Racial antidote to apartheid poison has unwanted side effects

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By Dan Newling

South African institution's positive-discrimination policy stirs up fresh debate. Dan Newling reports.

'Target' system: the University of Cape Town's race-aware admissions policy has caused controversy; with one professor saying that it was 'an insult to believe that I am disadvantaged because of the colour of my skin'.

Eighteen years after South Africans took part in their country's first fully democratic election, a debate on race and admissions at the country's most prestigious university are proving to be highly contentious.

In 1994, South Africa's new president, Nelson Mandela, who had only recently walked free after spending 27 years in prison for his opposition to the apartheid regime, heralded the election as a moment of celebration for "all our people, be they African, Coloured, Indian or White, [to] regard themselves as citizens of one nation". Since then, South Africa has completely redefined its image. Dire predictions of race war and economic collapse have come to nothing. Democracy has flourished. Mr. Mandela signed into law a liberal constitution that outlaws discrimination based on race; which is why the University of Cape Town's admissions policy - explicitly based, in part, on race - has provoked such controversy.
Cape Town, which occupies a majestic site on the slopes of Table Mountain overlooking the city from which it takes its name, was founded in 1829 and is the country's oldest university. Its race-aware admissions policy was formally established in 2004, but has become more contentious in recent years as the university increases the proportion of non-white students it seeks to accept on to popular courses. All its South African applicants are asked to define themselves on racial grounds, the options being: "black African", "Indian", "coloured", "Chinese", "white" or "I do not wish to declare my race".

It is a request, the university explains, that offers students the "opportunity of redress if they believe they have been disadvantaged by apartheid". But with the exception of the non-declaration, these are the same classifications that were used by the apartheid regime to entrench power and privilege in white hands - and condemned anyone who was not white to an inferior education. Between 1959 and 1994, in addition to attending inferior schools, only a limited number of non-whites were permitted to go to university. Even at liberal-minded Cape Town, which bent the rules to admit black and mixed-race students, non-whites were barred from campus dormitories and forbidden to attend medical post-mortems on white corpses. Neville Alexander, a sociology professor who spent 10 years imprisoned alongside Nelson Mandela on Robben Island for his anti-apartheid activities, has argued that Cape Town's present-day admissions policy betrays the non-racist ideals for which he struggled.

In a letter to the Cape Times newspaper in 2010, Professor Alexander accused the university of "intellectual and political cowardice" by seeking to redress the racial inequalities of the past by using a new form of racial engineering. As well as writing that it was an "insult to believe, even implicitly, that I am disadvantaged because of the colour of my skin", he linked Cape Town's "race-thinking" to genocide in Nazi Germany and Rwanda. But the university's vice-chancellor, Max Price, argued in two detailed newspaper articles last month that the policy is necessary for the simple reason that the poison of apartheid has not yet been flushed out of the South African education system. "Generally it is still the case that whites go to the private schools or the good public schools," Dr Price told Times Higher Education.

"Most black students in this country are going to rural schools or township schools, which are very poor quality."

**Positive discrimination**

In a bid to more closely mirror South Africa's racial make-up (79 per cent of the populations are black), Cape Town runs a "target" system for its most popular courses: it aims for around 65 per cent of students to be non-white. The result is a system of positive discrimination favoring "previously disadvantaged" race groups (i.e., those who suffered under apartheid), who are accepted with lower marks than white applicants. In order to have stood a chance of being accepted to study medicine (Cape Town's most oversubscribed course) this year, white students would need to have achieved 84 per cent in their final school examinations because of the intense competition from many white applicants from excellent schools.

South African students classifying themselves as Indian (i.e., with family roots in the Indian subcontinent) would also have needed 84 per cent. However, a Chinese applicant would have needed 82 per cent, a coloured (mixed-race) student 69 per cent and a black African student 67 per cent. The policy is undoubtedly achieving its aim: at the start of the South African academic year, which begins later this month, 65 per cent of the 25,000 students walking
Cape Town's corridors will be non-white. But the side effects of this undoubtedly desirable outcome are proving to be problematic.

**Negative results**

The first obvious problem is that the positive discrimination policy is likely to result in white students with superior exam results losing out on university places to black students with lower scores. But the problem runs deeper: many of Cape Town's black and mixed-race students are struggling to keep up. Even with extensive instruction programmes, just 50 per cent of Cape Town's most disadvantaged black students manage to graduate within five years. Another complicating factor in Cape Town's admissions policy achieving its aims relates to the country's growing black middle class. André du Toit, an emeritus professor who spent 25 years teaching the history of political thought at Cape Town, said: "Many, if not most, of the black students who come to [Cape Town] are now products of a small but significant and growing black middle class. They attended some of the country's best elite schools and, in some cases, will have parents who have also been to university.

"They come from a group that is historically disadvantaged but they, as individuals, are no longer disadvantaged." If the objective of Cape Town's affirmative action is to redress historical injustice, he added, "using race as an indicator is no longer effective". The real result of Cape Town's policy, Professor du Toit argued, will be to entrench "an inequality which is no longer exclusively along racial lines, but between rich and poor".

**Escaping the 'legacy effect'**

But Dr Price said that looks can be deceiving. Just because a black student comes from a wealthy family and attended a good school does not mean that she or he has truly escaped what he has called the "legacy effect of apartheid". "The research we've done shows that the black students at those top private schools are doing worse than white students," he said. "Why is it that they are performing more poorly? "In fact, the way that you are brought up in very early childhood is influenced by your parents' education, whether you were encouraged to read at home, etc. "The [more affluent black] children that we're talking about - their parents were brought up under apartheid. So it is not surprising that they are growing up in households that don't yet have the cultural capital to perform as well as the students from wealthy white middle-class families." Dr Price conceded that it is "far from ideal" that today, almost 20 years after Mr. Mandela triumphantly proclaimed the birth of a new nation, South Africa's brightest youth are still being asked to define themselves in terms of the colour of their skin.

Cape Town is testing other more direct indicators of disadvantage that avoid the use of apartheid classifications. But Dr Price said that if it and the country's other oversubscribed, formerly "white" universities that follow similar policies are to rectify the problems of the past, race "is still the best aggregate proxy for all of those factors that determine educational performance". He added: "[Race] captures wealth; it captures education, home language, whether they live in an environment with some privacy, whether they have the internet at home and broadband, and the negative consequences of racism itself."