

Equity in Admissions Policies of Undergraduate Students in Post Democracy in Selected South African Universities

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Abstract: This paper investigates the policy pathways that inform and regulate student selection and admission at three selected universities in South Africa, namely the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. We argue that these universities have progressed a long way in addressing the race problem in their enrolment strategies. However, their main target group remains students from rich or affluent communities, to the exclusion of potentially good students from marginalised groups, particularly those from under-resourced township and rural schools. As a result, their main challenge in the context of formal access to higher education in South Africa has largely shifted from a race problem to one of social class. This is due to an overemphasis on narrow conceptions of merit that cannot be reconciled with equity and social justice concerns. The paper suggests that current notions of merit warrant reconceptualization in order to embrace these missing dimensions. While there is plenty of evidence that most institutions agree on the need to embrace a particular form of affirmative action to address current social imbalances, given the fierce contestation of redress policies within the South African higher education sector, they find it difficult to develop and implement adequate admission strategies in practice.

Keywords: Access, Admissions policies, Equity, Redress, Entrance requirements.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we investigate the nature of the selection and admissions policies in place at three Universities in South Africa, namely the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), in the context of the nation-wide debate. We address the following main question: What are the policy pathways that inform and regulate the selection and admissions policies at these three universities? In so doing, we deal with the following key issues: (i) the selection and admissions policies in place, including inter alia the principles and values that underpin them, the underlying assumptions considered in the formulation of these policies, and the implications in the context of the social justice and human rights discourse proclaimed in the national Constitution; and (ii) the implications for student enrolment with reference to the question of equity and equal opportunities in student access to higher education. Where necessary, reference is made to how the different institutions have positioned themselves in terms of support structures and mediation strategies required for catering for their particular student profile.

Central to our analysis is a concern with the manner in which the principles and values enshrined in the Constitution are addressed against the legacy of racial, gender, class and other forms of social discrimination

imposed by apartheid. We argue that the selected universities have progressed a long way in addressing the *race problem* in their enrolment strategy. However, they still tend to privilege students from rich or affluent communities while neglecting talented and potentially good students from marginalised groups, particularly those from under-resourced township and rural schools. As a result, the problem has shifted largely from *race* to one of *social class* due to an overemphasis on narrow conceptions of merit that cannot be reconciled with equity and social justice concerns. We suggest that the notion of merit be reconceptualised to embrace these missing dimensions. This in turn necessitates a policy of affirmative action to ensure that potentially good students from marginalised backgrounds have equal opportunity to enter higher education. While there is plenty of evidence that most institutions agree on the need to embrace a particular form of affirmative action to address current social imbalances, given the fierce contestation of redress policies within South African higher education, they find it difficult to develop and implement adequate admission strategies in practice.

Explaining Admissions and Selection of Students: A Conceptual Framework

Arguments about selection and admissions policies in higher education differ in various contexts, depending on the emphasis placed on concepts such as merit and meritocracy, equal opportunity, equity and social justice, affirmative action, or redress. These concepts require careful scrutiny given the different and sometimes emotive meanings attached to them. The

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concept of *selection* is used to refer to the mechanisms employed to choose between qualified candidates for university entry when demand for student places exceeds supply; it includes all those decisions made throughout both schooling and the entry point to higher education affecting whether a person is admitted and, if admitted, to which field of study, programme or course (Harman, 1994). Of importance to our argument is that selection has become both a highly complex technical matter, and a political one. As Harman (1994: 316) indicates, selection can be highly technical in terms of the choice of methods used, and judgements made about the utility of different methods; and political in those methods used can be readily contested, both on technical grounds as well as on social and economic grounds. Selection in higher education relies a great deal on the utility of particular forms of examinations and tests (such as aptitude tests, achievement tests, and quasi-psychometric tests) as means to assess academic achievement and potential for success in higher education (Harman, 1994).

Similarly, different meanings are attached to the concept of *admissions*. The Council for Higher Education (CHE, 2004) defines *admissions* as those policies and procedures that an institution formulates to manage the admission, selection and placement of students. Admissions management includes the systems, structures, staff and services that an institution establishes to recruit students, process applications, and select and place students in particular programmes. The admissions process includes various activities such as publicity and recruitment, the administration of examinations and tests, the handling of applications, advertising and course counselling, and activities undertaken by potential students including submission of applications, and participation in interviews.

Generally, all universities in South Africa admit undergraduate students on what is referred to as *merit*, a highly contested concept. According to Erasmus (2010), in practice, 'merit' refers to high matriculation scores, which have become institutionalised as a socially acceptable measure of what constitutes 'socially valuable ability' for the purposes of academic performance. Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) argue that merit-based admission favours students from privileged backgrounds and elite schools and does not offer equal opportunity to students coming from disadvantaged families. This is one of the reasons why certain universities such as Wits, UCT and UKZN have recently adopted affirmative action policies. In this

sense, Erasmus (2010: 249) indicates that matric scores are "effectively a proxy for wealth and power" and historically racialised privilege in South Africa" (see also Harman, 1994; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). Although concerns with access have focused attention on the norm of equality of rights over the last three decades (Goastellec, 2006), merit-based admissions continue to prevail. For example, for disadvantaged students to benefit from affirmative action policies, they require comparable skills and knowledge with students from affluent backgrounds.

Affirmative action refers to a body of policies and procedures designed to reverse former discrimination against marginalised groups including disadvantaged students, and women. It has been defined as a compensatory procedure to address past injustices; a corrective tool to address present discrimination; and an intervention to promote social equality and diversity in a given society (Tierney, 1997). Its main objective is to redress the effects of past discrimination (Wanyande, 2003: 50). Affirmative action happens when a deliberate action is taken that gives marginalised groups priority, in this case in terms of university admissions. This priority granted to the disadvantaged does not mean that minimum qualifications are ignored (Onsongo, 2009). It means that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who apply for admission to universities, are still expected to show academic potential, and that they have a chance of succeeding in their studies.

Generally, the literature shows that most scholars agree that admission to university should be based primarily on merit with reference to successful Grade 12 examination results, aptitude tests and interviews. This is because merit has proven to be a good predictor of academic performance in higher education (Harman, 1994). However, some scholars like Hall (2006) and Soudien (2010), argue that universities cannot always use merit when selecting and admitting students. Their argument is that merit privileges students from wealthy families who can afford to attend 'model C' schools—historically white schools—where they can achieve good results and meet requirements for university entrance. These researchers argue that universities need to apply the principle of equity and affirmative action because society is 'unequal' and the education system currently favours those who are privileged. Equity and affirmative action policies offer disadvantaged learners an opportunity to participate in higher education, and also ensure that the university population reflects the wider society (Hall 2006 & Soudien, 2010).

This study draws on the *theory of capital* formulated by Bourdieu (1987), namely economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital. This approach allows us to explore the key assets to be considered in the recruitment and selection of undergraduate students, the type of social assets these students bring to campus, their social networks as well as how these students are likely to bond, bridge and link with other students to enhance academic performance. Bourdieu's (1987; 1997) species of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) provide a conceptual basis for understanding the backgrounds and profiles of students being targeted by universities, as well as the kinds of intellectual and academic assets they carry with them.

Economic capital refers to command of economic resources such as cash or assets, which allows individuals to access most of the benefits available to a consumer society, including education. In our study, this an attribute of students from wealthy families, very often labelled by universities as 'fee-paying students'. However, economic factors alone are not sufficient to explain disparities in the educational attainment of children from different social classes and their chances of achieving access to higher education. In this regard, we use the concept of *cultural capital*, on the assumption that cultural habits and dispositions inherited from the family are fundamentally important to school success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Family characteristics are more influential than schools in affecting students' life chances, hence the importance of biography and background in student selection. Cultural capital consists of any knowledge and skills, experience or connections that enable people to succeed more than those who have a different set of resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital enables individuals to be familiar with, and easily make use of institutionalised and valued cultural forms. *Symbolic capital* consists of resources available on the basis of honour, prestige or recognition.

The paper also draws on a revisited theory of *social capital* to account for students from poor backgrounds who might develop assets that enable them to navigate successfully at university (Bourdieu, 1987). These authors argue that, through persistent learning absorbed from their everyday experiences in the community, some of these students develop alternative assets that might help them positively regulate their choices and actions when faced with challenges at university (p.2). We will return to this point later.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. While the core of primary data relates to the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) as the main case studies, it also draws on the recent body of secondary data on student enrolment to explore emerging institutional trends at the national level. The scramble for good students and the consequent experiments and adoption of more flexible entry requirements have triggered a heated debate on admission policies and greater commitment to institutional and academic research on these issues, which fortunately yields a significant pool of data. The conference held at the University of the Witwatersrand on the use of racial categories, and the debate on the affirmative discrimination policy used in the University of Cape Town admissions policy have also given rise to considerable material (Wits, 2014; Price, 2010). The use of multiple cases in this study created opportunities for within-case and across-case approaches to data analysis (Denscombe, 2003).

The interviews conducted for this study focused on selection and admission procedures and criteria, policy changes over time, the principles, values and assumptions underpinning them, as well as the perceptions of the interviewees about current strategies. We targeted administrative managers in faculties, faculty registrars, assistant deans (or deans) responsible for undergraduate admissions, and members of student representative councils. We focused on people in the faculties and schools who administer the admissions policies and procedures for recruiting undergraduate students, marketing and publicity personnel, and staff involved in student selection. Given the large amount of data collected and its diversity, a rigorous coding procedure assisted in reducing and categorising the data into more meaningful units for interpretation. Data were analysed using the thematic content analysis method (Stake, 2005). Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were triangulated (Patton, 1980) with information gleaned from the document analysis stage.

National Vision and Strategy

The new political dispensation in 1994 demanded a serious overhaul, restructuring and transformation of higher education to redress the injustices of the past. A particular feature of this vision was the need to improve

formal access to higher education for historically disadvantaged students (CHE, 2010). The pursuit of equity and redress occupied centre stage as stated in the *Education White Paper 3, A Programme for Higher Education Transformation* (1997):

The principle of equity requires fair opportunities both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them. Applying the principle of equity implies, on the one hand, an honest and incisive identification of existing inequalities which are the product of policies, structures and practices based on racial, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination or disadvantage, and on the other hand, a programme of transformation with a view to redress. (DoE, 1997:7)

Universities were required to develop new admissions policies that embrace the principles and values outlined in the White Paper to ensure that the goals of equity, redress and nation building could be achieved. Institutions had to increase access for blacks, women, disabled and mature students, and generate new curricula and flexible models of learning and teaching, including modes of delivery, to accommodate a larger and more diverse student population. The implementation of this vision has been steered by government through the provision of funding (e.g. funding formula, rolling plans, student financial aid, etc.) (DoE, 2006).

Redress Policies and Strategies: Working through and Against Racialised Categories

Some of the key defining features of apartheid social engineering were gender discrimination which marginalises women and legitimises unequal power relations between men and women and oppressive patriarchal relations and ethnicity, which was used to support white supremacy and exclude other ethnic groups from mainstream South African society. It is, however, the salience or *arrogance of race* in the South African discriminatory machinery that shaped debates on equity issues in a somewhat unique manner, comparable to a limited extent only to the American experience (Webbstock & Sehoole, 2016). Thus *race* has become a highly contested category as a measure of affirmative action or social equalising strategies. As eloquently articulated by Jansen (2010), the question that race poses is whether the “master’s tools” can be

used “to dismantle the master’s house”, or more specifically, whether race can be used as an analytical category in dealing with equity issues. As Warmington (2009: 295) indicates, the challenge for educators committed to social justice is that, in drawing on racialised categories, they place themselves in a paradox of having to work both *with* and *against* conceptual tools that have yet to be effectively replaced.

Racial Categories as a Measure of Transformation

In South Africa, analysts are divided about the use of racial categories. There are those who argue that apartheid racialised categories (‘white’, ‘Indian’, ‘Asian’, ‘coloured’ and ‘African’), which have been used as *categories of practice* alongside those such as ‘native’, ‘bantú’ and ‘volk’, can also be used as *categories of analysis* in conceptualising, designing and implementing equity and social justice strategies (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 4). By *categories of practice* we refer to those terms connected to everyday social experience, developed and deployed with the purpose of acting upon or shaping people’s lives in a specific manner. *Categories of analysis* are those terms used by social scientists to make sense of social phenomena covering a whole range of sociological concepts. In both cases, one must realise that categorizations make up and order the world and, hence, constitute and order people within it (Webbstock & Sehoole, 2016).

In this sense, one might argue that, as an analytical category, race should be used as an important consideration for university admissions to rectify the injustices of the past. Accordingly, the use of race as a criterion for admission could balance the demography of the student population, ensure that all major sections of society are equally represented, and minimise bias against any particular ethnic, social, regional or gender group in the selection process (Soudien, 2010). The implication of using race as a criterion for admission means that black students who show academic potential can also be considered for university entry. Favish & Hendry (2010: 271) comment on the lack of progress on redress: “While the increase in the number of black students is welcomed, it is of a very small base”. The proportion of black students is still far from approximating the demographics of the South African population. For example, major challenges remain with regard to redressing past racial inequalities in the proportion of black students enrolled in institutions like UCT, Stellenbosch and UP, and in their success rates (Favish & Hendry, 2010). For Erasmus (2010: 250):

... Participation rates for white South Africans in tertiary education continue to be among the highest in the world, and for 'blacks' they remain the lowest. South Africa's higher education system remains markedly unequal, with only small changes over the past 12 years.

Erasmus (2010: 250) concludes that with the continuing advantage of white South Africans as a demographic segment, a race-blind policy will perpetuate historical patterns of discrimination; it is appropriate to take disadvantage of racial profiles in admissions. For him, race categories should be used as a proxy in student admissions to rectify the injustices of the past as a temporary compromise, until such time more sophisticated tools, which take into account the historical and contemporary social 'mix', are available.

Racial Categories in Normalising a Racialised Future

Insofar as apartheid categories are concerned, there are those who challenge the persistent use of racial categories, whether as categories of practice or categories of analysis. Benatar (2010) argues that it is disadvantage, rather than race, that is relevant. Admissions policies need to find methods of identifying disadvantage and using these methods. If the policy is to favour moderately disadvantaged students, then all the applicants who are admitted, and who would not otherwise have been admitted, will be moderately disadvantaged. The same author goes on to argue that if universities use race as a basis for admission, some students might use their race classification to their benefit, regardless of their socio-economic status. By using any type of racial categorisation, such as the apartheid regime's Population Registration Act of 1950, universities would be confirming apartheid's objective to have these categories permanently established in society. Race classification entrenches the normalisation of this categorisation leading to a racialised future, even if such a classification is used in a redress project.

Institutional Approaches to Racial Categorisation

Since the introduction of the new National Senior Certificate (NSC) in 2008, most universities have amended their admission policies. Technically, admission policies are currently based on three sets of results, namely (i) the NSC examination (which

replaced the former matriculation examination) converted into an admission points system (APS); (ii) the national benchmark tests (NBT) determined by Higher Education South Africa (HESA); and (iii) institutional tests designed to assess university entrance capability. The APS is calculated by adding the performance levels (1-8) for the six subjects taken for the NSC, and converting them into points. An applicant must meet a certain number of points on the APS, depending on the choice of degree. Various amendments to admissions policies were introduced, such as additional requirements that applicants must meet to secure a place at a university. These include writing the NBT, a minimum of 50% pass in English, and increases in admission points (Bowman, 2010). Adopted by different faculties across institutions to minimise a perceived catastrophic decline in the quality of school leavers, the barriers posed by increasing admission points raise serious moral and political challenges for the South African universities. However, in so far as racial categorisation is concerned, three main categories of institutional responses can be identified.

University of Cape Town: Race Based Admissions Policy

According to an analysis of data from the University of Cape Town (UCT), which had adopted racial categorisation in their admissions policy, there was no empirical basis for arguing that race should not be an important consideration in university admissions. As Le Grange (2010: 335) put it:

... Fairness in the case of university admission policies would mean that one cannot simply apply the same criteria for admitting advantaged and disadvantaged students. The implication is that, in a country which has experienced decades of legal discrimination based on race, and where legacies of disadvantage remain, colour consciousness in public policies is crucial for a certain period of time.

In this perspective, admitting more black students than other races based on racial classification would diversify the student population, since there are still relatively few black students in South African institutions. UCT validated on these grounds its 'reverse discrimination' or 'fair discrimination' strategies in student admissions. It argued that its race-based admissions policy was designed to address access

issues and redress the injustices of the past (Price, 2014). The goal was to ensure that the university grew a diverse student body to reflect the demographic diversity of the South African population (Soudien, 2010; Price, 2014). For this purpose, the university required applicants to declare their racial classification ('White', 'Indian', 'Asian', 'Coloured' and 'African'). In line with our argument, the assumption was that these racial categories would be used only as *categories of analysis*, i.e. to judge whether applicants have been affected by inequality and disadvantage, and not as *categories of practice* i.e. ideological artefacts that entrench racism.

Like many universities in South Africa, UCT drew on NBT tests results (undertaken by Higher Education South Africa (HESA), which emphasise reading, writing, and mathematics –to check the ability of individual students to cope with university studies. The selection of applicants at UCT was based on Admission Points Scores (APS) as indicators of eligibility. Racial categorisation enabled the university to set targets for each racial group, i.e. for each qualification or group of qualifications the university set redress enrolment targets for each racial category. After fierce criticism of its admissions policy, perceived as 'racist framework', UCT dropped racial categorisation from its admission policy in 2014, shifting its emphasis on race to educational disadvantage, taking family background as proxy for disadvantage:

Whereas in the past, almost all black applicants to UCT were uncompetitive in terms of their school-leaving results because overwhelmingly they came from poor schools and disadvantaged backgrounds, now many come from good schools and are admitted on a competitive basis in terms of school leaving results. Others may be less competitive on this basis because there is still educational disadvantage through their school or home backgrounds – but the playing fields can be levelled by taking these backgrounds into account – without reference to race (Price, 2014: 1).

University of the Witwatersrand (Wits): Merit-Based Policy

Admissions criteria at Wits were entirely based on academic merit, applied without regard to

considerations of race, colour or creed. This was based on the Admissions Point Score (APS) system focusing on those students perceived as capable of achieving and succeeding in their studies:

We believe that the student has the potential to succeed at university. We do not discriminate in terms of the school that you went to; you don't get extra points because you went to a private school ok, or fewer points because you went to this school or... that school. That is why we have what we call 'admission criteria' (Interview 1, 2014).

Such capability was associated with key attributes for student success such as hard work, independence, resourcefulness, and ambition; in other words attributes which, in Bourdieu's (1986) terms, reflect strong social and cultural capital inherited from the family and the community. Since these attributes are difficult to measure, the tendency was to target such students only by raising the bar and requiring higher point scores, notwithstanding the claim that, under current circumstances in schools, the senior certificate is not a good predictor of a student's intellectual ability (Griesel, 1999).

Wits have recently embraced the concept of fair discrimination. Accordingly, it has developed access principles that do not rely only on success in school-leaving examinations (as reflected in the APS). Instead, it also targets candidates with potential from scholastically disadvantaged groups and socio-economically deprived backgrounds (Joseph, 2014). An example can be seen in the revised admissions policy of the Wits Faculty of Health Sciences, which stipulates that 40% of places will be allocated to top-performing candidates based on academic merit, and the remaining 60% of places will be allocated to previously disadvantaged students as follows:

- a) 20% of places for top-performing rural learners
- b) 20% of places for top-performing learners from quintile 1 and 2 schools. The quintile system is a government policy that categorizes schools based on their level of poverty. It is tied to the school funding formula. Schools are categorised into five quintiles (quintile 1 is the poorest and quintile 5 is the richest), with schools in poorer quintiles receiving more funding than those in wealthier quintiles.

- c) 20% of places for top-performing African and coloured learners.

For this purpose, Wits has also decided to link its admissions policy to an increasing focus on teaching and learning practices, and academic development programmes for students at faculty and school levels, to support students in study, writing, argumentation, and research skills.

University of Kwa-Zulu Natal: Educational Disadvantage

UKZN was the first institution to adopt and maintain an admissions policy grounded on educational disadvantage or fair discrimination. This institution uses quotas in its admission policy. For instance, at least 15% of new entrants to each programme are selected from students who have completed their schooling at quintile 1 or 2 schools and meet all the minimum entry requirements for the programme. Specific university programmes require increased quotas across the quintiles, within which selection is done based on academic merit. Certain university programmes may impose additional criteria (for example, a portfolio of work, audition or interview) to determine eligibility for entrance to the programme. As in the case of Wits, UKZN has linked its admissions policy to a comprehensive student academic support programme, managed at all levels of the university hierarchy.

Placing Educational Disadvantage on the Agenda: Theoretical Challenges

Current institutional convergence on educational disadvantage in admissions policies raises important theoretical challenges. The first theoretical challenge concerns the existing conceptualisation of *educational disadvantage*. While there is growing consensus about the need to move away from apartheid categorisation, particularly the emphasis on race, to concentrate on educational disadvantage, there is no clarity on what this means both theoretically (what conceptualisation is adequate?) and in practical terms (how should it be translated into policy?). The question that remains is whether racial categories can be replaced effectively by colour-blind *social class* (very often diluted into *socio-economic status* to avoid Marxian terminology), particularly where, in real social life, racial group overlaps with social class, given the extremes of apartheid social engineering.

The second theoretical challenge stems from the fact that the emerging conceptions of educational

disadvantage remain constrained by assumptions connected to the deficit model. Currently, the concept of educational disadvantage is linked to forms of marginalisation of individuals or social groups that, by virtue of their race, gender, geographical location (rural, township or poor neighbourhood etc.), have been historically placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy. In Bourdieu's (1997) strict conceptualisation of social capital, given their historical background, such students would have no place in any South African elite institutions. We consider this problem from a radically different angle - an approach that is more in line with prevailing contextual complexities in South Africa.

A recent study by Cross & Atinde (2015 – in press) challenges prevailing conceptions about the fate of historically disadvantaged students. They demonstrate that some of these students derive attitudes and strategies from their experiences that enable them to succeed within a complex university environment. They offer a valuable qualification of Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital and *habitus* by showing how disadvantaged students acquire alternative forms of capital and dispositions that help them to navigate the challenging environment of the university. These forms of capital include cognitive processes - forms of adaptive learning which they label as the 'pedagogy of the marginalised'. Accordingly, through persistence in activities that may be subjectively threatening, experiences of mastering these, and the consequent enhancement of self-efficacy, people process, weigh, and integrate diverse sources of information concerning their capability which becomes central to regulating their choice of behaviour and effort expenditure as they confront new situations (Bandura, 1977: 212).

Cross & Atinde's (2015 - in press) argument point to the need for careful reconceptualisation of the concept of *merit*, particularly in relation to educational disadvantage. Currently, the concept of merit is based, to some extent, on a misrepresentation, and attendant marginalisation of some students who are potentially talented and in a position to succeed. It raises important questions for future research: What alternative forms of capital and dispositions students possess? How should they be measured and taken into account in selection procedures? Interestingly, the University of Cape Town was the first to take recognition of this fact. However, it faulted in placing too much emphasis on race, which was interpreted not only as a manifestation of racism, but also as ignoring

the fact that currently the problem of educational disadvantage is more about class than race.

CONCLUSION

University admission of students remains a site of fierce contestation in South Africa. Historically, all universities used the concept of merit, viewed as an acceptable measure of student 'socially valuable ability' for academic performance, as a primary basis for student admission. However, peculiar to the South African context, is the fact that merit could not be separated from the racially discriminatory logic of apartheid. As universities were racially and ethnically segregated, merit became a mechanism for distribution of privileges in higher education. As such, merit favoured students from racially privileged backgrounds and left the limited room to equal opportunities to students from racially disadvantaged families, making it effectively a proxy for white privilege.

The higher education vision categorically brought the question of access, equity and social justice to the centre of the policy agenda, which warranted the reframing of the prevailing conceptions of merit to embrace the principles of race and gender redress translated in some instances into affirmative action. It has also raised profound theoretical and policy challenges. First, the main challenge has been whether the apartheid categorisation or classification ('master's tools'), which were instrumental in giving expression to apartheid identities, can still be used to redress apartheid imbalances in university access (to dismantle the master's house'). The paper has argued that policy-makers and analysts are divided in this regard. Some argue that racial categories must be used as 'categories of analysis' in to adequately conceptualise student selection and admission, thus placing on their analytical power while downplaying their role in constituting racial subjectivities or identities as categories of practice. Others contend that, given this racial particular racial dimension as categories of practice using apartheid classification amounts to reproducing apartheid logic and practices.

Second, given the controversy around the use of racial categories, South African universities, including the University of Cape Town - the most persistent in the use of these categories, have abandoned racial classification in their admission policies. Some of these, have shifted from emphasis on race to class, and reverted to a conception of merit that takes into consideration the notions of 'educational disadvantage'.

The paper has argued that, while educational disadvantage represents a considerable departure from racially-based policies, the paucity and limitations of research remains a major constraint for catering for educationally disadvantaged students. It draws attention to the alternative assets (learning, skills and attitudes) that historically disadvantaged students develop under certain social and comic conditions, which are very often overlooked in current theoretical and policy discourses.

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