

CONNECTION TO
OPPORTUNITY

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

Rural Education Access programme: Creating Higher Education Opportunities for Determined Rural Students

Who we are and what we do

Schooling in South Africa is in crisis. The literacy and numeracy levels of our learners remain very weak. Eighteen years after apartheid we are still unable to deliver quality schooling for most of our children. Clearly centuries of subjugation with structured and imposed racial inequality are not easily turned around. We know that in South Africa the great majority of the top school leavers continue to come from a small minority of more privileged schools while the Gini Coefficient for South Africa remains one of the highest in the world.

The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) targets young people from very disadvantaged rural communities who have struggled against the odds to achieve a National Senior Certificate¹. They are often from single parent or grandparent headed households with limited education and very few resources. Their families are, in all likelihood, surviving on a state pension or social grant. Rural schools are severely under-resourced and teachers are often poorly qualified with limited capacity. Information is scarce and access to technology is only a dream for most. They live in remote areas making visiting urban hubs a long and expensive journey. Family motivation for further study may be low, but at the same time post matriculation opportunities are few without further education.

In this grim context these young matriculants are amongst the very few in their age group to achieve university entrance. They are special. They have personal strengths and values and gained from life experience. They deserve an opportunity to access tertiary education, having applied and dedicated themselves at school in adverse circumstances.

They are, however, uninformed and ill prepared socially and academically for the Higher Education environment. REAP has proved that with the right kind of support these young people will make the best of an opportunity, succeed with their studies, join the economic mainstream and contribute to their families and communities.

Research in recent years has shown that the graduation rates from South African state Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are disturbingly low. The graduation rate has been around 44% over the last five years but significantly weaker for African

Black rural matriculants from poor communities are unable to access Higher Education because of:

- Poverty, in particular lack of financial resources
- Lack of information
- Poor education
- Weak support and motivational background
- Distance from educational hubs and the resources of urban centres

A programme such as REAP is necessary to:

- Bridge the gap for disadvantaged learners and to improve throughput rates
- Address historical inequity
- Develop independent confident young people with a community service ethos
- Transform the composition of student populations at, and graduates from, institutions of Higher Education
- Build the knowledge and skills capacity of young South Africans to enable economic growth and to reduce rural poverty

¹ A school leaving examination after 12 years of schooling



and coloured students with figures of around 32%². An evaluative study commissioned by REAP in 2010 demonstrates a five year graduation rate of 57% for REAP students and a potential graduation rate of up to 70% ultimately. This finding is consistent with those of an earlier evaluation study completed in 2005. Thus, a programme like REAP significantly improves the chances of success for students and enhances the return on state funds made available for students. The need for a programme of support to enable young black South Africans from poor rural communities to access and succeed in higher education remains essential.

Our student selection and support strategy

a) Recruitment and Selection

In line with our constitution and founding mission, we prioritise academically able young people from poor families matriculating from rural schools. We utilise both our historical recruitment networks (largely linked to the Catholic church) and a range of new partnerships with other NGOs (eg. loveLife, NACCW, Penreach) and corporations (eg. Mondi, iSimangaliso Wetlands Park) to identify suitable applicants.



Our means test for 2012 is a maximum family income of R2 500 per household member per month with an overall ceiling of R140 000 per annum. This is adjusted annually to accommodate increases in living expenses. Our students must be South African citizens that have matriculated from a rural secondary school, performing well enough academically to meet our entrance criteria for particular courses of study. We support students at 15 different universities and universities of technology, but do not work in the FET sector.

² Scott, Yeld & Hendry (2007) – Department of Education study.

Applications from eligible students are received by the end of July and students are shortlisted based on their midyear academic performance and a range of other criteria important for success in higher education. Short listed candidates are interviewed by our recruitment partners and are probed and rated on:

- Course selection (applicants may choose 3 courses)
- Motivation and resilience
- English language skills
- Aspirations post graduation

Final matriculation results and offers from the institutions lead to formal acceptance into the REAP programme for highly ranked students.

b) Support Programme

Each REAP student is assigned a Student Development Advisor (SDA) who interacts with them on a monthly basis, either face to face or telephonically on our toll free line. Each SDA has a maximum caseload of 60 cases. Monthly interviews address a range of issues including motivation and goal setting; academic progress; accommodation; finance; social or emotional issues; family; and personal growth and development.

SDA's are able to offer basic counselling and may respond to arising issues by:

- Referral to appropriate specialist services
- Liaison with relevant institutional personnel
- Advocacy and representation
- Remedial or corrective action including placing students on probation or suspension

If students fail to keep their monthly appointment their meals allowance is withheld. This is an important tool for ensuring regular contact is maintained.

REAP students are also expected to attend a series of workshops focussed on developing life and study skills. We have developed strong and formalised relationships with relevant senior and operational personnel in all the institutions where we support students. This makes for a streamlined and integrated support service with multiple points of referral and co-operation with a view to best assisting students. We have also negotiated priority places in residence for most first year



students, greatly enhancing their chances of success.

Experience has taught us that more intensive support is required at first year level when students attempt to manage the huge transition into higher education. Many senior students need less support as time goes on and so the structured engagement tends to be slightly less frequent. Our target is for an 85% pass rate in a given year and a 70% graduation rate within five years.

c) The Bursary

Through our partnership with the National Skills Fund students receive a full cost bursary covering registration and tuition fees, accommodation, meals, books and local transport. We top this up, using money donated by funders, to cover club and society membership, technical equipment and optician costs (if required) as well as costs to travel home in term breaks.

What we have achieved

In 2011 406 students started the year on the REAP programme, being made up of 188 new students and 218 continuing.

- 218 (53.6%) students passed all their subjects at the end of the year
- 94 (23.1%) students passed a majority (though not all) of their subjects at year end including their majors and proceed to then next level
- 7 (1.7%) students were doing in-service training and did not write exams
- 29 (7.1%) students withdrew from the REAP programme during the year. Some dropped out of their studies and some obtained other bursaries
- 55 (13.5%) failed subjects including their major which means they had to repeat the year

Over a longer period we have consistently attained



yearly pass rates (i.e. passing at least a majority of subjects including their major) of at least 80%. Historically many REAP students have secured other bursaries prior to graduation so ultimate graduation rates are difficult to measure. But our tracking studies have indicated that between 60-70% is a likely figure. Our most recent tracking study carried out by Andrew Hartnack in 2011 on our 2002 cohort indicated that 75% of sampled students were now in full time employment.

Our advice to other organisations

The critical components of our programme are careful recruitment and an excellent support programme

We are heavily investing in upgrading the quality of career guidance given by our recruitment partners to learners. Experience has taught us that much of the drop-out rate we see amongst first years can be attributed to poor course selection based on inadequate information.

Our intensive support programme, especially in the transition period of the first year when the risk of drop out is highest, is an important success factor for us. Both government and corporations invest vast sums in providing access to higher education in the form of bursaries and student loans. However, drop-out rates remain frighteningly high for black and coloured students (around 32%)³. It is therefore imperative that policy makers grasp that resources for support must be made available alongside funds for access. Our graduation rates of around 65-70%⁴, which is more than double the national average, for a student group drawn from some of the poorest rural schools in the country, proves the value of high quality support programmes implemented by organisations like REAP.

Face-to-face contact is more effective

The establishment of a Johannesburg office in 2011 has enabled us to provide monthly face-to-face, as opposed to telephonic, interactions with all Gauteng and Western Cape students. Our SDA's report a greatly enhanced relationship with their students. Physical proximity to institutional staff

³ Scott, Yeld & Hendry (2007)

⁴ Ngidi W, Tracking Study on REAP's 2005 cohort, (2010).



has also deepened our collaborative partnerships evidenced by formalised MOU's, priority places for first year students in residence, collaboration around recruitment of rural students, and knowledge sharing with institutional personnel. We have further expanded our face-to-face reach with the opening of a Durban office in April 2012.

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