promised to dismantle.⁹ Addressing these resource constraints is therefore not only an educational imperative but a moral one. Tutoring should serve as a pathway to empowerment, mobility, and academic success; yet, rural institutions remain trapped in a cycle of underfunding and limited capacity that prevents them from offering the level of support their students require. The evidence suggests that meaningful tutoring relies on sustained investment; however, such investment remains out of reach for institutions already disadvantaged by historical and structural inequalities.

² Reitumetse Obakeng Mabokela and Yeukai Angela Mlambo, "Access and Equity and South African Higher Education: A Review of Policies after 20 Years of Democracy," *Comparative Education Review* 61, no. 4 (2017): 780–803.

³ Simangele Constance Cele and Samson Adeoluwa Adewumi, "Funding, Inequalities, and Access: An Amalgam of Challenges in South African Higher Education," *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies* 5, no. 4 (2024): 1–22.

⁴ Chioma Sylvia Okoro and Nelson Bakali Phiri, "Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution," 2023.

⁵ Benjamin Damoah, Xolani Khalo, and Bunmi Omodan, "Disparities in Rural Universities Transformation: A Review from a South African Perspective," *Prizren Social Science Journal* 7, no. 3 (2023): 1–10.

⁶ Patrick A. Nyathi, "Rethinking Freedom: Challenges Facing Rural Education in Northern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies* 6, no. 2 (2025): 1–24.

⁷ Nelia Frade, "Guest Editorial: Tutoring and Mentoring," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 5, no. 2 (2017).

⁸ R. S. Wells et al., "Narrowed Gaps and Persistent Challenges: Examining Rural-Nonrural Disparities in Postsecondary Outcomes over Time," *American Journal of Education* 126, no. 1 (2019): 1–31.

⁹ Rendani Mercy Makhwathana, "Inclusive Education: All Things Considered," in *Handbook of Research on Inclusive and Accessible Education* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2024), 345–58.

Breaking this cycle demands more than policy adjustments; it requires a bold rethinking of how South Africa allocates educational resources and supports rural institutional development. The challenges faced by rural tutoring programmes strike at the heart of South Africa's broader vision for an equitable education system.¹⁰ These constraints are not merely administrative concerns but obstacles to achieving the democratic ideal of equal opportunity. Only through committed, targeted investment and structural support can rural universities build the capacity needed to offer transformative academic assistance, ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, can share in the promise of South African democracy. The study aims to investigate how resource limitations hinder tutoring in disadvantaged South African institutions and how practical support can reduce educational inequalities. The study first deals with the apartheid marginalization to post-apartheid struggle, together with the persistent crisis of tutoring programmes in South Africa's disadvantaged institutions. The study then focuses on understanding the realities of tutoring in under-resourced rural institutions. It further discusses how funding and resource shortages influence tutoring effectiveness. The study explores the inequalities through policy and constitutional mandates. Lastly, the study addresses strategies for strengthening tutoring programs in challenging contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study was qualitative, allowing for an in-depth exploration of tutoring outcomes in challenging environments. This approach provided a comprehensive overview of effective best practices and identified areas in need of improvement. By focusing on participants' lived experiences through literature, the study offered valuable insights into the dynamics of tutoring in these contexts.

DISCUSSION

From Apartheid Marginalisation to Post-Apartheid Struggle: The Persistent Crisis of Tutoring Programmes in South Africa's Disadvantaged Institutions

The transformation of tutoring programs in South African higher education represents one of the most profound educational reckonings of our time, a story of human resilience overcoming decades of systematic educational oppression. The South African higher education landscape was shaped by the apartheid policies of the National Party government before 1994.¹¹ A deliberately fragmented system where 36 institutions were racially segregated, designed to entrench white privilege while systematically undermining black educational opportunities.¹² This was not merely policy; it was the destruction of human potential on an industrial scale. Alexander and others powerfully capture the human cost. In their studies, they provide an analysis that fifty years of apartheid's "social engineering" created inferior primary and secondary education for black learners, leaving scars that persist decades after apartheid's end.¹³ These were not abstract policy failures; they were dreams deferred, talents wasted, and futures stolen from entire generations. Yet from this devastation emerged remarkable innovation. The page reveals how institutions like Stellenbosch University developed "uniquely African tutor/mentor systems," specifically designed to support students who had been systematically disadvantaged.¹⁴ This was not charity, but it was justice in action.

Furthermore, Subotzky argues that the challenge remains immense: most students still arrive "severely underprepared" due to apartheid's ongoing legacy.¹⁵ However, scholars like Underhill revealed how universities have responded with unprecedented determination, creating collaborative

¹⁰ M. M. Stephen, "The Utilisation of ICT Resources for Teaching and Learning Science in Rural Schools: A Bibliometric Analysis," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 23, no. 10 (2024): 676–700.

¹¹ Ian Bunting, "The Higher Education Landscape under Apartheid," in *Transformation in Higher Education: Global Pressures and Local Realities* (Springer, 2006), 35–52.

¹² Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa between 1948 and 1991.

¹³ Rachel Alexander, Elmi Badenhorst, and Trevor Gibbs, "Intervention Programme: A Supported Learning Programme for Educationally Disadvantaged Students," *Medical Teacher* 27, no. 1 (2005): 66–70.

¹⁴ B. J. Page, A., Loots, and D. F. du Toit, "Perspectives on a South African Tutor/Mentor Program: The Stellenbosch University Experience," *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 13, no. 1 (2005): 5–21.

¹⁵ George Subotzky, "Enhancing Retention and Success in South Africa," *International Higher Education* 58 (2010).

tutor development programs that transform not just individual students, but entire institutional cultures.¹⁶ Again, Frade revealed how institutions have embraced supplemental instruction and peer-assisted learning as essential tools for addressing the “apartheid-era secondary schooling” that continues to impact students.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Maphalala and Mpofo also revealed how modern tutoring programs incorporate multilingual approaches and technology, recognizing that accurate educational equity requires cultural sensitivity alongside academic support.¹⁸ The evidence is overwhelming: South African universities have fundamentally reimagined tutoring from a peripheral academic service into a central pillar of educational justice. These programs do not just improve grades; they restore dignity, rebuild confidence, and reclaim the human potential that apartheid sought to destroy. This transformation proves that educational systems can evolve from instruments of oppression into engines of liberation. The scholars’ collective research demonstrates that when institutions commit to genuine transformation, they can heal historical wounds while building more equitable futures. South Africa’s tutoring revolution isn’t just an educational success story; it is a testament to human resilience and institutional courage.

Understanding the Realities of Tutoring in Under-Resourced Rural Institutions

The growing crisis affecting tutoring programmes in under-resourced rural institutions has become one of the most urgent yet least addressed challenges in South Africa’s higher education landscape. While urban universities benefit from stable infrastructure, diverse funding opportunities, and convenient access to academic resources, rural institutions operate under deeply embedded structural disadvantages that directly weaken their ability to deliver meaningful academic support. Studies across the sector consistently reveal a complex, interconnected set of obstacles that require coordinated and transformative solutions rather than piecemeal intervention. The severe infrastructure limitations in rural universities form the bedrock of ongoing educational inequality. Research shows that inadequate physical facilities and insufficient Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure continue to hinder transformation and limit the ability of rural institutions to modernise effectively. This digital gap is far more than a matter of slow internet; it creates a systemic barrier to participating in contemporary higher education. Without reliable connectivity, functional learning platforms, or updated technological tools, tutoring initiatives cannot meaningfully support students.¹⁹ As digital learning becomes increasingly central to academic development, rural institutions remain locked in a cycle where weak infrastructure prevents access to the very technologies that could help them close the gap with urban universities.

Furthermore, geographic isolation adds another layer of complexity to these infrastructural struggles, creating challenges that urban institutions seldom encounter. The lived experiences of rural students illustrate how physical distance becomes intertwined with cultural and psychological distance from mainstream campus life. Many arrive at university feeling disconnected from academic culture and uncertain about their place in these environments. When tutoring structures overlook these cultural dimensions, they fail to reach the students who need their support the most.²⁰ The result is a widening gap between rural learners and the academic communities to which they are expected to belong. Economic hardship within rural communities further complicates students’ educational journeys. Many rural learners come from areas experiencing economic decline, limited employment prospects, and shrinking industries. These realities shape students’ expectations and urgency regarding education: they cannot afford academic failure, yet often lack the necessary preparation and support systems to

¹⁶ J. Underhill and J. McDonald, “Collaborative Tutor Development: Enabling a Transformative Paradigm in a South African University,” *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 18, no. 2 (2010): 91–106.

¹⁷ Frade, “Guest Editorial: Tutoring and Mentoring.”

¹⁸ Mncedisi Christian Maphalala and Nhlanhla Mpofo, “Examining First-Year Students’ Experience of Being Tutored: A South African Case Study,” *Issues in Educational Research* 30, no. 3 (2020): 1025–39.

¹⁹ DAMOAH, KHALO, and OMODAN, “Disparities in Rural Universities Transformation: A Review from a South African Perspective.”

²⁰ Dani McCauley, “Rural Students Need Campus Champions,” *About Campus* 24, no. 4 (2019): 4–9.

succeed.²¹ In such contexts, tutoring programmes must do more than offer academic guidance; they must address multiple layers of socio-economic disadvantage simultaneously, functioning as holistic support structures rather than simple interventions. Staffing and resource shortages only intensify these challenges. Rural institutions often struggle to attract and retain qualified personnel, leaving tutoring programmes reliant on individuals who may themselves lack training, resources, and institutional support. Tutors frequently face overwhelming workloads, inadequate coaching, limited materials, and insufficient supervision. These issues reflect larger systemic barriers that make it difficult for rural institutions to operate sustainable and effective tutoring models.²² When programmes lack sufficient resources or trained staff, they cannot deliver the personalised, intensive support that rural students require to thrive academically.

Moreover, psychological and social barriers play a significant role in shaping how rural students engage with tutoring services. Stigma, fear of judgment, and a cultural emphasis on independence often discourage students from seeking help even when they desperately need it. A lack of awareness about available services and logistical barriers further reduces participation. In tight-knit rural communities, where expectations and social pressure are strong, students may avoid tutoring to protect their sense of dignity, confidence, or belonging.²³ These internal and external pressures undermine the effectiveness of even well-designed support systems. In the digital age, technological barriers have become especially critical. For instance, online tutoring initiatives face low participation, weak engagement, poor communication between tutors and lecturers, insufficient training, and administrative inefficiencies. These challenges are magnified in rural institutions, which are already hampered by unreliable connectivity and outdated systems. The rapid shift to online learning during COVID-19 exposed these weaknesses dramatically, revealing how unequally students experience digital education across different geographical regions.²⁴

On the other hand, conventional tutoring models, initially developed for well-resourced urban institutions, cannot be transferred directly into rural environments without adaptation. Tutoring improves academic performance when implemented under supportive conditions; however, rural institutions often lack the necessary structures to make these models effective.²⁵ Without the proper resources, staffing, and contextual understanding, these programmes fail to address the realities rural students face, underscoring the need for tailored, innovative tutoring approaches. In this instance, a global perspective underscores the urgency of this problem, highlighting that rural universities worldwide face similar limitations. Additionally, inequality, inadequate infrastructure, fractured technological support systems, and persistent underfunding emerge as shared challenges across rural higher education contexts internationally.²⁶ This suggests that the issues facing rural tutoring programmes are not isolated or accidental; they are systemic, global, and in urgent need of comprehensive intervention strategies. The human consequences of inaction are profound. Stories of promising rural students abandoning their studies because they feel unsupported, misunderstood, or overwhelmed illustrate the actual cost of these structural failures.²⁷ Each student who disengages represents not only a personal loss but a broader community setback, especially in areas that rely on educated youth to drive development and social leadership.

Nevertheless, strong faculty-student relationships, flexible institutional practices, and culturally responsive support structures significantly improve rural student persistence. Rural institutions possess unique strengths, such as close community ties and smaller learning environments, that can become

²¹ Caitlin Howley, Barbara Chavis, and John Kester, “‘Like Human Beings’: Responsive Relationships and Institutional Flexibility at a Rural Community College,” *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 28, no. 8 (2013).

²² Joshua Jay Eden, Ramona Prado, and Rosalie Esteban, “Exploring the Lived Experiences of Education Students in the Tara, Basa! Tutoring Program at a Local University,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 3, no. 10 (2025): 70–82.

²³ Galen Ciscell et al., “Barriers to Accessing Tutoring Services among Students Who Received a Mid-Semester Warning,” *Learning Assistance Review* 21, no. 2 (2016): 39–54.

²⁴ Yvonne Trijntje Joubert and A Snyman, “Challenges Experienced with Online Tutoring in an ODL Institution,” 2018.

²⁵ D. C. Rheinheimer et al., “Tutoring: A Support Strategy for At-Risk Students,” *Learning Assistance Review* 15, no. 1 (2010): 23–34.

²⁶ Damoah, Khalo, and Omodan, “Disparities in Rural Universities Transformation: A Review from a South African Perspective.”

²⁷ McCauley, “Rural Students Need Campus Champions.”

powerful tools when supported by adequate resources and thoughtful program design.²⁸ The challenge lies in harnessing these advantages while simultaneously addressing the structural deficits that hinder these institutions. Hence, moving forward requires a holistic and coordinated strategy that addresses infrastructure, technology, culture, and human relationships simultaneously. Meaningful investment in infrastructure must be matched with innovative programme models grounded in an understanding of rural contexts. Technology must be integrated thoughtfully, and support relationships must reflect the values and realities of rural students and communities.²⁹ The overwhelming evidence shows that the challenges facing rural tutoring programmes are not minor operational issues; they reflect a more profound crisis of educational equity. Rural institutions serve communities that have historically faced economic hardship, geographic isolation, and technological exclusion.³⁰ Without decisive action, these inequalities will persist and continue to be reproduced across generations. Comprehensive, well-supported intervention is not merely desirable; it is essential to ensure that where a student is born does not determine the quality of educational support they receive or the opportunities available to them.

How Funding and Resource Shortages Influence Tutoring Effectiveness

The crisis of tutoring effectiveness in South African disadvantaged institutions represents more than just an academic challenge; it is a profoundly human struggle that affects thousands of students seeking to transform their lives through education. Okoro states that tutors receive inadequate resources, unclear instructions, and technical barriers that prevent them from effectively supporting their students.³¹ These are not abstract institutional failures but real obstacles that tutors face daily as they attempt to fulfill their crucial role in student success. One tutor poignantly described their frustration: *“The memo should be clear; I think they should give us the memos and explanations.”*³² This simple statement highlights the profound impact of resource shortages on human relationships within the educational environment, where tutors struggle to provide meaningful support without adequate guidance or resources.

In addition, tutors reported using inadequate devices, such as tablets and phones without screen-sharing capabilities. In contrast, others faced connectivity issues that left them watching helplessly as students disappeared from virtual sessions due to network problems.³³ As one tutor explained, “WIFI, network, by the time you come back, you find that some students are gone.”³⁴ This technological inadequacy doesn’t just represent a funding shortfall; it means lost opportunities for human connection and learning that could have transformed students’ academic trajectories. Frade contextualizes these challenges, highlighting how institutions struggle to support historically underrepresented groups who often arrive underprepared due to apartheid-era educational inequities.³⁵ This historical context lends urgency to the funding crisis, as these students heavily depend on tutoring support to succeed in higher education. When resource shortages compromise the effectiveness of tutoring, they perpetuate the very inequalities that these programs were designed to address. The human cost of inadequate funding becomes evident in the administrative burdens that tutors face. Okoro and others asserted that lengthy appointment processes for remuneration divert tutors’ attention from their primary educational mission.³⁶ This bureaucratic inefficiency reflects deeper systemic underfunding that forces institutions to operate with inadequate administrative support, ultimately affecting the quality of student assistance.

²⁸ Howley, Chavis, and Kester, “‘Like Human Beings’: Responsive Relationships and Institutional Flexibility at a Rural Community College.”

²⁹ Technology integration efforts must address existing inequities and disparities in access. Schools need to consider the diverse needs of their students and communities, addressing socioeconomic disparities, language barriers, and special educational needs.

³⁰ Rural-social institutions, which include family units, local governments, schools, religious organizations, and agricultural cooperatives, are organized systems and organizations that control life in rural areas.

³¹ Okoro and Phiri, “Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution.”

³² Okoro and Phiri, “Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution.”

³³ Pinar Dinçer, “Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning behind the Screen: A Case Study on the Perspectives of Freshman ELT Students and Their Instructors” (Anadolu University (Turkey), 2022).

³⁴ Nelson Bakali Phiri, “Factors Affecting Tutoring Effectiveness in Finance-Related Modules” (University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2021).

³⁵ Frade, “Guest Editorial: Tutoring and Mentoring.”

³⁶ Okoro and Phiri, “Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution.”

However, the research also reveals the remarkable resilience and dedication of tutors who continue to make a difference despite these constraints. For instance, McKay demonstrated that even under challenging conditions, effective tutoring can improve student marks by an average of 20%.³⁷ This finding underscores the transformative potential of well-supported tutoring programs and highlights what could be achieved with adequate funding and resources. The solutions proposed by tutors themselves reflect their deep understanding of what students need to succeed. The scholar calls for regular communication, tailored workshops, timely provision of materials, and improved infrastructure, all of which are fundamentally achievable goals that require sustained institutional investment.³⁸ Okoro and others emphasize that tutors need “high-quality instruction material” and continuous training to effectively support their students, particularly in navigating technological platforms that have become essential for modern education.³⁹ Hence, without incorporating tutor development into mainstream institutional priorities, peer tutors cannot effectively facilitate subject content and discourse.⁴⁰ This perspective highlights how funding shortages create a cascade of educational disadvantages, where inadequately supported tutors struggle to provide the academic and social integration that they identify as crucial for student success. This demonstrates that funding and resource shortages in South African disadvantaged institutions create systemic barriers to tutoring effectiveness that ultimately harm the students who most need support. When tutors lack proper training, materials, technology, and institutional backing, they cannot fulfill their potential as facilitators of educational transformation.⁴¹ The human stories behind these statistics, including tutors struggling with poor connectivity, students dropping out of virtual sessions, and educational opportunities lost due to administrative inefficiencies, underscore the urgent need for sustained investment in tutoring infrastructure and support systems. Only through adequate funding can these institutions realize the proven potential of tutoring to bridge educational inequalities and transform student outcomes.

Addressing Inequalities through Policy and Constitutional Mandates

In many disadvantaged South African institutions, tutoring gaps reflect more profound inequalities rooted in history, funding disparities, and uneven policy implementation.⁴² Addressing these challenges requires aligning education policies with constitutional mandates to ensure equal access to academic support and meaningful learning opportunities for all students. For instance, *a first-year student walking onto a university campus for the first time, perhaps the first in their family to reach higher education. They carry not just textbooks, but the weight of generations of systemic exclusion.* This is the reality across South Africa, and it reveals a powerful truth: tutoring is not just an academic support system, but a bridge to human dignity and constitutional justice. Gore discusses what “student disadvantage” actually means in human terms.⁴³ It’s not just about poor grades; it’s about students facing “a culture of racism, alienating university campuses, student poverty,” and gender inequality.⁴⁴ These are not abstract policy problems, but somewhat daily realities that crush dreams and perpetuate cycles of exclusion.⁴⁵ When a student from a disadvantaged background sits in a lecture hall, they’re not just learning calculus or chemistry; they are fighting against decades of structural barriers designed to keep them out. McKay discovered that students who attended tutorials improved their marks by an average of 20%.⁴⁶ Think about what that means, not just statistically, but humanly. That’s the difference between a student

³⁷ Tracey Morton McKay, “Do Tutors Matter? Assessing the Impact of Tutors on First-Year Academic Performance at a South African University.,” *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 4, no. 1 (2016): 51–62.

³⁸ McKay, “Do Tutors Matter? Assessing the Impact of Tutors on First-Year Academic Performance at a South African University.”

³⁹ Okoro and Phiri, “Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution.”

⁴⁰ Underhill and McDonald, “Collaborative Tutor Development: Enabling a Transformative Paradigm in a South African University.”

⁴¹ Dayce Makakole Chuene and Florah Moleko Teane, “Resource Inadequacy as a Barrier to Effective Curriculum Implementation by Life Sciences Teachers in South Africa,” *South African Journal of Education* 44, no. 2 (2024).

⁴² Godfrey Chitsauko Muyambi and Philip Kwashi Atiso Ahiaku, “Inequalities and Education in South Africa: A Scoping Review,” *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 8 (2025): 100408.

⁴³ Oliver Tafadzwa Gore, “Student Disadvantage’: Key University Stakeholders’ Perspectives in South Africa,” *International Journal of Higher Education* 10, no. 1 (2021): 214–25.

⁴⁴ Gore, “ ‘Student Disadvantage’: Key University Stakeholders’ Perspectives in South Africa.”

⁴⁵ Gore, “ ‘Student Disadvantage’: Key University Stakeholders’ Perspectives in South Africa.”

⁴⁶ McKay, “Do Tutors Matter? Assessing the Impact of Tutors on First-Year Academic Performance at a South African University.”

dropping out in despair and walking across a graduation stage. That's a family's economic trajectory changing forever. McKay's research revealed that "tutors enabled epistemological access for many," in simpler terms, tutors opened doors that had been locked for generations.⁴⁷

Generally, South African institutions are "under pressure to broaden access to historically under-represented groups who are often underprepared for tertiary education as a result of apartheid-era secondary schooling."⁴⁸ This is not ancient history, but it is today's reality. Every semester that passes without adequate tutoring support means more students falling through cracks that should have been filled decades ago. Page and others developed what they call "a uniquely African tutor/mentor system" at Stellenbosch University, recognizing that cookie-cutter solutions will not work for students whose educational journeys have been shaped by uniquely South African challenges.⁴⁹ Their six-year experience shows that effective tutoring serves both "the student who is most at risk of failing" and helps traditionally underachieving gifted students reach their potential.⁵⁰

On the other hand, what happens when tutors themselves lack support? They found that "technical issues, unclear instructions, inadequate resources and training influenced tutors' performance."⁵¹ *"When we fail to support tutors properly, we are not just creating administrative inefficiencies; we are breaking the human chain that connects struggling students to success."*⁵² Furthermore, Cele frames this issue within South Africa's constitutional mandate, arguing that addressing "funding, inequalities, and access" requires expanding educational opportunities through multiple strategies, including robust tutoring programs.⁵³ This is not just good policy; it is a constitutional obligation to the millions of South Africans whose potential remains untapped. Transformation requires "incorporating tutor development into mainstream disciplines" because without this integration, "peer tutors will not be able to act as facilitators of subject content and discourse effectively."⁵⁴ Tutoring works, but only when it's properly resourced, systematically implemented, and humanely designed. Mzangwa argued that true transformation in higher education must translate into "material benefits for the majority of previously disadvantaged black people." Every day we delay comprehensive tutoring reform, we perpetuate injustice.⁵⁵ Every student who drops out due to lack of support represents not just a personal tragedy, but a failure of our collective commitment to equality. In addition, the scholars' research provides the roadmap that we need to have the political will and moral courage to follow it.⁵⁶ Hence, the question is not whether we can afford to invest in comprehensive tutoring programs, but rather whether we can afford to advance the tutorial session to help students.

Strategies for Strengthening Tutoring Programs in Challenging Contexts

In the lecture halls and study spaces of South African universities, a quiet revolution is unfolding, one that holds the power to transform not just academic outcomes, but entire life trajectories. The tutoring programs operating within these institutions represent far more than supplementary academic support; they are lifelines for students navigating the complex terrain of higher education in a post-apartheid society. Page discusses what they describe as "a uniquely African tutor/mentor system."⁵⁷ Their work revealed a profound truth, asserting that effective tutoring not only serves students most at risk of failing but also elevates the achievement of gifted students who have historically underachieved.⁵⁸ This dual impact underscores the democratising power of well-designed tutoring interventions.

⁴⁷ McKay, "Do Tutors Matter? Assessing the Impact of Tutors on First-Year Academic Performance at a South African University."

⁴⁸ Frade, "Guest Editorial: Tutoring and Mentoring."

⁴⁹ Page, Loots, and du Toit, "Perspectives on a South African Tutor/Mentor Program: The Stellenbosch University Experience."

⁵⁰ Page, Loots, and du Toit, "Perspectives on a South African Tutor/Mentor Program: The Stellenbosch University Experience."

⁵¹ Okoro and Phiri, "Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution."

⁵² Okoro and Phiri, "Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution."

⁵³ Cele and Adewumi, "Funding, Inequalities, and Access: An Amalgam of Challenges in South African Higher Education."

⁵⁴ Underhill and McDonald, "Collaborative Tutor Development: Enabling a Transformative Paradigm in a South African University."

⁵⁵ Shadrack T Mzangwa and Yüksel Dede, "The Effects of Higher Education Policy on Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Cogent Education* 6, no. 1 (January 16, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2019.1592737>.

⁵⁶ Mzangwa and Dede, "The Effects of Higher Education Policy on Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

⁵⁷ Page, Loots, and du Toit, "Perspectives on a South African Tutor/Mentor Program: The Stellenbosch University Experience."

⁵⁸ Page, Loots, and du Toit, "Perspectives on a South African Tutor/Mentor Program: The Stellenbosch University Experience."

The human dimension of these challenges becomes even more apparent when we consider the voices of those directly involved. Okoro and others discuss the experiences of tutors and lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how technological barriers created not just logistical problems, but also emotional disconnection. Tutors spoke of losing that crucial “personal level” connection with both students and lecturers, a reminder that effective tutoring is fundamentally about human relationships, not just content delivery.⁵⁹ This relational aspect gains more profound significance when viewed through the lens of South Africa’s educational transformation. As Underhill and McDonald argue, the shift from formerly segregated academic contexts has led to unprecedented diversity in the cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds of student populations.⁶⁰ Without incorporating comprehensive tutor development into mainstream disciplines, peer tutors cannot effectively facilitate the complex interplay between subject content and academic discourse that diverse learners require.⁶¹ Okoro argues that technical issues, unclear instructions, inadequate resources, and insufficient training create a perfect storm of ineffectiveness.⁶² Yet the solutions are equally clear and achievable: regular engagement protocols, targeted workshops, tailored training programs, timely resource provision, meaningful incentives, and robust supporting infrastructure. These are not abstract recommendations; they represent concrete pathways to transformation. Maphalala and Mpofu discuss the lived experiences of first-year students to understand how sociocultural distinctions shape tutoring effectiveness.⁶³ Their findings reveal tutoring as an inherently “intersubjective process,” one where translanguaging strategies, technology integration, and collaborative approaches create meaningful learning experiences.⁶⁴ In addition, their recommendation for more multilingual, structured, and cooperative programs is not only pedagogically sound, but also a recognition of students’ full humanity and cultural wealth. On the other hand, Farooq demonstrates how tutors’ varied conceptions of their roles directly impact their effectiveness.⁶⁵ Their identification of a promising tutoring model that integrates disciplinary content with pedagogically guided approaches offers hope for addressing the persistent theory-practice dilemmas that plague many programs.⁶⁶

The Success Tutoring framework provides perhaps the most systematic approach to implementation.⁶⁷ The path forward requires courage and commitment. Institutions must move beyond viewing tutoring as a peripheral support service and recognise it as central to their educational mission. This entails investing in comprehensive tutor development, establishing supportive infrastructure, and identifying the complex sociocultural dynamics that influence learning experiences.⁶⁸ The students walking through university doors today carry with them the hopes of families and communities. They deserve tutoring programs that honor their potential, respect their backgrounds, and provide the strategic support necessary for success. The research roadmap exists now; institutions must have the will to follow it.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the continued fragility of tutoring programmes in under-resourced and rural institutions is not merely an administrative shortcoming but a failure of meaningful transformation within South Africa’s higher education system. Despite a progressive constitutional framework and three decades of democratic governance, material inequalities rooted in apartheid-era exclusion continue to shape who receives adequate academic support and who does not. Treating tutoring as a peripheral or

⁵⁹ C. S. Okoro, O. Takawira, and P. Baur, “An Assessment of Tutoring Performance, Challenges, and Support during COVID-19: A Qualitative Study in a South African University,” *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 18, no. 8 (2021): 1–21.

⁶⁰ Underhill and McDonald, “Collaborative Tutor Development: Enabling a Transformative Paradigm in a South African University.”

⁶¹ Underhill and McDonald, “Collaborative Tutor Development: Enabling a Transformative Paradigm in a South African University.”

⁶² Okoro and Phiri, “Institutional Influencers and Support for Tutoring in a South African Higher Education Institution.”

⁶³ Maphalala and Mpofu, “Examining First-Year Students’ Experience of Being Tutored: A South African Case Study.”

⁶⁴ Maphalala and Mpofu, “Examining First-Year Students’ Experience of Being Tutored: A South African Case Study.”

⁶⁵ Brendon D Farooq et al., “Tutoring for Success: Tutors’ Experiences of a Tutoring Programme in a Health Sciences Faculty,” *Perspectives in Education* 43, no. 1 (2025): 62–81.

⁶⁶ Farooq et al., “Tutoring for Success: Tutors’ Experiences of a Tutoring Programme in a Health Sciences Faculty.”

⁶⁷ Linda Spark et al., “Paving the Road to Success: A Framework for Implementing the Success Tutoring Approach,” *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 5, no. 2 (2017): 75–88.

⁶⁸ Spark et al., “Paving the Road to Success: A Framework for Implementing the Success Tutoring Approach.”

discretionary intervention entrenches these disparities and undermines the promise of equal access to education. The evidence presented makes clear that without deliberate investment, policy enforcement, and institutional accountability, tutoring programmes cannot fulfil their potential as engines of equity and academic success. The time for incremental adjustments has passed. What is required is a decisive shift that recognizes tutoring as a constitutional obligation rather than a remedial afterthought. Failure to act risks reproducing historical injustice under the guise of reform, while meaningful action offers a tangible pathway toward restoring dignity, opportunity, and substantive equality within South African higher education.

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