

## Measures of redress: Defining disadvantage in a university *access* programme <sup>◇</sup>

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Equalizing access to tertiary education in South Africa is an important democratic aim, and one of several official redress objectives for higher learning institutions to rectify apartheid-era injustices.<sup>1</sup> The 1997 Higher Education Act formally legislated that ‘the admissions policy of a public higher education institution must provide for the redress of past inequalities’.<sup>2</sup> In the KwaZulu-Natal province, the University of Durban-Westville and the two campuses of the University of Natal instituted various access-related initiatives.<sup>3</sup> More recently, with the merging of these campuses in 2005 into a single institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, access programmes were re-deployed and to some extent reconstructed under a single organisational body charged with fulfilling the university’s stated mission to become ‘demographically representative, redressing the disadvantages, inequities and imbalances of the past’.<sup>4</sup> Because the merger project itself was a strategy to alleviate *institutional* inequalities and imbalances, access initiatives and admissions policies in the post-merger environment are more deliberately geared towards *social* redress. Access programmes empower the university to ‘promote access to learning that will expand educational and employment opportunities for the historically disadvantaged, and support social transformation and redress’.<sup>5</sup>

Yet how ‘disadvantage’ is best conceptualized in a nation characterized by profound economic inequalities and the enduring macro-social legacy of racialized domination and

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<sup>◇</sup> Draft—please do not cite or circulate.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the shifts in institutional redress strategies for higher education, see Teresa Barnes ‘Changing discourses and meanings of redress in Southern African Higher Education, 1994-2001’. *Centre for Civil Society Research Report* No. 38., 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in the ‘policy on undergraduate access and admissions to the university of KwaZulu Natal’, p.1

<sup>3</sup> Programmes targeted disadvantaged groups in various age categories and in various disciplines, for example through Foundational curricula for science, commerce and business management, and humanities; workers college; Teach Test Teach (TTT), Upward Bound, to name a few.

<sup>4</sup> UKZN mission statement.

<sup>5</sup> UKZN mission statement.

exclusion—affecting a *majority* of the total population—is far from clear. The language of redress is strikingly vague, both in its identification of eligible beneficiaries and its strategic objectives. Phrases like ‘demographic representation’ and ‘social transformation’ are generally regarded as euphemisms for racial categories, quotas and counts, yet their indirectness allows for alternative interpretations. For example, in a commentary appearing in the *Mercury* last year, UKZN Vice Chancellor Malegapuru Makgoba affirmed the importance of developing ‘new ways of selecting alternative access students’ to enable the university to ‘select an increased number of students from peri-urban and rural contexts’ as well as ‘adult and disabled learners’.<sup>6</sup> Because applicant pools overwhelm available spaces and financial aid packages at universities, and because of the internal, institutional concern to ensure high student throughput rates, defining disadvantage—or rather, setting priorities among different definitions of disadvantage—is a necessary component of redressive admissions policy.<sup>7</sup> It is both important (and also controversial) not merely because it effectively determines how opportunities for university study are to be distributed, but also because it establishes a criterion for evaluating the efficacy of redress actions.

Affirmative, or ‘corrective’, action is implemented as a redistributive measure in many societies, intended to remedy persistent inequalities that are the legacy of historical injustices. Yet, whether applied to corporate employment structures, public offices, sport, or education, it has seldom been free from heated contest. Debates are rife around a number of philosophical and political questions, for example about the nature of social equality desired or possible (e.g., formal or substantive) and how it is to be measured<sup>8</sup>; whether a politics of recognition can be accommodated in a liberal democracy<sup>9</sup>; whether the state or the ‘invisible hand’ of the market is the most effective agent of redress<sup>10</sup>; and the extent to which history can (or should) be related to existing social structures and to present-day civic and personal

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Opening wide the doors of learning: The University of KwaZulu-Natal’s new access policy recognises that value and potential can be found in many non-conventional places’. The *Mercury*, 6 December 2004.

<sup>7</sup> At the time of this writing, this issue, and a specific proposal, is coming up for debate in senate.

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of this debate, see Goodin, Robert E., Bruce Heady, Ruud Muffels, and Henk-jan Dirven. *The Real Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See the seminal essay on this question by Charles Taylor, and comments by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, and others in Amy Gutmann (ed) *Multiculturalism*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> A good overview of the arguments between libertarians, liberals and social democrats can be found in Nicholas Barr’s *The Economics of the Welfare State* Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

responsibilities or entitlements. Other debates are located not so much around the *principle* of affirmative action as their particular methods of *implementation*: the ethical and social implications of utilizing the same categories for redress that were the basis of original injury; and whether the categories deployed by particular policies are suitable to their aims and objectives.<sup>11</sup>

This paper is, in a general sense, concerned with the last two of these questions, both of which focus on the consequences of categorical schema deployed within a corrective action. In the post-apartheid South African context, racial categories are obviously considered meaningful for redress because they were salient under apartheid, regulating patterns of social and economic status, mobility and opportunity. Racial identification and economic status were highly correlated through South Africa's path of industrialization and capitalist development, and enforced through legislated job market discrimination and geographical segregation. For this reason, race and economic status continue to be viewed as mutually signifying categories, and phrases like 'historically disadvantaged' are considered to be self-evident.

But, with current changes in class structure in South Africa is race the most effective category for identifying disadvantage?<sup>12</sup> And is it the most appropriate means for doing so in a society historically wounded by race ideology? These questions are too complex to address adequately in one study and my aim for this paper is much more modest: to offer glimpse of the issues at stake from the perspective of a single case study. In this paper I describe the effects of two distinct definitions of disadvantage—one racial, the other economic—in the admissions policies of a university access programme operating on two campuses. I compare respective student cohorts by three sets of variables affecting access to higher education: educational background, household resources, and personal difficulties experienced in matric year. The research suggests that economic and racial identifications produce significantly different student cohort profiles, though certain parallels between the groups warrant further

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<sup>11</sup> The question of categories for redress, and the use of statistics to measure discrimination and redress, in the European and U.S. contexts are the subject of a special issue on Affirmative Action in the *International Social Science Journal*, March 2005, no. 183.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass note that 'the most striking change in South African society in the 1990s has been the accelerated growth of what is generally called the black or African middle class'. Seekings and Nattrass, 'Class, Distribution, and Redistribution in Post-Apartheid South Africa' in *Transformation* no. 50, 2002, pp. 1-30.

investigation. I argue that while employing a racial definition of disadvantage prioritizing African learners may not reliably predict a 'disadvantaged educational background', identifying variables that can predict economic and educational marginalization will yet create student cohorts within targeted populations without evoking or entrenching the anachronistic language of race.

### **Defining disadvantage**

In post-apartheid higher education, institutional redress is being pursued on a number of fronts: resource flows to historically disadvantaged universities, efforts to adjust the racial composition of staff, administration and students to reflect national census figures, and changes to curriculum and programmes of study appropriate to a diverse, multicultural society. The discourse of *social* redress acknowledges university institutions as agents of change in society at large. A basic premise is that a university degree links graduates to gainful employment and thus is an avenue for upward social mobility, the effects of which may ripple towards improving the lives of families and communities. While this assumption may be somewhat problematic in a society with growing rates of unemployment for university graduates, it continues to be the foundational principle on which university access initiatives rest.

In effect, this means that the social categories used to identify eligible disadvantaged learners for alternative access to university are related not only to righting the wrongs of the past, but to shaping future patterns of social growth and development in the geography of the nation. Viewed in this way, admissions decisions are a tangible linkage between democracy and development, and fit within emerging understandings of poverty reduction.<sup>13</sup> It is from within this perspective that race-based affirmative action has sometimes been criticised for being a poor proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage, often bypassing individuals and groups who are most in need. Inequalities *within* racial groupings can mean that the most privileged members

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<sup>13</sup> See Whitehead, Laurence 'Democratization and Social Policy' in Thandika Mkandawire (ed) *Social Policy in a Development Context* (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development {UNRISD}, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); also Cox, Aidan and John Healey. 'Poverty Reduction Strategies of the Development Cooperation Agencies' in Anne Booth and Paul Mosley (eds) *The New Poverty Strategies: What have they achieved? What have we learned?* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), pp. 23-24.

of a group reap the benefits of redress, while the most disadvantaged members remain marginalized.

In the U.S., for example, the application of racial statistics to anti-discrimination policy is a challenge because of the enormous heterogeneity of cultural, economic and social background within racial designations. For example,

one Asian American group (Koreans) has the highest rate of business formation in the nation, and another (Laotians) has the lowest... Different rates of achievement among Latino groups (Cuban relative to Puerto Rican or Mexican Americans) and blacks (American born relative to West Indian or African) can also be observed in education and income, not to mention differences in the degree of discrimination suffered. This inequality within [racial] categories may thus result in most preferences and opportunities going to the most advantaged ethnicities within each category...<sup>14</sup>

This difficulty does not necessarily undermine the case for group-based redress. Kanya Adam argues that in some societies 'the differences between groups may be so vast that the disadvantage cannot achieve adequate outcomes purely on the basis of individual rights...[and] the discrimination, segregation and exclusion of groups in the past warrants the use of group membership definitions for redress and compensation'.

Hardly any other society exists where clear-cut group based discrimination and exclusion have left a wider legacy of political, economic and social injustice as legalised apartheid did in South Africa. The need for compensatory justice in order to redress the past and facilitate the inclusion and participation of previously excluded groups could hardly be defended anywhere else with such moral validity.<sup>15</sup>

Still, Adam concludes (with specific reference to employment in the private sector) that there are compelling reasons to avoid racial classifications for redress. Firstly, because of new class formations across racial divides, racial categories do not any longer reliably measure socioeconomic advantage or disadvantage, a trend that will most likely continue. Therefore, 'the implementation of race-based policy to benefit blacks as a group, without distinguishing between the relatively privileged stratum and those who are truly disadvantaged, detracts

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<sup>14</sup> Morning, Ann and Daniel Sabbagh 'From sword to ploughshare: using race for discrimination and anti-discrimination in the United States'. *International Social Science Journal*. 184, March, 2005. Blackwell Publishing and UNESCO. p.68.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Kanya, *The Color of Business: Managing Diversity in South Africa*. P. Schlettewien Publishing, 2000. p.20.

from focussing on and assisting those most in need, particularly in a society in which they constitute the overwhelming majority of the population.<sup>16</sup> The second reason is that racially defined affirmative action risks ‘nurturing the same racial divide which underpinned apartheid’.<sup>17</sup>

The worry that redress policies may entrench injurious divisions are not simply a ploy of privileged groups attempting to hold fast to their dominant social positions through the merit-based, individualistic and market driven advantages that tend to mask their historical and social basis. Fears of accommodating group identities where conflicts and suspicions were historically embedded motivated policy-makers in Nigeria and India to utilize ‘replacement’ variables in redress programmes.<sup>18</sup> Where ethnic and caste tensions, respectively, posed problems to the nation-building efforts of these newly independent states a *regional* definition of disadvantage was implemented. Benefits were accorded to under-represented and marginalized regions, with the understanding that this would offer a means of reaching those ethnic groups/castes that most required assistance. While the success evident in instances of ‘replacement’ policy appears to be ambivalent, they yet illustrate that concerns about redress categories are widespread and have generated some innovative measures worth considering.

In the Netherlands, where ethnic and social class origins overlap, disadvantaged students are defined by educational priority policies as students of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese or Antilean origin and/or students whose parents have only lower secondary qualifications or less, statistical weights are used to prioritize admissions and other benefits. Researchers explain that

socioeconomic inequality is inherent in the official Dutch definition of ‘ethnic minorities’ as not only culturally different but also (collectively) disadvantaged. It seems important to take into account class origins (e.g., parental education and occupational status) in ‘ethnic statistics’ not only for analytical reasons—to separate out the unexplained variance due to ethnic origin after taking into account non-ethnic sources of unequal opportunities or outcomes—but also for pragmatic

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<sup>16</sup> Adam, Kanya ‘The politics of redress: South African style affirmative action’. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (June 1997), p. 249.

<sup>17</sup> Adam, ‘The politics of redress’, p. 249.

<sup>18</sup> De Zwart, Frank ‘Targeted policy in multicultural societies: accommodation, denial and replacement’. *International Social Science Journal*. 184, March, 2005. Blackwell Publishing and UNESCO. pp.153-164.

reasons. In particular, restrictive measures which disproportionately affect ethnic minorities most often come under the guise of socio-economic criteria.<sup>19</sup>

It is against this backdrop of issues that this case study of the effect of access categories may be considered, hopefully offering some insights into possible directions for access policy in higher education.

### **Access: some background**

For South Africans, the history of inequality comes into view from a substantial distance, but with its more recent chronology encompassing a full century of British imperial plunder and labour exploitation, colonial settlement, and racial segregation prior to the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid a half century ago. The apartheid period, obviously the most notorious and prominent in public memory, both entrenched and invented measures of legal and spatial separation through the principles of apartheid and ‘separate development’. Along educational segregation according to racial designations of ‘Indian/Asian’, ‘coloured’, and ‘white’, the government developed a discrete system of ‘Bantu education’ specifically for black African people. Institutions of higher learning were developed as partitioned and unequally resourced, such that following 1994 they could be classified as either Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) or Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), designations that became the basis for reform policies of various kinds.<sup>20</sup>

The legacy of ‘bantu education’ and conditions of persistent poverty and poorly resourced education has meant that a majority of disadvantaged South African learners are unprepared for the demands of tertiary learning. It is broadly recognized that matriculation results, utilized by universities to set the standards for normative admissions criteria, do not necessarily reflect the organic intellectual ability of learners from impoverished regions but may instead document the monetary and human resource deficits common in disadvantaged schools. Equalizing access in higher education therefore requires that alternative admissions structures be crafted to assess the ‘academic promise’ of learners who may be capable of

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<sup>19</sup> Guiraudon, Virginie, Karen Phalet and Jessika ter Wal (2005) ‘Monitoring ethnic minorities in the Netherlands’. *International Social Science Journal*. 184, March, 2005. Blackwell Publishing and UNESCO. p.85.

<sup>20</sup> Barnes, “Changing discourses”

benefiting from university study and who have achieved low matriculation results specifically because of economic and social disadvantage.

Yet, in such cases, opening the doors of higher learning, as envisioned half a century ago by the Freedom Charter, is by itself an insufficient (and, moreover, an irresponsible) measure. Equalizing access also requires supportive curricular structures to ensure that 'open doors' translate into practical and socially meaningful educational success for admitted students. In its policy template, UKZN access is defined not merely as instrument of inclusive admissions criteria but also as a means of ensuring a reliable outcome of high student retention rates and 'throughput'. One access programme, the Humanities Foundation Year (HFY), offers a package of pre-first year modules to assist student success in learning and in the attainment of higher degrees. Coursework includes English language development, numeracy and computer skills, academic literacy and foundational 'content' modules, intended to make up for the deficits of disadvantaged schooling. In a context where the majority of 'mainstream' university students (students *not* admitted through alternative access routes) struggle against harsh odds and high failure rates to achieve degrees, or struggle to do so in the allotted time frame, access programmes offer an undeniable benefit to disadvantaged students admitted through its selection processes.<sup>21</sup>

The HFY is now hosted by two campuses of the UKZN. Funded by the Department of Education and the Norwegian government, its mandate is to accommodate 'students from schools disadvantaged in terms of monetary and human resources', 'targeting students from previously marginalized areas'.<sup>22</sup> Yet university officers face practical difficulties in identifying and recruiting eligible candidates for this programme. The most marginalized of South Africa's learners face enormous barriers even to learn about opportunities of university access, and many face personal obstacles and/or complex and immediate family or

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<sup>21</sup> A recent report by Education Minister Naledi Pandor (*Weekend Witness* 14 May 2005, *Sunday Independent* 18 September 2005), reveals that almost a third of students enrolled at the beginning of 2000 had dropped out by the end of that year and another 20 per cent by the end of 2002. 'Of the remaining 50%, less than half graduated within the intended three years.' Pandor noted the enormous financial costs of student struggles and failure: the government lost about R4.5 billion in subsidies to higher education institutions because of student drop-outs between 2000-2003.

<sup>22</sup> HFY programme template, 2004, p. 1.



community responsibilities which preclude university study as a viable option. Nor has it been clear whether financial support is available if they are admitted. Moreover, information flows between schools and university representatives appears to have been unevenly developed both over time and across campuses, prior to the UKZN merger.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the difficulties in the access admissions policy are not simply practical, but also conceptual. And, in the context of the merger, different interpretations of educational disadvantage and marginalisation operated in the admissions process on two campuses for the 2005 academic year. These circumstances provide an opportunity better to understand the impact of different categories for redress in higher education.

### **Defining disadvantage in practice: a case study**

For the 2005 academic year, HFY admissions procedures and decision-making were administered autonomously on each of the two campuses where the Humanities Faculty is located. In part this was because the universities were in the process of tumultuous change, merging as a single entity out of three regional institutions of higher learning, making it difficult to facilitate coordinated inter-campus practices. Admissions procedures on each campus followed similar paths in admitting applicants on *academic* grounds. Eligible candidates were identified as those whose matric scores were insufficient for ‘mainstream’ admissions routes but whose performance on a special standardized entrance test fell within a particular range, indicating a potential capacity for university study if offered academic support.<sup>24</sup> However, different operationalisations of disadvantage, based on different methods of reasoning about the nature of disadvantage in South Africa, affected the criteria for identifying disadvantaged applicants on each campus.<sup>25</sup> As a result, two distinct admissions strategies were employed.

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<sup>23</sup> It is acknowledged within the access administration that these issues must somehow be addressed.

<sup>24</sup> Very generally, applicants eligible for the HFY had matriculation scores below 32 points but above 24, though special cases were made depending on year of matriculation (and age) and exemption status. Performance on the special entrance test with a score of over 80% placed a student directly into mainstream first year status. On the HC campus, students with a score above 50% were eligible for access to university via the HFY, while on the PMB campus, students were considered with scores of 40%.

<sup>25</sup> I would like to express here that although this paper is written in a critical vein, it is not meant *in any way* to criticize the UKZN staff involved in making these difficult decisions. I have tremendous respect for the reasoning and the benevolence which guided the decision-making in an emotionally wrenching process.

The programme on the Pietermaritzburg (PMB) campus identified 'disadvantage' on the basis of economic criteria, measured by variables related to schooling and household resources. The programme coordinator crafted a brief questionnaire to assess the extent of an applicant's educational and personal advantage/disadvantage. Questions about schooling elicited information regarding the numbers of learners per classroom, homework load, essay-writing experience, language of instruction, library and computer facilities, and the number of subjects offered. Questions pertaining to household resources established the employment status and level of education of family members, and the number of rooms in the home. The questionnaire was designed so that a numeric 'score' could be tallied for each student, roughly ranking their circumstances on an ordinal scale. Among the pool of applicants whose entrance test scores fell within the target range, those whose profiles indicated a high level of educational and personal economic disadvantage in identified areas were prioritized for admission.

In contrast with emphasis on economic disadvantage operating in Pietermaritzburg, admissions procedures at the Howard College (HC) campus in Durban were guided by a racial definition of 'historically disadvantaged', limiting eligible applicants to those identified as 'African'. The use of race as a variable, however, was not explicit and candidates were only indirectly identified racially. Officially, applicants qualified for eligibility if they identified themselves as second language English-speakers. Administrators who ran the selection process, however, concede a racial basis for selecting students, pointing out that no first-language Afrikaans speakers were admitted into the programme.

It could be argued that both campuses utilized 'replacement' strategies to accommodate a racial definition of disadvantage, since the 2005 HFY student profile was exclusively African in both instances. On the PMB campus, students were indeed asked to identify themselves as a member of one of four 'population groups' and although this was not officially used in decision-making, it is possible that it had an unofficial bearing on selection. Yet, in previous years, the Pietermaritzburg HFY programme—under a different name but through an identical admissions procedure—had admitted small numbers of Indian students. This suggests that

the economic variables, although highly correlated with racial identification, were indeed the principle mechanism for creating a virtually exclusively African profile in 2005 on the PMB campus. In the HC case, language was more clearly a replacement variable, as suggested by the exclusion of Afrikaans speakers.

A total of 80 students registered in the HFY on the Pietermaritzburg campus, and 108 on the Howard College campus. More were admitted in each case but did not register and their reasons for not enrolling are unknown.

The inadvertent circumstances which led to the operation of two distinct definitions of 'disadvantage' offers a unique opportunity to consider theoretical about affirmative action debates in terms of their empirical effects and practical implications. It is important to note the probable effects of geography and other variables, as well as to emphasize that no admissions process is likely to be completely consistent. Still, comparing the HFY student profiles across campuses offers can indicate the effects on the student body profile of prioritizing different conceptions of disadvantage in this region of South Africa.

## **Method**

### *Survey design*

An 18-page questionnaire instrument was designed by myself and my research counterpart, HFY student counsellor Jean Leach (from the Pietermaritzburg campus), and in consultation with staff from Development Studies, to generate information related to a range of variables, grouped around factors that are believed to affect an individual's level of opportunities/access for higher learning, beyond individual endeavour. The range of variables was intentionally broad and exploratory, in an attempt to remain open to what might emerge as significant similarities or differences across campuses. Most questions were focussed around three general categories: to educational background, household economics, and personal experiences affecting schooling, across various stages of the students' life. It should be noted that the validity of the information must be considered in relation to issues arising with self-

reporting and subjective memory, though we tried to exclude questions that required too much detail or were ambiguous.<sup>26</sup>

In relation to educational background, students were asked to indicate the type of school (local government school, former model C, private, or other) they attended for the majority of time in each of a set of years; grades 5-7, 8-10, and 11-12. At each level, students were asked to indicate whether the school had electricity, running water, a library, computer facilities; to indicate the primary language of instruction; the distance between home and school, and their method of transport. More detail was requested in regards to the school resources available during matric year, including whether they had someone who was available to help them with homework and study.

Pertaining to household resources, students were asked to report on a series of conditions for each of a set of years, measured in school years, grades 0-4, 5-7, 8-10, and 11-12. Questions asked about place of residence, material construction of home (mud, brick, corrugated iron, other), utilities available, whether a family grew food or kept livestock (and how important these were as a food source), household responsibilities (chores), household composition and employment status, primary caregivers, and whether the student was the first family member to complete Grade 12, or be admitted to an institute of higher learning. Some of these questions were designed so that the data could reveal patterns of mobility over the course of a student's life.

A large group of questions were directed to experiences during the matric year, difficulties that would be disruptive to schooling and perhaps explain poor matric results. Students were asked to indicate the frequency of a particular personal events affecting their life (never, once, twice, more than twice). These included subjective emotions such as unhappiness, self-doubt, or 'feeling worried'; as well as acute events such as death or serious illness of family members and friends, troubles at home, becoming a parent, 'feeling hungry because lack of sufficient food', and having to interrupt school to earn a wage, care for a family member, or

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<sup>26</sup> Some of this data could be triangulated through census data and the schools survey of needs, but this requires resources beyond our current capacity.

help out at home. Other 'events' were related more directly to school: inability to pay fees, difficulties with transport, school closures, physical or sexual abuse by a staff member, staff absenteeism or drunkenness, violence or danger at school.

From these questions 136 separate variables were coded using SPSS. A number of open-ended questions, including questions about family composition and employment status were also asked.<sup>27</sup> The tone of the questions was kept at a general and non-threatening level, and questions that could be perceived as deeply personal were kept to a minimum in order to ensure a favourable response rate.

### *Sampling and response*

The questionnaire was completed by 213 students, 144 of whom are in the HFY programme and 69 who are first year mainstream undergraduates. It was administered to all HFY students present in the foundation Life Skills classes during selected days in May 2005. Response rates provided a good sample, with 66 out of 80 registered HFY students on PMB campus completing the questionnaire (83%) and 78 out of a 108 students on HC campus completing the questionnaire (72%). As far as we could determine, factors affecting response rates appeared to be related to two main factors: 1) the rate of attendance in the Life Skills classes on the days when the questionnaire was administered, and 2) the attitude of students towards the HFY programme (and therefore research related to the programme). On this last point, based on observations and comments at HC, it appeared that cynicism and unhappiness with the HFY programme was key in shaping the decision of a number of students not to participate. It was also reported that some students felt that a questionnaire about disadvantage, administered to African students, was racist. Some questionnaires were simply not complete or clear enough to include.

A convenience, quota sample of first year students completed a parallel questionnaire.<sup>28</sup> Students were selected by identifying a number of the most popular first year courses on both campuses and choosing tutorial groups to complete the questionnaire. At Howard College,

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<sup>27</sup> These have not yet been coded.

<sup>28</sup> Out of 100 prepared questionnaires, we had 69 questionnaires we could use: 15 were unusable due to a photocopy flaw and others had to be rejected because they turned out to be second year students.

first year modules in Sociology and Internet Studies were selected: in Pietermaritzburg, students were approached in the first year modules in Commerce and English studies. We did not have the resources to achieve a representative or random sample but believe our method of selection allows for some suggestive—though not generalisable—comparisons to be made.

## **Results**

Did the student bodies within the HFY, on the HC campus and PMB campus respectively, show significant differences in educational background, household resources and experiences disruptive to matric study?<sup>29</sup> In what aspects of disadvantage did they differ? In what aspects of disadvantage did they reveal little difference? Below, I provide a summary of the data for each of the three broad categories of disadvantage, compared as a percentage for each campus. Rather than detailing all the available data, however, I have chosen to highlight a selection of variables that appear to be representative of overall trends.<sup>30</sup>

### *Educational Background*

Because students on the PMB campus were more directly selected on the basis of disadvantaged schooling, it is unsurprising that the overall profile of HFY students on that campus has a higher percentage of students from disadvantage educational contexts than on the HC campus. For Grades 4-7, 83% of PMB foundation students report that they attended local government schools, and 3% that they attended former ‘model C’ schools. On HC campus, 61% attended local government school in these grades, with 32% attending former ‘model C’ schools.<sup>31</sup> (Among our first year control group respondents, 70% attended local government schools and 23% attended former ‘model C’ schools). This helps make sense of some of the differences in school resources in these grades, as shown in the table below:

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<sup>29</sup> Statistical significance of these variables is currently being tested for a later draft of this paper, so in this version we must rely on a comparison of frequencies/percentages.

<sup>30</sup> A complete frequency report was submitted to the UKZN access executive and can be made available on request.

<sup>31</sup> Remaining percentages include private schools of various kinds, independent schools, farm schools, and other arrangements.

<b>Schools attended by HFY students in grades 4-7</b>	<b>PMB</b>	<b>HC</b>
% with electricity	65	77
% with running water	70	82
% with computer resources	15	46
% with a school library	11	49
% with a sufficient number of desks per classroom	64	86

In addition to material resources in schools, another factor relevant to university access is training in English as a language of instruction. In the upper primary school years, the use of English as the primary language of instruction varied significantly between groups, with 61% of HC students and 29% of PMB students reporting that they learned primarily in English during grades 4-7.

In early high school, there are some shifts evident in the data.<sup>32</sup> In arguably the most important years for preparing university study, i.e., grades 11-12, 77% of PMB foundation students report that they attended local government schools, and 2% attended former ‘model C’ schools. Of HC students, 56% attended local government school in these grades, and 35% attended former ‘model C’ schools.<sup>33</sup> For these grades, access to important resources still appear to be skewed:

<b>Educational conditions of HFY students in grades 11-12</b>	<b>PMB</b>	<b>HC</b>
% of schools attended with primary language of instruction English	61	83
% schools with sufficient desks per classroom	79	91
% schools with (estimated) 35 or fewer learners per classroom	54	69
% schools with (estimated) over 50 learners per classroom	13	3
% schools with computer resources	14	53
% schools with a school library	20	60
% students claiming they had access to a town library	61	77
% students with ‘someone to help with homework/study’	35	45

<sup>32</sup> I will not report the statistics for grades 8-10 in the interest of brevity, but choosing data from early and later years offers some perspective of trends over time.

<sup>33</sup> Remaining percentages may be attributed to private schools, independent schools, farm schools, and other arrangements.

Some rates of access to basic school resources, such as utilities, have risen for both groups, and the gaps between them have lessened. For example, the gap between rates of attendance at schools with electricity has gone down from a 12% to 7% difference (PMB = 83%, HC = 90%) and, in the case of schools with running water, from 12% to 5% difference (PMB = 85%, HC = 90%). Yet other differences remain notable, most obviously in relation to library resources and school computer facilities.

Differences between groups also emerged in terms of the human resources available in schools, affecting their matric year in particular. In the case of PMB students, 23% reported that their year of matric schooling was disrupted because of school being closed down, with almost half indicating this occurred 'more than two times'. In the case of HC, school closure was a factor affecting 5% of students, most of them reporting only one occasion. Teachers not showing up for school was another issue, with 43% of PMB reporting this as a problem, more than double the figure for HC students (20%). Teacher drunkenness was reported as a problem by 22% of PMB and by 9% of HC students. Twenty three percent of PMB students reported being affected by physical abuse by staff at school during matric year, as opposed to 10% at HC. Finally, problems with violence disrupting school were reported to have occurred in the experiences of 44% of PMB students and 33% of HC students.

A question that needs to be asked is not only how statistically significant these various differences of percentage points are in themselves, but also how meaningful such differences are in the broader context of South African educational inequality. The rates of disadvantage in both groups are unacceptably high, and it is clear that categories of race are still salient in terms of the average levels of disadvantage they capture. One of the controversial issues in access was the inclusion of students who attended former 'model C' high schools, considered to offer a distinct educational advantage. Advocates for including students who have attended model C schools have argued that decisions should not penalize genuinely impoverished students whose parents may have made enormous sacrifices to ensure that their children receive a good education. The assumption is that these students are most likely entering former model C schools in their last years in their last years of secondary school in an attempt



to increase the chances for good matric scores. While this is a compelling argument, the data is ambiguous. When the HFY students who attended model C schools are isolated as a group, it seems a good portion of these students do not appear to be especially disadvantaged: 68% lived in households with a car, 40% had home computers, 42% had medical care from a private doctor seen in a private office (as opposed to hospital or public clinic). These figures may be compared to control group (CG) first year students (in all 'race' groups) who attended former model C schools, where these rates are higher but with some still comparable: 81%, 44% and 69% respectively. Moreover, 82% of the HFY students who attended model C schools in high school *also* attended model C primary schools. In the CG, this figure was 75%. The question is raised about whether such students can be considered disadvantaged or whether there are other explanations for poor performance in high school: for example personal problems or lack of motivation.

### *Household profiles*

A brief comparison of basic household indicators suggests that the PMB cohort come from household backgrounds that are generally poorer than HC campus. PMB students are more likely to come from rural areas, to have grown up in mud houses, with fewer utilities such as electricity at home. More PMB students appear to come from households that relied 'significantly' on food grown and raised themselves. A full 10% lived in informal settlements for at least 7 years of their schooling (with 6% for their entire educational lives), compared to 1% of HC students reporting residency in an informal settlement between grades 5-7.

Of all HC respondents, 23% said they had a home computer during their matric year, compared to 9% at PMB. Forty-two per cent of HC students resided in households with a family car, almost double the percentage of PMB students with this resource (22%). In the HC cohort, only 3% reported that they were first in their family to complete grade 12, compared with 17% in the PMB group. Thirty three percent of HC students claimed to be first in their family to be admitted to an institute of higher education, while at PMB this figure was 44%.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The questions asked 'are you the first person in your family to...', but no definition of family was given. Therefore, it is probable that a number of interpretations motivated student response, a flaw in the questionnaire.

As was reflected somewhat in schooling patterns, household profiles indicate a general trend towards upward mobility, though the pattern is more dramatic in the case of PMB students.

In grades 0-4, residency patterns were as indicated in the following tables:

% within Campus

		Campus		Total
		PMB	HC	
Grade 0-4 lived	city or city suburb	9.1%	15.8%	12.7%
	a township	25.8%	53.9%	40.8%
	an informal settlement	10.6%		4.9%
	a town	6.1%	11.8%	9.2%
	a very small town/village	13.6%	2.6%	7.7%
	a rural homestead/plot of land outside/village, town, city	28.8%	13.2%	20.4%
	a commercial farm	1.5%	1.3%	1.4%
	Other	4.5%	1.3%	2.8%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In high school, residency had altered somewhat, with growth in numbers presenting for both groups in cities and city suburbs and, for the PMB group, in townships.

% within Campus

		Campus		Total
		PMB	HC	
Grade 11 through 12, residency	City or city suburb	15.2%	25.6%	20.8%
	A township	31.8%	43.6%	38.2%
	An informal settlement	6.1%		2.8%
	A town	4.5%	12.8%	9.0%
	A very small town/village	10.6%	6.4%	8.3%
	A rural homestead/plot of land outside/village, town, city	27.3%	9.0%	17.4%
	A commercial farm	1.5%	2.6%	2.1%
	Other	3.0%		1.4%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

While the breakdown for patterns of residency does not adequately highlight the circumstances of livelihood, nor neatly decipher rural and urban divisions, it does indicate a general level of access to urban-base resources. However, a more reliable basic indicator of household resources is derived by identifying the materials used for house construction, specifically whether the house is made of mud or brick.<sup>35</sup> To get an idea of how campus HFY groups compared on this issue, and also to get a sense of trends over time, we can look at the figures from the beginning of primary school and the end of secondary school. These figures indicate a pattern of movement from mud houses to houses made of brick in both groups (whether this is an indication of a geographical move or the replacement of an existing house is not coded in the statistical data). Yet the ratio of mud to brick remains relatively constant, with almost four times as many PMB students living in mud houses than HC.

<b>% living in mud houses</b>	<b>PMB</b>	<b>HC</b>
In Grades 0-4	50	14
In Grades 11-12	32	8

Collectively, and in combination with other indicators, these figures indicate that racial classification of ‘African’ does not indicate a socio-economic status that is homogeneous. It seems that a higher percentage of students from the PMB group had more educational and household obstacles to overcome in the path to gaining access to higher education. Yet, it could be argued that, on average, ‘African’ still captures a higher percentage of disadvantage than is reflected otherwise in the first year of university life. For example, brief look at the control group data shows, for example, that only 4% of CG first years lived in mud houses in their early primary school and only a bit above 1% in their matric year.

#### *Difficulties experienced during matric year*

The table in the appendix of this paper provides a full account of the frequencies for all variables. What is striking about this data is that it appears to indicate more similarities than differences between groups. The figures for acute misfortunes, specifically illness of family

<sup>35</sup> Consultants in Development Studies claim that this is one of the most reliable predictors of level of economic resources in KZN (conversations with F. Lund, C. Meth, and A. McCord). Mud and brick account for 97% of housing materials reported by HFY students.

members, injury or trauma (both of self and family members), and deaths (both of family members and friends) appear to be parallel. Both groups had similarly high rates of reporting ‘difficulties at home’. Roughly half of students in each cohort reported having trouble paying school fees and difficulties in their relationships with boy/girlfriends. For each group, self-doubt and unhappiness appeared to be comparable challenges.

Observable differences can be seen in a selection of indicators, with the PMB group generally reporting a higher rate of disadvantage. (An exception is illness (self) with a 16% higher occurrence reported by the HC group.) Notably, the effects on matric schooling of hunger (because of insufficient food available) affected 53% of PMB students as compared to 36% of HC students; needing to care for family members at home affected 46% of the PMB group compared to 28% at HC; and 29% of PMB, as opposed to 13% at HC, reported being told that they’d ‘be more useful at home’.

What is striking about this section of data is that, if accurate, it reveals a horrifying picture of the way particularly illness and deaths are affecting learners. While the study did not ask about HIV status or its effects on friends and family members, it is the most likely explanation for the high rates reported to affect the year of matriculation for these students. As discussed, this is a striking area where the two UKZN campus cohorts of HFY students present *parallel* rates of social disadvantage, rates which differ significantly from our control group sample of first years. If measured by percentage of students reporting ‘never’ to have been affected in their matric year by illness, trauma or death, the rates may be compared as follows:

<b>Experience affecting matric year</b>	<b>HFY students</b>	<b>CG students</b>
% NOT affected by family illness	44	72
% NOT affected by injury/trauma to self	66	83
% NOT affected by injury trauma to family member	65	77
% NOT affected by death of a family member	47	71
% NOT affected by death of a friend	66	85

It is possible that the rates do not reflect deaths or illnesses that occurred in one year, as students may register a death or illness that affected them over a longer period and into their matric year. Still, as seen in the appendix, a portion of students report more than one event they were affected by, indicating the probability that these incidences in fact occurred during or close to the matric year. This represents a category of disadvantage that must be viewed as social and not personal, and should be considered as affecting learners in their educational paths.

### **Discussion**

In this research project, the objective was to compare the student body profiles of two cohorts admitted according to different definitions of disadvantage across a range of variables used to measure educational background, household resources, and personal experiences affecting matric year of study. The frequency statistics appear to indicate that indeed in relation to most variables the racial category 'African' does not indicate a homogeneously disadvantaged group. On the other hand, in relation to personal experiences—most disturbingly the affects of high morbidity and mortality rates—the figures indicate some important similarities. While the 2005 data is not generalisable (and would indeed required a more scientifically sampled control group to confirm the findings presented here) it is certainly suggestive.

Kenneth Prewitt writes, 'There is a strong moral case for jettisoning the term "race" altogether. Relevant data can be collected without ever using the term that echoes a discredited eighteenth-century science that took physiological markers as indicative of moral worth and intellectual ability'.<sup>36</sup> Kanya Adam recommends the replacement of racial categories with socioeconomic categories, on grounds that the population groups targeted in order to ensure 'demographic representation' will be reached but without entrenching the social divisions that can invite simmering resentments. There are other reasons for not relying on the short-cut 'race' in access admissions, specifically related to concerns internal to the access programme which I will mention here only briefly. Among these are the perceptions of students admitted to the HFY who believe themselves selected on the basis of

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<sup>36</sup> Prewitt, Kenneth 'Racial classifications in America: Where do we go from here?' *Daedalus*, Winter 2005, p. 15.

race and feel stigmatized by the idea that 'remedial' and 'African' appear so closely knit. Students who desire to be acknowledged as middle class describe attempts to define them as disadvantaged as 'racist'.<sup>37</sup> Another important issue is that the curriculum designed for the HFY is tailored to students whose educational background is poorly resourced, and morale has been low at HC because of the perceived mismatch between expectations about students' pre-university preparation and access coursework.<sup>38</sup> PMB students reported themselves much happier in the HFY programme than HC students (see pie charts, next page).

The data presented here, while not conclusive, supports the argument that disadvantage may be more effectively identified by socio-economic (or at least, a definition should include socio-economic) factors than according to racial status in selecting eligible candidates for access. For this reason, and also to avoid unnecessarily reintroducing anachronistic categories that have been hurtful in the past, access programmes should consider non-racial definitions of disadvantage in order more adequately to affect the aims of social redress in South Africa.

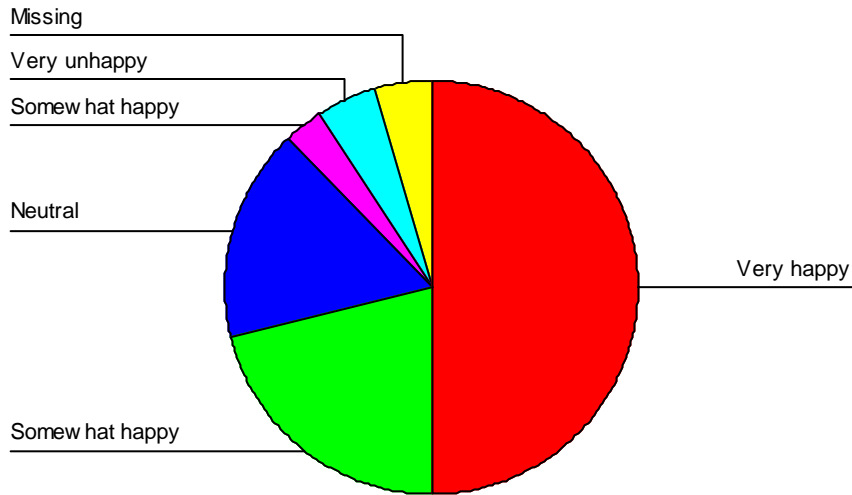
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<sup>37</sup> This accusation emerges continually in the HFY on HC campus.

<sup>38</sup> However, the perception is not necessarily the reality, as many HC students are indeed unprepared but reluctant to admit that they could benefit from the foundation curriculum.

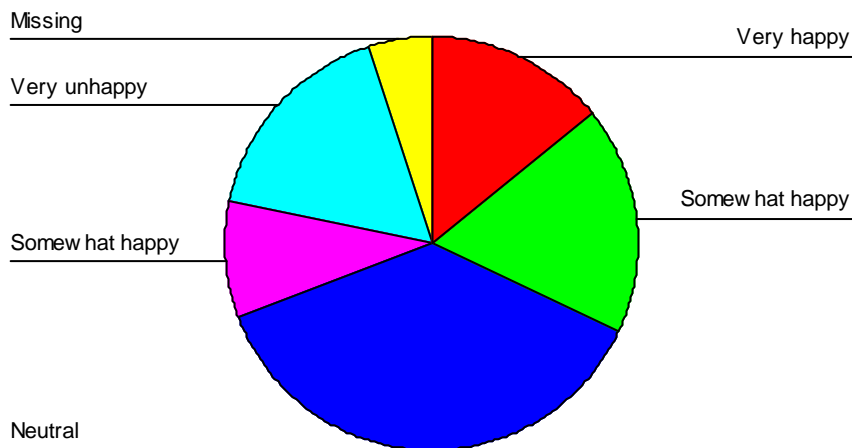
### Feeling about being in the foundation year program

CAMPUS: 1.00 PMB



### Feeling about being in the foundation year program

CAMPUS: 2.00 HC



Appendix A: Experiences disrupting matric year, by campus

(valid percentages roughly calculated and rounded off—do not cite)

<b>Experiences disrupting matric</b>	<b>Campus</b>	<b>%Never</b>	<b>%Once</b>	<b>% More than once</b>
Unhappiness	PMB	39	23	38
	HC	30	27	44
Illness/self	PMB	67	14	18
	HC	51	22	26
Injury or trauma/self	PMB	68	20	9
	HC	65	21	11
Illness/family member	PMB	46	21	33
	HC	41	31	27
Injury or trauma/family member	PMB	65	18	17
	HC	64	19	18
No funds for school	PMB	52	27	21
	HC	49	26	24
Earning a wage	PMB	80	10	10
	HC	77	10	13
Death of a family member	PMB	49	25	26
	HC	45	22	32
Death of a friend	PMB	67	24	8
	HC	65	22	13
Difficulties at home	PMB	30	20	50
	HC	34	24	41
Troubles with boy/girlfriend	PMB	56	18	26
	HC	50	14	36
Self-doubt	PMB	32	16	51
	HC	28	25	46
Becoming a parent	PMB	94	3	3
	HC	88	4	8



<b>Experiences disrupting matric</b> (Continued..)	<b>Campus</b>	<b>%Never</b>	<b>%Once</b>	<b>%More than once</b>
Moving residence	PMB	75	12	13
	HC	70	11	19
Feeling hungry	PMB	46	11	42
	HC	64	10	26
Too busy for school because of work at home	PMB	62	10	28
	HC	72	10	18
Caring for family members	PMB	54	23	23
	HC	72	11	17
Could not afford transport	PMB	74	2	24
	HC	72	12	16
Transport unavailable	PMB	85	3	12
	HC	70	12	18
Dangerous at school	PMB	80	6	13
	HC	76	9	14
Sexual abuse by staff	PMB	98	0	2
	HC	99	1	0
I was told I'd be more useful at home	PMB	71	6	23
	HC	87	6	7