The Complexities of Race-Based Admissions in South African Universities

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Abstract
Race has been a key feature of admissions in South African universities over the last 30 years. The admission policies coined around affirmative action have received conflicting criticisms in the academic literature. Some scholars argue that affirmative action policy promotes mainly the interests of Black students, challenges university autonomy, compromises quality, and recreates a new form of racial discrimination. Some of the views see admission of "Black" as compromising quality and lowering standards. This paper analyzes the different perspectives around race-based admission policies in South African universities and the outcomes of their implementation. It argues for a nuanced approach to admission policies beyond race, and advocates for other features of disadvantage to be considered beyond race.

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Race has over the years been a key feature of admissions in South African universities. Under apartheid, universities used race-based admission policies to exclude the majority of Black students from access to higher education in general, and from well-resourced historically white universities in particular. Drawing from the constitution, which advocates for "fair discrimination," or affirmative action, universities in the postapartheid era developed inclusive race-based policies aimed at redressing these inequities. The government set targets for the number of Black students for universities to admit, which, by doing so, deracialize and diversify their student demographics. The implementation of these policies has not been without challenges. There were those who argued that raced-based policies led to the lowering of standards and advocated for merit-based admission policies. On the other hand, some argued that unless race-based quotas and targets were set, universities would remain unchanged and untransformed. This article provides an analysis of these opposing perspectives.

The Case for Race-Based Admission Policies

Those who support race-based admission policies invoke the constitution, which mandates the necessity of radical action in the context of "deeply rooted informal racial discrimination." When South Africa attained freedom in 1994, it inherited a highly fragmented, inequitable and racially-divided higher education system with a participation rate (i.e., total number of enrolled students divided by total population in the 18–24 age cohort) of 17 percent. The inequities of the system found expression in higher education participation rates by racial group: only 9 percent of students were Black, despite Black South Africans constituting 80 percent of the country's population. Colored students represented 13 percent, and Indian students represented 40 percent of all students, while the majority of the students—70 percent—were white (despite them constituting just 10 percent of the country). The new dispensation decided that the only way to redress these inequities was to use race-based admission for those who met the academic requirements to enter university. In many historically white universities, admission targets for each racial group in some programs of study were set in order to provide access and improve participation in programs which other racial groups were previously excluded from. Such an approach was viewed by the opponents of race-based admission policies as unfair. They argued that it would lead to the decline of quality and standards.

The Case for Merit-Based Admission Policies to Preserve Quality and Autonomy

Arguments for merit-based admission policies with particular focus on quality, university autonomy, and noninterference in the business of universities surfaced. In other words, universities have moral obligations to admit only qualified students irrespective of race. Some of the top historically white universities have experienced pressure to either continue or discontinue race-based admission policies. These universities attract the best students in the country because of their reputation, and should thus drop race as a criterion in favor of academic performance. There is a view that the only way to transform these universities is to remove barriers of race created by apartheid. On the contrary, there is also fear that some universities will not transform unless the race card is played. The conflicting arguments put universities' autonomy and internal policies regarding quality and admission into question. While some universities claim to have transformed, for some of them there is no evidence that racial admission policy is effective.

The Case to Abolish Race-Based Admission Policies in Favor of Economic and Disadvantage Status

The University of Cape Town's Commission of Inquiry recommended a revised admission policy using alternative markers of disadvantage. This should include a combination of academic performance and disadvantage weightings such as school attended, parents' and grandparents' levels of education, et cetera, but not race.

This view seems to have marked a shift in the debate around admissions, which moved beyond race. Race as a category for defining redress has increasingly become unhelpful with the growth of the Black middle class since 1994. This group earns good salaries and can afford to send their children to good schools and can, therefore, no longer be regarded as candidates for redress policies.

This view also finds expression in the eligibility criteria for government-sponsored Student Financial Aid Scheme, where—in addition to academic criteria—not race but financial criterion is used, targeting students who come from households with income up to 350,000 South African rand per year (approximately USD 1,842). Those who come from households that receive government social security grants automatically qualify for funding.

Access Versus Success

The question is whether race-based admission policies have translated into the success of the beneficiaries of these policies. The statistics show a bleak picture demonstrating that access does not always translate to success. Studies conducted over the past two decades show that under one-third of students complete their programs in regulated time, while only one in three students graduate within four years. Research also shows a drop-out rate of 52 percent, which undermines the access gains of postapartheid South Africa. South Africa's graduation rate of 15 percent is among the lowest in the world. Financial reasons, students' poor entry level, poor academic support, and pressure to provide families with financial support are some of the reasons for dropping out of universities.

The Need to Transform Admission Policies

There is a concern that race-based admission policies need to change. The recent changes in the country's student population (Black Africans constituted 79.5 percent out of the country's 1.068 million students in 2021) represent a good development, but in the long run might exclude other population groups. Literature suggests that affirmative action policy devalues the ability of excellent Black students to fairly compete. Seemingly, the majority of them experienced cognitive dissonance after gaining access to universities based on their race. The "disadvantaged" groups feel empowered and would like to compete without the race factor. This position comes strongly in matters where Black students excel, and their performance is not judged on merit but is attributed to affirmative action. There are concerns that affirmative action is unfairly treating disadvantaged white students and gives advantaged wealthy Black students preference even after they benefited from economic opportunities of the past 30 years. In this regard, there is a need to develop policies that look beyond race as a criterion for admission.

Conclusion

The discussion highlights the need for a balanced approach to admission policies in universities depending on the country. In South Africa, race continues to impact admissions to universities, however, it might be balanced with other factors of disadvantage in order to have a nuanced approach to the development and application of admission policies in universities. The use of race-based admission policies for future imperatives of redress, quality and sustainability in higher education remains contested. ◢

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