

Is the Equity Index a good tool to gauge demographic transformation at South African universities?

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The article by Govinder et al. (*S Afr J Sci.* 2013;109(11/12)) on assessing the demographic transition in South African universities is extremely interesting and is certainly something that university administrators around the country will find valuable. During my own tenure at the University of Cape Town (UCT), from 1981 to the present, I have seen the student demography change dramatically. The MBChB intake that I saw in my first year teaching at UCT was overwhelmingly white and male, whereas the current intakes are predominantly female, and white students represent less than 40% of the students enrolled. The precise figures for all undergraduate students at UCT in 2011 were 36% black, 20% coloured, 10% Indian and 31% white.¹ The transformation took place in two waves: the first after 1983 when the government dropped its racial controls on admissions and the second from 1990 when UCT began to actively recruit and select African students.² During this period, UCT has been criticised for using racial identity as a factor in the selection of students and the medical school in particular has had its admissions policy challenged in the courts and at the Human Rights Commission.³ The outcome of the legal cases has been that the University's right to use race as a selection factor has been upheld because changing the demography of the student body is an important aspect of righting the wrongs of the past. Despite the need for demographic transformation in higher education and the obvious value of the Equity Index created by Govinder et al. in assessing transformation, several issues in their analysis suggest that more thought is required before the index is applied as an intervention tool.

The data presented by Govinder et al. indicate that not all universities in South Africa have completed the transformation process. Certainly this is true based on national demographic statistics, but national demographic ratios might not be the best standard to work with. The authors baldly state that the national data are the preferred benchmark because 'all South African universities are classified as national assets'. Such a rigid approach has already been challenged in the courts and found to be wanting. Judge Rabkin-Naicker ordered the Department of Correctional Services to take immediate steps to ensure that both national and regional demographics were taken into account in respect of members of designated groups when setting equity targets at all occupational levels of its workforce.⁴ Although the legal issue is important, there is an even more compelling reason to consider regional rather than national demography. Students will preferentially choose a university that is closer to home if that is possible. Living at home and commuting to school on a daily basis is clearly a financial advantage, but even when students are in residence, there is a preference to be closer to home if possible so that visits to family are easier and can be made more frequently. This factor is not considered in the analysis and it does help to explain why all four Western Cape institutions fall at the 'worse' end of the equity index. I would be fascinated to see how the equity indices would appear if provincial demographic data were used instead of national data.

The data from the Equity Efficiency Index do tell us that the match to national demography is poorer in graduating classes than for admissions. Although no breakdown is given in the article, my own experience at UCT is that African students struggle and that even with substantial resources being spent to help these students cope, their failure rate remains higher than students in other demographic categories. Data from UCT indicate that of the 2007 admissions cohort, only 48% of black, 67% of coloured, 68% of Indian, but 81% of white students graduated within 5 years. The situation had actually worsened for black students, as nearly 60% had graduated from the 2003 cohort.¹ Meetings have been convened at all levels from departmental to University Senate to look at the cause of this problem and many factors have been identified. The most important factor by far is the language barrier for students who speak English as a second language. This disproportionately affects black African students. Add to this the fact that minimum academic scores for admission are lower for African students precisely because UCT wants to admit more African students. Other factors that impact on success rate are culture shock, lack of educational triggers in the pre-university home environment, and inadequate primary and secondary preparation, none of which can be easily fixed at university. I can only speak for my UCT Faculty of Health Sciences experience, but we have had an extensive intervention programme in place for years and my own Department of Human Biology has three academic staff members who have been hired specifically to engage with the intervention programme students.

In the light of this considerable effort to help weaker students, I am particularly concerned that Govinder et al. think that a positive Equity Efficiency Index is something desirable. The target Equity Efficiency Index must be zero, and any deviation, either positive or negative, suggests that we are failing to provide proper support for students somewhere along the line. Intervention programmes must not be applied on the basis of race, but only on the need for academic help, so the worst possible outcome would be a positive index because that would mean that resources are being applied on the basis of race rather than academic need.

Lastly is the hoary issue of the relationship between transformation and research output. There is no question that the demographic transformation of academic staff has been much slower than the transformation of the student body. Govinder et al. do not emphasise this disparity, but a simple comparison of the average Equity Index for student admissions (32.87) with that for academic staff (63.3) shows how far apart they are. Despite this disparity, a simple correlation of these two data sets produces a significant *r*-value of 0.562, showing that, at least in proportional terms, the demography of the academic staff is broadly similar to the student intake in each institution. This finding is important to note as the demographics of the students *have* transformed at all universities and therefore so have academic staff even if they do not match the national demographic ratios.

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Of greater importance is the relationship of research output (a form of quality assessment) with staff equity. Govinder et al. tell us that there 'is no direct linear correlation between EI ranking and research productivity', but this is not true. The r correlation coefficient for their two data sets is a statistically significant 0.588. When the per capita research output is considered, the r -value rises to 0.745. It is always unwise to assign cause and effect to significant correlations, but the data indicate that the two variables are connected and that poor equity scores pair with higher research output and vice versa. The universities fall into three groups (with the University of Fort Hare as an outlier) and it is indeed disturbing to see how five 'previously advantaged' schools in the graph (Wits, Pretoria, Rhodes, UCT and Stellenbosch) separate out. These schools are not just separate from other South African schools, but actually fall well within the spectrum of top-class universities on a world scale.^{5,6}

One almost certainly false interpretation of this result would be that academic staff transformation damages research quality. A more realistic interpretation is that different universities have different priorities in hiring and promotion of academic staff. The cluster of 'previously advantaged' universities base their hiring and promotion standards on high levels of research production, while the cluster of technical universities in the opposite quadrant of the graph have traditionally focused on teaching in terms of hiring and promotion. This means that the different universities are drawing academic staff from different pools of applicants with differing demographic structures (especially in relation to overseas applicants). The pool of skilled scholars from previously disadvantaged demographic categories in South Africa is growing, but it is not yet at the point at which all applicants for high-level research posts fit the national demographic profile.

My worry is that Govinder et al. do not recognise these issues in their discussion and promotion of the Equity Index. Transformation is only seen in the light of racial and gender equity and it is implied that universities which do not meet the national demographic ratios for staff or students need to find ways to correct this. It is a given that all South African universities still require demographic transformation for both staff and students to a greater or lesser extent, but is the solution to use only equity issues when planning for the future? Govinder et al. ask whether the slow pace of demographic change in the universities is because of active resistance to transformation by the 'privileged' or passive resistance through conservatism. They ask if it is time to reconsider self-regulation and autonomy, and by implication suggest the possible implementation of demographic quotas in admission and hiring. Certainly in my experience there has been no active resistance

to transformation. Change has already been marked, just not in the rigid direction that Govinder et al. demand. I wonder how they will respond to the new proposals for admission to UCT from 2015 in which race is removed as the central factor in admissions.⁷ The proposals will give higher admission credits to students from rural contexts, and those with families with first time exposure to university education and lower socio-economic status. These factors may or may not overlap with racial categories, but their inclusion is an attempt to broaden the transformation at UCT by taking the focus away from the 'privileged' few by concentrating on social class rather than on race.

On a last note, I have sat on the UCT Faculty of Health Sciences Readmission Review Committee for over a decade. This committee is the 'last chance' committee that considers appeals by students who have been excluded from the Faculty on academic grounds. It is by far the most difficult and emotionally taxing committee on which I have served and each and every student that is reviewed is considered purely on the basis of the committee members' belief in whether or not the student will ultimately succeed if readmitted. Race or gender is never an issue.

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