

From school to higher education – what Grade 12 learners choose

Why do Grade 12 learners choose certain universities or technikons for further study? What fields do they choose, and why?

These were some of the questions HSRC researchers Michael Cosser and Jacques du Toit of the Human Resources Development (HRD) research programme tried to answer in the first phase of a national study on Student Choice Behaviour. More than 12 000 Grade 12 learners from 288 schools across all provinces participated in the study.

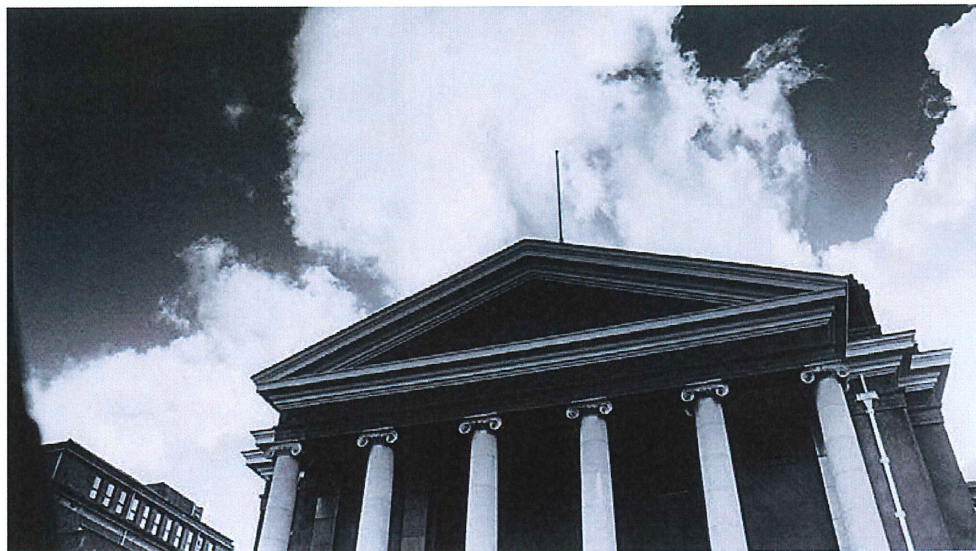
The study, published in 2002, aimed to investigate the factors affecting the choices of South African Grade 12 learners with regard to three variables: intention to enter higher education (HE); institution; and field of study. It is pitched at addressing two of the key objectives in the *National Plan for Higher Education*: to increase the participation rate from 15% to 20%; and to shift the balance in enrolments from the current ratio of 49% humanities, 26% business and commerce, and 25% science, engineering and technology to a ratio of 40% : 30% : 30%.

While the study gathered a huge amount of information on all three variables, what drew media attention was some surprise findings on choice of institutions. It revealed that, at a national level, technikons were clearly more popular than universities (55% versus 35%) with the top two positions being occupied by Technikon Pretoria and Technikon Witwatersrand.

On the face of it, this overturned popular – and even some informed – perceptions about the relative popularity of technikons versus universities.

While African and coloured learners preferred to study at a technikon rather than a university, Indian and white learners preferred a university. The popularity of technikons is largely attributable to ease of access (no matriculation endorsement is required) and the promise of jobs to follow.

The province in which learners went to school emerges as the most significant predictor of which institution they plan to study at. In the following graphs, the top five institutional choices of learners in each province are



displayed. As the first three graphs indicate, the HE institutions in the Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal and the Free State are all more popular among learners in those provinces

than are institutions from other provinces.

Notable exceptions to such provincial loyalty, however, are to be found in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and the North West:

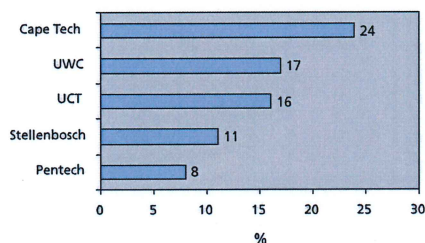


Fig. 1. Learner Choice - Western Cape

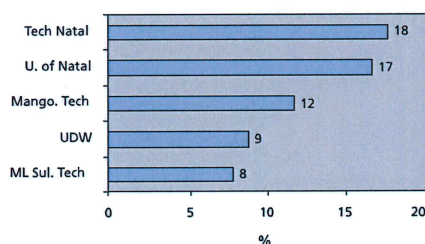


Fig. 2. Learner Choice - KwaZulu Natal

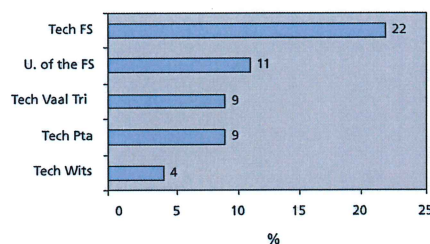


Fig. 3. Learner Choice - Free State

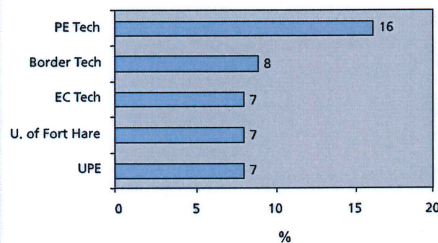


Fig. 4. Learner Choice - Eastern Cape

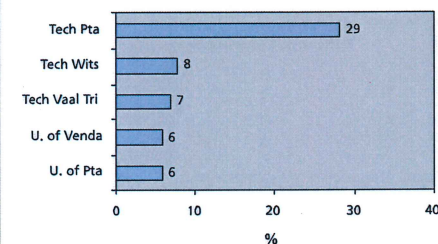


Fig. 5. Learner Choice - Limpopo

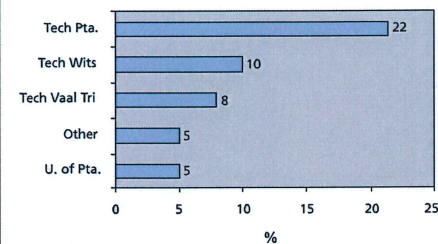


Fig. 6. Learner Choice - North West

While the top five places in the Eastern Cape profile are occupied by Eastern Cape institutions, UCT is preferred to Transkei, while five non-Eastern Cape institutions – UCT, other (private and foreign) institutions, Technikon Pretoria, Cape Technikon and Peninsula Technikon – are preferred to Rhodes.

In Limpopo, the three nationally most popular technikons (Pretoria, Witwatersrand and Vaal Triangle) are all preferred to the University of Venda, while in addition four other Gauteng-based institutions – the University of Pretoria, Technikon Northern Gauteng, Medunsa and Wits – are all more popular than the University of the North. No North West-based institution features in the top five list in the province – Potchefstroom appearing in the seventh position.

In Gauteng, only the position of private and overseas institutions is remarkable. The profiles for Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape, which have no HE institutions, are largely geographically determined:

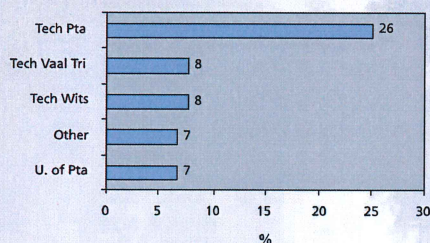


Fig. 7. Learner Choice - Gauteng

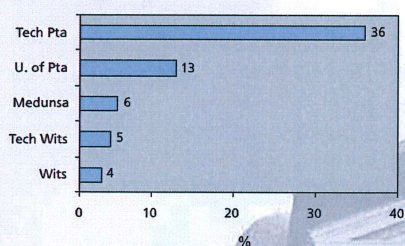


Fig. 8. Learner Choice - Mpumalanga

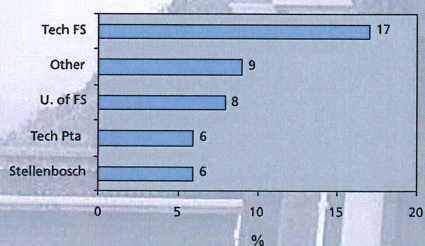


Fig. 9. Learner Choice - Northern Cape

That the first choice of learners in all nine provinces is a technikon (in four of the nine provinces technikons occupy the first three places) reinforces the national preference for study at technikons rather than universities.

When learners are regarded as a national pool, the study's ranking of institutions to which learners would prefer to go puts Technikon Pretoria at the top of the list, followed by Technikon Witwatersrand, University of Pretoria, Technikon Vaal Triangle and 'other institutions' (private and overseas).

Geographical location also plays a major part in the national preference profile: as this ranking demonstrates, the four most popular institutions are all in Gauteng, home to nearly a fifth of the country's population and conveniently accessible from three other provinces – Mpumalanga, Limpopo and North West. Also significant has been the establishment of satellite campuses in neighbouring provinces (Technikon Pretoria, for example, has three in Mpumalanga and one in Limpopo) – giving institutions a presence which in itself has a strategic marketing function.

From among the listed factors influencing learners' choices of institution, reputation (whether of institution or field of study) emerges as the most important. Reputation, in turn, is largely a function of institutional positioning, achieved through a combination of strategic marketing and physical location. And as the foregoing analysis has shown, geographical location has the greatest influence upon choice of institution for HE study.

These findings, it must be emphasised, pertain to learner intention to study at specific institutions. They do not necessarily reflect either enrolment patterns or the quality of learning at these institutions. The results of Phase 2 of the project, to be released in 2003, will confirm the extent to which intention has translated into enrolment.

When it came to intentions to enter HE, there was a strong correlation between learners' average Grade 11 symbols and their intention to go into HE. Learners with an average A symbol were nearly nine times likelier than those with an F-G symbol to

say they would study at tertiary level.

Access to finance for study is clearly an important factor influencing the decision to enter HE – but unequally across the population groups. External sources of funding – such as the government's National Student Financial Aid Scheme, bank loans, bursaries and scholarships – are most important for African learners, followed by coloureds, Indians and whites.

Some key implications of the study for national policy:

- Since lack of funds emerges as one of the chief disincentives to entering HE, the Education Ministry needs to consider all possible avenues for increasing financial aid for needy academically capable learners.
- If the participation rate in HE is to be increased, the quality of teaching and learning in schools needs to improve dramatically, the numbers of Grade 12 learners achieving passes with matriculation endorsement needs to increase significantly, and more learners who are academically capable need to be encouraged to enter HE.
- Encouragement to enter HE, in the absence of guardian / parental guidance, needs to be provided through career counselling initiatives in schools; and since a higher percentage of learners who have received career guidance at school intend entering HE than those who have received none, dedicated resources need to be allocated for effective career guidance programmes. In particular, learners' choices of subjects need to be steered in the direction of Mathematics and Physical Science, which are key areas for human resources development in South Africa.

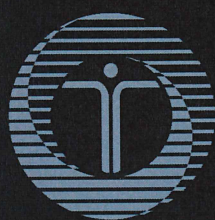
From School to Higher Education? Factors affecting the choices of Grade 12 learners is available as a research monograph. Purchase a printed copy or download a free digital copy from www.hsra.ac.za/publishing.

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