



# Seventeen Students. Six Conferences. One Mentor.

Rethinking Open Access Equity in South African Higher Education

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*K.S-G. Brown: research design, conference access intervention, individual research project mentorship · K. Tshabalala: workplace readiness training and professional development*

*Companion paper: "Participation as Open Access: Industry Mentorship, Conference Equity, and the Epistemic Responsibility Gap in South African Higher Education"*

**"We have largely solved publication access. The conference door is still closed."**

Two decades of open access advocacy have focused on removing paywalls from published research. For students at under-resourced institutions in the Global South, the more fundamental barrier is exclusion from the conferences, networks, and communities of practice where knowledge is created and scholarly careers are made. This study argues for a third level of open access: participation access.



## A NEW FRAMEWORK — THREE LEVELS OF ACADEMIC ACCESS

LEVEL 1

### Publication Access

The ability to read published research without a financial barrier. The primary focus of the open access movement for two decades.

*Budapest OAI (2002, 2022) · Piwowar et al. (2018) · Willinsky (2006)*

Substantially addressed ✓

LEVEL 2

### Infrastructure Access

Access to research tools, databases, software, and technical support. Addressed unevenly by the open science infrastructure movement.

*UNESCO (2021) · Bosman et al. (2021) · European Commission (2022)*

Partially addressed

LEVEL 3 ♦ THIS STUDY

### Participation Access

The ability to attend and contribute to conferences, networks, and communities of practice where knowledge is produced, debated, and validated — and where scholarly identity is formed through legitimate peripheral participation.

*Chan et al. (2020) · Wenger (2000) · Mboa Nkoudou (2016) · Fricker (2007)*

The missing piece

*Removing the paywall does not open the conference door. This study argues that a just open science system must address all three levels.*

## THE INTERVENTION — SOUTH AFRICA, SECOND HALF OF 2024

17

STUDENTS IN COHORT

Final-year undergraduates: 88% mathematical sciences, 12% software engineering. All with zero prior conference attendance.

0

PRIOR CONFERENCE ATTENDANCES

Combined prior conference experience across all 17 students. None had attended any academic or professional conference before the intervention.

300

MINUTES OF RESEARCH INVESTED

Approximately 60 minutes per morning across five consecutive mornings, mapping the full conference landscape for the cohort's disciplines.

6

CONFERENCES FACILITATED

All with free or facilitated student access. All 17 students attended a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 events. Zero registration fees paid.

## THE RESPONSIBILITY GAP — INSTITUTIONAL PROXIMITY WITHOUT INSTITUTIONAL ACTION

• THE INSTITUTION

### The Dean knew. No student did.

- The university's Dean co-chaired the largest mathematical sciences conference held in South Africa that year
- Free student participation provisions were available and well-publicised within the conference community — yet not one student in the institution's mathematics department was informed
- No institutional mechanism existed to translate the Dean's proximity to the conference into student awareness or attendance

**Result: 0 students attended through institutional channels**

• THE EXTERNAL MENTOR

### 300 minutes. 17 students. Zero cost.

- An unpaid external mentor invested 300 minutes identifying six conferences with free or facilitated student access — guiding all 17 students, at zero registration cost across all six events
- For the conference co-chaired by the Dean, all 15 students from that institution attended;\* every motivation letter was accepted
- A hackathon team — none with prior competitive experience — was peer-voted second place by the conference audience at their first event

**Result: Every student from that institution attended — at zero cost**

*\* 15 of the 17-student cohort were enrolled at the same institution as the co-chairing Dean; all 15 attended that conference*

## WHAT HAPPENED WHEN STUDENTS WERE SHOWN THE DOOR

3-5

Conferences per student

All 17 attended a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 events — zero prior conference experience, zero cost

100%

Motivation letter acceptance

Every letter submitted to secure student access was accepted across all six conferences

2nd

Hackathon placement

Peer-voted second place by the conference audience — the team's first competitive technical event

## FIVE LEVELS OF ACTION — CLOSING THE PARTICIPATION GAP

CURRICULA

Embed conference literacy in undergraduate programmes — teach students to identify, apply for, and navigate professional events using the frameworks of Hicks (2018) and Lloyd (2017)

EDUCATORS

Stay actively engaged in your discipline's conference landscape — knowledge of student access provisions is a professional obligation, not a personal extra

CONFERENCES

Communicate student access provisions directly to departments at under-resourced institutions — do not assume information reaches those who need it

INSTITUTIONS

Create systematic processes to translate institutional conference proximity into student awareness — structural reform, not individual goodwill, is the solution

OA COMMUNITY

Expand the definition of open access to include participation access — the right to enter the spaces where knowledge is produced, not only to read its outputs

## THEORETICAL ANCHORS

Epistemic justice

*Fricker (2007) · Kidd et al. (2017)*

Navigational capital

*Yosso (2005)*

Strategic ignorance

*McGoey (2019)*

Communities of practice

*Lave & Wenger (1991) · Wenger (2000)*

Mentoring theory

*Mullen & Klimaitis (2021) · Nabi et al. (2024)*

Capabilities approach

*Walker (2005)*

*Academic outcomes — above 60% on final-year research projects and above 80% on oral presentations — reflect the full mentorship investment encompassing research project guidance, workplace readiness training, and oral presentation practice. These outcomes are not attributed to conference participation alone.*

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