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Socio-economic and academic challenges faced by black undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds at the Wits School of Education

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to widen access to higher education and promote inclusion of students from marginalised groups in society have seen an increase in admission of students in what were formerly regarded as historically white universities (HWUs) including those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Coming from a background that has less commonalities with the institutions that these students find themselves predisposes these students to challenges that their counterparts from middle class backgrounds may not experience. The aim of this study, therefore, was to explore the socio-economic and academic challenges faced by black undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds at the Wits School of Education (WSoE). The guiding research questions included the characteristics of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The second question was on the nature that the challenges they faced and the last question related to respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the interventions that are put in place at an institutional level to mitigate these challenges. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital was used as a lens for guiding the study, focusing on his concepts of cultural capital, habitus, field and agency. Using a qualitative research approach and a case study design, the study collected data through individual interviews with a group of students and members of staff. Focus group interviews were also conducted with students according to year of study (first and second year). Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data collected. Findings from the study showed that most of the characteristics of being a student from disadvantaged background were rooted in the lack of economic resources, which resulted in inadequacy and lack of choice, and exposure to better quality of life. The nature that these characteristics would later manifest themselves in a number of dimensions including academic, social, and cultural dimensions. The institution was perceived, on the one hand, as maintaining 'highbrow' culture that favoured students from advantaged backgrounds. On the other hand, the initiatives by the institution including bursary disbursement, the food parcels initiative, Counselling Careers and Development Unit (CCDU) and Write Up Read Up (WURU) enabled students to manage their situations. The findings also revealed variations in the impact of challenges faced by disadvantaged students according to duration of their stay in the institution, with the first years struggling more than second year students, which in part explained the concept of agency.