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Op-ed

White exclusion claims must answer the education evidence

By Daryl Swanepoel

Claims of white persecution in South Africa should be tested against the opportunities white people actually have. In tertiary education, the evidence demands a more sober account than the sweeping picture of racial exclusion promoted by the Solidarity Movement and others. There are changes worth investigating and difficulties that deserve attention. But a serious case requires more than a declining student count or an unsuccessful application.

The question is whether white young people are being systematically deprived of educational opportunity because of their race. Answering it requires us to look at public universities, consider the growth of private higher education and measure participation against the size of the relevant population. It also requires us to distinguish evidence of an outcome from evidence of its cause.

The decline in white public-university enrolment is substantial. The DHET figures recorded in our analysis show 90,088 white students aged 19-24 in 2015, compared with 50,590 in 2024. That decline cannot simply be brushed aside. People concerned about access to public universities are entitled to ask what explains it. They are not entitled to supply racial persecution as the explanation without establishing the connection.

A student count tells us how many people were enrolled. It does not tell us how many applied, qualified for admission, received offers or chose another institution. Nor does it tell us how much a changing population affected the result. Anyone claiming that racial admissions practices caused the decline must produce evidence capable of separating those effects. The enrolment figures alone cannot do that work.

The private sector complicates the picture further. DHET's published figures show that white enrolment in private higher education increased from 25,740 in 2015 to 45,504 in 2024, an increase of approximately 77%. These figures cover all ages, so they cannot be treated as an exact replacement for the decline among 19-24-year-olds at public universities. Nevertheless, they show why a public-university count is an incomplete account of white participation in higher education.

Private education raises its own questions. Families may pay more, and those unable to afford the fees may have fewer choices. Growth in private enrolment does not establish that access to public institutions is fair. Equally, it does not establish that students were forced out of those institutions because of their race. Both propositions require evidence.

The affordability concern extends to public universities and TVET colleges, where NSFAS provides financial support. Its bursary eligibility rules allow qualifying white students to apply alongside students of other races. The ordinary household income ceiling is R350,000 a year, with separate provisions for students with disabilities and qualifying social grant recipients. A missing-middle loan

scheme provides a route for eligible students from households earning above R350,000 and up to R600,000. But eligibility for a repayable loan does not make education affordable, and an income above either threshold does not necessarily mean that a family can carry the costs.

I therefore believe government should review the funding thresholds and the adequacy of support for the missing middle. That review should consider changes in living and study costs, the number of dependants a household supports and families with more than one child studying. It should examine whether support can taper as income rises, rather than leaving families facing abrupt funding cut-offs, while protecting assistance for the poorest students. White families struggling to finance their children's education deserve to be heard, as do families of every other race. Challenging claims of racial persecution does not require us to defend a funding policy that may leave deserving students without an affordable route to study.

These funding concerns matter when interpreting participation figures: continued enrolment does not tell us what financial sacrifices families make. With that qualification, public and private higher education must be considered together. An illustrative calculation, assuming that two-thirds of private students were aged 19-24 in both years and using provisional population estimates, puts combined white participation at approximately 29.3% in 2015 and 28.7% in 2024. That is roughly one in three-and-a-half white young people in both years. In this calculation, private-sector growth substantially offsets the decline in public-university participation.

Applying the same assumption to Black African students puts their combined participation at approximately 7.2% in 2015 and 12.5% in 2024: an improvement from around one in 14 to one in eight. On these estimates, increased Black African participation occurred alongside broadly stable white participation. The figures challenge the suggestion that widening access for Black African young people necessarily means closing opportunities to white young people.

These combined rates depend on an assumed private-sector age breakdown and provisional population estimates. They must therefore be treated as illustrative, rather than established official rates. Nevertheless, they demonstrate why conclusions drawn solely from declining white public-university enrolment are incomplete.

A separate Stats SA comparison allows us to examine educational attendance without assuming a private-sector age breakdown or constructing separate population estimates. It covers a different period, 2018-2024, and a different age group, 21-25. It also includes school attendance alongside universities, TVET colleges and other institutions. It therefore provides a broader perspective on educational participation, rather than a direct confirmation of the combined higher education estimates.

Among white young people, the estimated number attending was 69,000 in 2018 and 67,000 in 2024. The relevant population was 244,000 and 247,000 respectively. Dividing attendance by population gives approximately 28.3% in 2018 and 27.1% in 2024. That is a small decline of about 1.2 percentage points.

This measure is broader than tertiary education. It includes people still at school, alongside those at universities, TVET colleges and other institutions. It must therefore be described as educational attendance. But it provides a useful check on the claim that white young people's educational opportunities are collapsing.

The comparison with Black African young people is revealing. Their attendance rate fell from approximately 18.3% to 16.0% over the same period, a decline of about 2.3 percentage points. In

2024, around one in 3.7 white people aged 21-25 was attending an educational institution, compared with one in 6.3 Black African people of the same age.

These are survey estimates, and the differences over time have not been tested for statistical significance. We should not pretend they prove more than they do. They nevertheless provide little support for a general account in which white young people are uniquely losing educational opportunity while Black African young people advance at their expense.

The central distinction is between a complaint about a particular decision and a claim about the condition of an entire racial community. A person can experience unfair treatment even where their group retains a higher participation rate. Such a complaint deserves examination on its merits. But it cannot automatically be elevated into proof of systematic persecution.

The same discipline applies to redress. These figures do not establish that every admissions policy is justified or every decision fair. But the illustrative combined estimates suggest that substantial improvements in Black African participation can coexist with broadly stable white participation. Those alleging systematic racial exclusion must explain the broader pattern and establish how particular policies caused the harm they claim.

The Solidarity Movement and others advancing claims of systematic exclusion should engage with that evidence. They should explain the growth in white private enrolment and the relative stability of broader white educational attendance. If they believe these outcomes conceal widespread racial exclusion, they should demonstrate how, with admissions evidence and comparable data.

Government and universities have responsibilities too. They should publish clearer information on applications, admission offers, enrolment and completion, broken down by age and population group. A more transparent system would help families assess their prospects and allow disputed claims to be tested properly.
South Africa needs a serious debate about educational access. It needs to address the costs families face and the low participation of many young people. Turning those difficulties into a sweeping narrative of white persecution makes that debate less honest.

I would defend any student against demonstrably unfair treatment. I would also insist that organisations making claims on behalf of a whole community distinguish what they can prove from what they want people to believe. On the education evidence before us, systematic white persecution has not been established. Those who insist otherwise must do more than repeat the allegation.

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