



11 August 2023

Women's Month: UCT research analyses post-school education in an unequal society



Dr Emma Whitelaw graduated with her PhD in economics last month.

Photo: Lerato Maduna

Dr Emma Whitelaw believes post-school education is a powerful tool for catalysing social mobility in South Africa, and it's for this reason that she dedicated her PhD research to the topic – to demonstrate its importance, identify gaps that need to be addressed, and showcase the long-term benefits for the next generation.

Whitelaw, a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU), graduated with her PhD in economics last month.

Whitelaw's research forms part of the Siyaphambili Project – an initiative of SALDRU. The project was developed as a post-school research programme that focuses on post-school

education and training in South Africa. It supports South African universities' ability to improve student learning and academic success.

Her thesis explored inequalities in access to post-school education among the youth in South Africa; its impact on their achievements once they reach university; and graduate realities – considering each as an obstacle to students' equitable participation and success at university or college, and thereafter.

"Using economic analyses, I unpacked these dimensions of post-schooling with the hope that when findings are inserted into relevant policy dialogues, they will inform evidence-based decision-making that ultimately has the potential to disrupt cycles of socio-economic inequality," she said.

An overarching theme that emerged during her research process is the interconnectedness between post-schooling-related inequalities within the system itself and in society more broadly. Further, she said, funding-related themes are extensive. These include how student funding is financed, and the implications for graduates; how household inequalities (as proxied by funding receipt) interact with student success; and who accesses funding – and consequently, post-school educational opportunities.

Data-driven approaches

Part of Whitelaw's research proposed using an empirical and conceptual methodology based on households' income mobility over time. This approach suggests analysing the household circumstances of youth who are eligible for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), as well as youth who form part of the 'missing middle' groups and who are not eligible for state funding.

"I differentiate the socio-economic circumstances of households, using nationally representative survey data, within the context of the current post-school funding policy. My results revealed that simply aggregating household circumstances within the missing middle would overstate the well-being of vulnerable youth in the long term and understate the economic security of youth classified as more stable," she said.

This proposed approach highlights the fact that income vulnerability fluctuations should be considered an important constraint for access to post-school education, even in cases where household income is above the NSFAS threshold.

The value of post-school education

Whitelaw said the value of post-school education, and the benefits that come with it – for the South African labour market, and for society more broadly – should not be underestimated. She believes that it continues to play a key role in promoting a more equitable society.

"Addressing socio-economic inequality in South Africa is complicated by the fact that it pervades the systems and institutions (such as post-schooling) that aspire to dismantle it. I wanted to leverage data in a way that could deepen an understanding of the extent of these inequalities," she noted.

"I am immensely grateful for the investment my parents made in my education. But the reality is that I was born into circumstances that would gear me towards economic opportunity and future stability. The fact that I've been afforded opportunities by the luck of

my birth, while others remain unable to escape intergenerational cycles of poverty, is a huge social injustice.”

She said she hopes her work will draw attention to where there is scope to address inequality, both within the post-school education sector and through post-school education attainment.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za