

Redressing the colonial and apartheid legacy: social equity, redress and higher education admissions in democratic South Africa

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The Paper

- **Analyses colonial/apartheid legacy of higher education (HE) for blacks**
- **Advances 6 propositions regarding the erosion of pre-1994 legacy in HE and realising social equity and redress for historically disadvantaged**
- **Describes approaches to equity/redress and admissions post-1994 and outcomes**
- **Identifies critical challenges confronting state and HE institutions if constitutional and legislated values and goals related to equity and redress are to be realised**

Not in this Paper

- Paper confines itself to the issues of equity, redress and admissions **for students** from historically disadvantaged social classes and groups.
- Important issue of equity and redress with respect to the **employment of members of historically disadvantaged social classes and groups not addressed**, - limited progress and employment equity in higher education remains key challenge.
- Neither is issue of ***institutional redress*** for HBIs addressed. Institutional redress to enhance the academic capabilities of HBIs remains important issue. Arguable lack of state support for institutional redress makes controversial policy of institutional differentiation and diversity.

This Seminar Paper: Objects

- Engage with the issue of social and redress in HE admissions for students from historically disadvantaged social groups through advancing 6 propositions
- Identify the critical challenges that continue to confront the state and higher education institutions if constitutional and legislated values and goals with respect to social equity and redress are to be realised

Apartheid legacy

In 1993

- Gross participation rate in HE was about 17%
- But 9% for Africans, 13% for Coloured, 40% for Indians and 70% for whites
- Black South Africans constituted 89% of the population, but black students only constituted 52% of the student body of 473 000
- White students, although only 11% of the population, constituted 48% of enrolments
- 43% of students were women

Highlights the relative exclusion and subordinate inclusion of black and women South Africans in higher education.

Propositions

1. Equity and redress

- Politics of equal recognition
- Cannot, however, be blind to the effects of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid
- Cannot blithely proceed from notion that advent of democracy is in itself a sufficient condition for the erasure of the conditions, policies and practices that have grounded and sustained inequalities.

Precisely this reality that gives salience to the idea of redress and makes it a fundamental and necessary dimension of HE and social transformation

2. Equity and excellence/quality

- Contended that increased participation of historically disadvantaged social groups in HE and pursuit of equity and redress must necessarily compromise excellence and quality and result in the diminution of the quality of provision, qualifications and graduates

Certainly risks, but such outcomes are not pre-ordained. May be an intractable tension between the simultaneous pursuit of equity and redress and quality, but no inevitable conflict between them. Imperatives of social equity and redress do not mean any inevitable reduction of quality and the compromise of standards, appropriately defined.

- **'Quality' and 'standards' not timeless and invariant - are historically specific and must be related to the objectives of institutions and to educational and broader social purposes**
- **"Educational process in higher education (including curriculum frameworks, course design, and approaches to delivery and assessment also neither immutable nor technical or neutral issues - . "historically constructed" and "constitutes a significant variable affecting performance and determining who gains access and who succeeds".**

- Achievement of social equity with quality and quality with social equity may be challenging - but not impossible goals.
- Without quality, prospect of meaningful social equity is compromised and rendered meaningless.
- But, 'quality' pursued in a way that is oblivious to the imperatives of equity and redress means that social advancement through equity of opportunity in HE is precluded, the class, race and gender character of the occupation and social structure of apartheid is reproduced rather than eroded and transformed and democratisation is effectively compromised

3. Equity of access and opportunity and outcomes

- Necessary to distinguish between **equity of access** and **equity of opportunity** and **outcomes** for historically disadvantaged social groups
- Access may be secured through various mechanisms. But equity of opportunity and outcomes depend on supportive institutional environments and cultures, curriculum innovation, appropriate learning and teaching strategies and techniques, appropriate induction and support, and effective academic mentoring.

- Challenge of equity of opportunity is “part of a wider project of democratising access to knowledge”. Means that beyond providing students formal access, ensuring also “epistemological access” is vital (ibid.:3).
- This ‘epistemological access’ “is central not only to issues such as 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”.

4. Diversity, equity and quality

- Achievement of **social equity and redress** in HE has great value for diversity as well as for quality
- **Diversity** 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”
- “Diversity enriches the educational experience” as students “learn from those whose experiences, beliefs and perspectives are different from” their own
- Conversely, the **quality** of education is diminished by an absence of diversity and “educational opportunities are drastically limited without diversity, and that compromises an institution’s ability to maintain its own mission and goals”.

5. Affirmative action

- Pervasive inequities, as Albie Sachs writes, “cannot be wished away by invoking constitutional idealism” (2006:x), and ‘equal opportunity’ and “equality of treatment...is unlikely to reduce disadvantage (but) merely maintain it”
- No great reliance should be placed on the ‘free market’ or ‘natural processes’ to promote social equity and redress
- Specific measures and strategies are necessary. One such strategy is **affirmative action**, which can take different forms including quotas, targets and preferences.

Conceptions of Affirmative action:

- **“Proactive steps to reduce or address the impacts of discrimination with the ultimate goal of eliminating differences between genders, race and ethnicities, underrepresented and dominant groups”**
- **“Preference, by way of special measures, for certain groups for the purpose of securing adequate advancement of such groups or their individual members in order to ensure equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms”**
- **“Focussed and deliberate governmental intervention that takes account of the reality of race to deal with and overcome the problems associated with race”**

- Important distinction needs to be made between the use of race to **discriminate and exclude** social groups and individuals, and use of race to **facilitate redress and enhance social equity** as part of creating more inclusive and more educative learning environments and processes.

Aims of affirmative action

- “Not to establish a form of anachronistic or disjunctive compensation for past injustices. It is to rectify the way in which these injustices continue to permeate the world we live in”
- Not to “replace one form of social inequality with another, that is, to elevate ‘now-its-our-turnism’ into a principle of equitable redress – is to overcome all forms of structured advantage”
- “We should never lose sight of the fact that the goal is to establish a non-racial society in which social and cultural diversity is celebrated and seen as a source of vitality, and in which race as such ultimately has no political or economic significance. That must always be our goals”.

6. Admissions: policy and practice

- Commitment to equity, redress and diversity and affirmative action as a strategy to achieve their realisation have considerable implications for student recruitment, admissions and support (financial as well as academic)
- Great misunderstanding of issues of 'eligibility' and 'admission'
- "First step in the admissions process is determining the eligibility of applicants" - specified requirements students must meet to be considered for admission to university.

- **Admission**, in contrast, has to do with “set of criteria the university will employ in making a decision on which students” will be admitted – can include academic results, school attended, geographic origins, race, gender, income levels, home languages, civic involvement, special talents and abilities, nationality, hardships overcome, etc.

Restrictive admissions policy: confines itself to or privileges academic accomplishments alone. In South Africa likely to reproduce historical and prevailing social inequalities.

- **More open and extensive admissions policy** has greater prospects of eroding existing social inequalities. Here, 'merit' is not defined solely in terms of, or reduced to, academic accomplishments alone, but a wider set of criteria are deliberately employed to establish merit.
- **Academic accomplishment must be highly valued and encouraged and mediocrity disdained** - but arguable whether there should be any automatic right to admission based purely on academic results that is unconditioned by constitutional or social imperatives, the vision and mission of a university, the needs of society, development objectives and the realisation of a particular kind of intellectual, learning and educational environment and process.

Democracy dividend

- Recall 1993:
- Gross participation rate in HE 9% for Africans and 70% for whites
- Black students only constituted 52% of enrolments
- White students 48% of enrolments of 473 000
- 43% of students were women

2005:

- Black students 75% of total enrolment of 737 472
- 54.5% of students women

Challenges

- **Challenge 1**
- Progress of both black, and especially African, and women students **masks inequities** in their distribution across institutions, qualification levels and academic programmes.
- Large numbers of African students continue to be concentrated in distance education, and both **African and women students** continue to be under-represented in science, engineering and technology and business and commerce programmes.
- Post-graduate enrolments across most fields are also low.

- **Challenge 2**

- Black enrolments have increased but gross participation rate (especially African and Coloured) continues to be **considerably lower** than for white South Africans.

	1993	2005
• Africans	9	12
• Coloureds	13	12
• Indians	40	51
• Whites	70	60
• Overall	17	16

- **Challenge 3**

- Major racial disparities in **completion rates** in undergraduate programmes, together with the particularly **high attrition rates** of black students across the board, have the effect of negating much of the growth in black access that has been achieved.
- Judging by drop-out, undergraduate success, and graduation rates a substantial improvement in **equity of opportunity and outcome** for black students remains to be achieved.
- White student success rates in 2005 were **85%**, while African student rates were **70%**.

- **Challenge 4**
- **Enrolments at various HWIs reflect lower black representation than demographic representation. So even though deracialisation, white students still concentrated at HWIs and HBIs remain almost exclusively black.**
- **Important social class factor at play.**
- **Students from capitalist and middle classes concentrated at HWIs, while those from working class and rural poor concentrated at HBIs.**
- **If equity of opportunity and outcomes previously strongly affected by race, now also shaped by social class.**

- **Challenge 5**
- **Extent to which there exist at all institutions **academically supportive cultures** that promote higher learning, cater for the varied learning needs of a diverse student body through well-conceptualised, designed and implemented academic programmes and academic development initiatives, and mechanisms to promote and assure quality are moot issues.**

- **Challenge 6**
- **Institutional cultures**, especially at historically white institutions, could compromise equity of opportunity and outcomes. The specific histories of these institutions, lingering racist and sexist conduct, privileges associated with class, English as the language of tuition and administration, the overwhelming predominance of white academics and administrators and male academics, the concomitant under-representation of black and women academics and role-models, and issues related to respect for and appreciation of diversity and difference could all combine to reproduce institutional cultures that are experienced by black, women, and working class and rural poor students as discomfoting, alienating, exclusionary and disempowering.

- **Challenge 7**
- One reason for very high rate of drop-outs among black students is almost certainly **inadequate state funding** in the forms of scholarships, bursaries and loans.
- Highlights reality of **inter-connection of race and class** - equity of access for black students from working class and impoverished rural social backgrounds will be severely compromised unless there is a greater commitment of public funding for financial aid to indigent students

- **Challenge 8**

- Despite legislative requirement, few institutions have **admissions policy**. Absence hinders public scrutiny and critical analysis.
- Have institutions clearly and rigorously thought through social equity and redress in the light of South Africa's history and inherited and contemporary social structure?
- **Is deracialisation result of equity and redress or prohibition of discrimination?**

- **Challenge 9**
- **Affirmative action** as a strategy for enabling redress and advancing social equity continues to be object of contestation.
- Some (usually historically advantaged) claim 'discrimination', 'reverse racism' and inevitable erosion of 'quality' and 'standards' 'psychological damage' on beneficiaries, etc.
- Those committed to **social justice** raise concerns about: benefiting a growing black capitalist and middle class and reinforcing class inequalities; efficacy of the use of race and gender as proxies of advantage and disadvantage, possibility of race categories becoming ossified rather than eroded, etc.

- Yet **crucial further issue** regarding affirmative action
- Can affirmative action “overcome all forms of structured advantage”, especially when it tends to “ignore those inequalities based on **class or socio-economic position**”, and is reduced to race and gender
- Mamdani’s challenge: “whether a strategy designed to address the grievances of a racially oppressed minority could be adequate to dismantling the apparatus of domination which strangled a racially oppressed majority. In other words, no matter how open the access to minority white institutions, in the name of ‘Affirmative Action’, will this not simply alter the racial composition of that minority with little consequence for the oppressed majority except to legitimize their exclusion as based on merit this time round? In the final analysis, will not embracing the language and vision of ‘Affirmative Action’ obscure the very task that must be central to democratisation in a “new” South Africa, that of **institutional transformation**?”

- **Challenge 10**
- **Pace of social equity and redress in higher education continues to be severely constrained by conditions in South African schooling.**
- **Powerful link between social exclusion of disadvantaged social classes and groups, and equity of access, opportunity and outcomes and achievement in schooling**
- **Fundamental challenge is to improve the quality of education in historically black schools**

Conclusion

- Post-1994: significant expansion in enrolment of black and women students - by 2005 75% black and 55% women
- Yet paradoxes:
- ✓ Motive forces of increased enrolment arguably *combination of outlawing of discrimination and active national and institutional measures of social equity and redress* (formulated and implemented to varying degrees at individual institutions).

- ✓ **By 2005 minimal increase in participation rate of Africans and participation rate of both Coloureds and overall participation rate had declined**

Measured in terms of participation rates, and given intersection of race, class, gender and geography and schooling in South Africa, clear that significant advance in social equity and redress for those of working class and rural poor social origins remains to be achieved.