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Evaluating diversity and inclusion in higher education admissions: A case study of the Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute

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This study evaluates student recruitment, selection and support strategies at the Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute (EATI) to assess their contribution to diversity and transformation. Using a multi-method, embedded research design, the study assesses the impact of transformation policies on previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs). A secondary analysis of EATI admission and enrolment data (2016–2022) is supplemented by two questionnaires: one for admitted applicants who enrolled and another for those who did not. Findings indicate that institutional efforts, such as bursaries and an upgraded Student Information System (SIS), have expanded access at the EATI. However, enrolments among PDIs, particularly black, coloured and Indian (BCI) students, remain disproportionately low. Key barriers include limited financial support, inadequate accommodation, language constraints and a weak alignment between institutional identity and student expectations. These issues underscore systemic inequities in higher education and the gap between official policy discourse and the realities faced by students.

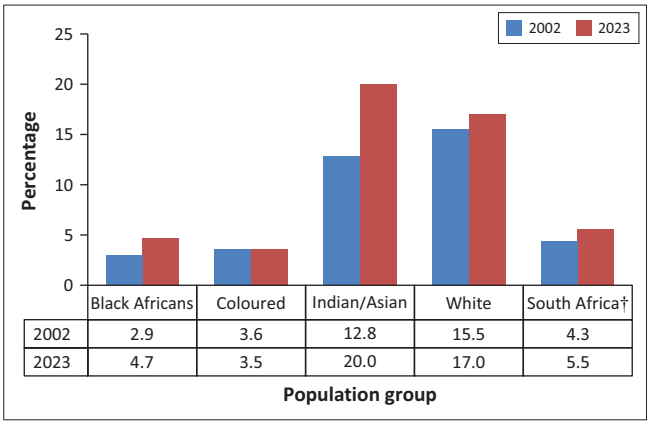
Contribution: The study contributes to discussions on higher education transformation by highlighting the unique challenges confronting agricultural colleges. It underscores the importance of enhanced financial support, targeted marketing and recruitment, language inclusivity and infrastructural improvements to enable equitable participation and sustainable transformation in South African higher education.

Keywords: admissions; Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute; diversity in higher education; disadvantaged students; transformation.

Introduction

Over the years, the lack of diversity in higher education has been of growing concern. Despite policies promoting inclusivity, inequality at South Africa's institutions of higher learning remains a challenge (Brown 2004:21; Gore & Botha 2022:238; Pineda & Mishra 2022:865). The participation rate of persons aged 18–29 years enrolled at institutions of higher education in the country increased from 4.3% in 2002 to 6.3% in 2022 (Statistics South Africa 2023a:15). In 2022, black African students made up more than three-quarters of all students (76.4%), compared to 60.2% in 2002 (Statistics South Africa 2023a:15). However, concern remains that among young aged 18–29 years, the participation of black (4.7%) is still lower than their Indian or Asian (20%) and white peers (17%) (Statistics South Africa 2023b; Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2020:67; see Figure 1). Addressing these inequalities requires purposeful interventions to improve inclusion in areas where these students remain under-represented (Badat 2010:28).

Reynolds and Moyo (2024:157), in a systematic review of challenges facing the South African higher education sector, find that limited finances, inadequate transportation and housing, unplanned motherhood, lack of parental support and curricula offered predominantly in English limit access to higher education for students from poor backgrounds. Gururaj et al. (2020:78) agree that higher education institutions should promote equity and expand access for minority and historically disadvantaged groups by prioritising campus diversity, supporting marginalised communities and contributing to social progress. This concurs with earlier advocacy by Badat (2010:28) that consistent efforts are needed to promote black students at certain institutions, qualification levels and academic programmes to maintain the representation of designated groups. The agricultural sector has shown strong growth, averaging 8.8% nominally per year since 2013 (Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development [DALRRD] 2024:i). Expanding enrolment in agricultural training programmes can enhance young black Africans' access to opportunities in commercial farming by



Source: Statistics South Africa, 2023a, *Statistical release P0318 general household survey*, p. 15, Stats SA, Pretoria, viewed 15 September 2025, from https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182023.pdf

†, national percentage of persons aged 18 to 29 years enrolled at an institution of higher education in the country.

FIGURE 1: Share of student participation rates for individuals aged 18–29 years by population group, 2002 and 2022.

equipping them for careers in the sector. Agricultural colleges occupy a distinctive space in this landscape. As vocationally oriented institutions, they are tasked with addressing skills shortages in a sector shaped by histories of dispossession and ongoing rural inequality (Western Cape Department of Agriculture [WCDoA] 2021a:121). The Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute (EATI), one of 11 agricultural colleges in South Africa, forms part of the formal education system in South Africa and has two subprogrammes, namely Higher Education and Training and Agricultural Skills Development (WCDoA 2021a:18). Despite several initiatives aimed at transforming the student population at the EATI, the diversity of annual admissions remains largely homogenous. The EATI student information system shows that previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) are increasingly under-represented in the Bachelor of Agriculture (BAgric) programme. In 2015, students nationwide protested about the lack of transformation at the country's higher education institutions, including at the EATI. These protests were marked by class boycotts and the closure of lecture and examination rooms (Evans 2015; Le Grange 2016:1). Consequently, EATI adopted a comprehensive transformation plan to address the crisis through change management, focusing on organisational realignment and a review of all systems and processes (Evans 2015; WCDoA 2018:5).

The main purpose of this case study, therefore, was to examine whether EATI's student admission strategies support its diversity goals.

Literature review

Higher education institutions are widely recognised as central to advancing structural transformation, fostering social mobility and promoting economic participation for historically disadvantaged groups (Cloete 2015). However, these institutions struggle to absorb and support increasing student numbers amid declining government subsidies and growing political pressure from student movements, such as #FeesMustFall (Jansen 2017). Redressing societal inequalities requires not only inclusive and alternative admissions policies but also systemic interventions that disrupt entrenched patterns of inequality (Boughey & McKenna 2021:23; Soudien 2010:16). Universities must implement inclusive admissions policies and strong student support mechanisms (South African Human Rights Commission, 2016:64; Swilling & Annecke 2012:94; Thiem & Dasgupta 2022:223). Burke (2020:201) argues that widening participation in higher education extends beyond simply meeting enrolment targets. It is also necessary to critically examine how students' progress beyond university admissions if the promotion of equity is to carry any meaning (Burke 2020:201). Transformation initiatives should focus on removing financial barriers, promoting language inclusivity and refining recruitment strategies to cater for the needs of previously disadvantaged applicants. South African scholars similarly caution that equity must be linked to broader institutional reform if transformation is to be meaningful (Jansen 2018:6).

Diversity in higher education

Diversity in higher education encompasses aspects such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic class (Sanger 2020:3). An inclusive learning environment should be created to address all students' diverse needs. In the African context, the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems in curricula marginalises indigenous knowledge and fails to reflect African learners' experiences (Gwaravanda & Ndofirepi 2021:1,3). Decolonising academic programmes is essential to acknowledge multiple perspectives without trivialising historical injustices (Le Grange 2016:5–6). Although affirmative action policies have improved access for under-represented groups, challenges remain (Coleman & Ndebele 2010:23). Affirmative action alone is insufficient to address the deep-rooted structural inequalities that drive educational disparities (Trujillo et al. 2017:7,18). Recent South African scholarship similarly underscores that transformation cannot be reduced to demographic change but must include epistemic, institutional and cultural shifts in higher education (CHE 2022:12–14). In describing the academic project, Jansen (2018:5) advocates for the importance of open-mindedness, resistance to imposed ideologies and active encouragement of different viewpoints.

University leadership plays a central role in advancing diversity and inclusion by integrating strategic planning, budget allocation and governance structures (Kezar et al. 2008:74,78,85). More diverse leadership teams promote equitable decision-making and enhance institutional performance by bringing varied perspectives to governance and policy development (Ashikali, Groenwald & Kuipers 2021:498,500). At the same time, teaching practices ought to accommodate different learning styles and ensure that all students feel represented in the curriculum (Schuelka 2018:10).

Cost of higher education

Socio-economic status affects an individual's likelihood of participating in higher education (Wanti et al. 2022:280). While high-income households are generally in a better

financial position to support their children's education (Kromydas 2017:6), working-class students face significant financial barriers (Ioakimidis & Papakonstantinou 2017:1761). Financial exclusion is compounded by intersecting factors, such as gender, ethnicity, geographic location and language status (Wanti et al. 2022:280). Although financial aid programmes have expanded, many students' needs remain unmet, and poverty continues to hinder access and success in higher education (Maree 2016:9). The CHE (2020:11) emphasises that financial exclusion intersects with structural inequities in ways that perpetuate racialised patterns of access and success, despite significant expansions in National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding.

To improve representation, higher education policies must prioritise clear financial aid information, budgeting skills and pre-entry support to ensure that students understand the costs associated with university education (McCoy et al. 2010:90). Public policy in South Africa has undergone significant changes to reform the higher education system with the expansion of the NSFAS and the introduction of the NSFAS Student Loan Scheme (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2024). The number of university students receiving NSFAS funding has increased considerably from 179 000 in 2015 to over 504 000 in 2020, representing a growth rate of 181%.

Language of instruction

Globally, multilingualism is receiving increased attention in light of the growing number of students who are proficient in multiple languages (Cenoz & Gorter 2010:2). A challenge in multilingual education is to ensure that all student languages are accommodated effectively, which requires a strong institutional commitment to language planning and policy development. Additionally, teaching staff must adopt a more positive attitude towards multilingualism to foster a more inclusive academic environment (Cenoz & Gorter 2010:8–9).

Following a recent amendment to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the country now recognises 12 official languages (RSA 1996:section 6). However, language remains a significant barrier to higher education access and success, particularly for students from historically marginalised groups. Burke (2020:201) argues that language challenges extend beyond enrolment, affecting students' ability to participate fully in tertiary education. Once admitted, many students struggle with language competency, particularly where English serves as the primary medium of instruction (Le Cordeur 2013:5). Student success is hindered when learncers have not mastered the academic language required to express theoretical knowledge (Boughey & McKenna 2021:65). Despite the adoption of multilingualism policies, implementation remains inconsistent (Le Cordeur 2013:12). As DHET (2020:11) argues, language policies are deeply tied to the politics of identity and transformation in South Africa, and their uneven implementation reflects broader structural tensions within the system.

Recruitment of students

Recruitment in higher education is not a neutral administrative function but a key mechanism through which institutions advance structural transformation and promote social justice, as it determines who gains access to opportunities for economic growth, innovation and societal leadership (Ajani 2024:218; Jansen 2018:1). In higher education, this includes strategic student recruitment, which can be used to ensure greater inclusivity and accessibility. Many tertiary institutions in South Africa have already transformed their recruitment and selection policies to improve access to quality education (Vandeyar 2010:914). Yet, as Jansen (2017:16) points out, recruitment strategies must be critically evaluated in terms of whether they genuinely advance equity or simply reproduce existing patterns of privilege within the sector.

Marketing is an essential part of student recruitment, allowing institutions to share information about the available qualifications and support to align with students' needs (Bapat & Gankar 2020:1860). Understanding students' decision-making processes can enhance targeted recruitment efforts (Wiese, Van Heerden & Jordaan 2010:151). Engaging with students from diverse backgrounds offers institutions insight into students' needs, experiences and challenges, enabling the development of a strong, credible and inclusive institutional message that attracts diverse applicants (Hannan 2021:52).

Improved academic support

Rickard et al. (2018:43) highlight the growing need for student-oriented strategies that consider students' diverse backgrounds, including their education, income generation, family commitments and career aspirations. Jansen (2018:2) laments that 'the majority of youth now entering university are poor and have weak academic backgrounds', placing universities under pressure to address both social poverty needs and additional academic support. Badat (2010:29,17,29) also emphasises the importance of quality academic development programmes that support students, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Initiatives such as individualised mentorship, coaching, as well as summer bridging programmes have been shown to enhance academic performance and credit accumulation (United States Department of Education 2016:3).

To help students engage with university structures from the outset and successfully transition to university life, Rickard et al. (2018:48) identify four key areas of support: academic assistance; help with enrolment and admissions-related anxiety; guidance in connecting, courses and learning pathways and assistance in navigating online learning systems and schedules. Both academic and professional support services staff play a crucial role in guiding students through complex university processes (Rickard et al. 2018:41).

Inclusive agricultural education

Including and empowering marginalised communities plays a crucial part in enhancing agricultural production. Addressing systemic inequalities, particularly those relating to race and gender, is essential (Suttie & Benfica 2016:7–8). Women constitute 43% of the global agricultural workforce (FAO 2011:35), and when given equal access to resources, they often achieve higher crop yields than their male counterparts. Closing the gender gap in farm production and wages could contribute to a 1% increase in global gross domestic product and reduce global food insecurity rates by approximately 2% (FAO 2023:162). To fully realise these benefits, it is essential to understand and address the specific barriers that women in agriculture face. Targeted interventions and policies, particularly those focused on agricultural education and training, can help empower women and foster a more inclusive and productive agricultural sector. In South Africa, agricultural colleges such as EATI are located at the intersection of higher education transformation and rural development. Scholars have argued that higher education must address not only technical skills but also structural inequalities that prevent access and maintain historical patterns of exclusion (Boughey & McKenna 2021:80; Cloete 2015).

Synthesis

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that transformation in higher education must be understood as a multidimensional and systemic process, encompassing demographic change, financial access, language inclusivity, curriculum reform and governance practices. While much has been achieved, South African scholarship warns against fragmented or surface-level approaches, emphasising the need for deeper structural transformation that links higher education to broader societal goals while critically interrogating enduring colonial assumptions about knowledge and institutional purpose (Boughey & McKenna 2021:96; Soudien 2025:4). This study investigates the systemic and contextual factors shaping enrolment decisions in agricultural higher education, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the barriers that continue to constrain equitable access.

Research methods and design

The purpose of the study was to assess progress towards the Institute's goals of promoting diversity and transformation by analysing changes in the application and enrolment data at the EATI. Outcome evaluations assess whether interventions achieved their intended effects on the target population (DPME 2019:23; Mouton 2016:143) and are appropriate for determining whether EATI's diversity strategies have meaningfully altered enrolment patterns. Advancing transformational change and equity requires a comprehensive redesign of systems that have historically advantaged certain individuals, groups or areas over others (DPME 2022:5). However, many interventions adopt a linear model of change that overlooks the complex and deeply embedded nature of the challenges they aim to address (Chaplowe & Hejnowicz 2021:6). By examining why EATI students choose to enrol or not after successful admission, this study provides insight into potential systemic barriers that remain unaddressed in current strategies to advance transformation within the BAgric programme.

The study adopts a multi-method, embedded design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011:90). A secondary analysis of EATI admission and enrolment data from 2016 to 2022 was undertaken to trace shifts in student diversity following the adoption of a strategic approach to broaden access. This analysis established how the demographic profile of enrolled students changed over time. However, documenting outcomes alone cannot account for the deeper structural factors that continue to shape access and equity.

To interrogate the reasons why admitted students choose to enrol or not and thereby illuminate systemic barriers that may hinder transformation, two complementary questionnaires were developed. The first targeted admitted applicants who enrolled, while the second targeted those who were admitted but did not enrol. Together, these instruments move beyond admissions processes as administrative events, framing them instead as a lens into the broader structural and institutional dynamics that facilitate or constrain transformation.

Each questionnaire comprised three parts. The first section collected demographic data to characterise the respondent population, including family involvement in agriculture, as a way of situating students within broader socio-economic patterns. The second section examined decision-making factors, such as entry requirements, financial assistance, access to course information, student experiences and campus-related considerations. Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). The final section invited open-ended reflections, providing qualitative data on enrolment decisions, perceptions of the admissions process and recommendations for strategies to advance equitable access.

The questionnaire was piloted on four PDIs, amended and then distributed using the SUNSurvey platform. Given the anticipated low response rate, the questionnaire was distributed to all applicants admitted to EATI between 2016 and 2022, including those who enrolled in 2023. The target population was 1372 participants, which comprised 396 applicants who were admitted and subsequently enrolled with the EATI, and 976 applicants who were admitted but did not enrol with the EATI. The questionnaire launched on 27 September 2023 and was available until 13 October 2023. Follow-up communication was sent on 06 October 2023.

A total of 153 respondents completed the questionnaire (response rate = 11.15%), of which 143 were complete (10.42%) and 10 were incomplete. Of the complete responses, 52 (36.4%) were from individuals who did not enrol at EATI, and 91 (63.6%) from those who did. Although the response

rate is too low to generalise the findings to the broader population, the data nonetheless offer valuable insights. As shown in Table 1 and discussed in the demographic overview, the responses reflect a diversity of applicant profiles and provide valuable insights into the factors influencing enrolment decisions at EATI.

The Likert-scale responses were analysed using Excel and SPSS to generate descriptive statistics. Open-ended responses were retrospectively coded to identify themes, which were then explored through thematic analysis.

Enrolment at the Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute

This study focuses on courses offered by the EATI at the Higher Education Training level only. These offerings range from a 3-year Bachelor of Agriculture (BAgric) degree at National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 7, which is offered in collaboration with Stellenbosch University, to a 3-year Diploma in Agriculture at NQF level 6 (WCDoA 2021a:18). Prior to 2020, EATI also offered the 2-year Higher Certificate in Agriculture as well as a 1-year Diploma in Agriculture (WCDoA 2021b:57).

Admission and enrolment

Prospective students who have completed Grade 12 and meet the minimum admission requirements may apply for admission to EATI. The initial screening process identifies all applicants who adhere to the admission criteria (EATI 2017a:6). Because of limited capacity, the selection committee assesses applications on a competitive basis to identify the most promising applicants (EATI 2022:4). Applicants offered placement are notified via email (EATI 2022:12) and are given a specified time within which to respond to secure their place by paying a non-refundable deposit (EATI 2022:12). Failure to do so could result in withdrawal of the offer (EATI 2022:12).

Student support

The Elsenburg campus, which is located some 13 km outside Stellenbosch, has limited student accommodation. Students who reside more than 60 km from campus are prioritised for residence placement (EATI 2018:7). Some residence spots are reserved for first-year students as well as returning students who have excelled academically (EATI 2018:7). The EATI makes available a limited number of bursaries each year, while bursary assistance is also available from the national DALRRD. These bursaries primarily support students with financial need (EATI 2017b:2). The EATI and DALRRD bursaries include accommodation in an EATI residence only. The NSFAS-funded students are covered for accommodation in either an EATI residence or NSFAS-accredited private housing (Dauncey n.d.).

Language transformation

Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute is a multilingual institution that promotes the use of the three official languages of the Western Cape, namely English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa (WCDoA 2016:5). The Institute's language policy upholds constitutional principles, affording students, lecturers and members of the public their choice-of-language privileges within the scope defined by the *Western Cape Provincial Languages Act 13 of 1998* as well as the Western Cape Government's 2005 Language Policy (WCDoA 2016:4). The default language of instruction is typically English, which serves as the common language of understanding (WCDoA 2016:5). Writing tasks, assignments, tests and examinations are available in English and Afrikaans only.

Academic support

The Extended Programme supports students who demonstrate potential but do not yet meet the full academic requirements. In the Extended Programme, first-year modules are split over 2 years to ease the transition into tertiary study. Students must pass all year one modules to continue with their studies. The prescribed modules are specifically designed to ease the transition from secondary and tertiary education. Only first-year EATI students may apply. The EATI also offers peer tutorial programmes to help students master complex learning material, as well as independent counselling and advisory services for first-year students (EATI 2017a:9,10,19).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Social, Behavioural and Education Research Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University, project number: 28303, on 05 September 2023. In addition, permission was granted by the Head of Department of the WCDoA to use student enrolment data of the EATI for this study. Respondent contact details were kept confidential, and no personal identifiers were collected to ensure participant anonymity.

TABLE 1: Race of survey recipient vs respondents: Admitted non-enrolled vs admitted enrolled participants.

Race	Enrolled		Response rate (%)	Non-enrolled		Response rate (%)
	Recipients (N = 459)	Respondents (n = 91)		Recipients (N = 913)	Respondents (n = 52)	
African people	151	34	22.50	467	26	5.60
Coloured people	134	25	18.70	145	13	9.00
Indian people	1	0	0.00	33	2	6.10
Prefer not to say	3	3	100.00	8	0	0.00
White people	170	29	17.10	260	11	4.20
Total	**459**	**91**	**19.80**	**913**	**52**	**5.70**

Results

Analysis of application, admission and enrolment statistics

In 2017, the definition of the student equity target group at EATI was changed from BCI (black, coloured and Indian) applicants to PDIs, which includes all designated groups as well as white females (WCDoA 2018:152). Altogether, 4659 applications were received from the PDI pool between the 2016 and 2022 academic years (Table 1). A total of 1547 applicants were conditionally accepted (Table 3), of whom 509 ultimately registered (Table 4). In comparison, 2630 applications were received from non-PDI applicants for the same period (Table 2). A total of 1094 applicants were conditionally accepted (Table 2), of whom 640 ultimately registered (Table 3). The consistent gap in actual enrolments points to structural barriers that disproportionately affect PDIs, raising questions about institutional culture and broader systemic inequalities.

Figure 2 illustrates applications received from PDIs and non-PDIs, respectively, from 2016 through 2022 and shows an increase in EATI's programmes. From 2018, applications from PDIs started growing significantly, while non-PDI applications remained constant, perhaps indicating that the latter group had already reached a stable demand for places at EATI. This trend reflects EATI's growing visibility among PDIs, but it also highlights persistent disparities in translating applications into actual enrolments.

Figure 3 illustrates that conditional acceptances for PDIs increased sharply between 2016 and 2019, coinciding with EATI's deliberate diversity strategies. However, the subsequent stabilisation suggests that institutional initiatives created entry opportunities but did not fully dismantle barriers that limit successful transition to enrolment.

TABLE 2: Breakdown of applications received for the 2016–2022 academic years (EATI Student Information System 2023).

Group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Grand total
Non-PDI	361	362	326	317	280	385	599	2630
PDIs	396	264	375	582	461	726	1855	4659
Grand total	**757**	**626**	**701**	**899**	**741**	**1111**	**2454**	**7289**

PDI, previously disadvantaged individuals; EATI, Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute.

TABLE 3: Breakdown of conditional acceptances for the 2016–2022 academic years (EATI Student Information System 2023).

Group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Grand total
Non-PDI	169	134	141	160	143	164	183	1094
PDIs	122	136	185	322	240	241	301	1547
Grand total	**291**	**270**	**326**	**482**	**383**	**405**	**484**	**2641**

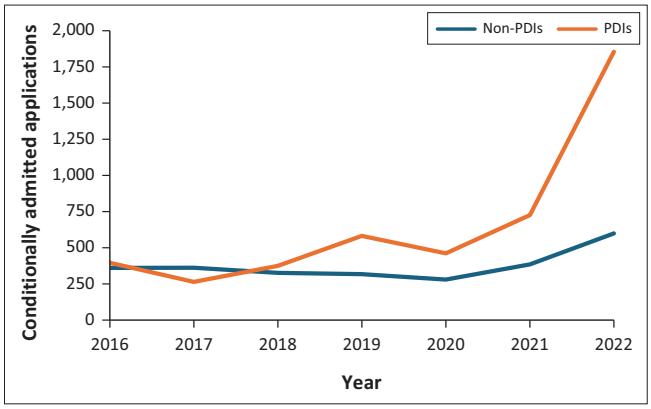
PDI, previously disadvantaged individuals; EATI, Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute.

TABLE 4: Breakdown of first-year previously disadvantaged individuals student enrolments for the 2016 – 2022 academic years (EATI Student Information System 2023).

Group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Grand total	%
Non-PDI	107	81	81	92	90	97	92	640	56
PDIs	69	59	86	63	77	65	90	509	44
TOTAL	**176**	**140**	**167**	**155**	**167**	**162**	**182**	**1149**	**100**

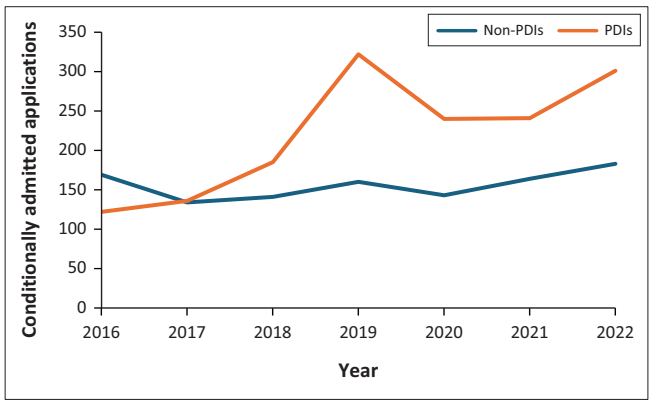
PDI, previously disadvantaged individuals; EATI, Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute.

The number of PDI and non-PDI first-year students who eventually registered for the 2016–2022 academic years is shown in Figure 4. Apart from 2018, the number of registered students remained constant for both groups, with PDI registrations lower than their non-PDI peers. This indicates that admission alone does not ensure access. The persistent drop suggests that the admission process may function more as a symbolic gesture of inclusion than a guarantee of equitable participation. It also raises questions of whether conditional offers are



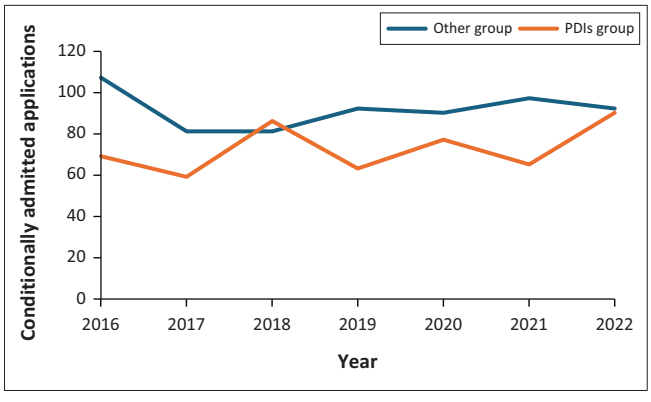
PDIs, previously disadvantaged individuals.

FIGURE 2: Previously disadvantaged individuals vs non-previously disadvantaged individuals applications received for the 2016–2022 academic years.



PDIs, previously disadvantaged individuals.

FIGURE 3: Previously disadvantaged individuals vs non-previously disadvantaged individuals conditionally admitted applicants for the 2016–2022 academic years.



PDIs, previously disadvantaged individuals.

FIGURE 4: Previously disadvantaged individuals vs non-previously disadvantaged individuals first-year registrations for the 2016–2022 academic years.

equitably accompanied by the resources and guidance necessary to translate access into enrolment.

Further evaluation of the PDI data revealed that the intake of black, coloured and Indian students specifically (i.e. the PDI pool excluding white females) was considered considerably lower than other groups. Of the 3926 applications from BCI candidates for the 2016 to 2022 academic years, 1085 were accepted, of whom only 352 registered. In comparison, of the 3363 applications from non-BCI candidates (i.e. white males, white females and international students) for the 2016 to 2022 academic years, 1556 were accepted, of whom 797 registered.

A total of 352 (31%) BCI students registered at EATI between 2016 and 2022, while 797 (69%) students from other groups (white males, white females and international students) registered during the same period (see Table 5). Other students include white males, white females and international students. The large gap in enrolment shows that systemic barriers, rather than individual shortcomings, prevent equal participation in higher education. This observation highlights the limited efficacy of equity-focused admissions policies when they are not complemented by strategies addressing student uptake, student retention, financial accessibility and inclusive institutional practices.

Figure 5 illustrates the number of applications, admissions and registrations for BCI and non-BCI students, respectively, from 2016 through 2022.

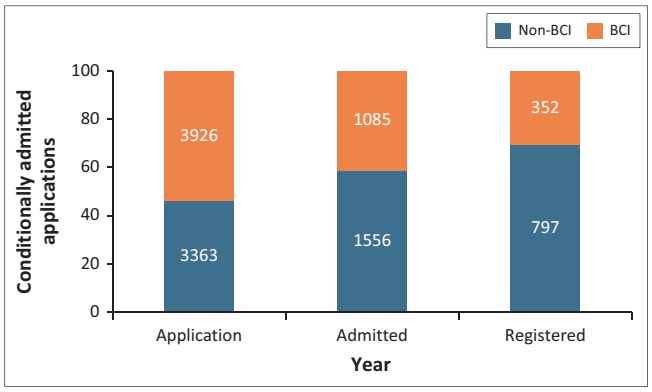
In terms of gender and racial distribution (Table 6), EATI enrolment rates among white males decreased from 61% in 2016 to 49% in 2018 but substantially recovered to approximately 50% and remained stable from 2019 onwards. Black male enrolments at EATI dropped from 7% in 2016 to 3% in 2019, with a gradual increase seen from 2020. Female student enrolments gradually increased from 21% in 2016 to 30% in 2022. However, male enrolments remain disproportionately higher than female enrolments, with a male-to-female ratio of 70:30. In addition, uptake by Indian students is very low. These figures point to gendered and racialised access patterns, raising questions about how effectively current strategies promote transformation in line with national higher education policy goals.

The EATI has increased access for PDIs through strategies such as the granting of bursaries and the introduction of a new Student Information System (SIS). Yet the secondary analysis shows that these interventions have not sufficiently disrupted entrenched inequalities, particularly for BCI students, suggesting that access without structural change does little to advance genuine transformation. This pattern supports broader findings that admissions alone do not ensure equitable participation (Burke 2020; Jansen 2017) and reflect the systemic impact of affordability constraints noted by Maree (2016) and Wanti et al. (2022). The evidence also complements Reynolds and Moyo's (2024) observation that financial aid, transport and housing intersect to constrain access for poor and rural students. Although bursaries exist at EATI, their limited reach highlights that bursary-based interventions are insufficient on their own, thereby challenging earlier assumptions (Badat 2010) that financial assistance can secure transformation.

TABLE 5: Breakdown of first-year black, coloured and Indian student enrolments for the 2016–2022 academic years (EATI Student Information System 2023).

Group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Grand total	%
Non-BCI	124	94	112	107	124	115	121	797	69
BCI	52	46	55	48	43	47	61	352	31
Total	**176**	**140**	**167**	**155**	**167**	**162**	**182**	**1149**	**100**

BCI, black, coloured and Indian students; EATI, Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute.



BCI, black, coloured and Indian.

FIGURE 5: Black, coloured and Indian vs non-Black, coloured and Indian applications, admissions and registrations for the 2016–2022 academic years.

Demographics and background of the respondents

As mentioned, of the 143 complete responses, 91 were from respondents who ended up enrolling at EATI, while 52 were from applicants who ultimately did not enrol. In terms of their demographic profile, female respondents dominated both groups (non-enrolled: 69%; enrolled: 66%). Non-enrolled participants were predominantly black (50%), while enrolled respondents included higher proportions of white (32%) and coloured (27%) students.

TABLE 6: Breakdown of first-year enrolments by gender and race for the 2016–2022 academic years (EATI Student Information System 2023).

Gender and race	Percentage							
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Grand total
Female	**21**	**26**	**34**	**25**	**32**	**23**	**30**	**27**
Black people	5	11	7	7	8	7	9	8
Coloured people	6	5	8	8	4	4	5	6
Indian people	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	0
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	0
White people	10	9	19	10	20	11	15	13
Male	**79**	**74**	**66**	**75**	**68**	**77**	**70**	**73**
Black people	7	6	7	3	5	7	8	6
Coloured people	11	11	11	12	8	10	10	10
Indian people	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	0
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
White people	61	58	49	59	54	60	51	56
Grand total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

For respondents who were admitted to the EATI but opted not to enrol, 29% spoke Afrikaans as a home language, 25% English, 21% Xhosa, 10% Zulu and 15% spoke other languages, which include Ndebele, Southern Sesotho, Northern Sesotho, Tswana, Swati and Tsonga. Among respondents admitted to the EATI who opted to enrol, 42% spoke Afrikaans as a home language, 22% English, 25% Xhosa, 8% Zulu and 3% other languages. This seems to be contrary to EATI's current language policy, in terms of which the default language of instruction is mainly English. This suggests a tension between policy and practice, where Afrikaans remains dominant despite formal commitments to inclusivity.

Family involvement in agriculture differed significantly between those who enrolled at EATI and those who did not. Non-enrolled respondents reported greater family involvement in agriculture (60%) than those who enrolled (39%). In terms of non-enrolled participants' education status, 74% went on to pursue tertiary education elsewhere, and 62% were attending college or university at the time. While EATI was the first choice of 74% of enrolled students, only 25% of non-enrolled students preferred the institute. Collectively, these findings suggest that while family involvement in agriculture may provide exposure and familiarity with the sector, it does not automatically translate into enrolment at EATI. Decisions to enrol appear to be influenced by a combination of institutional preferences, perceived programme suitability and broader educational aspirations. Contrary to assumptions in the agricultural education literature that prior exposure facilitates access (Suttie & Benfica 2016), this study shows that systemic and institutional barriers outweigh background familiarity, suggesting that enrolment decisions are shaped more by structural inequalities than by sectoral ties.

Considerations influencing enrolment decision

The findings from the questionnaire are organised into three themes, namely factors contributing to non-enrolment, factors that support the decision to enrol and suggestions relating to the admissions process at the EATI.

Theme 1: Factors contributing to non-enrolment

The questionnaire explored the reasons why applicants opt not to enrol at the EATI. The primary reasons for not enrolling at EATI included financial constraints, the remote location of the campus, acceptance at another course and falling short of the minimum admission criteria.

Financial constraints remain a significant barrier to enrolment, and many applicants cited a lack of funding and the unaffordability of the course as primary concerns. While bursaries exist, respondents indicated limited awareness of them, reflecting communication gaps and structural exclusion in funding models. The EATI's academic reputation and practical exposure to the agriculture sector positively affected enrolment choices, while perceived exclusionary practices relating to language use and campus culture deterred some students. Data analysis revealed disparities in PDI representation across different programmes, pointing to gaps in current recruitment and retention strategies.

Several respondents who did not ultimately register with EATI cited the cost of courses (33%) and the lack of financial aid (33%) as key factors influencing their decision not to enrol. The recurrence of affordability concerns indicates that financial considerations play a decisive role in students' decision-making, highlighting that economic factors can limit access to EATI regardless of academic eligibility. The limited student accommodation available (29%) was another factor that impeded ultimate enrolment. However, resolving inadequate residential facilities would require a collective effort among many stakeholders.

In response to the open-ended questions, respondents cited inadequate funding options and additional travelling costs, as well as concerns about potential debt and a lack of financial support, as factors that influenced their decision not to enrol. As some respondents explained:

> 'Elsenburg College is quite a far distance from home, and it would incur many additional travelling costs. Hence, I decided to look for a much closer institution.' (Respondent 1731489)

> 'I was [*keen*] to [*enrol*] and complete the course, but I did not have financial aid or assistance, so I was afraid I might not get it and end up in financial debt should I proceed.' (Respondent 1733834)

Financial constraints combined with logistical challenges highlight how socio-economic and geographical factors jointly limit students' ability to pursue higher education.

Preference for a specific academic institution or programme may also influence enrolment. Among the reasons why respondents ultimately did not choose EATI were guaranteed admission at another institution, changing career inclinations and parental pressure. The responses of the 24 (46%) respondents who chose to enrol at an alternative institution offer insight into the reasons for their decision, including the location of the college (n = 8), admission to another preferred programme (n = 11), quicker feedback or stronger financial support from another institution (n = 3) and family pressure to enrol elsewhere (n = 4). This indicated that EATI has yet to establish itself as a first-choice institution, especially among black and rural students. Clearly, the final decision is rarely informed by only one consideration, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

> 'I really wanted to come study in Stellies, but because of the distance and Stellies replying late, my dad opted for the University that responded to us the quickest, as it showed my dad that they valued me as a student.' (Respondent 1733953)

> 'It was never my first choice to study there; it was a backup option.' (Respondent 1731578)

This response highlighted the importance of creating a strong, recognisable brand to give organisations a competitive advantage. As applicants become more selective in choosing an educational institution, having a strong and recognisable

brand is important to appeal to students from diverse backgrounds. The data also underscored the complex interplay of personal, practical and familial considerations that shape students' education decisions. The decision-making process is shaped by the intersection of institutional and societal barriers, including financial, geographic and linguistic factors, along with individual and familial considerations, highlighting the constrained nature of educational choice.

Naturally, minimum admission requirements also determine the likelihood of enrolling. Several respondents indicated they were unable to meet the minimum admission requirements for final admission to EATI, and some went on to enrol at other institutions where they did meet the requirements. This highlights the need to implement programmes to promote access and success, particularly for PDIs, while considering the implications of existing policies and institutional rules and regulations. Such programmes should promote access while maintaining quality standards and improving the likelihood of academic success.

Theme 2: Factors encouraging applicants to enrol

The questionnaire explored reasons that may positively influence the decision to enrol with the EATI. The respondents who ultimately enrolled at EATI believed that the institute provided high-quality qualifications. Specifically, respondents appreciated the practical exposure (90%) to the different fields of study (85%) on offer. The career-oriented and market-driven programmes appear to be the institution's strongest asset in attracting PDIs, but they are undermined by affordability and inclusion challenges. The questionnaire asked respondents who opted to enrol at EATI for suggestions on how to attract applicants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Some respondents deemed the EATI to be 'very diverse', with 'a lot of students from different cultures and backgrounds', with the 'first-year team building' and 'team assignments to deal with diversity' increasing integration (Respondents 1731432 and 1734676). Further recommendations offered by respondents included promoting diversity and inclusion, improving marketing and outreach efforts, providing financial aid and scholarships and recruiting in rural and under-represented communities. These align with national policy imperatives for widening participation but require sustained institutional commitment beyond short-term interventions. Respondents confirmed the importance of creating an inclusive environment that embraces students from different backgrounds. Some suggested mentorship programmes for marginalised students and the inclusion of a culturally diverse curriculum. Such proposals reflect intersectional understandings of transformation, acknowledging that race, gender, language and culture intersect in shaping student experiences. One respondent (1734183) suggested that EATI should create a 'culturally diverse curriculum' and 'offer courses related to social justice, diversity, and inclusion'. These initiatives should be implemented throughout the academic year, as one respondent indicated that while such initiatives are offered at the start of the year, 'soon after that, it seemed like the energy to keep that going died down a lot' (Respondent 1731273). Relating to the marketing of EATI's programme offering, a respondent recommended that EATI should 'show them somehow that it doesn't matter where you come from or how much you know about agriculture; all of us are here to learn'. (Respondent 1731347).

Theme 3: Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute admissions process and support

The questionnaire explored applicants' overall experience of EATI. In higher education, irrespective of whether an applicant ultimately chooses to enrol, the aim is to ensure that all prospective students enjoy a positive experience of the campus setting, the application process and the staff affiliated with the institution. Most respondents found EATI's staff friendly, helpful and knowledgeable (84%). The application process was quick and efficient (70%), and communication was clear. The timeliness of admission decisions was satisfactory (74%), and respondents found the information on the institute's website useful (67%). While positive, these findings also suggest that efficiency in administration is not enough to guarantee equity in outcomes.

Respondents offered recommendations on how EATI could improve its support for applicants during admission. The responses were mainly positive, although there was a call for better communication, quicker response times for admissions, clarification of the institute's relationship with Stellenbosch University and provision for other languages where necessary. Lack of clarity on institutional identity reflects a branding issue that undermines EATI's competitiveness with larger universities.

Additionally, respondents highlighted the importance of language support. Some suggested phone-based guidance in applicants' home languages and the use of plain language in written communication, as reflected in the following quotes:

> '[*The EATI could*] offer personalised guidance to applicants by assigning admissions counsellors or advisors to assist them throughout the application process.' (Respondent 1730744)

> 'Provide a number for personal messaging to help applicants as quickly and efficiently as possible when they are struggling.' (Respondent 1731559)

These proposals underscore how language can act as a determinant in higher education admissions, reinforcing or disrupting exclusionary practices. This finding aligns with Burke (2020) and Le Cordeur (2013), who caution that symbolic language policies often reinforce exclusion, while the proposals for call-assisted support and plain-language communication extend Boughey and McKenna's (2021) call for operationalising multilingualism to disrupt entrenched inequalities.

Stressing the importance of sufficient information, respondents suggested that the webpage should enable applicants to 'preview class schedules, tests and exams, as well as what classes entail' (Respondent 1733552) and should be easier to

navigate (Respondent 1733367). A data-free website may also improve access for all applicants (Respondent 1731480). It should also clarify the relationship between EATI and Stellenbosch University in terms of geographic location, moving away from the assumption that applicants understand the institutional and geographic dynamics.

Overall, the responses highlighted the importance of effective communication towards simplifying admissions and making it an enjoyable process for students. Ineffective communication and the absence of deep institutional reform mean that admissions processes, although efficient, continue to reproduce structural inequalities rather than dismantle them.

Conclusion and recommendations

The case study of EATI revealed that while existing strategies support diverse admissions, significant gaps remain when these strategies are viewed against broader debates on equity and transformation in South African higher education. Existing strategies include outreach to under-represented groups, revised definitions of equity to include PDIs, bursaries for disadvantaged students and an open selection system. These have increased PDI applicants but not yet translated into proportional enrolment, supporting Soudien's (2010, 2025) argument that transformation cannot be confined to demographic representation but must also dismantle systemic inequalities.

Previously disadvantaged individual applicants' decisions are influenced by financial, academic and personal factors. Respondents who enrolled cited EATI's hands-on learning, reputation and quality facilities. Respondents who did not enrol cited financial challenges, inability to meet admissions criteria, lack of accessible accommodation and language barriers as key constraints. These findings affirm the centrality of socio-economic status (Maree 2016; Wanti et al. 2022) and highlight the continuing contestation around language inclusion in South African higher education (Burke 2020; Le Cordeur 2013).

The findings flagged the need for clear and transparent communication in various official languages throughout the admissions process to navigate the application process smoothly. This should include communication with parents and families who influence enrolment decisions. The emphasis on language confirms that multilingualism remains one of the most under-implemented aspects of higher education transformation, echoing critiques by Boughey and McKenna (2021).

Finally, some respondents pointed to a need for greater clarity on the relationship between EATI and Stellenbosch University, as this may influence final registration decisions. This highlights the complexity of institutional positioning within a massified and highly stratified higher education system. In this sense, the EATI case complements Jansen's (2018) critique that institutions often adopt surface-level reforms that signal inclusion symbolically but fall short of systemic transformation.

To address these findings, this study offers the following recommendations:

- Financial support: EATI should enhance awareness of all funding options (i.e. EATI's bursaries, DALRRD funding and NSFAS assistance) and consider loan options and stipends for the diploma students. However, national funding crises and competing priorities may limit the feasibility of fully resourcing such initiatives. This not only echoes Badat's (2010) emphasis on equity financing but also extends the debate by showing the insufficiency of bursaries in isolation.
- Marketing and outreach: EATI should strengthen rural outreach, expand recruitment efforts beyond the Western Cape and build school partnerships to attract students from various backgrounds. Institutional marketing and communication often assume a fixed paradigm of what applicants are expected to know. However, as applicants from increasingly diverse backgrounds apply, their prior knowledge and awareness cannot be taken for granted. If communication practices do not adapt to this shift, prospective students may be left without the information they need to navigate the enrolment process effectively. This gap not only disadvantages applicants but also undermines institutional transformation efforts. To support transformation, communication with prospective students should be responsive, inclusive and avoid relying on outdated assumptions about what applicants know about the EATI.
- On-campus housing and accessibility: EATI should explore partnerships with private providers and negotiate affordable tariffs for students. A shuttle service between Elsenburg and Stellenbosch could improve accessibility by offering students from lower-income households more affordable accommodation options.
- Language support: Materials and tutorials must be provided in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. This recommendation aligns with Burke (2020) on linguistic access and situates multilingualism as a political as well as pedagogical issue.
- Addressing competition from other institutions: To remain competitive, EATI should adopt more proactive engagement strategies with prospective students and their families to address misconceptions and concerns, thereby encouraging enrolment.
- Communication and transparency: The EATI website should be refined to clarify admission criteria and to leverage digital technologies to enhance timely student support.

Collectively, these recommendations contribute to broader debates on equity and transformation by demonstrating how institutional strategies at a specialised agricultural college both enable and constrain participation. They also advance the wider scholarly conversation (Boughey & McKenna 2021; CHE 2022) by showing that equity-focused admissions, while necessary, cannot by themselves achieve transformation without systemic reforms addressing finance, spatial inequalities and language dynamics.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Desiree Chinasamy-Dampies: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Babette Rabie: Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

Student enrolment data analysed in this study were provided by the Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute following formal permission by the relevant authoritative persons. Permission was obtained to survey applicants to the programme. A self-administered, electronic survey rendered completely anonymised data. The raw data are not in the public domain.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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