Admission to university in an academically non-homogeneous society

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Abstract. The concern with the disadvantaged student as a specific educational problem is relatively recent in South Africa. This paper deals with a proposed admission policy aimed at positive action — the removal of past discrimination without reference to race, class or creed. The proposed dual admittance system is described and compared with the New Zealand accrediting system, another dual admittance system. Results from an empirical study with regard to the proposed system, are presented. The study was conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and the findings indicate that the dual admission system does discern students who are talented, but disadvantaged. Finally, some advantages of the system are discussed.

Introduction

Access to higher education is contentious, not because of its cultural value, but because the university is seen as the principal avenue to certain prestigious, influential and highly-paid professional careers. Even after statutory racism is removed, the \textit{status quo} may still discriminate against vast sections of the society. In tertiary education this means that some students, through no fault of their own, will arrive at university with an inferior background — while others perhaps equally talented might not be admitted at all.

Even within a supposedly homogeneous community such as the white community in Johannesburg, South Africa, disparities of over fifty percent exist between schools in the fraction of students who obtain a university entrance school leaving certificate. The contrast is more dramatic when all the schools in the country are considered, where the vast disparities in resources and facilities between black and white schools are felt. Educational discrimination in South Africa is debated extensively by Danaher (1984). Only about two percent of African students pass the matriculation examination and their inferior academic backgrounds, (evident in their poor results), then prohibit them entrance into the "white" universities open to black student enrolment. There is thus a need for university admission criteria aimed at redressing the advantage which a student from a "good" high school has over a student of equal, or higher ability from one of the poorer schools.
A dual criterion admission system

As a first step to solving the problem mentioned above, the authors proposed a dual criterion system for admission to university (Gering and Zietsman, 1983). The system is aimed at positive action — the removal of de facto discrimination without explicit reference to race, class or sex and is based on the premise that it is unfair to compare students from diverse backgrounds.

As a first, general criterion, the student is judged against some national standard. While this could be achieved using whatever entrance requirement is currently used at the university involved, it will become apparent later that a national or state-wide school-leaving examination would be particularly suitable. In this way any student who is able to prove him/herself directly capable of academic study is accepted to the university. In particular, a student is not penalised for having studied at a school with a good academic record. In the Southern African situation this implies that all students who obtained a matriculation certificate meeting the requirements for university entrance should be admitted. This certificate is referred to as matriculation exemption in this paper.

However, it is obvious that some students have been disadvantaged if the performance of their peer group (that particular matriculation class) is compared with the national standard. In such a case we proposed that the particular class should be used as a control group and the second or safe-guard criterion is invoked. A student who has not obtained a matriculation pass good enough for admission to the faculty of his/her choice can be admitted because he was in the top academic group of his school. In this way the student may be adjudged gifted by his performance against that of the control group, and in view of his inferior academic background, gauged by comparison with the performance of matriculation students from the rest of the country, such a student should be allowed a second chance in being accepted for study at a university. This admission policy is premised upon the belief that a random distribution of talent and aptitude will be present in any sample from the total population; in other words, that race, sex or class will not influence the distribution above.

Comparison with other admission criteria

We categorise “admission” in three ways: those with no criterion, one standard criterion and dual admittance criteria.

In some sense the relaxation of entrance requirements to a barest minimum is a brute force attempt to give people who might otherwise be denied the opportunity a chance to obtain a university degree. In South Africa where over