University access and admissions

Post-1994, new social imperatives and goals resulted in changes to admissions policies, criteria, processes and practices at universities. The *Higher Education Act o*f 1997 required each institution to publish an 'admission *policy* and make it available on request'.

An *admissions policy* is much more than simply admissions *criteria and procedures*. It needs to reflect a university's engagement with the apartheid legacy, the current patterns of advantage and disadvantage, constitutional, legislative and other social imperatives, and with the issues of social equity and redress.

A university also needs to set out in relation to its particular history, vision and mission, and academic programmes, its admissions criteria and how it will pursue equity and redress, including through what specific strategies and mechanisms.

Admission policy, in line with constitutional ideals, cannot discriminate unfairly. However, the *Constitution* states that 'to promote the achievement of equality, measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken.'

The 1997 Higher Education *White Paper* enunciates 'equity and redress' as a fundamental principle. It states that 'the principle of equity requires *fair opportunities both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them.*'

Although this is seldom the case, admissions policies may confine themselves to or privilege academic accomplishment alone. Academic achievement must be highly valued and promoted. But must academic results always trump all other considerations when it comes to admissions?

Where privilege and disadvantage is structured along lines of class, 'race', gender and the like, as in South Africa, an admissions policy that is based *exclusively* on academic results could strongly reproduce social inequalities.

In general, therefore, admissions policies do not (and should not) reduce merit to academic accomplishments alone. A wider set of considerations are deliberately employed to establish merit. It is legitimate to also take into account the need to build an equitable society, and create a diverse intellectual, learning and educational environment.

When it comes to access to universities, there is great misunderstanding about *eligibility* and *admission*.

The 'first step in the admissions process is determining the *eligibility* of applicants.' Each institution sets out the minimum requirements that a student must meet to be considered for admission to university – in other words, to be *eligible*. This is usually a National Senior Certificate (NSC) with a university entrance pass.

Being eligible to enter a university does not, however, *entitle* a student to be admitted to any university; or, to a specific university programme, such as medicine, engineering or performing arts.

Each university has the legal authority to decide which students it will admit. *Admissions criteria* must set out openly and clearly what students need to demonstrate in order to be considered for admission to a particular institution (and within that institution, to a particular programme of study, such as medicine or engineering).

These criteria typically include academic results. But they can also include the school attended, geographic origins, class background, 'race', gender, family income, home language, civic involvement, special talents and abilities, nationality and economic and emotional hardships overcome. The more inclusive the admissions policy, the greater the prospects of eroding social inequalities

One strategy used by universities to enhance redress and achieve greater equity in admissions is *affirmative action*. Both the Constitution and laws provide for the use of affirmative action. As Albie Sachs notes, pervasive inequities 'cannot be wished away by invoking constitutional idealism.'

A simple notion of 'equal opportunity' or 'equality of treatment' in the face of historical and contemporary disadvantage will not 'reduce disadvantage but merely maintain it.' No great reliance either can also be placed on the 'free market' or 'natural processes' to promote equity and redress. This means that specific measures and strategies such as affirmative action are necessary.

Affirmative action is contentious. Some committed to social justice argue that it primarily benefits the black elite and reinforces class privileges. They also question the use of 'race' as a proxy for disadvantage and warn about 'race' categories becoming ossified rather than eroded, and warn about the continued use of 'race' in the construction of identities.

Indeed, we find ourselves in the grip of a profound paradox: the use of '*race*' to promote redress and to advance social equity. In Sachs' words, we are making 'conscious use of racial distinctions in order to create a non-racial society.'

Affirmative action raises 'a number of complex questions.' These include the goals of affirmative action: are they 'redress for past injury to a group, compensation for ongoing disadvantage, or increased diversity in a learning environment?'

Should affirmative action 'be class-based, rather than identity-based? How are group rights balanced against individual rights?' Given that disadvantage takes myriad forms 'how should an institution weigh different forms of disadvantage?' Finally, "what criteria (or sunset clauses) should be used to phase out affirmative action?'

Redress, equity of *access* and equity of *opportunity* and *outcomes* for black and women South Africans, and those of working class and rural poor social origins and with special needs is vital for democratising access to knowledge.

These students need not just formal access to universities, but real opportunities for learning and knowledge. This is key not only to quality and 'throughput and graduation rates but also to the very institution of the university itself and to the role it can play in a new democracy such as South Africa.'

Social equity and redress has great value for diversity within universities, as well as for quality. Diversity in higher education, as former Harvard president Neil Rudenstine argues, is a necessary condition for 'human learning, understanding and wisdom', and a powerful means of 'creating the intellectual energy and robustness that lead to greater knowledge.'

Further, 'diversity enriches the educational experience', in that students 'learn from those whose experiences, beliefs and perspectives are different from' their own, 'and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment.'

The quality of education is diminished by the absence of diversity and 'educational opportunities are drastically limited without diversity, and that compromises an institution's ability to maintain its own missions and goals.'

Diversity facilitates 'critical examination of oneself and one's traditions', knowledge and understanding of different cultures, 'of differences of gender, race, and sexuality', and democratic citizenship, and 'the cultivation of humanity.' It is also vital to forging, through higher education, greater social cohesion in our deeply fractured society.