Students’ transition from school to university: Possibilities for a pre-university intervention

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Abstract
A successful transition from school to university is crucial to academic success – especially in the first academic year. Various studies have, however, shown that students are increasingly underprepared for higher education studies. Not only is the school-university gap increased by the school system that produces inadequately prepared learners for higher education, but universities are also ill-equipped to accommodate these learners – particularly learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. In this article it is argued that universities have a responsibility to facilitate the school-university transition and should actively get involved in schools at an early stage. The research reported in this article aimed at developing a framework for a holistic and integrated pre-university intervention. In this sense it is foreseen that universities might play an increasingly important role at school level to prepare prospective students more effectively for university studies and thus facilitate a smoother transition from school to university.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUALISATION
The South African school system is producing students who do not easily succeed in higher education. A Department of Education study on graduation rates at South African higher education institutions indicated that only 30 per cent of first-time entering students had graduated after five years of study. By the end of 2004 (five
years after entering) 56 per cent had left their original institutions and only about 14 per cent were still in the system (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007).

Various studies have shown that students are increasingly underprepared for higher education studies (Tinto 1993; Foxcroft and Stumpf 2005; Kivilu 2006). The gap between school and university does not only complicate the transition from school to university, but also the level of academic success in the first year (Mumba, Rollnick and White 2002; Nel 2006). The highest drop-out from higher education takes place in the first academic year and mostly during the first six months – thus in the transition phase (Nakasa 2003; Thomas and Quinn 2007). Problems resulting from the gap between school and university have been exacerbated by inequalities that still exist in the South African secondary school system (Mji 2002; Hay and Marais 2004).

The school-university gap, however, is increased not only by the school system that produces inadequately prepared learners for higher education, but also by universities that are ill-equipped to accommodate these learners – particularly learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Maxakato 1999; Jones et al. 2008). According to Viljoen (2005) higher education can barely rely on secondary schools to adequately prepare learners for higher education. It is the universities’ responsibility to facilitate the transition from school to university (Bubb 1991; Jones et al. 2008). Foxcroft and Stumpf (2005, 18) comment that ‘the time is right for South African higher education to stop moaning about matric and the poor quality of learners produced by the school system’. They urge universities to develop partnerships with schools and become actively involved in preparing learners for further studies.

Therefore, taking into account the need for universities to get involved in schools, the research reported in this article aimed at developing a framework for a holistic and integrated pre-university intervention whereby universities might play an important role at school level to facilitate a smoother transition from school to university.

**TRANSITION AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

Various factors contribute to poor school-university transition. These include the perceived gap between school and university, inadequacies and inequalities in the school system, unrealistic perceptions and expectations, poor academic adaptation, poor social and emotional adaptation, inadequate cultural adaptation and challenging financial circumstances (Tinto 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Richardson and Skinner 1992; Nair 2002; Sedumedi 2002; Tait, Van Eeden and Tait 2002; Yorke 2002; Lowe and Cook 2003; Eiselen and Geyser 2003; Fraser and Killen 2003; Nel 2006; Thomas and Quinn 2007; Jones et al. 2008).

Although adjustment to higher education is a unique individual experience, university attendance after school is a natural next step for most students whose parents and family were students themselves. However, this is different for non-traditional first-generation students for whom the school-university transition does not involve family traditions or expectations (Terenzini et al. 1994). Besides academic
and social adaptation, first-generation non-traditional students also face challenges of cultural adaptation (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). In the South African context these are mostly black students. Serious concerns are being voiced about their high dropout rate at South African universities (Tait et al. 2002; Nair 2002).

**A PRE-ENTRY PERSPECTIVE**

In the context of the new South African school curriculum and the National Senior Certificate that produced the first intake in higher education in 2009, there is great uncertainty about first-year student quality at higher education institutions. It also remains doubtful whether a new school curriculum will solve current challenges, such as resource constraints, inadequately trained teachers, poor socio-economic conditions and a lack of parent involvement (Jenkins 1990; Van der Berg 2004; Phurutse 2006; Legotlo et al. 2002), in the school system. It has therefore become increasingly important to investigate, at school level, the factors that play a role in the transition from school to university and eventual academic success.

The inequalities in the South African school system affect the academic results at school (Van den Berg 2005; Kivulu 2006). Although school differentiation on the basis of colour or race has been done away with and more African learners seem to attend previously ‘white’ schools, there is still a vast distinction in quality between previously disadvantaged and so-called ‘privileged’ schools (Moneyweb 2007). Data from the Transformation Audit for the 1999/2000 matric results confirmed that there had been very little improvement in results according to population group since 1994 – in spite of the decentralisation and re-application of resources. The audit further indicated that black students who attended previously ‘white’ privileged schools had a better chance of passing and qualifying for matriculation exemption (Van den Berg 2004). The data from the Department of Education and the Independent Examination Board indicates that although the number of African learners who wrote Grade 12 increased with 46 per cent from 1991 to 2006, the percentage of learners who qualified for university exemption candidates remained the same at 11 per cent (Moneyweb 2007). The number of coloured candidates also increased with about 53 per cent from 1991 to 2004, but the university exemption rate decreased from 22 per cent to 17 per cent. For white students the number of candidates who wrote the final end of year exam in 1991 decreased with 34 per cent, but the percentage with university exemption increased from 42 per cent to 52 per cent. The quality of teaching for black learners is clearly not at the desired level in South Africa (Moneyweb 2007). This coincides with the discrepancies in higher education participation rates per population groups in spite of widening access since 1994. The gross participation rates for the total enrolment numbers in 2005 as a percentage of the 20 to 24 age group indicate that the overall participation rate in higher education is 16 per cent. For whites and Indians it is respectively 60 per cent and 51 per cent, but for both coloured and African students the participation rates are 12 per cent (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007).
The inequalities in the school system, which contribute to a lack of adequate preparation in core subjects such as Mathematics and Physical Science in disadvantaged communities, also lead to the eventual exclusion of black learners in the study field of science and technology (Cosser and Du Toit 2002; Kahn 2006). Moreover, Mji (2002) has emphasised the importance of investigating the variables that play a role in learners’ choices to enter higher education and to determine reasons for the drop in enrolment. Some of the main variables influencing enrolment into higher education are the decreasing pool of potential students, the role that parents and family play in encouraging learners (especially first-generation learners) to enter higher education, socio-economic circumstances and financial support (Carroll, Berkner and Chavez 1997; Cosser and Du Toit 2002; Malan 2007; Thomas and Quinn 2007). The role that schools play in preparing students for higher education, especially in terms of providing adequate information as well as the academic results required to gain access to higher education also contribute to learners’ decisions to enrol for higher education (Maxakato 1999; Cosser 2006; Thomas and Quinn 2007).

**SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY LINKS**

Although it is necessary for secondary schools and higher education institutions to co-operate in facilitating the process of transition (Chaffee 1992; Frick 2007a), it seems that higher education institutions do not make contact with schools early enough. If higher education institutions want to improve their retention rates, intensive interventions are necessary at the earliest possible phase – not only to identify potential students at risk, but also to prepare prospective students (Bitzer and Troskie-de Bruin 2004; Thomas and Quinn 2007). Good academic preparation at school directly correlates with academic success at university (Frick 2007b). Furthermore, prospective students should develop the necessary skills at school level to cope with the possible challenges (Nel 2006). In this regard Foxcroft and Stumpf (2005, 18) maintain that higher education should be very clear about the entry-level competencies expected of entering students. They urge higher education institutions to develop partnerships with FET colleges and the school sector ‘as to actively engage with them and the community with a view to developing learners who are prepared for further studies and the world of work’.

Various studies point at pre-university and partnership projects that aim at facilitating access and transition. Some programmes focus specifically on information dissemination on study opportunities whilst others aim at preparing students academically for the transition. Thomas and Quinn (2007) indicate the importance of using role models or student mentors in activities in schools or on campus whilst Frick (2007a) highlights the importance of open days. Padron (1992) emphasises the successes of pre-university programmes in, amongst others, study methods, computer skills, mathematics and language skills before the commencement of the first academic year. Chaffee (1992) confirms the value of a high school on campus to prepare especially first-generation students for higher education. In Thomas and
Quinn’s (2007) discussion of examples of some pre-university interventions in America, the United Kingdom and Australia, they point out that institutions start at a very early age, in some cases in primary school, with programmes that extend right through the learners’ school career.

To effectively identify and target potential prospective students, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds remains a challenge. There is no guarantee that an intervention will target the ‘right’ student that will benefit most from the intervention (Thomas and Quinn 2007). Padron (1992) argues that, because of their intensive and personal nature, most pre-university programmes only reach some high school learners as it is impossible to reach large groups with such interventions. It is therefore important that institutions should also visit their feeder schools and distribute information more broadly.

Although a variety of pre-university interventions are discussed in the literature, reported interventions appear to be fragmented. There seems to be no holistic and integrated approach towards pre-university interventions in schools – particularly in South Africa. We elaborate next on a study at one South African university to identify factors that play a role in the school-university transition phase. The study is used as a basis to establish an integrated framework to address pre-university interventions.

**METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-mode approach using questionnaires and interviews was utilised to generate quantitative and qualitative data. The study involved black\(^1\) newcomer first-year students who participated in a Stellenbosch University bursary project in their Grade 12 year at high school and took a bursary test. The bursary test is based on the University’s official Access Test aimed at determining the allocation of bursaries. The data was generated in two phases: a questionnaire to prospective pre-university students followed by semi-structured interviews with the same group of students after enrolment.

The aim was to investigate factors that play a role in the transition from school to university in the pre-university phase. The interview schedule was based on a literature review and the quantitative results of the pre-university survey.

**First phase of inquiry**

Purposive sampling was used to select a group of 213 black Grade 12 learners from 70 schools in the Western Cape who attained an aggregate of 70 per cent and higher at the end of Grade 11 and participated in a University bursary project in 2004. The schools were classified according to the Western Cape Education Department’s socio-economic index. Approximately half of the schools could be classified as socio-economically advantaged whilst the other half was classified as socio-economically disadvantaged. The schools were also representative of urban, peri-urban and rural areas.

Quantitative data on possible factors that played a role in the transition phase from school to university in the final school year of the participative group was
obtained by means of a questionnaire containing 25 mainly closed-ended questions that focused on the following themes and categories:

- Socio-economic circumstances
- Support structures
- Career choices (field of study as well as higher education institution)
- Perceptions of preparedness for higher education
- Vocational guidance at school
- Prospective students’ expectations in terms of university studies.

The quantitative data was analysed to seek relationships among factors by means of the Chi-Quadrant test, whilst relationships between ordinal factors (e.g. performance results) were determined by means of Spearman-correlations. Different groups were compared using ANOVA analysis techniques.

**Second phase of inquiry**

Participants in this phase of the study consisted of a representative group of 17 first-year students from a group of 96 who participated in the bursary project and were enrolled as students in 2005. Semi-structured interviews on the transition process were conducted after participants received their first midyear examination results. The aim of the interviews was to generate data on students’ perceptions of the factors that play a role in the transition from school to university once students have entered university.

The interview schedule covered the following broad categories:

- Factors that play a role in the transitional phase (first six months)
- Expectations of the higher education experience
- The extent of preparation at school
- Support networks
- The University’s role in the transitional phase.

Data analysis was performed in accordance with Carney’s (1990, in Miles and Huberman 1994) ladder of analytical abstraction. The first phase of analysis used inductive open coding with ATLAS.ti-software. The codes were then categorised and continuously refined to identify and verify themes, patterns, processes and interdependent relations.

**RESULTS**

The results of the study confirmed some of the findings reported in the literature. For instance, the impact of the school-university gap on first-year transition, and the significant role that academic, social, financial and cultural factors play in
the transitional phases, were confirmed. It was also clear that the transition phase involved multiple levels, that is, from pre-entry to enrolment (access) followed by a post-enrolment phase which spans the first six months until the first formal assessment. Although the various academic, social, financial and cultural factors played a role in the different levels of the transition process, it appeared from the results that students’ expectations (or perceptions) of university studies and school background were the two common denominators that linked the various factors. The influence of a support network and the importance of social integration were also key factors impacting on successful transition. These results are discussed below.

The referencing of verbatim quotes uses the following code system:

- Programme: Natural Sciences (nat), Social Sciences (soc), Engineering (eng), Accounting (acc), Health Sciences (med), Actuarial Sciences (act) and Law (law)
- School classification: previously disadvantaged (pda) and privileged (pr)
- Mid-year examination status: passed (p) and failed (f).

(Unrealistic) expectations

In the first inquiry phase, almost 88 per cent of Grade 12 respondents indicated that school prepared them well for university studies and 92 per cent felt that they were ready for higher education. After enrolling at university, the respondents indicated in retrospect that schools, particularly previously disadvantaged schools, did not prepare them adequately for university studies. Students from both disadvantaged and privileged schools indicated that their schools had failed to prepare them for higher education.

No, my school did not prepare me ... the stuff that we learn here (at university) – it looks like school is light years behind ... (nat/pda/f)

No, I was not (prepared). At school, the only thing they do is spoon feed. (soc/pr/p).

Unrealistic expectations also influence students’ academic transition. Top academic achievers at school often have to adapt their expectations of their own academic achievements as indicated by the following quotes:

I think I’ve expected too much. I was number one at my school and I expected it to happen here as well, but it didn’t work that way. (eng/pda/p).

The sudden freedom, especially for students from more secluded rural areas, can also be very overwhelming in the transition phase. Students often have unrealistic expectations about the influence that the social life at university will have on their academic performance:
... the social life was much more than what I’ve expected, and the academic life was lacking ...(acc/pda/f).

In the context of a historically white university such as Stellenbosch, wrong perceptions about cultural differences are also a reality that black students face:

I don’t know why, but for me it was just scary to interact with the white children all the time, you know, except that they are also normal, you think that they’re from this model C schools, that they are so intelligent and so cool, and stuff, and you see “oh my gosh, I can beat them”, and then you like, “o, okay, we’re normal” ... Afterwards you see that, but first, initially you think, there’s no way I’m gonna be all these things .... I don’t know what it is, I’m sorry to say, but white children just look clever, you know, they just do, that’s my perspective of it ...(law/pda/p).

This particular student, who had very clear perceptions of her white peers, was from a racially non-integrated school. However, it seems that students from integrated (predominantly privileged) schools did not experience the same cultural transition to a historically white Afrikaans university as intensely as their peers from more homogeneous (mostly disadvantaged) schools:

... Nooo, I’m so used to it, agh, like my whole life I was surrounded by white people ...(soc/pr/p).

School background
The higher the socio-economic status of the school, the greater the chance of students participating in university studies. A significant difference (p<0.01) was found between the socio-economic status of the school and students enrolling for higher education. This finding directly related to the financial means of learners and their parents to access higher education.

School background, more specifically the socio-economic status of the school, played a significant role in students’ experience of the transition phase. Deficiencies in the level of skills in core subjects such as Mathematics and Physical Science as well as in Computer Skills were found in both the quantitative and qualitative data – particularly in the case of university students from previously disadvantaged schools. A student from a disadvantaged school described his situation as follows:

... some of my friends that studies Theoretical Physics (with me) ... most of them attended Mathematics Olympiads, and this and that and a lot of things. Our school (referring to a disadvantaged school) did not offer this ... Yes, they had like connections and everything, Mathematics Olympiads, and they have computers, and if you had landed there your parents would have had money. (nat/pda/f).

Less than half of the academic top achieving black respondents in this investigation took Mathematics and Physical Science at the higher grade level in Grade 12.
Respondents who took higher grade Mathematics and Physical Science were from better socio-economic status schools (mostly privileged ‘white’ schools). Respondents from privileged schools also did better in higher grade Mathematics and Physical Science than their peers from disadvantaged schools.

However, in spite of an initial difficult academic transition for most of the students from socio-economically disadvantaged schools, some students regained confidence and were academically successful in their first year. One student explained how she gained confidence by participating and asking questions in class:

... you’re scared because you’re thinking maybe, you know, I’m from a disadvantaged school and so they don’t think that you’re that clever, you have to prove yourself ... Ja, I did, and the way I try and do it is by speaking in class more often ... So I started off very small in tut groups, with tuts, starting speaking, stating my point, and it doesn’t matter if I’m wrong, so long as I’m saying something ... the first time I did it, it was in Criminal Law, I spoke and I just, afterwards I phoned my mom and it was like, “I spoke in front of the whole class now, and there’s white children in class, Mommy, I knew the answer and I thought, that’s okay to me.” (law/pda/p).

Although the socio-economic status of the school from which students come apparently plays an important role in the transition phase and is considered a possible indicator of academic success, in this study no significant difference was found between school status and academic performance (p=0.03, r=-0.22), but there was a meaningful correlation between school results (Grades 11 and 12) and first-year academic achievement (See Table 1).

Table 1: Relation between first-year academic achievement and Grades 11 and 12 end-of-year results and school classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Number (n)</th>
<th>Spearman correlation</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-year and Grade 11 end-of-year results</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year and Grade 12 end-of-year results</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year results and school classification</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support network and social integration

A support network plays an important role in the successful transition from school to university, especially with regard to the emotional wellbeing of students. Parents are the key players – not only after students’ enrolment at university, but also in the pre-entry phase:

... that does play a big role ... that you have the support, that there is someone standing behind you. If you had like that there’s nobody there, you give up anytime and you know no-one will stop you ... (nat/pr/f).
Regardless of their own educational level, the support role that parents play in the transition phase is essential to students’ successful adjustment. Some of the first-generation students indicated that although they depended on their parents for support, their parents did not always know how to support them:

... they’re not constantly involved, like they’d be there when the report comes out, and when I’m about to write exams, and that, that would be it. But they don’t realise that I have to constantly work, all the time, ja ... they don’t know my workload, they see the textbooks, and they’d say “oh, we have to buy those textbooks and they cost” and ... that’s their involvement. And they didn’t know that I have to spend time like every single day just, just to keep up and that’s not even staying ahead, that’s try to keep up (med/pr/p).

The role that friends and peers play as support structures is also becoming increasingly important in the transition phase – even more than the parents’ role in many cases. A respondent explains the connection with peers as follows:

... It’s just better, because they know what you are going through ... Especially before a test ... but they (parents) will phone before a test, the evening or the morning ... but it is your friends that walk with you into the exam hall ... (med/pda/p).

Social integration has a significant role to play in the successful transition from school to university. The support network in the university residence facilitates the transition process, while private accommodation poses challenges with regard to transport, the use of campus facilities and social integration that could ultimately have a negative influence on the transition process. One respondent explained the advantages of residences as follows:

... the residence make everything much, much easier ... the first day we had to go to the faculty, you go with the group of people from the residence and you know exactly where to go. And the residence is very supportive. If I was at home, I would have been more unsure as to where I should go, and where’s my classes ... I think that that made the transition easier for me ... the residence is part of the orientation programme and meet people ... it makes it easier to know that you have someone to talk to in class ... (act/pr/p)

But, social participation, especially on a campus where the majority of students are from relatively privileged backgrounds, seems difficult for students who cannot afford to participate in activities that cost money. This is only one of the challenges faced by financially needy students who often choose to commute rather than to stay on campus in order to save money. This complicates both social and academic integration.
IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The underpreparedness of prospective university students, especially those from disadvantaged schools, is of great concern. The study has shown that, as a group, learners from these schools were academically less prepared for university than their peers from privileged schools. This coincides with various studies on retention and throughput rates in higher education (Tinto 1993; Mushishi 1997; Maxakato 1999; Foxcroft and Stumpf 2005; Kivilu 2006; Jones et al. 2008). Underpreparedness influences both the successful transition from school to university and throughput rates. It seems impossible for universities to catch up during the transitional phase or even in the first academic year with the backlogs, which are imbedded in the remaining inequalities of the South African school system. Ineffective career guidance and unrealistic perceptions and expectations of top school achievers hamper the transitional process and contribute even further to underpreparedness for university studies. This confirms previous findings that inadequate career guidance can lead to unrealistic expectations with regard to specific study programmes and incorrect study choices (Maxakato 1999; Sedumedi 2002). Researchers such as Yorke (2002) and Lowe and Cook (2003) also emphasise the negative role that unrealistic perceptions and expectations have on academic success in higher education.

Another challenge faced by universities, in addition to underpreparedness, is the rapidly-decreasing pool of potential university students (Malan 2007). Both the literature and the results of this study emphasise that factors such as inequalities in the school system, weak academic results (especially in mathematics and physical science) and the shortage of sufficient financial support to study at university contribute to the decreasing pool, especially in disadvantaged communities. This study further indicated that learners from low socio-economic circumstances are less inclined to enter higher education than their peers from privileged environments. The backlogs in skills, particularly in core subjects such as Mathematics, Physical Science and Information Technology, also impact negatively on access – especially for black students. Universities are increasingly forced to find ways to enlarge the potential student pool to provide for the developmental needs of the country (Department of Education 2006) as the pool of learners from schools is decreasing.

Although universities are not directly involved in the school system and should not take over the work of schools, there appears to be room for better liaison and collaboration between schools and universities. Partnerships and relationships with schools, teachers and learners will be to the advantage of all parties involved. In view of limited capacity and resources, the value of such partnerships lies in a holistic approach.

From the results of the study a theoretical framework for such a holistic pre-university intervention (see Figure 1) is proposed according to which a university can play a role at school level to prepare prospective students more effectively for university studies and thus facilitate a smoother school-university transition. This integrated approach to interventions, rather than the fragmented efforts of every
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A faculty or department that works in isolation in schools, could make a difference in learners’ preparedness for university studies.

Figure 1: A framework for pre-university intervention

The proposed framework in Figure 1 points to the interdependence of factors that play a role at school level before students enter university and in their transition to higher education. The framework recognises the socio-economic differences in the pre-university and transition phases and does not operate on the assumption that it includes all the possible factors that play a role in the transition phase (emotional factors, for example, are not included). It does, however, propose a point of departure for early intervention.

The proposed framework will be discussed next on the basis of the following broad themes:
- Academic
- Social
- Financial
- Expectations
- Cultural.

None of these or other sets of factors that play a role in the process of transition should be seen in isolation. The framework indicates the three levels of the student transition phase, namely pre-entry, enrolment/access and post-enrolment.
Academic factors

The academic skills required to adjust successfully to higher education should already be developed at school level (York 2002; Eiselen and Geyser 2003). It is therefore important for learners to master these skills at school. The university can be involved by utilising focused intervention programmes. However, it is rarely possible in a relatively short time to make up for lost ground in subjects (e.g. Mathematics and Physical Science) through such programmes, as these backlogs accumulate over many years. Moreover, such interventions are labour intensive and costly. Higher education institutions should therefore focus on teacher training in order to reach and support more learners (Frick 2007a).

Subject choices in Grade 9 are the basic point of departure in the planning and preparation for higher education. Universities should play a role in career guidance projects in the school community. In the South African context the development and accessibility of on-line assessment are areas in which universities can contribute significantly.

Since school performance marks of students from educationally disadvantaged schools are not necessarily the best predictors of academic success (Huysamen 2000), alternative mechanisms are required to identify potentially successful university students.

Social factors

Learners in schools with a low socio-economic status (by implication first-generation learners) indicated that their teachers had assisted them in obtaining information on studies and bursaries, while second- or third-generation learners whose parents had a higher education experience and who were in schools with a higher socio-economic status, identified their parents as their source of help. This indicates that universities should contribute to equipping teachers with relevant knowledge and skills, particularly in previously disadvantaged schools. However, first-generation students rely just as much on the support from their parents as students whose parents completed their schooling or have a higher education qualification. Yet it seems as if first-generation students’ parents do not always provide effective support (Thomas and Quinn 2007). Universities should therefore not only involve schools in the process of preparing prospective students, but parents as well.

Financial factors

It appears that although comprehensive financial support is available (especially for needy students), learners (especially prospective first-generation students) are not conversant with bursary application procedures and tend to miss deadlines for application. Many learners and parents do not have Internet access and thus cannot obtain electronic application forms. Prospective students, their parents and their teachers ought to be well informed regarding their options and the procedures they can follow to be considered for financial support at a university.
It seems that needy students generally prefer private accommodation at university in order to save money, but they often find it difficult to cope with the ensuing challenges (such as those related to transport and social integration). Residence accommodation, particularly in the first academic year, plays a major role in students’ academic and social integration (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991).

Cultural factors
Cultural factors that play a role in the transition process are mostly contextual (Richardson and Skinner 1992). In the South African school system there are still classifications in terms of population groups. When black learners from previously disadvantaged schools enter a mainly white, Afrikaans campus (such as Stellenbosch University) it could cause them to experience a culture shock – especially as far as accommodation in university residences is concerned. The same applies to any student who enters a university with a dominant culture which is different from his/ her own (Rendón 1992). If learners in the pre-university phase (and their parents) are introduced early to the university and the campus they could gain a realistic view of the university environment. In this regard universities should make use of role models in schools to break down negative perceptions and encourage learners to be receptive to cultural diversity.

Expectations
It was found in this study that learners who wished to enter higher education perceived themselves to be ready and well prepared for university study. However, when they actually entered university they realised that their schools, especially previously disadvantaged schools, had left them unprepared or underprepared for university studies. They also had unrealistic expectations with regard to maintaining their school academic performance at university, specific subjects and career options, as well as the impact of sudden social freedom.

When universities market themselves to prospective students they generally paint an attractive picture for prospective students (Yorke 1999). Institutions ought to provide a more realistic picture of the academic challenges that learners have to face in higher education.

CONCLUSION
The study proposed a theoretical framework for pre-university intervention. The findings have revealed that the inequalities in the South African schooling system influence the transition from school to university, while the classification of schools (previously disadvantaged or privileged school) plays a crucial role in students’ preparedness and how they handle the transition from school to university. There are various academic, social, emotional, cultural and financial factors that impact on this transition. However, these factors are interdependent, and no single factor can be regarded as being more important than another. Therefore universities need
to adopt a holistic approach to the school-university process. Universities have a responsibility to ensure that the diminishing pool of potential students in higher education be expanded. They can contribute by preparing prospective students more effectively so that the transition process will be less challenging. With the use of a holistic and integrated approach and early intervention at school level, universities can make a difference to learners’ preparedness for university studies.

NOTES
1 In the context of the specific investigation in this article, ‘black’ refers mostly to so-called ‘coloured’ students.
2 The transition phase after enrolment could last up to a year or more. In this particular study the transition after enrolment was investigated up to six months after enrolment.

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