



# Funding as a crisis for mature women students: Agency, barriers and widening participation

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## Abstract

Drawing on a research investigation into the learning pathways of mature women, this chapter highlights funding as a crisis. Mature women students face barriers to access, participation and success in higher education. Understanding these barriers is crucial for widening institutional access. The analysis in this study indicates that a lack of personal finance and difficulties in accessing institutional funding are among the significant barriers these women experience.

In addition, the findings show that some women overcame their funding crisis and successfully gained entry into higher education, while others remain excluded. Motivation to overcome poverty is primary to the agency that women demonstrate in their efforts to devise strategies to access funding for their higher education studies.

## Introduction

Mature women students are marginalised in higher education (Kasworm 1980, 2018; Roosmaa & Saar 2017). The 'widening access agenda' is aimed at expanding access to higher education for marginalised people. However, limitations are evident in this agenda for mature women students seeking entry into higher education institutions in South Africa. Among the many challenges that create barriers to their access and participation, a funding crisis is the most notable.

This chapter reports on an investigation into mature women's learning pathways into higher education in South Africa. The main question is: What are the barriers and motivations in the learning pathways of mature women early childhood development (ECD) practitioners who pursue access into higher education to become Foundation Phase teachers?

A discussion of the literature on widening participation, on motivation and agency, and on barriers to access for mature women students, contextualises the study. The data analysis exposes the barriers that impede widening participation, such as a lack of information about application for entry into higher education institutions, as well as about funding.

A key finding relates to the crisis of funding which six participants experienced during their life journeys from school towards higher education. Data analysis reveals how the participants exerted their agency to overcome funding crises in order to advance their learning pathways towards higher education studies. All participants repeatedly applied for access to higher education at various times in their lives. Three participants gained entry into the BEd (Foundation Phase) programme. Three participants were excluded but remain hopeful as they continue to pursue their journeys toward higher education.

Apart from the barriers to access and participation which are commonly experienced by adult students (Kasworm 1980, 2018; Roosmaa & Saar 2017), data from the present investigation describes the barriers experienced by mature women against the backdrop of widening participation. Mature women students experience a crisis of funding throughout their learning pathways, which either limits their access or denies them access completely.

This study contributes to our understanding of barriers for mature women students (Markle 2015; Zart 2019) and of motivation for adult students (McGivney 2004). It leads to new theoretical perspectives regarding motivation that is rooted in agency and that can persist regardless of the outcome of a pathway which is pursued.

## Context and methodology of the study

This study focuses on the learning pathways of mature women who are ECD practitioners in the Western Cape. It defines mature women ECD practitioners as aged 23 years and above who work either as ECD practitioners or Grade R teachers, and who are actively seeking access into the BEd degree in respect of the Foundation Phase of schooling.

The research design of this study included face to face interviews. However, due to COVID-19 and its associated regulations, the author of this chapter gathered the data by conducting and recording life-history interviews using Google Meet.

The following is a profile of the participants:

Pseudonym	Age	Family background	Status of access
Surreya	46	Married, three children	2nd-year student
Elethu	37	Single, two children	2nd-year student
Eileen	45	Divorced, three children	2nd-year student
Lithemba	39	Engaged, two children	ECD practitioner
Nomha	43	Single, one child	ECD practitioner
Babalwa	33	Married, three children	1st-year student (Grade R Diploma)

## Adult learning and widening participation

Research shows that there has been an increase in the participation of mature women students in formal education (Kaldi & Griffiths 2013; Reay 2003; Zart 2019). However, this marginalised group still faces various challenges regarding access and participation on a global scale (Desjardins & Rubenson 2013; Roosmaa & Saar 2017; Zart 2019). Despite widening participation efforts in Australia and the United Kingdom, large numbers of adult students cannot access higher education (Webb, Burke, Nichols et. al. 2017). Furthermore, these authors argue that the ability of working-class students to access and participate in higher education does not narrow the gap between the working and the middle class. This means that, while many do not access higher education, for those who do gain access, access to higher education does not necessarily equate to social mobility. Rather, the enduring influence of family background and social class continue to have a greater impact than that of the widening participation agenda. To some extent, it does not matter what an individual student from a working-class background achieves or negotiates in his or her own right, the reason being that enduring constructs such as social background create a sharp difference between middle- and working-class learning pathways (Reay 2003; Webb et al. 2017).

Efforts aimed at widening participation have become crucial in many higher education institutions across the world. In South Africa, where it is especially important to eradicate deep-seated inequalities rooted in the apartheid era, the difference between the working and middle classes when it comes to accessing higher education is based not only on class, but also on race. Leibowitz and Bozalek (2014: 94) describe the challenges students experience in higher education in South Africa and note that 'racial categories continue to constitute a significant descriptor of social background'. More marginalised and poor students tend to drop out of school, and, for those who do gain access to higher education, their educationally disadvantaged backgrounds limit them from gaining epistemological access (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2014). This means that, for students from marginalised backgrounds, access to university is a barrier, participating at university is a barrier, and completing a degree successfully is a barrier. In a study that focused on the journeys of students from working-class backgrounds into higher education, Case (2015) found that the university curriculum is a constraint, as the students in her study struggled to understand and grasp content knowledge. They consistently had to seek additional assistance from lecturers and friends. This author argues that the identities of the students in her study were shaped by a 'tough' university curriculum. Thus, students from working-class backgrounds experience the university curricula as challenging due to having been disadvantaged educationally. In this way, structural challenges continue to impede their journey.

In the context of South Africa, mature women students from disadvantaged backgrounds need to create pathways into higher education through structural barriers caused by race and class. Racial and social class structures have meant that these women experienced a form of schooling which did not adequately prepare them for higher education (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2014), and, due to continuing inequalities, have limitations affecting their institutional and epistemological access, participation and success (DHET 2013).

## **Access to higher education, barriers and mature women students**

Zart (2019: 245) argues that women undergraduate students' lives 'symbolize a puzzle with obscure pieces that do not quite fit together. Education is one piece of that puzzle, while family and work present additional pieces.' She argues that the role of 'mother' complicates the experiences or the pursuit of higher education for mature women students in that the two roles often clash and present challenges that are unique to this group of students. Mature women students are often first-generation students, work full-time, and often fall within the low-to-working-class category (Zart 2019). Thus, these women experience role-conflict and need specific factors in place that will enable them to push toward degree completion.

Reay (2003) argues that adult women students study in spite of severe material and educational constraints. She suggests that studying towards a degree is a risk for mature women students in that their journey is filled with confusion and difficulties. In Reay's (2003) study, the journeys of a small sample of women were investigated to understand the participation of working-class women in higher education and to show the nature of the route they take toward graduation. The study also shows that the route they take is 'hard and painful' (Reay 2003: 308). In her study, mature women students drew a strong connection between survival and education: they had to survive and succeed, and they were determined not to fail, since all of them had experienced failure academically. For these women, failure would be a setback. Most of the women in this study also had a specific desire or were motivated to establish ways in which they could uplift the communities of their childhood. They believed that successfully participating in higher education would put them in a position to do so.

*These women's accounts of the underlying motivations that prompted their return to education reveal the complexities and contradictions of reflexive modernisation in which projects of the self can be aligned with a strong sense of community commitment and a desire to 'give back'. (Reay 2003: 306)*

Markle (2015) conducted a three-year study into the persistence on the part of adult students in pursuing higher education and found that mature women students are motivated in a unique way to prove that they are capable of success. This study also found that the role of student for mature women:

*renders them different from other mothers and their parenting role renders them different from other students, leaving them to struggle with the pressures of being a mature student in isolation. Their intense dedication, or will to persist, enables non-traditional women students to overcome countless obstacles associated with their multiple roles in order to persist. (Markle 2015: 65)*

## Motivation and agency

McGivney (2004) argues that motivation is essential in contributing to the persistence and success of mature women students. Adult students often feel discouraged, and mostly women students feel a desire to withdraw from their studies, particularly due to role-conflict (Markle 2015).

*Motivation is a word that is often applied to adult learners. [M]ature students tend to be more motivated than younger students ... because they have made sacrifices in order to participate; because they want to prove to themselves (and others) that they are capable of learning and*

*gaining a qualification; or because they need or are required to study for career or employment reasons. (McGivney 2004: 42)*

A will to persist, or motivation, is thus a primary factor in participation and success for mature women students (Markle 2015; Reay 2003; Zart 2019). Motivation can be seen as an enablement, whereas a lack thereof can be seen as a constraint. It is referred to as the power to move towards a particular goal (Boeren, Holford, Nicaise et al. 2012). 'An adult learner can be said to be motivated if he or she has the intention to put some effort into his or her learning activities and to undertake actions in order to reach learning goals' (Boeren et al. 2012: 249). The literature differentiates between two types of motivation: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation is self-determined and is a free choice which is dependent on the individual. Controlled motivation is based on the need to comply with external pressures and requirements. Understanding the motivations for adult women students to study in higher education institutions is important in realising goals to widen access (Boeren et al. 2012).

Autonomous motivation, which is a free choice (Boeren et al. 2012), can be connected to Archer's (2003) notion of agency, which, she argues, is the domain where human action and interaction occur. In a study that reviews conceptions of agency, Groener and Andrews (2019) note that 'students' agentic actions to overcome barriers in pursuit of post-school education opportunities confirm Archer's (2003: 7) sociological supposition that 'humans have degrees of freedom in determining their own courses of action' (Groener & Andrews 2019: 44). In this way, autonomous motivation and agency work together, in that individuals use their agency to continuously plot their course along a particular pathway. Motivation is thus rooted in agency. This means that the individual freedom students exercise, their agency, enables them to pursue a particular pathway, even if it is hard to do and even if the outcome is not what they had hoped for. Their motivation fuels their agency. In this way, motivation is rooted in agency.

Motivation that is rooted in agency is an enabler. It enables students to continue pursuing a path regardless of the challenges or obstacles that this may give rise to. It is to this extent that research clearly shows that motivation is important to participation and success for mature women students. Under extreme pressure and effort to fit in, and manage and negotiate various roles, motivation is important in that it gives them a consistent push toward degree completion and, ultimately, graduation.

## Findings

Through a narrative analysis, the data was analysed. In this type of qualitative, in-depth analysis, care is taken to read and understand the life accounts of participants in their entirety (Check & Schutt 2012). Elsewhere, Johnson-Bailey

(2004: 334) states that, 'as a method, narrative analysis places emphasis on collecting the story of the participant, while taking care to preserve the holistic nature of the participant's story'. The themes derived from the storied analysis for this particular study were related to the barriers and motivations that cut across the women's life histories, in order to seek answers to the primary interrogation, as highlighted above. The themes that emerged highlighted points at which the participants sought access into both further and higher education.

In South Africa, further education refers to theory- and practice-based educational programmes which are available at technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, private colleges, and community colleges in the form of certificates and diplomas. Higher education, on the other hand, refers to education received at a university, generally in the form of a degree. Matric is the final year of basic schooling and is equivalent to Grade 12.

ECD programmes are offered as learnerships to ECD practitioners at TVET colleges on Levels 1, 4 and 5. Level 1 is equivalent to Grade 9, Level 4 to Grade 12 and Level 5 to a certificate. TVET colleges also offer a National Diploma in Educare at the N4, N5 and N6 levels, which are equivalent to Grade 12, to a certificate and to a higher certificate, respectively. The participants experienced barriers at the following three points in their learning pathways:

1. From matric into higher education; high motivation and high barriers;
2. From ECD practitioner into further education; high motivation and low barriers; and
3. From further education into higher education; high motivation, and high and multiple barriers.

The participants are identified as working class and, as such, experienced structural challenges related to their racial and social-class background in South Africa. All participants attended school during apartheid and inherited the disadvantages of being classified *black* during this time. Race determined educational access and opportunities; being classified as *black* meant poor-quality and limited educational access and opportunities for the women in the present study.

## Experiences of financial barriers at high school

The participants experienced three barriers during their initial attempts to access higher education: *a lack of parental support, a lack of information and guidance* about various institutions and their programmes, and *a lack of funding*. For Lithemba, Nomha and Babalwa, in particular, the lack of parental support had a big impact on the route their lives took after they matriculated from high school. These participants did not receive care, guidance, resources such as food and

shelter, or moral support from their parents. Babalwa related that her high school teachers encouraged her to apply to university and supported her with the application for funding:

*There was a teacher ... that guided me because [she] knew my situation, my family background ... ; she said I must write a letter. I remember one day I wrote a letter... asking for assistance. And then they asked me [for] the payslip for my father, the payslip for my mother, [but] unfortunately I didn't have [those]... . I knew that they were working, so I was not accepted that time.*

Babalwa, who grew up in a child-led home, was the one leading the family throughout her years in high school. She played the role of parent to younger siblings. Thus, there was no opportunity to apply for access in spite of a strong desire to do so and a good matric pass. Her own survival, and that of her siblings, was more important.

*So I was left in my mother[and] father's house with my two sisters coming after me and the last-born... . I was left with three children to raise. It affected me [so] much that I [failed] the class, and it was [the] first time [that I failed].*

Along with her sister, Lithemba had been responsible for providing for her family throughout the years at school by selling sweets.

*In Standard 6 ... I [had] to carry the chips and the lollipops – every day, whether [it was] raining or ... not... . [By] break you didn't even socialise ... with your friends because we [had] to go and look for ... customers all over in [the] school ... .*

She recounts that, at the time, she was happy selling sweets, because she was a child. She said:

*At that time I was a kid. I didn't feel it was bad. I enjoy[ed] it because I [had] to give ... respect to my mother but now I realise ... that [what] I was doing [was] ... too much ... . Maybe I would have [got] an A or a B, [which is] much better than what I [achieved] in the end.*

With no parental support and needing to provide for her family, she started working in a series of restaurants as a waitron and in fruit-canning factories. She mentioned that, because of the chances she didn't get, she ended up doing this work although it was not her career.

Nomha's family experienced a series of challenges – 'some personal problems' – during her final year of basic schooling which contributed to her needing to work in the retail environment over weekends, while studying during the week. She

attended school and was ‘working at the same time on weekends, working at Diskom, so I had to ... become a breadwinner’, she recalled. This inevitably contributed to her failing matric: ‘When I got to matric, I didn’t pass my matric.’ She persisted, however, and reapplied to do the matric examination through a finishing school the following year, after which she successfully applied and participated in higher education at the Cape Technikon, now known as the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Nomha relates:

*I only managed to pay the registration fee. My mother was a domestic worker at the time and she managed to give me one thousand rand for the registration, and then I also applied at a place that offered funding in Athlone, and they paid two thousand rand ... . [But] I had to drop out because I did not get any [further] funds, and I had to work full time.*

Moving from high school into higher education seems to have been a natural course to follow for the participants in the study, but, as Surreya indicated, a lack of information and guidance was a barrier:

*When you apply, you don't get in; you feel despondent and no one wants to help you. [Y]our parents [do not have] the means [to provide funding or information for higher education access].*

All the participants stated that succeeding at university was essential to changing their circumstances; access could lead them out of the poverty and disadvantage that was associated with their childhood. Surreya further commented:

*In our communities, there is no guidance, no one to help the children know where to go. [P]arents are too busy keeping their heads above water; they must work and so they are not even thinking of furthering their studies or pushing their children to do so.*

Both Eileen and Elethu dropped out of high school due to teenage pregnancies. They did not receive support during critical moments of their school careers. Elethu commented:

*I was not coping [being] at school again where I didn't even accept the position that I was in of me ... having a baby; and I couldn't even go to the matric farewell with my fellow [learners]. I couldn't, you do understand? So I was in a place of denial. ... I couldn't focus even on Grade 12 and my results were not looking so good.*

On the other hand, Eileen simply stated:

*I fell pregnant when I was in Standard 7. I just wrote the Standard 7 exams, but I didn't go back; I went to work after that.*

Thus, in these attempts to access education, a lack of parental support, a lack of information and guidance regarding various institutions and their offerings, as well as a lack of funding constituted structural barriers prohibiting access to university for these women.

### **Funding facilitates access from school to further education**

For the participants, the easiest point of access to a programme which offered a teaching qualification was a TVET college through the Educare N4 to N6 and the ECD Level 1, 4 and 5 programmes. At this point of the journey, the women all used their agency to access further education. They were able to do so with ease, because funding was provided by the colleges. Eileen stated that 'Level 1 was ... free', and, since these programmes all provided students with a monthly stipend, it was quite beneficial for the women to participate. Babalwa shared that, when she realised that the ECD course was free, she grasped the opportunity with both hands.

*ECD? I didn't know what ECD [was], what [was] going on, but just because I was so hungry for school[ing] at that time, and because she explained to me that, when you are doing the ECD, you don't have to pay ... your fees upfront ... you are going to get the stipend ... I felt [very] relieved ... and then went to Boland College to ... apply.*

Nomha shared her experience of participating in the Educare programme:

*I didn't think of myself [as someone who] could do so well, [who could get] distinctions. I [was] so proud of myself because of that ... [that] with so many problems and stress[es] ... I could still get those distinctions ... . [I]t pushed me to [be someone] who wanted to study more and more until I [became] what I want[ed].*

Surreya started volunteering at her son's school, as he had special needs as a learner. 'Then, in [the] three years that I was helping out at the school, ... I applied. The teachers actually motivated me to [apply] and further my studies ... .' She applied for ECD Levels 4 and 5 and was accepted into the programmes. She recalled:

*I actually did very well. My lecturer always pushed me because of how well I did.*

Elethu mentioned that the ECD 'learnership [was] bringing ... education [to] ECD practitioners'. She further pointed to a number of employment offers she received after she had completed the ECD Level 4 and 5 programmes. She was appointed as a principal at an ECD centre and facilitated isiXhosa in the ECD programme at a TVET college. She stated: 'I applied and I was called in for an interview. I went in and I was phoned, [and so, with] my Level 5, I am now the

principal of this Community Educare Centre.’ In addition, she explained that participating in the ECD programme ‘was paying off because even the lecturers [noticed] my efforts, and ... I was called in the following year to come and be the lecturer for IsiXhosa’.

However, she stated firmly that all the opportunities meant nothing much for her financially, for, as a single parent, she still had to provide for her family. According to her:

*There are no good salaries [in ECD].*

Lithemba struggled financially while working in ECD, where factors such as low or no income and unstable employment are common. She shared that, in Vukani (an ECD centre), there was a strike by teachers. They went on strike for more money in October, November and December. ‘So ... I work[ed] for [these] three months [but was paid] only once in December.’ Some of the motivations of the participants to pursue higher education from further education arose from a strong belief that having a degree when teaching in the Foundation Phase would secure permanent employment with a good salary, more specifically a ‘government job.’ Surreya admitted:

*I thought to myself [that I really needed to] do something so that [I could get a] job that pays better. Because ... obviously you opt for second-best, and then you're struggling and you think to yourself ... I didn't actually want this, I really wanted something better for my life and family. I really want ... a government job.*

Elethu explains that, through a government job, she wants to use her degree to change the ECD environment:

*My focus is still [on] ... ECD; my heart is still there. But, you know, at the Worcester Boland College, all the lecturers ... have a BEd qualification. So, I'm saying to myself that I will be there, I will be one of them. I'll be permanently employed at the Worcester Boland College.*

At these second attempts at access, the participants were able to access further education with ease, since they had good support structures in terms of peers and principals who guided them and provided them with information about the programmes for ECD practitioners. The financial support during the programmes also made access and participation easier for them. All three of these factors, *support, funding, and guidance and information regarding the programmes*, were present during this period of the journey. This, in turn, made access to, and participation and success in, the programmes possible for the women. With these factors in place, participation was widened for this marginalised group.

## **Recognition of prior learning (RPL) facilitates access from further education to higher education**

After studying in ECD programmes at TVET colleges, the participants were highly motivated to access higher education. As mentioned previously, three of the participants in this study gained access to higher education at university, and three did not. All six participants had applied for access more than once at various institutions such as UWC, CPUT and the University of South Africa (UNISA).

For the three participants who gained access, the RPL programme at UWC provided a platform for them to do so. It provided a space in which they could freely exercise their agency to access higher education. Eileen was told about RPL by her principal at the ECD centre where she was teaching; and a friend directed Elethu to RPL after she was refused access by the university for not having enough entrance points. In Surreya's case, the following occurred:

*The first year [that I applied] I obviously didn't get in. [T]hen somebody, one of the teachers ... at CPUT [who] was doing a diploma in Grade R ... basically said: 'You know, Surreya, because of your age why don't you try to get in through the RPL [programme]?' ... and that's what I did.*

However, at her second interview, says Surreya, it was realised that 'she didn't even have to apply through the RPL, because she [had] got through with an exemption ...'.

Thus, for Surreya, who was refused access by the university and redirected to RPL, and then redirected to the university again because she had sufficient university entrance points for the BEd (Foundation Phase) programme, applying for access had taken three consecutive years. She accordingly felt strongly that the UWC application process had 'wasted my time'. As shown, initially she was refused entry by the university for an unspecified reason and advised by the academic administration to apply for the RPL programme. After completing a host of activities in order to be successful in the RPL programme, she was informed that she did not need the RPL programme for access, and that a traditional university application would suffice. Thus, after three years of applying, and many phone calls and emails in order to follow up on her application, she was finally accepted into the relevant programme.

## **Pathways from further education to higher education: Financial barriers/crisis**

Access to funding, and to information regarding funding opportunities, is crucial for mature women students at this point of the journey. Eileen, who had been accepted, further explained the challenge for those who are accepted. Of her journey in higher education, she states:

*The first month of being here [at the university] was stressful. They insisted that I pay [for] registration [but] I wasn't working and I didn't have money. I was here for orientation the entire week and they sent me a message saying that I can't go to class because I haven't paid. I told my student advisor that I need[ed] to go to Wynberg to find out [what was happening with my funding]. I went there and they told me [that] I [was] funded; [so] back the next day [to university] and they said I [was] not funded ... . Funding is actually a big problem.*

Eileen was eventually able to access funding and was thus in her second year of study at the time of the interview. 'I finally got funding', she exclaimed. However, Elethu was not able to access funding for the first year of study. She describes her experience of applying to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) as follows:

*I applied for NSFAS [funding, and] that was a journey! [I went] to the financial office [at UWC] and then I went to Wynberg to their offices. I got a lady to help me ... but there was still one document missing. [Even] if you [could] see my paper trail with NSFAS, you [wouldn't] believe [it]. One document missing, my mother's ID. I [had] to take that document personally to NSFAS in Wynberg. Three times [I did that], but the document was always missing.*

Currently in her second year, she owed the annual university fees throughout her first year. She remarked: 'You know, the university opened ... for this year [but] I was not at the university because I didn't have money to go there', the reason being that she still owed a large sum for 2019. Fees and a lack of money for food and transport are challenges that Elethu faced. 'There were times that it was really hard. The rainy days; there were times that I didn't even have money to pay [for] the train.' Fortunately, Campus Student Support Services proved to be of help with food parcels. Elethu related how excited her child was when she brought food home from the UWC feeding scheme:

*And then we got food, groceries from UWC. I will never [forget my boy's face] when I [walked] in with a bag full of food. He was so happy... he was skipping, he was glad that I [could] bring rice, [that] I was bringing noodles... . So, for me, [it was a] sense of... the university ...providing for me and now I'm providing for him; do you understand?*

There were many days when she travelled to the university with no money for transport back home, but Elethu is determined to continue. She believes that what she is getting from the university is much more than working in ECD. She says that it is much more than the R5 000 she was going to receive as a principal and the R2 500 as an ECD practitioner:

*Even if I am 37 at ... university ..., I am [still] pursuing my dream.*

Eileen indicated that, on making the decision to study full-time, she sat her family down and explained that, for the next four years, there would not be much in the house:

*My mind was ... made up: ... sacrifice ... or getting nowhere; there was nothing easy; it's about whether you want it.*

The remaining three participants still have to continue the journey in endeavouring to access higher education, in particular the BEd programme. Nomha has applied for university entrance almost every year since the completion of her ECD Level 5, but without success. She does not have enough university entrance points to be accepted into the programme, and was not aware of the access route through the RPL programme at the time of the interview.

Similarly, Lithemba had not heard of the RPL programme at the time of the interview and had applied for access twice, consecutively. In both instances, she followed up on her application and was told that it had been received late; however, she believed that she had applied in time (and provided data/quotations as evidence).

Though her pathway has been filled with rejections, Nomha indicated that she would not let this stop her:

*I am not going to let them stop me from studying. I am hoping, and I do have hope ... I know that one day I will become what I want to become. I'm not going to give up.*

At this point in the journey, it is clear that a *lack of funding and limited guidance and information regarding access routes* into higher education are among the key structural barriers that separate those who gain access from those who do not. These mature women students currently pursuing access now have a range of responsibilities. They no longer require parental support to gain access as in their first attempt after matric, since they themselves are parents with the specific responsibility of providing for their children, which makes it so much harder in pursuing access. The responsibilities of these women can be seen as structural barriers which limit or prevent their access and participation in higher education. As mentioned by Elethu:

*[It] is a struggle for ECD practitioners to study at university. [T]he university wants full-time students ... so the ECD practitioners must leave their work ... their homes ... their children ... their families behind to [study] ... . [M]ost of them are sitting here ... they cannot be accepted into university because of their education. They say it's poor; they say our [NQF] Level 4 and Level 5 [are] only for ECD; they cannot recognise it.*

## Discussion

The data analysis reveals that the motivations which drive mature women to pursue access to higher education is located within the context of their lives as poor black women, and as ECD practitioners working in an environment with low incomes and unstable job opportunities. While all the participants love the children they work with and have a passion for ECD, the limitations attached to this environment move them to want 'more' for themselves. In the words of Elethu: 'I wanted more. I looked around and saw that this was not it.' These women desire the security and financial access which is associated with 'government employment', and, for the women, graduating with a BEd degree in the Foundation Phase of schooling will mean just that – secure employment and financial access.

Whilst there are numerous barriers undermining access to higher education, the most significant is the lack of funding. This is a crisis, as it created acute difficulties for the women at each point that they tried accessing higher education. The strain they experienced in relation to this crisis shaped whether they had access to resources, and to information and guidance regarding access routes, and it shaped their participation. The lack of food for their families and transport challenges intensified the challenge of being at university. Thus, funding is the enduring, primary barrier which prevents access and limits mature women's participation.

At their first attempts to access education, the lack of funding led to a post-school learning pathway associated with low-paid jobs. It shaped a deep desire for an improvement in life chances and choices, and the continuous struggle for access. For these mature women, access would have secured a different set of choices for improvement. At their second attempts for access – now much older and ECD practitioners – the participants entered further education with ease, as this particular barrier no longer existed. Funding was provided, which meant they had easier access and could participate more easily. The ECD environment in which they work also provides a network of support and stimulus for the pursuit of higher education in order to graduate as Foundation Phase teachers.

At the third attempts at access, a lack of funding is once again a crisis. Groener (2019) notes that, for adult students in South Africa to gain access to higher education, structural and institutional barriers that are related to funding need to be removed by the government. These barriers undermine the potential of marginalised students to find routes out of poverty through education (Groener 2019). The analysis shows that, for higher education institutions to widen the access and participation of mature women, access to funding as well as accurate information regarding access routes need to be provided for them. The primary motivation for the lengthy pursuit of higher education is the prospect of gaining secure employment and financial access, and, undoubtedly, 'a route out of poverty' (Groener 2019). The key barrier these women face in their journey is the crisis of funding.

## Conclusion

This chapter provides an analysis of the crisis of funding which mature women experience, and the ways that they exert agency to mitigate this crisis as they travel along their learning pathways (Archer 2003). The motivation to succeed in higher education is a route to employment and financial security so that they can provide for their families.

The crisis of funding, though deeply personal and individual, is located within broader political, social and economic reality. Similarly, broader socio-economic structural factors limit resources for higher education and undermine higher education institutions' efforts in widening participation. As the findings indicate, some mature women are successful, while others remain excluded. Leading institutions must address critical funding challenges in order to enable mature women to address their funding crises and so facilitate their learning pathways towards access to higher education.

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