Quality and Equality in Higher Education

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Abstract: It is a curious aspect of higher education that the agendas of two key topics, quality and equality, rarely intersect. The point I make in this paper is that they should. The diversity agenda raises issues of equality, and equality programs often raise concerns about quality and standards. This issue can only be adequately addressed by re-examining the notion of quality itself.

In the documentation I received for this conference, INHolland University says:

Diversity is about putting ‘the standard’ in perspective, about emancipation of underrepresented groups, about justice and integrity, and about enjoying difference.

However:

At the same time, higher education will have to learn to deal with practical hindrances and, sometimes urgent, socio-economic problems brought into the institutions by the [diversity of] students. Being unfamiliar with the Dutch educational system, lack of financial means (more jobs on the side) and a worse command of the Dutch language are some of the causes that result in lower study results and higher drop out rates among non-western migrant students.

And that gets to the heart of the matter. The more we pursue diversity, the more we raise issues of equality, and the more we raise a perception of differentiation in terms of quality. I will argue that the agenda of diversity and equality cannot afford to ignore the quality question, and that the quality agenda has been too restricted to allow proper consideration of the benefits of diversity.

The argument flows as follows. I will consider the equality agenda, the reasons why a university might engage in this agenda, and some counterarguments. The strongest argument in favour of diversity and equality, I will argue, is that in the long run it brings benefit both to the institution and to society. But there is a significant obstacle, which is the common perception that more diversity and the pursuit of equality pose a threat to quality and standards. This leads to an examination of the notion of quality, in the context of the standard practice of quality assurance in higher education. I will make the point that the notion of quality which is at play in raising concerns about equality is of a very particular and quite limited kind, and that we need a broader understanding of quality.
Diversity and Equality

Essentially, the aim of the equality agenda is to decouple origins from destiny. Where you were born, what language you speak, what culture or religion you belong to, how rich or poor your parents are – these circumstances should not deny you any educational opportunity, nor impede your levels of attainment. Ability should be able to access opportunity regardless of circumstance.

This agenda is not based on a belief that nature has endowed us all with equal gifts. The equality agenda accepts that not all individuals have equal intellectual ability, just as we do not all have equal physical or artistic or musical ability. It does, however, start from the premise that natural ability is an individual trait, and that there is no ethnic, cultural, religious, socio-economic or language group whose individuals have inherently less (or more) ability as a consequence of belonging to or identifying with that group.

It is this distinction between individual talents and group characteristics which links the equality agenda with the reality of increasing diversity. At the university, as in society, our understanding of diversity is rooted in the recognition of groups, but our understanding of education is based on individual talent. The pursuit of equality has to do with making sure that no individual is disadvantaged (or, indeed, advantaged) simply by virtue of belonging to a particular group. If there were no diversity there would very likely be no need for an equality agenda.

That still leaves the question of why a university would need or want to pursue an agenda of accommodating diversity and striving for equality, for it is by no means self-evident that it is in a university’s interest to do so. There are three broad categories of argument in favour of the equality agenda: the moral argument, the historical argument, and the pragmatic argument.\(^1\) It is worth exploring both the strength and the weakness of each of these.

The moral argument for the equality agenda is clear from the first part of the INHolland quote above about justice and integrity. It says that under-representation and/or underperformance in higher education of any societal group may be a sign of systemic denial of natural rights or social justice, in which case society has a moral obligation to rectify the matter.

The moral argument for the equality agenda is about how the world ought to be, not about how the world is. The weakness of the moral argument is that cynics and sceptics can easily bypass or subvert it by paying lip service to the general idea but not giving it any support in practice. The moral argument is vulnerable to yes-but responses and nimbyism: “Yes it’s a good idea, but Not In My Back Yard”.

The historical argument for the equality agenda is applicable when there has been injustice in the past, which can now be identified as having disadvantaged a

\(^1\) I draw here, and below, on my paper “‘Standards will drop’ – and other fears about the equality agenda in higher education”, Higher Education Policy and Management, 21/1 (2009), pp. 19-37. I first presented this paper as a keynote address at the September 2008 Conference of the Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) program of the OECD in Paris. I have also presented it as a public lecture at Newcastle University, [http://www.ncl.ac.uk/about/assets/documents/standards.pdf](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/about/assets/documents/standards.pdf)
particular group or groups. Apartheid is probably the best known example, since it was an explicit part of apartheid legislation to keep education for black people at an inferior level. “What is the use”, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd infamously asked in 1954 when introducing the Bantu Education Act, “of teaching a Bantu child mathematics?”. Quite legitimately, then, in post-apartheid South Africa there is a policy of redress, which says that special measures are necessary to rectify the legacy of past injustice. Accordingly, the equality agenda in South Africa goes under the heading of “corrective action”.

The historical argument is only applicable in special circumstances, where an identifiable wrong was done which must be righted retrospectively. Moreover, in principle the case for redress must weaken over time. The very real need for redress in South Africa after 1994, and even today, must be moderated by the fact that, the more time passes, the less history can be held to blame. Already there is a question about “Mandela’s children” – to what extent redress may be exacted from young white South Africans born after 1994, who were clearly not complicit in whatever was done by their parents in the apartheid days. A similar point was made in 2003 in a judgment of the US Supreme Court. Handing down a majority judgment of 5-4 in the case of Grutter v. Bollinger, regarding the affirmative action admissions policy of the University of Michigan Law School, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor said:

Finally, race-conscious admissions policies must be limited in time. The Court takes the Law School at its word that it would like nothing better than to find a race-neutral admissions formula and will terminate its use of racial preferences as soon as practicable. The Court expects that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today.²

The pragmatic argument for the equality agenda refers not to rights but to utility, and not the past but to the future. It says that we can turn diversity to advantage, as a source of innovation and creativity. If we only draw participants in higher education from certain sectors of society then we are missing an opportunity to optimise potential across the broad base of the population, and failing to exploit to the full the human capital available to us. Moreover, if we fail the equality test, and leave certain sectors disadvantaged, the build-up of anger and resentment will undermine whatever success we may have had with favoured sectors. Essentially, then, the pragmatic argument for diversity and equality is that there is a good business case for it, both for the institution and, in the long run, for society. This is a powerful argument, because it is rooted in how the world is, rather than how the world ought to be, and it appeals in the first place to self-interest rather than a common good. For the rest of this paper I will be concerned with the pragmatic argument, its main weakness, and how to address this weakness.

Perhaps the most comprehensive case ever presented in support of the pragmatic argument is a book titled The Shape of the River: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions, by William G. Bowen and Derek Bok³, former presidents of Princeton University and Harvard University.

respectively. This is a highly quantitative study, starting from a rich database called “College and Beyond”, constructed by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, of the “life histories” of more than 45,000 individuals. It includes information on educational and occupational histories, retrospective views of college, personal and household income, civic participation and satisfaction with life4. The conclusion, essentially, is that affirmative action policies in the USA, viewed in context and over time, have worked. That is, they have achieved two principal objectives5:

(1) To enrich the educational experience for students of all races by enrolling and educating more diverse student bodies; and

(2) To fill some part of what is widely seen as a national “deficit” by preparing larger numbers of talented minority students for positions of responsibility in the professions, the business world, academia, government and every other sector of American life.

I have used the pragmatic argument myself. When I was Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University (2002-2007), I argued that diversity brings educational benefit, because learning is better facilitated in an environment of diversity than an environment of homogeneity.

_Diversity has an inherent educational value. That is why we need more of it. The university is an educational institution. Our business is about knowledge. That means that we all have to learn, all the time. Students learn through their lectures, their assignments, their tutorials. Staff learn through their research, through their interaction with the community, and through their teaching. One way or another, we all have to learn, and keep on learning. And we will learn more from those people, those ideas, and those phenomena that we do not know, than from those we know only too well. We need around us people who represent the rich spectrum of South African life, and we need the diversity of ideas that are new to us. We need to pursue this diversity of people and ideas to increase the quality of our core business - which is to learn. Only in this way, I believe, can we really meet our responsibility to our students. We need, and we wish, to prepare our students to become active and confident participants in a multicultural and globalised society. Whatever the advantages may be of a mono-cultural institution, they do not include the opportunity to meet and engage with many different viewpoints, and to learn about many different environments. One reason why our engagement with diversity of colour is so urgent for us in South Africa is that engagement between black and white people is such a powerful training ground for engagement with different ideas._6

True diversity, in the educational sphere, is not the diversity of people but the diversity of ideas. The diversity of people is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. It is the diversity of ideas which provides us with the potential of educational advantage, and it is educational advantage which will provide institutional benefit.

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4 _The Shape of the River_, p.297.
5 _The Shape of the River_, Introduction, p.xxi.
6 This quotation is from an address titled “Quality needs diversity” I gave at Stellenbosch to an international gathering of former Rhodes scholars in January 2003, as part of the centenary celebrations of the Rhodes Trust. This and other speeches and writings during my time at Stellenbosch are collected in a commemorative volume, _Chris Brink: Anatomy of a Transformer_, SUN Press, Stellenbosch 2007, www.africansunmedia.co.za.
Such, essentially, was the version of the pragmatic argument I captured at Stellenbosch under the slogan *quality needs diversity.*

The difficulty with the pragmatic argument

Quality is universally accepted as a goal to strive for, an achievement when attained, and a treasure when possessed. Any claim that quality is being diminished is therefore bound to attract attention. In formulating the slogan that quality needs diversity I was quite deliberately turning the tables on the accusation that our diversity agenda would diminish quality. It had become clear to me that my idea of what educational quality would involve at Stellenbosch was at odds with a common understanding of quality amongst white Afrikaners struggling to come to terms with post-apartheid South Africa.

In 2005 Stellenbosch University went through one of the periodic audits carried out by the Higher Education Quality Committee in South Africa. I used the opportunity to write a comprehensive preface to our self-evaluation report, outlining the transformation agenda at Stellenbosch – “transformation” being the South African word for the diversity and equality agenda. The juxtaposition of quality and transformation naturally brought out the question whether the latter affected the former, and if so how. I pointed out that for many in the traditional Afrikaner white constituency this was not a question but a conviction.

Many Afrikaner alumni are of the view that Stellenbosch has always been an outstanding university, but that it is now sadly in decline, or at least in danger of decline, because of transformation.8

For most of my time at Stellenbosch this conviction was a constant refrain. “This man wants to transform Stellenbosch into a rubbish institution!”, fulminated one letter-writer to *Die Burger* (the Afrikaans daily in the Western Cape), encapsulating the view of many. And it was not hard to see why. We had built diversity into our vision statement for the University (“A campus culture that welcomes a diversity of people and ideas”), we had launched a recruitment drive for more Black, Coloured and Indian students9, and we had created a reward mechanism for students from educationally impoverished backgrounds. To a fairly affluent Afrikaner family, whose child had been to one of the “good schools”, with many opportunities and advantages, and who matriculated with high marks, it must have been galling to compete for a place in (say) Medicine or Engineering against students who did not have the same high school-leaving results. Moreover, it was definitely the case that upon entry these “previously disadvantaged” students10 had more difficulty coping

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7 I should just dispose here of a possible confusion between necessary and sufficient conditions. In saying that quality needs diversity, I was not claiming that an increase in diversity would result in an increase in quality. What I did claim was that Stellenbosch could not attain true educational quality without breaking away from homogeneity.


9 In post-apartheid South Africa, there are four state-defined racial categories: African Black, Coloured, Indian and White. “Coloured” refers mostly to mixed-race people originating from the Western Cape (not the same meaning as in the USA, for example), and “non-white” is regarded as a derogatory term.

10 “Previously disadvantaged” is the collective term for all people who suffered under apartheid.
and consequently a higher drop-out rate than their white counterparts. It was not
difficult, then, for transformation sceptics to make the argument that standards were
dropping.

Anybody who has been active in the implementation of diversity and equality
programs at university will have encountered, albeit perhaps in different
manifestations, this phenomenon, of increasing diversity leading to claims of
diminishing quality. This is the main difficulty with the pragmatic argument. To bring
greater diversity to the campus typically requires some flexibility on entry standards.
To keep these new students engaged in their studies may require a different
approach to teaching methodology and/or the curriculum. To graduate them may
require bridging courses, more tutorial support, extended degree programs and other
support measures. Even then dropout rates may be higher and graduation rates
lower than has been the norm. Such statistics are easily presented as evidence of
lowering standards, raising the challenge of a suitable response.

This apparent clash between quality and equality remains topical. Witness for
example the second part of the INHolland quote above, about “lower study results
and higher drop out rates among non-western migrant students”. Dutch colleagues
will be very aware of this particular dimension in the larger current debate about
allochtone and autochtone students, which again is part of a national debate about
the nature of civil society in the Netherlands. The Times of London recently\textsuperscript{11}
reported on similar tensions in higher education in France:

The elite colleges that train France’s rulers and top managers were in open revolt
against President Sarkozy’s Government yesterday, refusing orders to admit more
students from working-class and immigrant backgrounds.

Cabinet ministers expressed shock at the defiant stance adopted by the heads of
the grandes écoles, the establishments that educate the cream of the professions. Mr
Sarkozy wants them to take 30 percent of their entrants from low-income families.
The colleges retort that to do that would mean dropping their rigorous standards.

The difficulty is compounded when, as now, there is a squeeze on resources.
Following the recession, and landed with a huge national debt, the UK is currently
cutting back on public sector funding generally and higher education in particular. In
such an environment, arguments regarding the value-for-money aspects of the
diversity and equality agenda are bound to become more prominent. In a recent lead
article, for example, the Times Higher Education calls the outcomes of widening
participation initiatives over the past six years “a poor result for what has been spent”
(£392 million), and adds\textsuperscript{12}:

There seems to have emerged from research and reflection a consensus that what
works is partnerships between schools and universities, and a view that efforts
should be focused on raising attainment and giving guidance early in secondary
school.

This brings us to a difficult moment. At a time of fiscal constraint when the offering
is being recalibrated and student places cut, should universities be tasked with
widening participation? If early intervention is the answer, wouldn’t it be more honest
to admit that the cash would be better spent elsewhere in the education system?

\textsuperscript{11} The Times, 6 January 2010, p. 29.

\textsuperscript{12} Lead article, Times Higher Education, 25 February 2010.
A similar view comes from an editorial in the *British Medical Journal*, commenting on an article describing an Extended Medical Degree Program at King's College London. (Students coming from certain specified “educationally deprived” boroughs in inner London are admitted with a school-leaving result of three C-grades, rather than the usual two As and a B, and put through an extra year of study.) In response the editors point out that the scheme costs £190,000 to run, and conclude by asking:

*Is it worth our while to widen participation, particularly if this risks reducing standards? Political ideology says yes, but the evidence is pending and costs are rising fast.*

The notion of quality

Let us accept that the pragmatic argument for the equality agenda runs up against a view that increasing diversity lowers standards and erodes quality. Let us engage with this view by asking what we mean by “quality” and “standards”.

There is a whole professional discipline in higher education arising from this apparently innocuous question. This is the discipline of quality assurance, which has become an integral part of the higher education sector. Many universities nowadays will have an internal section taking responsibility for the equality agenda, but even more – probably all – will have a section taking responsibility for quality assurance. The latter has become a necessity, because by government decree in almost every country universities are subject to quality assurance audits. However, both within the institution and across the sector the agendas of quality and equality rarely intersect. You will not often find a discussion of quality and standards on the agenda of a conference on diversity and equality, nor the other way round.

Starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the topic of quality assurance in higher education first made its way into academic consciousness, the question of definition dominated. When is a university a good university? What do we mean by quality in higher education? To this question many answers have been advanced, including the answer that no answer is possible.

- The first and most enduring view is that quality is what you have when you answer Yes to the question “is it good?”. This is the notion of quality as excellence. The apparent simplicity of this view is, however, deceptive. I will return to this topic below.

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14 Hugh Ip and I.C. McManus, “Increasing diversity among clinicians”, *British Medical Journal* Vol. 336 No. 7653, 17 May 2008, pp. 1082 – 1083. See [http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/336/7653/1082](http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/336/7653/1082). In a short response, the authors of the original paper point out that the places reserved for widening participation are additional to the normal number of entrants to the medical school, and the extra cost is funded not by the University but by the Higher Education Funding Council of England. See [http://www.bmj.com/cgi/eletters/336/7653/1082#195526](http://www.bmj.com/cgi/eletters/336/7653/1082#195526).
• If we wish to take account of sectoral diversity, and acknowledge that not all universities are the same, we need to relativise the notion of quality to the mission of the university. This is the notion of quality as fitness for purpose, where quality is the answer to the question “Is it good at what it does?”. An institution would set out its stall through its vision statement, mission statement and declared strategic objectives, and a quality judgment would be made in relation to how well it achieves its professed purpose.

• A further variation arises when we judge, not the extent to which a university achieves its purpose, but the purpose itself. This is the notion of quality as fitness of purpose. It sees institutional quality as the answer to the question “What is it good for?”. 

• Separate but related is the idea of a “good university” being one which brings societal benefit. It delivers a skilled workforce, supports culture and business and industry, helps to create jobs, plays a role in economic development and social mobility, and has a strong corporate social responsibility profile. Here the notion of quality as reflected by esteem has changed into a notion of quality as reflected by impact. The quality question then becomes “Is it beneficial?”. 

• On a different front there is the notion of quality as value. The obvious version takes the quality question about university education to be “Is it good value?”, meaning “Is it a good investment for my future?”. There is also a sharper version, namely “Is it value for money?”. On this approach, the discourse and methods of the market become part of the quality debate.

• A variation on the theme of value is when we phrase the quality question as being about added value. The argument here is that quality of education is not just a matter of taking straight-A students from school and turning them into straight-A graduates. It is also a matter of taking disadvantaged and poorly prepared entrants and turning them into competent and well-rounded graduates. The quality of what the university provides is then a matter of the educational distance travelled between entry and exit.

By this time the apparently innocuous original question of what we mean by quality has become quite complex – which is in fact what happened over the last two decades in the development of the discipline of quality assurance. To complicate matters further, we have to factor in the distinction between efficiency and effectiveness. These are fundamental because they embody the distinction between process and product. Efficiency involves a judgement how well a process works in delivering a product; effectiveness involves a judgement whether a satisfactory product has been delivered. In the world of quality assurance in higher education this has cashed out as a distinction between quality and standards. If quality is the answer to the question “Is it good?” (or some variation of it), then standards give the answer to the question “Is it good enough?”. A student has to reach a certain standard in order to be admitted into the university, and again to get a degree. In that respect standards have to do with outputs, and quality has to do with process. Thus, for example, in the UK:
Academic ‘quality’ describes the effectiveness of the learning experience provided by universities to their students, i.e. the appropriateness and effectiveness of learning, teaching, assessment and support opportunities provided to assist students achieve their learning objectives.

And:

Academic ‘standards’ describe the level of achievement [the threshold] that a student has to reach to gain a particular degree or other academic award. 16

For present purposes we do not need to delve further into the somewhat arcane world of quality assurance. From the discussion above we may, however, draw a preliminary conclusion, namely that different notions of quality would fit to different degrees with an agenda of diversity and equality.

To get back to the difficulty with the pragmatic argument, we may note further that when claims are made that the equality agenda will lower standards and erode quality, the concept of quality is usually assumed to be understood. It does not take much analysis, however, to see that what is being assumed in such cases is a very particular – and, I will argue, quite limited – variety of the notion of quality as excellence.

Quality as ranking

Quality as excellence is a perfectly legitimate understanding of quality, but it is more subtle than might appear, and hence prone to oversimplification. One such is that, amongst universities, reputation easily becomes a proxy for excellence, which gives the advantage to the old, the rich and the beautiful. Often this leads to imitation, as when universities style themselves as the “Oxbridge of Africa”, the “Princeton of Europe”, or the “Harvard of the East”. Second, the notion of quality as excellence has the drawback that “elite universities” so easily come across as being elitist, evoking images of exclusivity and unmerited advantage, which of course works directly against any agenda of diversity and equality. But third, and mainly, if we construe quality as excellence, we are easily led from a substantive notion to a relational one. Excellence, in the sense of exceptional quality, comes to be seen not as the answer to the question “Is it good?”, but as the answer to the question “Is it better than the others?”. With that, it becomes all too easy to assume that quality manifests itself essentially as a ranking on some linear scale. Essentially, the simplistic view of quality as excellence presents a quality judgment as nothing more than a numerical position on a list.

This is the brick wall that the pragmatic argument for the diversity and equality agenda runs into. To understand it better, we should begin by clarifying two aspects of diversity in higher education. Sectoral diversity means having different kinds of institutions in the sector, while institutional diversity means having people from a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures and beliefs within the institution. Neither is a consequence of the other. Arguably, apartheid South Africa had a very diverse

16 I take these definitions from a 2009 publication by Universities UK (the representative body of Vice-Chancellors in the UK), titled Quality and standards in UK Universities: A guide to how the system works.
higher education sector, because it had white universities, black universities, Indian and Coloured universities, Afrikaans universities and English universities. Yet the entire intent of this engineered sectoral diversity was to create homogeneity within each institution. Conversely, it is possible in a fully egalitarian society to imagine a sector where every university has roughly the same proportions of ethnic, cultural, religious, socio-economic and language groups, giving each institution a satisfactory measure of internal diversity, while making institutions all look alike.

The inherent risk of sectoral diversity is that it gets presented as hierarchy. This happens every time a newspaper publishes a league table of universities. The pre-eminent example must surely be the list of “Top 200 universities in the world” published every year by the *Times Higher Education*. Within quite a short space of time, through publishing this league table, this magazine has acquired the astonishingly powerful position of driving not only institutional behaviour, but even national policy.

The evidence of the impact of rankings on higher education across the world is not hard to find. A single issue of THES, the Times Higher Education Supplement, contains an advertisement for the University of Auckland, which describes itself as a “top 50 University in a top 5 City” (*Times Higher Education*, 2008). Similarly, the University of Sydney is “rated as one of the top 40 universities across the globe”, whilst Imperial College London is “ranked 5th best in the world by the THES”. An analysis of higher education in Ireland includes some key statistics, led by the point that two of its universities are in the world rankings. The City University of Hong Kong’s growing international reputation is “evidenced by its surge up the THES rankings”.

Such behaviour is common despite the well-known shortcomings of league tables. They do not measure the same things, and they give them different weightings even when they do. The rankings of an individual institution can vary hugely from year to year. The methodology may be questionable. The data may be dodgy. The

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17 Slightly confusingly, the publication formerly called the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, with the acronym THES, renamed itself in 2008 as the *Times Higher Education*, acronym THE. I will use the names and acronyms as dictated by the relevant dates, but without further explanation.


20 See the very instructive table in the HEFCE report (p.20) on what five well-known newspaper league tables actually measure, and with what weightings. For example, the THES and the Shangai Jiao Tong rankings only overlap on one parameter, which is “Articles cited”, with a weighting of 20%.

21 The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, in 2004 - 2007, was successively ranked 44th, 103rd, 70th and 243rd in the world by the *Times Higher Education Supplement*.

22 Up to 2009, the THES ranking gave a weighting of 40% to a “peer survey”. The HEFCE report points out that this process has little commonality with what academics regard as peer review, and has “bias built in”. In 2010, THE started a new methodology, where the “peer survey” is replaced by what is claimed to be a more rigorous polling (by Thomson Reuters) of more people. The first “new” THE table is due in 2010.

23 The HEFCE report has a good discussion of how raw data, even from reputable sources, need to be massaged in various ways for a university to end up with a single number as its ranking in a league table. Some
rankings largely reflect reputational factors and not necessarily the quality or performance of institutions. Because of the attention being paid to league tables they are beginning to proliferate. It is easy to see how the portrayal of sectoral diversity as a hierarchy of institutions will influence institutional policy on diversity. Quality, to repeat a point made earlier, is widely taken as a universal good, but not often interrogated. Once the notion has taken root that the manifestation of quality comes as a position on a list, that list automatically becomes a reputational factor. Because of this reputational factor, university managers know that they disregard league tables at their peril. So entrenched has the simplistic notion of quality as ranking become that “slipping in the league tables” carries a significant risk, impacting on substantive matters such as staff recruitment and donor activity. Any actions, therefore, that negatively affect parameters which are measured by league tables, are at risk of short-term tactical decision-making. Entry scores, drop-out rates and time taken for completion of a degree are all examples of parameters that feed into league table rankings. These are exactly the kind of parameters easily affected by measures typical of the diversity and equality agenda, such as alternative admission programs, academic support programs and extended degree programs.

Thus a university’s diversity agenda may put it at risk of a lower position on some list, which is then portrayed as a drop in standards and an erosion of quality. At Newcastle University, for example, students have been admitted for some years now into medical school (and other programs) on an alternative access route called the Partners Program, which will accept students from disadvantaged backgrounds with lower school-leaving results than the norm (after successfully attending a summer school). Of these, 92% percent of the 2002 to 2004 cohorts of Partners alumni graduated with a degree classification of upper second or better, which compares well with the overall average of 95% for the same three years. In the league table game, however, the matter takes on a different complexion. *The Times Good University Guide*, for example, uses entry scores as one of the parameters in calculating a ranking of UK universities. In the 2007 Guide, the entry score for Medicine at Newcastle was quoted as 476 points, and our ranking on this parameter as 17th. Removing the Partners Program students from the equation would have taken our entry score to 510, and moved our ranking from 17th to 7th on that particular parameter, thus improving also our overall score. The Partners Program, publishers of league tables warn readers that it is not possible to replicate the overall scores from the published indicators.

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24 One of the conclusions reached in the HEFCE report.
25 This is a good thing. The more league tables there are, the more rankings of institutions will differ, and the less weight will correspondingly be given to any particular table. *Already THE* has split from its former league table partners Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), and teamed up with Thompson Reuters to address the criticisms arising from the more subjective nature of its assessment criteria, particularly the ‘peer review’ system. QS will continue to publish its own rankings, with partners including US News & World Report and Scopus, the Elsevier database that supplies bibliometric data. In addition, the European Commission has commissioned a consortium of universities to produce a design for a global ranking of higher education institutions which aims to avoid the perceived flaws of existing international rankings. The University of Twente has launched a project called U-Map to produce a multi-dimensional classification of European HEIs, fulfilling a similar role to the Carnegie Classification in the USA. A longer term aim is to develop a global tool to address perceived failings in the Shanghai Jiao Tong and *THE* tables.
to which we are firmly committed, therefore comes at a cost in terms of league table positions.

A broader notion of quality

The Shape of the River, as mentioned above, provides comprehensive evidence of the overall success of affirmative action policies in the USA. One of the great merits of the book is that Bowen and Bok can legitimately reach this conclusion without hiding the kind of facts seized upon by those who hold the view that diversity erodes quality. One such is the fact that black students in their study not only entered university with lower grades than white students, but were also less likely than whites to graduate. Interestingly, though, Bowen and Bok also add to this observation the evidence that black graduation rates are much higher at elite institutions, and that the black-white gap in graduation rates is smaller at these institutions.

Institutions that are selective in their admissions policies generally have more financial resources at their disposal than do other colleges and universities. ... Also, these schools are often able to provide more personal attention, counselling, support, and other resources than less well-funded institutions can afford to make available.26

Before moving on to the idea of a broader notion of quality, it is worth elaborating on this point: there is a distinction to be made between entry standards and exit standards, and the latter relates to the amount of support on offer. Almost by definition, the under-representation in higher education of some particular societal group correlates with the fact that people from that group do not meet university entry requirements to the same extent as the rest of the population. Consequently, admitting students from such groups into university – usually under some kind of special admission program – has the effect that the average school-leaving results of the new cohort are lower than they would have been without such a program. If “standards will drop” means nothing more than that – that relaxing entry criteria result in the average entry qualification going down – then the point may be readily conceded. But it does not follow that if entry standards are lower then exit standards must inevitably be lower. Exit standards depend on the quality of the teaching and learning over the entire period of study, including the extent to which value-add measures are instituted for those who enter under a special admissions program.

In the mid-1990s, at the University of Cape Town, while Head of the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics, I served for a while as Coordinator of Strategic Planning under Dr Mamphela Ramphele, the first black woman Vice-Chancellor in South Africa. In that capacity I came up, as part of our strategic plan, with the slogan “Flexible on access, firm on success”. We had a flexible admissions program, aimed largely at black students disadvantaged by apartheid education, backed up by an Alternative Admissions Research Project. This flexible access was coupled with active support. We had a special unit called the Academic Support Program, through which we offered options such as extra tutorials, walk-in consulting rooms, better staff-student ratios, and extended degree programs. My experience was that students admitted under the alternative admissions scheme who successfully completed their degrees were in the same band of competency on

26 The Shape of the River, p.58.
graduation to regular students. Moreover, far from the standard of education declining, I believe we actually learnt a great deal more about quality education by offering such programs than we would have done in their absence.

I had the same experience later at Stellenbosch. In 2005 we crossed an important threshold in the Medical School when more than 50% of the students enrolling for the medical degree were from the Coloured/Black/Indian communities. Crossing that threshold could not have been accomplished by a simple algorithm of judging entry in terms of school-leaving results. It was necessary to design admission criteria that looked at a variety of contextual data, such as school background, leadership qualities and community work, and to supplement such data as far as possible with personal interviews. When we crossed the 50% mark the program had been running for some years, and all the indications were that students from previously disadvantaged sectors admitted under this policy in their later study years performed just as well as those who had obtained higher school-leaving results in more privileged schools.

The same phenomenon was reported in the Extended Medical Degree Program at King’s College referred to above: despite their lower entry grades, and slower start, in the later clinical years pass rates are comparable to those of conventional students. And again we observed the same in the Partners program at Newcastle. It seems, then, that with good selection and good support the initial gap between special-admission students and mainstream students diminish over time, and that it is perfectly feasible to aim for comparable exit standards.

There is, therefore, the very real possibility that a university with the will and the resources may turn students admitted with lower qualifications into graduates comparable to those admitted with the normal qualifications and by the normal route. A sensible notion of quality should be able to recognise this as a plus, not a minus.

That brings us back to The Shape of the River. How do Bowen and Bok square their observation of lower exit grades for affirmative action students with asserting the overall success of such programs? The answer lies in the title of the book (which comes from Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi). It is not the many bends and variations in the river that count, it is the shape of the river itself. That is, the success or failure of the diversity and equality agenda has to do with the overall role played by that agenda in the pursuit of the good society. The business case for diversity must consider the entire life history and contribution to society of those recruited under this banner. This idea comes through in a variety of ways.

One conclusion we have reached is that the meaning of “merit” in the admissions process must be articulated more clearly. “Merit”, like “preference” and “discrimination”, is a word that has taken on so much baggage we may have to re-invent it or find a substitute.

What admissions offers must decide is which set of applicants, considered individually and collectively, will take fullest advantage of what the college has to

27 Cf. Garlick and Brown (2008), op. cit.
28 The Shape of the River, p.276.
offer, contribute most to the educational process in the college, and be most successful in using what they have learned for the benefit of the larger society.29

I have made the same point elsewhere, arising from my experience in the UK.

It is uncontroversial to say that in an admissions system relying mostly or entirely on school-leaving results, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds will not be successful to the same extent as children from a socially advantaged background. The difficulty arises when such a context-free numbers-based admissions system is called a “merit-based” selection, and the successful and unsuccessful candidates, respectively, thereby included or excluded from a presumed meritocracy. That could only be true if the playing field was level – which, by the very concept of “lower socio-economic classes”, it is not. To say that school-leavers whose parents could buy their way into “good schools” are of higher merit than school-leavers who struggled in adverse circumstances, on the sole evidence of their respective school-leaving results, seems a peculiarly narrow definition of the word “merit”.30

Likewise for quality. What the equality agenda needs is to articulate and propagate a broader notion of quality which challenges the simplistic idea of quality as ranking, does not run directly counter to the idea of quality as excellence, and leaves room for consideration of the circumstances of the individual and the mission of the institution. The equality agenda cannot afford not to engage with the notion of quality.

At Stellenbosch I made the point that performance is relative to context.

In line with our Vision Statement, Stellenbosch University strives to be an academic institution of excellence, with a national profile and an international reputation. Quality must be our benchmark. If so, we have to ask a simple but profound question: how do you judge quality relative to context? Some of us take for granted an environment, which for others is only a dream. If so, is it not the case that our performance, no matter how well merited on the basis of our own efforts, also owes something to the environment within which we live and work?

Consider two hypothetical cases. One is a student whose parents are well-educated professional people, reasonably affluent, and who comes to us from one of the so-called “good schools”, where she enjoyed every possible facility for sharpening the mind. The other is a student whose parents have had little formal education and who live in poverty, who comes to us from a historically disadvantaged school in a gang-infested area. If the former student comes to Stellenbosch with a school-leaving mark of 90%, and the latter comes with a school-leaving mark of 70%, is it possible for us to say that the former is a better student than the latter? And if we do, would that be right?31

My understanding of educational quality at Stellenbosch related to the place of this particular university, with its peculiar history, in the new democratic South Africa, and the mindset, not only the professional skills, of the graduates it should be turning out.

[Another reason] for saying that quality needs diversity concerns the role of a university in society – and more particularly the role of this university, in South

29 The Shape of the River, p.277.
30 “‘Standards will drop’ – and other fears about the equality agenda”, op. cit, p.34.
31 Anatomy of a Transformer, pp.5-6.
African society. I have said that we wish to be a top-class university, and we certainly do. But so do most other universities. We have to be more specific: what does quality mean for us? Certainly it means good research and innovation. Certainly it also means turning out top-quality graduates, well-educated intellectually and well-prepared for the world of work. But I would argue that there is more. For Stellenbosch to be a top-quality university, in the realities of the here and now, must mean also that we are an active participant and role-player in the exciting process of creating a new South African society. Our activity as a university, I would argue, is also judged on the quality of our contribution to society.

And that, in the end, is what it is all about. We wish to be a top-quality university for a reason: to make a contribution to the development of this country, and the development of Africa. We wish to be participants, not spectators, in the new democratic dispensation. We wish to go to work. If this university grew strong during the days of apartheid, let that strength now be put to work for the benefit of all. Let us use this university as a national asset. There is a strong argument that the pursuit of diversity should take place because we owe it to the past. But I believe there is an even stronger argument that the pursuit of diversity is necessary because we owe it to the future.32

In the end, then, we get back to the question what “top quality” means. There is, as we have seen, a narrow interpretation of quality as excellence, which simply means better than the others on some set of numerical parameters. But there is also a broader interpretation, which says that quality – for a university or an individual – is relative to context, and to purpose. To those proponents of the diversity and equality agenda who are weary of being accused of eroding quality, I would say that a robust response is possible by articulating a more contextual definition of quality.

I will not try to venture such a definition here. But I may point out that of the notions of quality already articulated above, straight from the quality assurance literature, some fit the agenda of diversity and equality quite well. Fitness for purpose, fitness of purpose, and quality as value-add, for example, can sensibly be woven into the various arguments for diversity and equality. I would advocate, however, an addition, which is to relate quality also to the role of a university in civil society. It is, and should remain, a sensible question to ask “What are universities for?”33

A broader notion of quality won’t end the debate on diversity and equality. It would, however, somewhat elevate the debate. The debate would shift to the question of the good society, and the shifting pattern of what is considered desirable in civil society. But that has been a healthy debate ever since the Athenians took it up two and a half millennia ago.

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32 From “Quality needs diversity”, Anatomy of a transformer, p. 87.

33 I ventured an answer in a public lecture at Newcastle University after taking up office in 2007. See http://www.ncl.ac.uk/about/assets/documents/whatareuniversitiesfor.pdf.