

# “Student Disadvantage”: Key University Stakeholders’ Perspectives in South Africa

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## Abstract

Universities in South Africa seem to be struggling to create inclusive conditions for black students to succeed in their studies. The persistence of inequality in universities could be partly blamed on the use of the term ‘historically disadvantaged’, which is not defined in policy documents, and this has resulted in universities being unclear on what exactly to address in their transformation. Using the capability approach in this study, it is argued that policy should address the structural, institutional and environmental factors that contribute to student disadvantage, which prevent the development of opportunities and agency among students. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data from key stakeholders who dealt with student affairs (university staff and student representative council [SRC] members) at one South African university with the aim of developing an understanding of student disadvantage from their perspective. The findings revealed that student disadvantage manifests through structural and institutional factors, namely a culture of racism, alienating university campuses, student poverty, university teaching, and gender inequality. The study recommends that universities consider addressing these factors in their transformation.

**Keywords:** inclusion, disadvantage, institutional culture, transformation, capability approach, equality

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the Study

Against the background of South Africa’s history of colonialism and apartheid, universities in the country are still grappling with providing inclusive environments for all students to succeed amidst the increasing enrolment of black students in higher education. Driven by the need to train graduates in order to grow the country’s economy and redress inequality and social injustices associated with apartheid policies, higher education policy has sought to increase enrolment of black students in universities (Department of Education, 1997). The apartheid policies discriminated against black people through establishing separate education systems based on race, which limited their access to universities, good quality education and employment. With the new democratic dispensation in 1994, enrolment of black African students in universities increased from 383 898 (60.2% of the headcount) in 2001 to 701 482 (71.9% of the headcount) in 2016 (Council on Higher Education, 2018, 6). Accompanying the latter is the policy’s provision of funding to academically talented black students from low-income families and the development of academic support programmes to underprepared black students who have received poor quality education in poorly resourced formerly black public schools.

Recognising the need to create inclusive environments in universities – especially in historically white universities (those previously meant for white students) – the White Paper 3 of 1997 (par 342) stipulates that universities should develop ‘a campus environment that is sensitive to racial and cultural diversity’. This was with the understanding that previously excluded black students from lower socio-economic backgrounds would struggle to adjust to university environments that were developed for the white and middle-class students. Despite the increase in enrolments in universities and the above-mentioned policy provisions, inequity and inequality of outcomes still persevere in South African universities. For instance, cohort studies show that, for both contact and distance learning, 24.3% of African students (previously called black students) graduated in three-year degree programmes compared to 41.9% of white students in 2015 (Department of Higher Education and Training 2019, 62-73). These figures show that white students have close to double the chance of graduating than African students. This raises the question whether universities are

prepared to cater for black students from low-income backgrounds that underwent poor schooling in township and rural schools.

Failure by universities to build inclusive environments could be attributed to the use of the term ‘historically disadvantaged’ – a term that is not defined in policy documents but frequently foregrounded in interventions designed to reduce inequality in higher education by providing access to state resources (Council on Higher Education, 2004). However, this term is understood to mean historically segregated black students who cannot access higher education, especially historically advantaged white institutions. Universities can decide the meaning of *disadvantage* (Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2015). By not defining *disadvantage*, higher education policy entrusted universities to be innovative and design interventions they deem appropriate for transforming the institutions and improving access, participation and academic outcomes among previously disadvantaged black students (Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2015, 13). Nevertheless, higher education policy has not taken into consideration the different interpretations by universities and the agency of university administrators as to whether they believed transformation (which refers to the changes made in higher education institutions to create inclusive conditions particularly for historically disadvantaged black students) should take place. Some of the historically white universities have found it difficult to clearly articulate the needs of black students in their interpretation of policy in their institutional documents and how they are going to improve campuses to become inclusive (Dhunpath and Vithal, 2012). Additionally, emphasis on students through the use of the term *disadvantage* is one of the ways policy diverts attention from the systemic conditions in the society and unfriendly institutional cultures and racism (Bozalek and Boughey, 2012; Gore and Walker, 2020). This could contribute to the persistence of inequalities in universities, as they do not adequately adjust to accommodate black students especially from lower-income groups.

### *1.2 Theoretical Framework: The Capability Approach*

The study was guided by the capability approach (Sen, 1999) and its key terms – capabilities, functionings, agency, and conversion factors. According to Sen (1999), when assessing disadvantage, the evaluative space should be people’s wellbeing through the use of ‘capabilities’ – that is, the opportunities one has to achieve ‘functionings’ (accomplishments) (Robeyns, 2017, 38). ‘Agency’ refers to people’s abilities to act (or not) and bring about change to meet their valued objectives (Sen, 1999, 19). The amount of capabilities an individual has, is determined by ‘conversion factors’ – that is, structural, institutional, environmental and individual factors enabling and constraining individuals to achieve their goals. As individuals differ with regard to their capacities to convert resources into achievements, we should assess individual, environmental and structural conversion factors affecting their opportunities (Sen, 1992, 33).

Gore and Walker (2020) used the capabilities approach to investigate student experiences of disadvantage with the aim of nuancing the term for interventions in universities. They revealed that disadvantage is a complex, multidimensional term that encompasses factors beyond race, class and gender, such as psycho-social health, intellectual growth, affiliation, participation and personal tenacity. Although they (Gore and Walker, 2020) identified these factors as excluding students in historically advantaged universities, it is also crucial that these be investigated from universities’ perspectives. Accordingly, the capability approach was employed in this study, as it focuses on individual students by recognising human diversity among students and allowing one to identify structural, institutional and individual barriers that are (dis)enabling to students (Robeyns, 2003, 2017). These conversion factors – that is, the structural system (poverty, racism, schooling system), universities’ institutional cultures, individuals and rated environmental factors – can be relevant spaces for equality, with interventions aiming to expand students’ opportunities to succeed.

### *1.3 Debates on Student Disadvantage and Transformation*

Concern has been raised regarding the slow pace of transformation in universities, and one of the reasons for the latter is lack of clarity on what to change and how these changes should take place (Soudien et al., 2008; Govinder, Zondo and Makgoba, 2013). This has resulted in the universities failing to adequately address student disadvantage. To develop measures that can be used for assessing transformation by universities, Govinder, Zondo and Makgoba (2013, 1) developed an ‘Equity Index’ which analyses demographic characteristics. Although helpful, they were criticised for concentrating on enrolment figures, while ignoring the internal practices of exclusion in universities and the context in which transformation should take place (Cloete, 2013; Dunne, 2014). Central to this literature is the role of structural and institutional factors in disadvantaging students even after enrolment in the universities. More over, it is unclear which aspects should be transformed and how these changes should be made hence the need to disentangle disadvantage and identify the aspects that universities should focus on.

Over and above racism – which has been experienced at historically advantaged (Afrikaans) universities – Jansen (2009) explained that the physical, academic and social aspects of institutions (i.e. architecture, names of the buildings, residence practices, leadership, monuments and religious practices) resemble the Afrikaans culture and that these exclude some black student. A study by Breetzke and Hedding (2018) focused on changing demographic profiles of staff members in universities and revealed that some progress has been made, as more black academic staff occupy academic positions at universities. Although still underrepresented, the proportion of black associate professors increased from 16% in 2005 to 23% in 2015, while the proportion of black full professors increased from 10% to 15% in the same period (Breetzke and Hedding, 2018, 158). Universities, therefore, appear to be insufficiently transformed in the face of persistent and deeply entrenched institutional cultures that continue to disadvantage most black students (Badat and Sayed, 2014).

The dissatisfaction of students with transformation progress was also expressed during the #RhodesMustFall movement in 2015, when University of Cape Town students protested for the ‘decolonisation’ of universities to move away from the apartheid legacy (Le Grange, 2016; Leibowitz, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). What can be stressed from the decolonisation literature is the need to change higher education content, teaching methods and academic staff from being Eurocentric to addressing the needs of all students, including black students. Curriculum and teaching arrangements should be sensitive to the needs of black students from low-income backgrounds without adequate readiness for university education. This is especially relevant for most of the black students who struggle to navigate academic as well as social life in historically white universities due to identity crises and lower proficiency in English, which is the language of instruction and writing (Pym and Kapp, 2013).

#### *1.4 Statement of the Problem*

There seems to be a disjuncture between policy aimed at transformation in higher education and its implementation which contributes to universities’ continued underpreparedness to create conducive environments for black students to graduate (Breetzke and Hedding, 2016). Defining student disadvantage is essential for transformation in that it informs universities on the exact aspects to address and how to tackle them. This research focused on exploring how student disadvantage manifests itself in structural and institutional conditions at a specific previously advantaged South African university and how universities could create inclusive environments on campuses for all students to graduate. Previous studies have focused on defining disadvantage using students’ voices (Gore, 2019, Gore, 2020; Gore and Walker, 2020). However, the term has not been examined from the universities’ perspective, which is central for transformation given that these institutions play a fundamental role in designing and implementing interventions for creating inclusive spaces. The main research questions addressed in this study are: How does the university understand student disadvantage? How can that understanding of disadvantage contribute to meaningful transformation at the university for black students to succeed? The argument presented in this paper is that in their transformation universities should focus on expanding students’ opportunities (capabilities) and enhancing their agency so that they can successfully complete their studies (advantage). This is achievable through articulating the (conversion) factors that constrain students from realising their potential including the institutional environments, and historical and systemic conditions (Bozalek and Boughey, 2012).

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Design: The Case Study Approach*

The case study approach was adopted for the study for it enabling the exploration of student disadvantage within the university setting, historical and structural contexts, institutional cultures, and students’ social, economic and schooling backgrounds (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Moreover, this methodology allowed the researcher to gather rich and detailed data essential to obtain a more nuanced understanding of what student disadvantage constitutes in order to inform transformation at a specific university (Schostak, 2002; Gore, 2019). The social constructivism research paradigm was adopted to obtain multiple perspectives on student disadvantage. This paradigm emphasises the assumption that disadvantage is subjectively understood and participants and the researcher co-construct its meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

The study was situated at the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa, a historically advantaged university that previously enrolled white Afrikaans-language students but currently enrolls some black students. In its transformation plan, the UFS aims at disassembling structures of the past apartheid and colonialism in all spheres including academic, social, economic and political to promote social justice (UFS, 2020a). Though the university claims to have equal learning conditions for diverse students through having a non-divided community, the institution is conservative in many ways (Walker, 2016) with incidents of racism taking place periodically. One incident in 2007 – which showed white students holding an initiation ceremony while humiliating black staff from the residences –

another one – where violence erupted between white and black students at a rugby match in 2016 – brought to the fore issues of racism. These racist acts suggest that the university may not be offering an environment for students to participate equally. Nonetheless, changes have also taken place at the university since 2009, resulting in a more integrated university – for instance, the implementation of mixed-race residences, or a programme that exposes students to international, multicultural contexts before returning to lead programmes that promote tolerances and diversity. In addition, the university adopted a gender equality policy (UFS, 2018) and a new language policy where English is the main language of instruction (UFS, 2016).

### *2.2 Participants, Data Collection and Analysis*

Data were gathered from four university's management staff members and three SRC members who dealt with student affairs so as to understand their perspectives on student disadvantage. Participants from the university's management staff constituted the members responsible for academic affairs, student affairs, and student welfare, and the head of department while those from the SRC included its leader and members responsible for student affairs and transformation. Two head of departments selected declined to take part in the interviews. Participants were purposively selected to participate due to their role in the university which positioned them to be more conversant with student affairs (Given, 2008). The sample size of seven participants was deemed sufficient to give insight into how the university understood student disadvantage, as these key stakeholders were well vested in the subject under investigation. This sample size was appropriate for collection of usable, new and richer insights through enabling follow-up questions on the topic while allowing a deeper case analysis of the data (Gore, 2019; Ogden and Cornwell, 2010; Sandelowski, 1995).

Data were collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews. The semi-structured interview schedules comprised of specific open-ended questions based on the challenges faced by students identified in the literature as well as institutional cultures issues, teaching practices, gender equality and racism. Participants signed consent forms to indicate their voluntary participation and understanding of the purpose, procedures and risks associated with the study. All the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The length of each interview ranged between 60 and 75 minutes. After transcribing the data, the data were coded using NVivo – a software program for qualitative data analysis – before being conceptually and thematically analysed (Saldana, 2009). Themes that emerged from the interviews were students' socio-economic background; student funding; academic preparedness; university teaching; race; curriculum; language; disability; and religion, and each one of these themes is presented in section 3.

Reliability of the findings was enhanced through testing the appropriateness and accuracy of the interview questions in a pilot study. This entailed administering the interview questions to one of the staff members who, in turn, provided feedback after the interview on how he or she felt, understood and interpreted the questions. Unclear and repetitive questions were then refined based on the feedback. Biases during data analysis were minimised by re-reading the texts before interpretation, being open-minded and cautious, and ensuring that the different views of participants were included during data interpretation to ensure credibility of the findings (Silverman, 2006). Finally, triangulation of multiple data sources was employed to compare perceptions of the university staff and SRC members to strengthen the credibility of the findings (Patton, 2002). Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the university, and all ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study; for example, voluntarily participation, not disclosing the name of the university in reporting and using pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.

## **3. Findings**

### *3.1 Student Socio-Economic Backgrounds*

The participating university staff claimed that some black students underperformed partly due to limited 'social capital' – that is, the information, social connections and the power derived from these resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 99). White students, on the other hand, received family support from their parents, who were involved in their children's university education. The member responsible for student and academic affairs had this to say:

“White families visit their students here [at the university]. They intervene much more than black parents do. They have a sense of compassion. They feel in place, the university is much more familiar to them than for black people.” (Member: Academic Affairs)

The university staff deemed family involvement as an advantage. Familiarity with the university environment is an important aspect of social and cultural capital that white students bring to the university, which most black students seem not to have. White parents' close involvement means that their children are more knowledgeable due to advice and information received from their parents prior to their enrolment, and they subsequently develop a stronger sense of

belonging to the university once enrolled compared to black students. It is also important to note that close parental involvement might prevent students from making autonomous decisions, consequently contributing to their loss of agency. Furthermore, this perspective views black students from a deficit model, as black students seemingly lack family support. Underlying factors that might prevent black parents from visiting their children – for example, the structural factors of inequality and poverty, including lack of finances, which limits black parents from supporting their children like more affluent parents do – are ignored.

### 3.2 Academic Preparedness and University Teaching

University staff elaborated further on how they thought students from low-quality schools had already been significantly disadvantaged by the time they enrolled in the university. An interviewee from the division of student affairs held the following view:

“I think students struggle a lot with writing and do not have the ability to write in a structured way to put forward an argument. In the cognitive functional area, I think students have many challenges. They have not developed critical and creative thinking skills, the ability to think in a flexible way, to take principles and apply them to different scenarios or settings, so they think in a very fragmented way. Even if you put them in an environment with excellent programmes and class, they don’t have the mental roots, if I can use that metaphor, to gain from a direct exposure to a [higher] learning environment.” (Member: Academic Affairs)

This shows that poor schooling is a significant conversion factor that limits students to succeed academically. To address these shortfalls, the university established its Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) in 2012 which offers academic support programmes to underprepared students. One such intervention, the University Preparation Programme (UPP), was implemented to offset the imbalances in the poor schooling system through admitting students with lower admission points than required for the mainstream programmes. The students undergo one-year resource-based learning before qualifying for an extended degree programme, which takes four years at the main campus. This was explained as follows:

“In my experience, students coming from the South Campus [UPP programme] are actually better prepared when they move to Bloemfontein campus. Therefore, I think the support structures in the programme that we have in the South Campus are extremely successful in preparing the students for the rest of higher education time at university.” (Member: Student Affairs)

While the above response reveals that students who have followed the UPP were better prepared than those in mainstream programmes, the university was not offering these key features to students enrolled in mainstream programmes. Academic support programmes have the potential to benefit students who might have qualified for mainstream programmes but lack some of the foundational skills needed for university education. Academic support programmes might, however, disadvantage students through giving them the impression that they are somehow deficient given that the programme is targeted at and delivered separately to underprepared students (Smit, 2012). This might alienate these students, which suggests that the foundational programme should be embedded in all the degree programmes, mooted the possibility of changing three-year degree programmes to four-year degree programmes (Council on Higher Education, 2016). However, in this case, well-prepared students will also undergo a support programme they might not need. In addition, through the CTL, the university offers additional training to lecturers and provides academic support to students at the main campus:

“I attended some courses for new lecturers when I arrived at this university last year. The Centre for Teaching and Learning is trying to build capacities for the lecturers. They are also assisting students when it comes to language. There are experts who always engage students on how to write, but I don’t know whether it’s sufficient or not.” (Head of Department)

The intervention described above helps to equip teaching staff with additional skills they need to provide academic support for students from diverse backgrounds. Encouraged by their lecturers, some underprepared students then receive academic support to enhance their performance. This is a formal intervention programme to enhance critical literacy amongst underprepared students. Furthermore, the university staff members reported that the university was supporting some first-generation students in the mainstream programme:

“‘Harmony’ is a first-year residence. So, we only have first years [students] in those residences but with some senior students to fill in the role of mentors. We train them on mentorship to fulfil a very distinct role in helping the first years [students]. I think that should provide a solution for us in future to provide better support to the first-year cohorts but also to take in more first-generation students [in residences] in their first year because that is where they are most vulnerable.” (Member: Student Affairs)

The quote above makes mention of another less formal academic intervention offered to students by their peers in university residences. This intervention benefits only a smaller proportion of students who are in university residences (about 3,000 students) – these are more likely to be advantaged students considering that they met the admission criteria for entry into the residences, namely good Grade 12 passes and funding (UFS, 2020b). Also important to note is that the university staff sought to expand academic literacy amongst underprepared students in the mainstream programme as a way of expanding students' opportunities. However, it is also clear that these interventions benefitted only a few on-campus first-generation students, whilst excluding off-campus students.

Moreover, it also emerged that, whilst the university staff appreciated the use of teaching methods that engaged students, lecturers were often constrained from using them due to conversion factors such as class sizes and student underpreparedness. The departmental head said the following in this regard:

“It always has to revolve around the students in small classes like the honour's ones. [...] Sometimes you try to organise some videos just to excite them to see that this thing is really happening in the real world. Learning by doing is the best for me, but this might not be practical in a large undergraduate class [sic]. From time to time, you give students some case studies just to be more practical, but again this is challenging in big classes. I tried to use examples and it is unfortunate that the students are not familiar with those examples and it does [sic] not help them.” (Head of Department)

Through emphasising pedagogies of engagement, the departmental head motivated students to participate in their learning. Pedagogy means the teaching methods, the teacher, what is taught, and the classroom context (Walker, 2006). However, the preceding response illustrates the challenges faced by the departmental head in enhancing students' learning. This disadvantaged these students, as their freedom to learn effectively were diminished. Through the pedagogical arrangements, students were excluded from learning effectively, as lecturers did not identify and address their needs. Presumably this failure on the part of the lecturers stemmed from them (the lecturers) assuming that all students had former Model C backgrounds and consequently knew how to learn (former Model C schools are historically white schools that charge fees and offer good quality education).

Funding was also identified as a barrier to effective teaching, as the university did not have the finances needed to recruit more teaching staff in the event that classes were made smaller. The interviewee explained:

“I don't think the university will be able to provide staff for the students' diverse needs. [...]. We need more money to offer the person [teachers]. We need more money to differentiate the students. We need more money to have a smaller class and a more personalised teaching. All these things happen with funding, and I don't think that they [lecturers] are doing such a bad job, but they need money to roll out the initiatives they have.” (Member: Academic Affairs)

It was difficult for lecturers to deal with diverse students' needs. Financial constraints were a setback for the university in its aim to create an environment that allows the lecturers to give individualised support to these students. Nonetheless, money alone will not suddenly improve teaching and learning, as there is also the need to address other conversion factors that disable students, namely the institutional culture in student residences and academic and social spaces that are supportive to white and middle-class students but alienating to black and low-income students.

### *3.3 Race, Curriculum and Language Issues*

Based on the understanding that racism is dehumanising, the university sought to build a non-racist community through challenging racial stereotypes and promoting a multicultural environment by way of raising awareness in residences. Furthermore, it promoted a multicultural environment through its accommodation policy:

“It's important for us that our residences are diversified according to different racial categories. So, we don't want a homogeneous group because we believe a diverse environment develops students better than a homogeneous environment.” (Member: Student Welfare)

The above illustrates some reforms to transform the university consistent with its diversity values, since motivating students to develop socially as global citizens was one of the stated objectives of the placement policy. Still, the implementation of this policy was of concern, as racism was still rife. According to the SRC members, the university was not addressing racism adequately as indicated by its leniency with perpetrators. The SRC member interested in transformation gave the example of the rugby incident, where little effort was made to restrain the perpetrators.

“Most of the people haven't even been brought to book. There is a video of the incident [violence perpetrated by white students on black students and workers during a rugby match], and we can identify the culprits. There

was an allegation that one of the culprits was a lecturer here and up to today, nothing has been done, as he is still teaching here.” (SRC: Transformation)

The SRC member believed that the university did not adequately address this incident in order to ensure that such behaviour would not be repeated. Although the university has made progress in acquiring a diverse student body by numbers, it still has a long way to go to achieve a multicultural environment that motivates students to respect and treat each other with dignity. Jansen (2009) argues that the challenge is related to the Afrikaans culture that promotes the idea of a closed community amongst its people, which then seeks to preserve its heritage in some universities. This suggests that policies on diversification threaten the traditional institutional culture of the university, resulting in little will and dedication from most of the white staff to implement them. Of the 841 academic permanent staff members at the university at the time of this study, 625 were white, 35 were mixed race, seven were Asian, and 175 were black (UFS, 2017, 63). The member responsible for student affairs was of the opinion that it was difficult to control racism:

“Is it fair to require from a university to erase racism in its students? Or is it fair to ask the university to be very responsive to incidences of racism and proactive to prevent incidences of racism? [...] But I also think we should be honest to say that racism is a human condition, and we must be honest with ourselves to say that collectively we must take responsibility because the university does not function as an island in itself. It’s part of a society and what we see on campus oftentimes is a symptom of what happens in society.” (Member: Student Affairs)

At issue was his belief that racism was inevitable and that the university was not (wholly) responsible for preventing racism. While it was clear that the university policy valued race fairness so that all students could flourish at the campus, the above responses suggest that racism was still rife.

Furthermore, the university also planned to implement curriculum changes to create equal opportunities for attainment amongst diverse students. This was in the wake of the realisation that some content taught in certain university subjects at the university did not address the needs of black students. Black students were disadvantaged by this curriculum, hence the call to ‘decolonise’ higher education through transforming universities into more inclusive spaces. The member responsible for academic affairs stated that plans were in place to make changes:

“There is a plan and that is across the board, and that is no joke. In some place, the content is specific; in other cases, the content is broad but it’s the attitude that needs to change. It’s the position of the lecturer in relation with the class.” (Member: Academic Affairs)

A close examination of this response shows that the university was determined to make changes to the university curriculum, which was believed to marginalise some identities and exclude African scholarship and those from the South. While universities in South Africa continue to exclude and marginalise the knowledge of colonised people and overvalue Eurocentric knowledge through the curriculum (Le Grange, 2016; Mbembe, 2016), the ‘decolonisation’ discourse poses implementation challenges due to the complexity of the movement – for example, Africanisation of universities – which raises questions about the specific aspects to be changed or maintained. The SRC member explained how the curriculum changes should take place:

“The best curriculum is one that will be able to speak to all the students and allow for black lecturers and female lecturers to teach so that all students can fully express themselves. This applies to teaching and the material as well. When we don’t talk about our heroes like Steve Biko, but we talk about white people only, the material that is being taught is not speaking to us. [...] Our LLB [law] curriculum is under review; I don’t think it reflects everything of us black Africans.” (SRC: Transformation)

Underlying the ‘decolonising’ process is the inclusion of issues such as African values and ways of living that make the content more relevant to diverse students. This also includes aligning the content, teachers and teaching methods to the contexts and needs of diverse students. However, what is important is how the university is going to change teachers’ attitudes given that the staff mostly comprises white people and that most of these lecturers have been in their positions for long periods of time.

Concomitantly, the university implemented its new language policy which recognises English as the main language of instruction in an attempt to address language and race disparities. This advantaged white students whilst disadvantaging other groups. The university had a dual language policy that offered parallel Afrikaans and English classes, and the member responsible for academic affairs explained how this unintentionally had privileged white students:

“It might be an advantage but not intentional discrimination. I have very few cases that demonstrate that habit, but what happens de facto is that we have a segregated campus that we have students learning in Afrikaans

who are mostly white, and the other one in English who are mostly black students. This is not the way the world in which we are operates [sic].” (Member: Academic Affairs)

As the Afrikaans students, who were mostly white, and the lecturers shared the same language, communication was easier. Realising that the concurrent use of Afrikaans and English privileged white students in class and polarised students on the basis of race, the university introduced a new language policy in 2016 where English was adopted as the main language of instruction.

### 3.4 Gender, Disability and Religion

Although there had been improvements in addressing gender inequality, university staff admitted that the university had not made much progress in ensuring equal participation of female students. The member responsible for academic affairs held the following view:

“There is a gender policy for the LGBTI community, but it’s not much of an affirmative gender policy. So, if you look at how the structure of the university looks like, you will see that all the women occupy lower levels and the men are the professors. And amongst students, there has been a very strong movement on the part of women against sexual harassment, patriarchy, etc., among the students. This country is very patriarchal, and our young revolutionaries can learn from that. So that’s the work in progress.” (Member: Academic Affairs)

Although it was highlighted that the university was traditionally patriarchal by nature, it had not yet put an affirmative gender policy in place to address gender unfairness (at the time of the study). The evidence revealed that female students lacked aspects of the affiliation capability, which restricted their freedom to participate effectively in their studies. Nonetheless, the above quote reflects the collective agency and voice of female students who had lobbied for gender fairness, thus constituting a form of advantage for them.

Disability is another dimension of disadvantage that emerged from the interviews with the SRC members. The SRC member interested in student affairs stated that there were approximately 19 students who were blind and 11 in wheelchairs at the time of the interview, implying that the university needed to pay more attention to them. Although there had been interventions to improve the access of these students to university resources and promote their learning, the SRC member explained that the university had not responded to some of their needs:

“Disabled students can’t access all of the residence, because some of the residences don’t have ramps and the rooms are on the first floor. So that means they cannot be accommodated easily in generic residences.” (SRC: Student Affairs)

This suggests that the university environment did not give the same opportunities for mobility to students with disabilities as compared to other students.

Equally important was the university’s unequal recognition of religion on campus. As reported by the SRC member, the university tended to decline support for minority religious groups on campus. This was true for Muslim students as demonstrated below:

“Muslim students don’t have prayer facilities. If they do give them a place to pray, it will be some dodgy place with cockroaches. It shows you how the university is very quick to dismiss somebody when they don’t form part of the majority.” (SRC: Leader)

Whilst this appeared to be a spatial issue on the surface, it is important to note that it also constituted an inclusion issue in that Muslims did not function as equal members of the university community. Jansen (2009) explains that the Afrikaans universities ensured efficient transmission of apartheid knowledge to the next generations through their theology faculties. This symbiotic relationship between most of the Afrikaans universities and the Dutch Reformed Church seemingly continues to pose a challenge to transformation in the post-apartheid era, as the university did not pay adequate attention to other religious groups, such as the Muslim faith. It is clear that students from the minority religious groups were deprived of the affiliation capability in that they were unable to exercise their religious freedom.

## 4. Discussion of Findings

The findings showed that the conversion factors that constrain students from participating effectively and successfully in completing their studies are the university’s teaching practices, racism, gender inequality, infrastructure that restricted movement of students with disabilities, and exclusion of minority religious groups. The findings led to a deeper understanding of how *disadvantage* in the institution is linked to the various dimensions in which black students are excluded and therefore are informative with regard to the type of interventions to design (Gore and Walker, 2020). For example, the findings point to the need to transform the curriculum (section 3.3). Aspects of the curriculum may

diminish black students' capabilities of confidence and participation, which may contribute to weaker performance. This capability of 'personhood self-formation' is undermined through the disregard of some students' identities or personhoods, and this diminishes their confidence in effective learning. The transformation process should, therefore, enhance the confidence and participation capabilities amongst diverse students, which position them as equal students in the learning process and attainment, thus advantaging them. Therefore, identifying conversion factors contribute to detailed knowledge about the aspects of the structural factors and institutional cultures to address as a way of expanding students' opportunities to succeed, hence changes can be made in those dimensions.

Another observation concerns disabled students' lack of mobility freedom to access some of the residences (section 3.4). This finding is consistent with that of Mutanga and Walker (2015), who revealed that universities deprive disabled students of the mobility capability due to the absence of facilities to enhance their mobility in lecture rooms. The absence of the mobility capability disadvantages them, as they cannot function equally to other students – that is, creating social networks in residences without facilities to enhance their movement. Finally, the findings showed that students had the capability of participation and voice, as they collectively lobbied for gender equality (section 3.4). Having agency is a form of advantage, suggesting that the university can foster students' agency in the area of teaching and help them to develop other capabilities for student success (Walker, 2006; Gore, 2019).

Based on the findings from interviews with the university staff and SRC members, some of the important capability-inspired capabilities to attain equal opportunities for students' success are as follows: economic stability; academic literacy; affiliation; participation and voice; psycho-social and mental health; and mobility. Instead of only focusing on enrolment figures (Govinder, Zondo and Makgoba, 2013), the capability approach goes further, offering a multidimensional framework whereby students' access, participation and success can be assessed. The above capabilities also emerged from the literature (Gore, 2019; Gore and Walker, 2020) where students mentioned these capabilities as dimensions of student disadvantage. What this study reveals as elements of student disadvantage (that did not emerge from the literature), are the diminished affiliation capability through lack of recognition of the LGBTI community, the limited religious capability enjoyed by minority religion groups, and lack of the mobility capability amongst students with disabilities.

The theoretical implications of the results in this study is for universities to address the conversion factors constraining students from graduating including teaching practices, racism, curriculum, gender inequality and disability. The social implication of the above findings is that universities should engage with their staff members, students and community leaders to find ways of changing the discriminatory attitudes so that students respect each other and appreciate diversity as a way of controlling racism. The results from the study have the practical implication for further research to investigate how to decolonise the curriculum considering the complexity of the subject (Leibowitz, 2016; Mbembe, 2016).

Although the study provides valuable insights into the concept of disadvantage and satisfies the goal of achieving a deeper (as opposed to a broader) understanding of student disadvantage, a larger sample size could have provided more diverse accounts. Furthermore, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the results cannot be generalised to other universities.

## 5. Conclusion

Although the university had implemented some interventions as presented above, it still faced some challenges of developing effective strategies to combat exclusion – for example, eradicating control racism and funding to differentiate classes. This suggests that the university might not have been able to address some of these challenges despite the expectation created in policy. Focusing on universities only to improve the institutional and individual (student) factors might not adequately yield the desired results, as there is a need to engage with positions of power in the wider society to disrupt the structural factors including racism, inequality and poverty.

It is recommended that the formation and expansion of students' capabilities be promoted by improving the university's quality of teaching (e.g. through diversifying the curriculum and using teaching methods that address the needs of individual students) and by creating enabling environments to develop students' capabilities (e.g. further training of teaching staff, using methods that involve students in the learning process, encouraging their participation in class, and valuing diverse opinions). Thus, through its teaching quality, the university could help students to develop and expand their capabilities despite the structural conversion factors that might otherwise prevent them from doing so. As regards institutional culture, the university should intensify programmes to raise awareness about gender inequality and prevent racism on campus, implement outreach programmes in surrounding communities on gender inequality and racism, and lobbying to influence those in positions of power to address the patterns of

injustices in society. Finally, it is recommended that infrastructure be improved to accommodate students with disabilities to move freely and to provide spaces for minority religious groups to practice.

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