

Policy Brief

Selection and Admissions: 'Universities to take the nation in its entirety to greater heights'

Executive Summary

Higher education plays an important role in nation building through the production of the much needed skilled professionals to work in the various sectors of the economy. It is therefore its mandate to select and admit students from all walks of life so that they are prepared for higher productivity and become poverty alleviators in **the areas or**

spheres they come from. Student selection and admissions in South African higher education are matters of concern at a time when the high pass rate of grade twelve learners is consistently increasing every year. This brought back the debate on student selection and admission policies in higher education. This policy brief argues that, given the deep social distortions entrenched by apartheid, current merit-based selection and admissions policies must be re-conceptualized to embrace the principle of equity and affirmative action.

Initially admission to the university was based on merit though other students were admitted based on the mature age exemptions policy as well as other criteria. Even with these criteria in place the majority of the population was excluded from participation in higher education because of the apartheid system.



"A key consideration in the idea of the transformation of the university is that universities do not reflect the new South Africa"





Background

Black students particularly were previously disadvantaged due to a poor schooling system. This perpetuated inequalities in the South African higher education system. A call for reform of university selection and admissions criteria demanded that universities amend their selection and admission policies with the view of redressing past inequalities (CHE, 2010). This has resulted in mass participation of previously disadvantaged groups. However, mass participation has recently become an issue partly due to lack of consideration of the level of preparedness of both the universities and the diverse group of students.

However with the introduction of a new curriculum and a National Senior Certificate in 2008, most universities in South Africa, amended their selection and admission policies or requirements. Universities felt that the new curriculum and the national certification undermined quality as most of the learners cannot cope with the demands of higher education. One of these amendments included additional requirements that applicants must meet in order to secure a place at university, such as written national benchmark tests (NBT), a minimum 50 percent pass in English and hikes in admission points (Bowman 2010).

The Admission Point System (APS) has been increasing every year (from 2004 to 2010 the APD increased from 18 to 34) to attract students who score good grades in Matric examinations. This change in admission requirements has made it even more difficult for less advantaged students in the face of a cut-throat completion and demand for selection and admission to higher institutions of learning (Bowman, 2010).

Some of these Universities that employ stricter admission policies tend to have policies on a variety of measures to support students. This is "to ensure that students are afforded the best possible opportunity to excel and that excellent pass rates, graduation rates and high research output are maintained" (Bowman, 2010). However, participation and representation of particular groupings remains low, particularly in relation to socio-economic status when it comes to selection and admission. Students who gain access to universities through the current policy come mostly from former model C schools (historically white schools) or private/elite schools.

Literature shows that it is widely accepted that ideally all major sections of a society should be equally represented in higher education and that selection methods should not be biased against any particular ethnic, social, regional or gender group since the university must reflect the society in which it finds itself (Soudien, 2010). Increasingly, it is felt that higher education should be accessible to larger numbers of individuals, regardless of their social and cultural origin. It should thus, represent the national diversity, and testify to the democratic dimension of the legitimacy of the state.



Methodology

The findings and recommendations of this policy brief were drawn from a research study that sought to examine admission policies and procedures of undergraduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand, and an analysis of various published documents and previous research done on selection and admissions in the universities, faculties, and schools in South Africa. This was augmented by a rigorous review of literature about issues of selection and admissions in universities nationally, regionally and internationally.

Findings

The situation in the sphere of admission and selection in most universities in South Africa has not fully been addressed at university level. The findings suggest that different universities adopt different models of selection and admissions. The following categories can be identified:

- Category A: Admission to university is still based on merit (this includes grade 12 examination results, aptitude tests, and interviews). Merit is considered the single most important predictor of academic performance in higher education. However, taken blindly merit privileges only those who are wealthy with good strong social and cultural capita and undermines the principle of equity. An emerging argument is that universities cannot always use merit when selecting and admitting students (Hall 2006 and Soudien 2010). They need to apply the principle of equity and affirmative action to redress the imbalances of the past in society that is extremely unequal.
- Category B: it includes those institutions that have embraced a centralized admission system that they perceive as the fairest model of selection and admission of students. There are however concerns that a major weakness of such a system is that most of the less advantaged



Policy Recommendations

1. The universities may consider adopting admissions and selection policy based on the principle of affirmative action that will

recognize the underrepresented disadvantaged groups of the population. The policies need to take into consideration those social sectors that are specifically included in the South African constitution as ones that require measures to ensure equity, such as race, women and those who are physically challenged.

2. Currently the policy is not addressing redress fully and effectively. This policy brief suggests that the concept of merit needs to be re-conceptualised to embrace the principle of equity.
3. University may also consider working with schools in the villages and townships to target talented learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds for admission.
4. There is need to devise ways in the admissions process to consider students who come from poor backgrounds and who show academic potential but do not meet the 34 APS cut-off point. It would then be incumbent upon the universities to introduce more effective support structures that will meet these students' needs.
5. It is important that universities re-introduce foundation programmes for underprepared students. The government should look more into subsidizing institutions so that more facilities, including support structures are put in place, and academic and support staff are trained to meet the expectations of under-prepared students.

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Acknowledgements

This project was supported by the Association of African Universities (AAU) under its Mobilizing Regional Capacity Initiative (MRCI).

About the Project

Originally initiated under the sponsorship of the South African Council on Higher Education and the African Higher Education Collaborative, this project is supported by the Department of International Development (DFID) under the Mobilizing Regional Capacity Initiative (MRCI) of the Association of African Universities (AAU). It includes the following members, Professor S Essack (University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa –Project Coordinator), Professor Michael Cross (University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa), Dr I Oanda (Kenyatta University, Kenya), and Professor Lilian-Rita Akudolu (Nmandi-Azikiwe University, South Africa). The Wits team includes: Professor Michael Cross (Project leader), Elizabeth S. Ndofirepi (PhD student), Nevensha Sing (PhD student), Felix Omal (PhD student), Basha Motswakhumo (PhD student), Bernard Akala (PhD student), Gift Laxomo (PhD student), Kishan Tang (M Ed student) and Samuel Fenyane (MA student).

