PART B

WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING
CHAPTER 6

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO FAIR ACCESS

Melanie Walker

The goal in this chapter is to sketch the access terrain in order to understand what may be missing in relation to equity and to research so that we can work towards university access opportunities and outcomes which are more just. It is proposed that these are evaluated in terms of the actual lives that persons are able to choose by advancing their valued opportunities (their human capabilities), their achievements and their agency freedoms (Sen, 2009). The chapter notes the strong correlation between socio-economic status and educational outcomes (Moses, van der Berg, & Rich, 2017), suggesting inadequate opportunities for many to shape their own futures. Yet who goes to university, who benefits and whose social mobility is advanced are important public-good questions in a highly unequal country. In 2015, the median income for people with a degree was ZAR 17 000 per month compared to ZAR 3 000 for those without a degree (Makgetla, 2018), while the unemployment rate of graduates with a degree is around 6% compared to 27% for other adults (Makgetla, 2018). Indeed, at the time of writing, South Africa was reported to have the highest rates of private return from higher education (Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014). If we understand higher education in South Africa as benefitting both a person but also her family, and if we understand higher education as advancing social mobility for low-income families, then access is a rather crucial first step in this direction.

If social mobility opportunities are not available to all, then who actually gets in to higher education and to which university and programme is a question for policy and practice. The universities and programmes into which students are admitted, the structural constraints which get in the way – despite the heroic efforts some low-income students make in the face of massive adversity (see for example reporting by Nombembe, Nair, & Macanda, 2018) – require critical scrutiny and debate.

Sketching research on access

Space allows for only a brief sketch of the considerable body of international research on access which is relevant to South Africa. This research has investigated how working class and middle
class students make different choices about higher education (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005), revealing a complex intersection of personal aspirations, parental education and economic capital (Hart, 2013). Often individual aspirations are reduced to fit what someone (or their school teachers) thinks is suitable for ‘a person like me’. Anders (2012) found that a greater proportion of people in the top income quartile in the UK apply to university, compared to those in the bottom quintile. Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (2002) suggest that in families where one or more members have been to university, it is assumed that others will follow; this effect of parental level of education is also confirmed by Oliveira and Zanchi (2004). More broadly, and even accepting that there are wide variations among the club of well-off countries, the OECD (2013, p. 3) reported that amongst its member countries, students from a more educated family are ‘almost twice’ as likely to attend university than their peers.

Educational stratification is not only imposed upon the student but also may be ‘self-imposed’, with young people making choices that are similar to those of their peers and their families, including choosing more familiar institutions – generally lower status universities for working class students and lower status degree programmes, while middle and upper class students choose higher status universities (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009). Reay et al. (2005, p. 85) thus comment that for a majority of ‘non-traditional’ students, choosing to go to university and to which university ‘involve[s] either a process of finding out what you cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options left, or a process of self–exclusion’. They argue that what appears to be an individual choice is ‘a social process which is structured and structuring’ (p. 160), informed by one’s social position and educational background. For many, this means only one choice rather than many possible pathways. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) further affirm that decisions about which subjects to study at school, what degree to aim for, which universities to apply to, and so on are influenced by social class background and the type of secondary school attended.

Finally, universities may also themselves look for students who are the ‘best fit’. Pitman (2015), using Australia as the context, considers university status as the elephant in the higher education room, arguing that the better off are simply more skilled at playing the access and admissions game, loading the dice with their own cultural capital. University status must then be factored into access policies for a ‘more democratic distribution of its benefits’ (Pitman, 2015, p. 290 and see Stevens, 2007).

What do we mean by access?

In the South Africa’s case, access is understood in this chapter as getting into university across four key stages which are not necessarily sequential: 1) Grade 12 marks and subjects; 2) choosing a university, including getting information from family, friends, schools, teachers, the

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6 In South Africa students must select their Grade 12 subjects at the end of Grade 9 and will do so under varying conditions of agency and equality. The subjects they select will shape possible university options, for example if they take mathematics literacy this will rule out a number of degree options.
media; 3) being accepted into a programme; and 4) registration, with access to funding. These moments may be more or less agentic, more or less secure or unstable, and more or less equitable. They may be serendipitous or carefully planned and aspirations to go to university may be formed early or quite late (when Grade 12 results suggest this possibility) (Walker, forthcoming; also see Walker & Fongwa, 2017). The end point is achievement of a university place and not just the formal opportunity.

Understanding how these moments work is helped by McCowan’s (2016) three dimensions of equity: availability (number of places), accessibility (can the student actually take up a place, are they selected and admitted and do they have funding), and horizontality (to which university does a student get access, high status, low status, rural, urban, and so on), shaped by wider socio-economic variables). In short: is there is a place, is it accessible, and which university and programme is the student able to access? In practice there is considerable overlap between the three dimensions.

Achieving access is further helped if we consider the capability approach (Robeyns, 2017). The approach points to the effect of: 1) (adequate) resources as the means to achieve (income, wealth, schooling and so on); and 2) each person’s set of conversion factors (structural conditions such as race, gender and class, and so on) which shape the freedoms to achieve access – what we can call the person’s capability set and her functioning. Thus we consider both the achieved outcomes but also the opportunities to achieve. Based on research in the Free State, Wilson-Strydom (2015) has proposed an access capability set which includes: practical reason; knowledge and imagination; learning disposition; social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional health and reflexivity; and, language competence and confidence. This would sit inside a capability set ‘box’ emerging from personal conversion factors, preference formation, character, and so forth (see Robeyns, 2017). Access is thus shaped by contextual and conversion variables, working through the biographies of students and the intersections of structures.

Choosing higher education, choosing a university and choosing a programme of study are then not simply personal decisions but sit at the intersection of the person, her schooling, her family, university policy and actions and government policy, and in turn intersect across McCowan’s three equity dimensions. How these factors intersect will either give the green light for genuine choice in access (achieving a place of choice at the university of choice), or the red light for exclusion or constrained choices. Given the importance of access it is surprising that there is limited research, for example on secondary school actions, on how universities engage

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7 In South Africa, universities require an upfront registration fee, usually around 10% of the total fee. Students can register if they can find this money, which is why we see registration rather than only the offer of a place as the end point of getting in. Progressing to the following year requires that students pay the balance of their fees or they are ‘deregistered’ and exam results are withheld. Free (government funded) university education fees for students from low-income families will reshape the access terrain, at least for now, and only for first-time entering students from 2018. In itself it does not increase the number of available places or smooth out prior inequalities that affect choice or even eliminate accessibility and horizontality, given that only fees will be covered by government, leaving a student and her family to cover all the other costs of higher education.

8 The DHET Green Paper (2012, p. 11) notes persistent apartheid effects: ‘While our leading universities are internationally respected, our historically black universities continue to face severe financial, human, infrastructure, and other resource constraints.’
with schools to enable fair access, or on how race intersects with social class to influence educational access, patterns of educational stratification, and patterns of advantage and disadvantage. We also need more research on how universities, and which universities, make a difference with regards to fair access. Overall, how do our universities enable or constrain the development of the public good in relation to access? What are the policy implications and policy levers that then follow? We need to know more about selection and admissions processes at the university end and choosing processes at the individual end across different types of schools. We know that students who get in have high aspirations, but we do not know about students who do not make it and what their aspiration pathways look like.

Given this gap, the paper suggests a conceptual framing of equity dimensions, capability formation and the functioning achievement of a university place, and maps this over what we do know.

**Equity dimensions**

**Availability**

Lack of places for all who qualify is an availability constraint. In 2018, South Africa’s 26 public universities had 208,308 first-year places for a total of 153,610 students with bachelors passes, which allow entry to a degree, and 161,133 with diploma passes allowing entry to a higher education diploma programme usually in a comprehensive university of technology (Africa Check, 2018). Thus more qualify than there are available places. For instance, in 2017 to take just two urban universities, the University of Johannesburg (a comprehensive university offering degrees and diplomas) had 135,500 applications for 10,500 first year places, while the University of Cape Town (an elite research and teaching university) had 26,000 applications for 4,200 places (Fengu, 2017). In short, as things stand currently in 2018, not every student that graduates with a bachelor or diploma pass will be able to go to university; there are simply not enough places. Of course where spaces are scarce, availability will articulate with accessibility factors – better qualified candidates will stand a better chance of getting in. According to the 2008 cohort study by van Broekhuizen, van der Berg, and Hofmeyr (2016) approximately 33.3% of Grade 12 students who qualify never enrol in university in the next six years. Of these around 33.3% attended quintile one to three schools9 and around half were black (African).10 The point here is that many students who qualify do not enter university. We do not know if this is because there are insufficient places or something else.

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9 In South Africa schools are divided into five quintiles as a rough but imperfect proxy for SES. Quintiles one to three do not charge fees, while quintiles four and five (former white schools) do. On the whole quality is low and uneven in quintile one to three schools.

10 Racial terms remain problematic in South Africa. African is used in official higher education statistics reporting. The paper uses black to mean African students.
National policy planning certainly has an effect on availability. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2016), the enrolment planning process includes bilateral discussions between DHET and each university in order to arrive at agreed upon funded student numbers. Institutional projections and targets are decided according to ‘a strategy of differentiated growth for each university in line with their institutional capacity’ (DHET; 2016, p. 5). A 2% deviation is allowed. While it is recognised that the higher education system needs to expand and enable access, over- or under enrolment of students in relation to the agreed-upon target results in funding penalties for universities. DHET further noted, however, that while targets are being exceeded in the undergraduate degree, universities were not providing access at undergraduate certificate and diploma levels, even though half of qualifying applicants can only enter diploma and certificate programmes. Nor has there been sufficient focus on enabling access through distance education programmes. In 2014 only ten universities enrolled students via distance mode and this resulted in a deviation of just under 10% from the projected DHET number.

Nonetheless, overall, there is not a place for every student who qualifies and who wants to go to university and both policy-makers and universities could do more. Moreover, wanting to go and being able to choose to go may not coincide for all students. Not wanting to go, even if spaces are available, cannot be assumed to be a genuine choice if conditions do not support aspirations to access higher education.

At the same time post-1994 government policy has effectively widened access by its focus on redress, while previous laws which prevented black students from accessing historically white universities formally fell away. Headcount numbers of black students continue to steadily increase. For example, from 640 442 out of 938 200 students in 2011 to 701 482 out of 975 837 in 2016 (CHE, 2016, p. 3). However, without a socio-economic measure we do not know if participation is widening for low-income students, and we do not yet know the effect for these students of fees-free higher education. Participation rate (or Gross Enrolment Ratios, GER) as a total headcount enrolment over the national population of 20–24 years old has increased slightly for African students from 14% to 16%, but remains much higher for white students at 50% in 2016 (although falling from 57% in 2011) (CHE, 2016, p. 6). Thus participation, and we can assume access, is uneven based on the numbers.

Overall, then, along McCowan’s availability dimension the picture is mixed.

Accessibility

From what we know accessibility is shaped by multiple intersecting factors, each of which may constrain or enable on its own or working with others. According to van Broekhuizen et al. (2016) these include Grade 12 attainment (including gateway subjects such as Mathematics and English as first language; quintile of school attended; quality of school; relative wealth of the school; structures of race, gender, age; and geography. From this study we know that there are huge differences in Grade 12 pass rates across race groups.
Only 57% of black learners passed the 2008 NSC exams, compared with 99% of whites. Among whites who passed Grade 12, 71% achieved bachelor passes (for degree entry), but in the case of black learners this was only 24%. Their evidence shows that the best schools significantly enhance accessibility. Thus the proportion of learners from quintile five schools who passed Grade 12 is more than double (93%) that of learners from quintile one schools (46%). While only about 12% of learners from quintile one to three schools enrolled in undergraduate programmes at some point between 2009 and 2014, the corresponding proportions for learners from quintile 4 and 5 schools were roughly 24% and 45% respectively. Further, van Broekhuizen et. al.’s wealth index for each school confirms that university access and completion are positively associated with the wealth of the schools that learners attended. They found that increases in this wealth index are more closely associated with increases in university access rates. Age and race also affects access: whether or not learners are of the appropriate age in Grade 12 (and this is related to socio-economic factors and school quality).

Moreover, they point to a regional dividend and rural ‘gap’ to accessibility. Van Broekhuizen et. al. (2016) show that the proportion of learners achieving an average grade of above 50% in Grade 12 varied widely: roughly 40% for the Western Cape, less than 20% for both Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, both provinces with large rural populations. The provincial differences in the proportions of learners who achieved an average Grade 12 grade of 60% or above are just as striking: roughly 21% of learners from the Western Cape achieved this grade, while only about 6% and 7% of learners from Limpopo and Eastern Cape did so. Given these provincial differences in Grade 12 performance, one might also expect provincial differences in university access and success. Thus, while Gauteng and the Western Cape have the highest access rates, Limpopo and Mpumalanga have the lowest.

Focusing on gender, van Broekhuizen and Spaull (2017) show that girls and women are doing better educationally than boys and men. Based on the 2008 Grade 12 cohort, they found a female advantage that continued to grow at each stage of the higher education process. Relative to their male counterparts, they found that 27% more females qualified for university, and 34% more enrolled in university than male learners. After controlling for pre-university achievement, females are 20% more likely to access university and graduate with an undergraduate degree in six years than are their male counterparts. They also point out that of 100 white female learners who passed Grade 12, 50% enter university. However, in quintile one schools only 2% of female Grade 12 students went to university and graduated with a degree, compared to 24% from quintile five schools. While overall there is a persistent numerical female advantage, the poorest females are the only group not to exhibit an advantage in accessing university. They therefore acknowledge how race and wealth intersect to act either as barriers or opportunities to accessibility, especially affecting low-income black girls.

In South Africa there is not much in the way of research on alternative pathways at the access end, nor on access articulations between technical and vocational colleges and universities – particularly universities of technology. Much of the work in the area of accessing university
within the South African context has been done only after students get into university through academic development (AD) programmes and extended programmes which stretch the curriculum over an additional year for students with lower entry points. For example, at the University of the Free State the extended programme in commerce is compulsory for students with an AP score of between 25 and 29, and Grade 12 Mathematics at least at Level 3 (40%), compared to a minimum of 30 points for the mainstream programme. The University’s Access Programme (UAP) admits students with an AP score (see Table 2) lower than that needed for the extended route, often as low as 19 AP points. On successful completion, the student moves into the relevant extended degree. Such access programmes seem to depend on the universities themselves and the UAP is not funded by government. One study of nine extended programmes (Shay, Clarence-Fincham, & Wolff, 2016, p. iii) did find that these ‘have played a significant role in terms of providing access … to South Africa’s most talented and capable but under-prepared black students’, suggesting that the availability and accessibility (students need to know that the UAP, for example, exists) of alternative pathways might widen access.

Significantly shaping accessibility is the issue of funding, of which fees are a major dimension (see Chapter 3). In the face of declining government funding, which has dropped by about one third in spending per student since 1997 (Makgetla, 2018), South African universities regularly increase tuition fees to compensate. The effect of fees on choice has been brought into sharp relief and will be shaped, we can assume, by the introduction of fees-free higher education for families who qualify. Nonetheless, the new policy does not apply to existing students nor to students whose family income is slightly above the threshold, but who may not be especially well-off.

### Table 1 Sample of university fees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>BA</th>
<th>BCom</th>
<th>BSc</th>
<th>LLB</th>
<th>BEng</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Cape Town</td>
<td>ZAR 53 440</td>
<td>ZAR 64 890</td>
<td>ZAR 58 400</td>
<td>ZAR 54 350</td>
<td>ZAR 61 220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the Witwatersrand</td>
<td>ZAR 44 890</td>
<td>ZAR 46 795</td>
<td>ZAR 47 920</td>
<td>ZAR 43 640</td>
<td>ZAR 61 810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stellenbosch University</td>
<td>ZAR 39 696</td>
<td>ZAR 41 030</td>
<td>ZAR 48 096</td>
<td>ZAR 47 270</td>
<td>ZAR 55 296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pretoria*</td>
<td>ZAR 36 000 (ZAR 38 880)</td>
<td>ZAR 42 000 (ZAR 45 360)</td>
<td>ZAR 44 000 (ZAR 47 520)</td>
<td>ZAR 37 000 (ZAR 39 960)</td>
<td>ZAR 46 000 (ZAR 49 680)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Johannesburg*</td>
<td>ZAR 36 650 (ZAR 39 580)</td>
<td>ZAR 37 500 (ZAR 40 500)</td>
<td>ZAR 44 000 (ZAR 47 520)</td>
<td>ZAR 34 150 (ZAR 36 880)</td>
<td>ZAR 41 600 (ZAR 44 930)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-West University</td>
<td>ZAR 39 300</td>
<td>ZAR 39 300</td>
<td>ZAR 42 600</td>
<td>ZAR 46 100</td>
<td>ZAR 49 900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2017 fees with adjustments.* The fees in parentheses represent the indicative 8% increase on 2017 rates for students whose household income is above ZAR 600 000 per annum, for UP and UJ.

To put this in context, in 2015 average monthly earnings were ZAR 16 506 – or less than half the required fees even for the cheaper programmes, while a skilled worker earned an average of ZAR 35 000 (Institute for Race Relations, 2016, pp. 305–307). Many poor students may come from families which are dependent on social grants and these are low, for example ZAR 1 500 per month for the state pension and ZAR 380 per month for the child grant. While they will no longer pay fees, money must still be found to fund accommodation, food, books, technology and transport. In poor families there may be no discretionary funding and the hardships from home will travel with students in completing their access journeys. At even earlier stages, money has to be found to attend an open day, or borrowed from a sympathetic teacher for a bus to get to the university, for example. Family wealth still matters.

Information wealth matters too. We know from international research that university access is strongly shaped by the right kind of information from the right people, by good schooling and supportive teachers who form and encourage higher education aspirations, and by families who know about higher education. Availability of information is needed in order to apply for a place at university. While the information on university websites regarding application procedures, admission requirements, tuition fees, bursaries and funding is easily accessible – if you have a smart phone or internet access – there appears to be less information about university open days, and even less regarding what respective universities are doing (if anything) through community engagement and outreach programmes to increase access to their institutions for low-income youth.

A small number of studies confirm the importance of access to a wide range of information. Thus, Wiese, van Heerden, Jordaan, and North (2009) looked at why relatively high achieving and better-off students chose particular universities. Sources of information that were valuable were university publications, followed by word-of-mouth, while campus visits, open days and university web sites were all helpful. Less useful were visits by universities to their schools, although this may be much more important to poorer students with no or very little information and no access to the internet. Nonetheless, the study confirms the importance of access to multiple sources of information and at least some correlation of middle class-ness and wide information. Walker and Mkwananzi (2015) conducted a small-scale study in an informal settlement (Orange Farm), and found that, while the young people had higher education aspirations, they lacked knowledge about what this entailed. They were aware of only two universities and did not know how to get hold of their brochures. In promoting the ‘apply now campaign’ launched by the DHET, the then Deputy Minister Manana (2013), noted that students could apply to universities as early as Grade 11 to avoid late applications. Yet the young people interviewed were in Grade 11, and did not know that they could already apply to university. They were influenced by other students at school, some teachers, and their guardians, even though these informants may not have reliable knowledge about higher education. In a study of undergraduate sociology students, Manyonga (2017) found evidence of student choice being constrained by a number of social factors, such as lack of parental support and knowledge. He also found that the participants in his study ended up in the
Humanities not because of choice or aspirations, but because of low school-leaving scores and as a result, limited choice of degrees and future careers. Walker’s (forthcoming) study on access compares quintile one to three informants with quintile five students and finds significant differences in choosing a secondary school, choosing subjects and knowing how to access university. In Ball and Vincent’s (1998) terms, low-income students are doubly disadvantaged in that they both lack ‘hot’ knowledge residing in close family members who have been to university and from teachers or university outreach. They do not even have much in the way of ‘cold’ knowledge in the form of reliable information from university brochures, the internet, and so forth.

All this comes together to result in many choices, or one choice. For example, Rebecca attended a Model C school in the north of Johannesburg. She comes from a family of civil engineers, her father and uncles and her sister, all studied or worked at Wits. Wits is an easy choice for her, and her parents are able to pay her university fees. Ramagoma attended a rural school in the Limpopo area. She applied to Univen and Limpopo – only Univen replied. She chose Univen because it is close to home and she thought she could study viticulture (not offered at Univen). She would have chosen radiography if she could have. She ends up in Animal Sciences and has a government loan to pay for her studies (from Walker & Fongwa, 2017).

Along this equity dimension the picture is mixed. The new fees regime should go some way to removing basic financial barriers to access, but along intersectional and cumulative factors of wealth, social class, race, gender and geography, barriers still reduce the opportunities of many students from low-income and/or rural backgrounds.

**Horizontality**

Turning to horizontality and university status, it is tricky to tease apart accessibility and horizontality so the focus here is on university status and its effects on access and admissions. It is hardly coincidental that the best universities tend to have the lowest numbers of students on government loans (as a rough proxy for socio-economic status or SES), nor that the best schools have the highest achieving students, or that advantaged universities have more of these kinds of students. Cooper (2015) in his account of the ‘stalled revolution’ points out that the five most elite universities in South Africa had around 30% black students compared to 85% attending the lower status universities. With regard to selection by universities, according to van Broekhuizen et al. (2016) there are large differences in the average Grade 12 performance of students who are admitted. Learners from the 2008 Grade 12 cohort who enrolled at high status universities in 2009 had average Grade 12 achievement levels of 75%, while those from the same cohort who enrolled at lower status universities achieved closer to 55%.

Even with fees now waived from 2018 to entering low-income students, the minimum qualification of a bachelors pass may still not ensure access to the best universities or the most prestigious programmes such as medicine, the health sciences and law. The admissions programme score (APS) which is calculated based on subjects studied, as well as subject grades,
sets requirements over and above the basic bachelors pass. Some degrees, for example medicine and accountancy, will also require that students have a good pass in mathematics. However, there is no nationally agreed way of calculating AP scores and no common AP requirement for each degree; universities calculate weighting differently of Grade 12 subjects and set varying score requirements. Elite universities can then set high or higher AP scores (see Table 2).

Table 2 APS required for admission across three universities of different status, 2016 entry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>APS required for admission</th>
<th>High (historically white): WITS</th>
<th>Mid-ranking (historically white): UFS</th>
<th>Low (historically black): University of Venda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td>34+</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences Faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td>40–43</td>
<td>30–24</td>
<td>23–26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law Faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td>43+</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own calculations

We can assume from the limited South African research that selection-admission processes are underpinned by an unproblematised discourse of meritocracy and ‘homophily’. Yet merit is not a neutral means of making decisions and, even when claimed to be fair, places emphasis on individual achievements rather than the conditions that supported the achievement. Naidoo’s (2004) study of access and admissions practices at two contrasting universities in the 1990s explains the problem well. Here I consider her case of the elite university (Mount Pleasant) whose admission judgements as implemented by ‘powerful agents’ did not appear to be consciously unfair in deliberately excluding black students from the institution that was (at that time) predominantly white. Instead ‘academic potential’ became part of the institutional narrative, and Naidoo argues that this focus on potential to succeed re-inscribed academic merit and reproduction effects, while still claiming the virtuous inclusion of disadvantaged students. The judgements implemented by powerful agents indicated that how students were classified ‘appeared to be part of an orientation to conserve institutional arrangements’ (2004, p. 463). New criteria (other than academic) were resisted because academics were concerned that more students from low quality schools would ‘threaten’ institutional arrangements such as time for research and the status of the university in the intellectual field, as well as reduce the student progression rate. The worry was that admissions shifts might require dominant and elite universities to change, even though years after the research was concluded Mount Pleasant had – if anything – reinforced its merit-based admissions policy.

11 In the 1950s, sociologists coined the term ‘homophily’ – love of the same – to explain our inexorable tendency to link up with one another in ways that confirm rather than test our core beliefs. In short we look for people (students) like us.
Naidoo’s analysis of the legitimate academic capital of what were considered ‘typical’ students coincided closely with qualities possessed by students from advantaged schools. The exclusion of poor and working class students was perhaps not malign; however, the exclusionary effects were the same. Indeed, the apparent objectivity of the criteria and the transparency of the process and the apparently just deserts that resulted might make it harder for those on the outside to fathom or challenge. Persistence, hard work and resilience will never then suffice, except for a few exceptional students, without knowing the precise rules of the admissions game. What results is an ‘aristocracy of [class-based] merit’ (Stevens, 2007, p. 242); elite colleges ‘get just what they are looking for’ (p. 247). On the other hand, she suggests that one could argue that Mount Pleasant was enabling an elite minority of African students to access more privileged positions in society, and this might be considered transformative.

Along this dimension, too, equity is not doing well and the stratification of the higher education system is reinforcing social inequalities, even if small numbers of disadvantaged individuals manage to break through. Take for example Marshall and Case (2010) who use one student narrative to rethink disadvantage. According to Mandla (from a large and poor family) at a critical point he began to take a longer term view of his future. It seems he took an individual decision to consider where his academic studies might take him, read about ‘a black guy like me’ working at a paper mill, did some research, and found out that this was connected to engineering. He decided on this as a career path and secured an industry-financed scholarship at an elite university. What we do not know is anything about the social conditions under which his choice was made or his aspirations formed or encouraged. Kapp et al. (2014) consider how their black and working class students at an elite university had negotiated high school contexts and neighbourhoods which were not socially conducive to learning and academic attainments, but which were also not over-determining. These students constructed themselves as ‘hard-working’ people who did not give up and sought out equally serious peers to form study groups. They also sought out community organisations which could provide support, including churches. Thus student agency emerges as important, but the research does not show how some students were agency-enabled and others were not, in the face of the same constraining opportunity structures.

**Going forward**

Of course there are students like the above who defy the odds and each life is unique in its bundles of qualities, effort, talents and capabilities. We should celebrate students such as Mandisa Xaba from a poor township in rural KwaZulu-Natal who obtained seven distinctions in 2017 at her no-fees school, and has a place to study computer science at UCT (Nombembe et al., 2018). But as Lareau (2003) reminds us, we should not be blinded to the fact that membership in a social group matters in the creation of inequality and structures life opportunities. When we look across the life chances of low-income South African youth, we
are some way off the kind of multi-dimensional equitable access which does not allow circumstances to limit opportunities. Across all three dimensions there are amber warning lights indicating equity challenges, with each dimension having a knock-on effect for the others. There is no unambiguous green for go.

Access is constrained by the availability of sufficient places for qualifying Grade 12 students. Accessibility is unequal across race, socio-economic class, rural/urban, quality of schools, field of study chosen and elite or non-elite university admissions criteria. Horizontality preserves stratification and status and is unequal across different types of universities and fields of study. Thus, higher education enables mobility – for some – but also reproduces social privilege and intergenerational inequality across income groups. Different people have different resources which they can convert to the capabilities to access university; all do not compete fairly. Achieving a place and being satisfied with that achievement choice are affected by multiple factors in each person’s life, including uneven capability sets shaped by resources, social conversion factors, preference formation and individual talents and qualities. Yet unequal endowments and resources make it urgent that university access is inclusive for those who qualify. In addition, access pathways which allow students entry with lower entry scores would enable a chance at higher education for students from low quality schools.

There is much we do not yet know enough about and more research on the access end is needed as noted earlier. We need action on multiple fronts – by universities, by government, by student movements and by individuals working in different and multiple ways to foster the formation of students’ capability sets and agency, using McCowan’s dimensions as a helpful equity grid. As Dreze and Sen (2002, p. 82) say, the basic approach to access ought to be ‘an overarching interest in the role of human beings – on their own and in cooperation with others – in running their own lives and expanding their freedoms’. In this way we might operationalise the capability to access higher education inclusively, thereby contributing to comparatively greater justice and more of the public good.

References


