

# ADMISSIONS FOCUS

A MONDAY MONTHLY SUPPLEMENT

MAY 2014



## PROPOSED ADMISSIONS POLICY AIMED AT DIVERSITY AND REDRESS



UCT is debating its admissions policy for 2016 and beyond – the crux of which concerns whether race is a good proxy for disadvantage, or whether a more nuanced index of disadvantage is required. What is being proposed, and how does that differ from the current model?

### Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price

Transformation – centred on values of redress, diversity, inclusiveness and the recognition of African voices – is an explicit component of UCT's strategic plan (about which you can read more under 'About the university' on the UCT website). This commitment to transformation has specific components that speak to the demography of the student body. Specifically, the university aims to have "the full diversity of South Africa represented at UCT, weighted towards the disadvantaged communities of the Western Cape".

UCT feels this is important – firstly, as a way to redress apartheid injustices; and secondly, because the university feels it is necessary "to create the critical diversity of perspectives that will produce new insights and a healthier education environment, promote inclusiveness within the university, and prepare students for a multicultural world of work".

The admissions policy is one mechanism the university uses to ensure this diversity among the student body, and the current admissions policy has helped ensure greater racial diversity on campus. But the university aspires also to socio-economic diversity: it feels it would be doing better in terms of redress and equal opportunity, if it could recruit the most talented but disadvantaged students.

### How does the current admissions process work?

UCT's current admissions policy is based on the principle that talent is randomly distributed in the population, regardless of race, class, gender or other demographic variables – but that it wishes to acknowledge and redress the great disadvantage at which many people were placed based on their race, as defined by the apartheid government. It uses race as a measure of this disadvantage.

How it works is that the university first sets aspirational targets for each population group in each programme. Targets are adjusted each year based on two considerations: the pool of applicants with the appropriate results in the appropriate subjects for a particular programme, and the university's aspiration to increasingly reflect the demography of the Western Cape and South Africa.

The university then starts to make applicants offers for the limited number of places at UCT, in order to meet these targets, by placing students in separate baskets according to their legacy apartheid population group (black, white, Indian or coloured), ranking them academically within their own group, and selecting the top few percent from each list – depending on the number of places targeted for each group.

### How is the proposed admissions policy different?

Changes to the proposed admissions policy centre on the debate about whether race is still a good proxy for disadvantage in South Africa or not; and as such, whether it's the best available basis for university policies of redress and transformation.

### Circumstances in South Africa and at UCT are changing in four key ways:

1. Increasing numbers of black applicants, often from wealthy families, are coming out of excellent schools with very good National Senior Certificate (NSC) results – and these students can get into UCT in the general open competitive pool.
2. The old apartheid correspondence of race and class has been shifting over the last 20 years. It's no longer accurate to assume that all black students are economically disadvantaged, nor that all economically disadvantaged students are black. UCT aspires not just to racial diversity, but also to greater socio-economic diversity – in the interests of fairness, and equal opportunities – and feels it would be doing better in terms of redress if it could recruit the most talented but disadvantaged students.
3. UCT, in line with the South African Constitution, aspires to a future non-racial society that does not always view the world through racial lenses. Apartheid's racial constructs were used to distribute power, to create divisions in society, to promote ethnic loyalties, and to signal superiority and inferiority. One of the main goals of the post-1994 South Africa is to transform society into one which does not privilege people or deny them opportunities on the basis of race. However, there's general support for the view that the path to that goal requires an interim period of redress, of conscious structuring of opportunities to undo apartheid's legacy of racial inequality. If we can achieve the racial diversity we aspire to for UCT, while moving away from a dependence on using race classification to do so, we believe this would be a positive contribution towards non-racialism.
4. Another concern is the current dependence on applicants self-identifying their 'race'. On principle, some students – including disadvantaged students of colour – do not want to declare their 'race' (even when they should rightly benefit from the redress policy). Other students wilfully misclassify themselves in relation to the old categories. Since there is no legislated way of classifying people, this puts UCT admissions officers in the untenable position of having to decide how such applicants should really be classified.

**How would the proposed admissions policy work?**

The application form would ask specific questions aimed at developing a disadvantage weighting for the applicant: details of the school they attended; their mother's, father's and grandparents' level of education; the applicant's preferred language; and their financial background.

How are answers to these questions markers of disadvantage? The school one goes to or can afford determines the quality of education one receives, and how prepared one is for tertiary study. The level of education an applicant's parents or grandparents achieved is not only a marker of their level of disadvantage under apartheid (where educational opportunities were limited and predetermined for many groups), but also a good indicator of the kind of learning-related support available to a learner in her or his home. If one's home or preferred language is indigenous to South Africa and different to the language in which one is taught at school, the chances are that one will have more difficulty in the classroom. Finally, one's reliance on social grants and other financial support mechanisms is a good indicator of the kind of economic opportunities available to one.

Using answers to these questions, the university will then compute a disadvantage weight, which will be used to increase applicants' entry-level scores. Applicants will then be placed into three separate bands, from which university selections will be made.



**What principles underpin the proposed policy?**

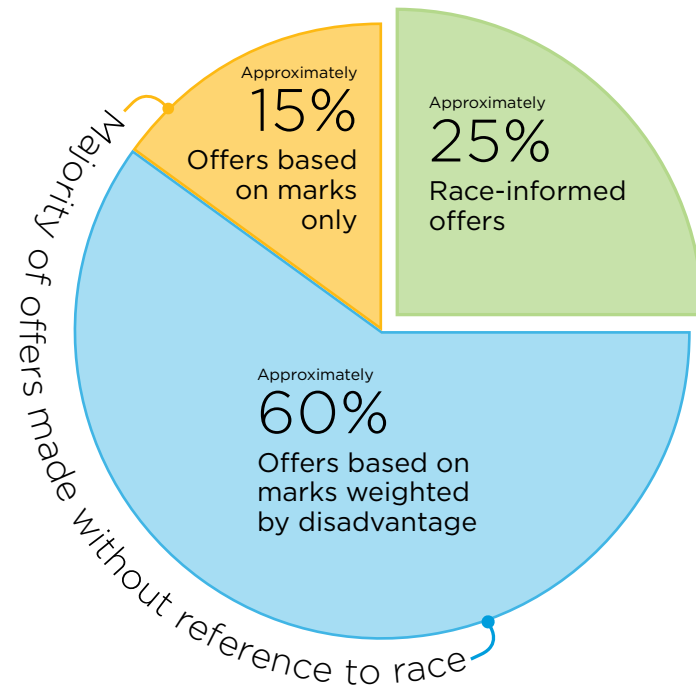
The university has developed the following principles to guide this new policy:

1. The admissions policy should identify applicants with the highest potential, recognising that they may not have achieved the highest marks in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) or National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) due to the quality of the school they attended, other obstacles, or lack of enabling environments.
2. The policy should also enable UCT to attract the highest-performing students nationally, regardless of their race or degree of disadvantage.
3. The goals of redress and diversity in the first-year class should not be relaxed; that is, a change to UCT's admissions system should not reduce the number of black and coloured students compared with the current situation.
4. The first-year class should reflect a wider diversity of social-class background by increasing the proportion of first-generation university students, students from poor schools, and those from poorer households. Such diversity should span all races.
5. Students selected should have a high probability of graduating, given the necessary support and extended programmes where necessary.

Do you have a question that's not answered here? Refer to the UCT website for more frequently asked questions: [www.uct.ac.za/news/admissions\\_debate/current/](http://www.uct.ac.za/news/admissions_debate/current/)

**WHAT NEXT?**

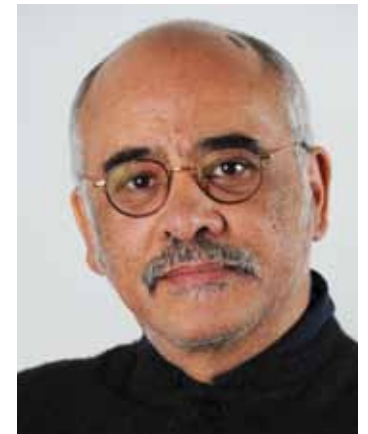
The admissions policy proposal will come before Senate on 30 May 2014 and before Council on 14 June 2014, where it will be decided whether to incorporate this policy proposal for the 2016 group of first-year students. In doing so, Senate and Council will consider the comments and questions that have come from staff and students, as well as from other people with an interest in UCT's admissions policy. Please send your views, comments and questions to [vc@uct.ac.za](mailto:vc@uct.ac.za).



# AN ADMISSIONS POLICY TO EXPAND DIVERSITY

Deputy Vice-Chancellor Prof Crain Soudien

The goal of UCT's admissions policy has been – and remains – to transform the student body into one that is more diverse and representative of the population, while still recruiting the best students available. Progress has been made – but transformation is incomplete. The proposals are a recalibration of the old policy, with the same goals in mind, taking into account the changing realities of 'race' and class in South Africa since 1994. They will achieve greater racial and socio-economic diversity in our student body, while relying less on 'race' classification for their implementation.



**Why we want to move away from reliance on 'race' classification**

Apartheid racial constructs were used to distribute power, to create divisions in society, to signal superiority and inferiority, and to promote ethnic loyalties. One of the main goals of the post-1994 South Africa is to transform society into one which does not privilege people, or deny them opportunities, on the basis of 'race'. This is how we understand our Constitutional commitment to non-racialism.

There is general support for the view that the path to that goal requires an interim period of redress, of conscious structuring of opportunities to undo apartheid's legacy of racial inequality. What is contested – and thrown into sharp relief when considering admissions policies – is the mechanism for applying redress. One school of thought argues that since redress is about countering the effects of discrimination against people classified as African, coloured, or Indian, interventions should simply focus on those who were (or would have been) so classified under apartheid. The other school argues that one must examine both how 'race' discrimination operated under apartheid and the ongoing effects of race-structured inequality, and target affirmative interventions on the basis of those factors directly (for example, to those who have been denied access to good schools or adequate income).

This second school of thought argues that any form of racially based preference firstly requires a system of 'race' classification, which is both legally and morally problematic; and secondly, entrenches a view of the world that links entitlement and access to resources only to one's colour, regardless of one's actual degree of privilege or status in society.

If we can achieve the racial diversity we aspire to at UCT, while moving away from a dependence on using 'race' classification to do so, we believe this would be a positive contribution towards non-racialism. And it seems we can move in this direction, because of the changing alignment of 'race' and class in South Africa over the past two decades.

**A shifting alignment between 'race' and class**

The old apartheid correspondence of 'race' and class has been shifting, and skin colour is not as strong a determinant of a person's economic advantage or position as it was. In brief, though in the past many black applicants presented lower matriculation results because they came overwhelmingly from poor schools and disadvantaged backgrounds, today many come from good schools and can be admitted on a competitive basis, without the need for reference to their 'race'. Others may be less competitive because there is still some educational disadvantage, through their school or home backgrounds; but the playing fields can be levelled by taking these backgrounds into account – again, without reference to their 'race'.

Thus, instead of using just 'race' as the proxy for disadvantage, we propose applying a hybrid model that is still 'race' conscious, where – as explained later – we will continue to acknowledge 'race', but will develop an approach that seeks to tease out the factors that are causing disadvantage more directly. These include the school one attended, parents' education, home language, and whether or not one is reliant on social grants\*. This brings us much closer to how 'race' actually operates in our society.

The proposed policy recognises that redress and social justice are promoted, not through privileging people just because of their skin colour, but because of how legislated 'race' discrimination impacted and still impacts on lives. By taking into account factors such as home background and the impact of not studying in one's first language, for example, we hope to ensure we are drawing the most talented students – both advantaged and disadvantaged – into our student body.

**Why 'race' remains relevant**

We have found it necessary to keep 'race' in the policy for three reasons:

Firstly, the goal of greater demographic representivity remains, and we still have a way to go to achieve it. Consequently, we will continue to set targets using 'race', and monitor outcomes using 'race'.

Secondly, because in many programmes at UCT, competition for places is so great that the marks required to be selected are very high – combined with the fact that the number of very high-performing white applicants is still so much greater than the number of black applicants – even after weighting students' scores for disadvantage, it is still necessary to select them for diversity in itself.

Thirdly, retaining 'race' as a criterion for selecting a portion of the class is a recognition of the fact that 'race' still matters, because racism still exists; there is still racial discrimination, and stereotyping of expectations by 'race' – all of which affect the performance of black students even at advantaged schools, just because they are black. Removing 'race' altogether would suggest that 'race' no longer matters.

Our ideal is that one day, 'race' should not matter. That day is not yet here. Racism continues to manifest itself in many guises. We need to be vigilant to how these take effect in our lives.

The hybrid, race-conscious admissions policy proposed would help the university achieve a substantial move away from a reliance on race-classification to distribute opportunities. Under the proposed policy and for most programmes, about 75% of the class will be selected without 'race' being taken into account. Instead, the obstacles people have overcome to achieve the marks they have – usually as a consequence of apartheid – will be considered.

“Our ideal is that one day, 'race' should not matter. That day is not yet here. Racism continues to manifest itself in many guises. We need to be vigilant to how these take effect in our lives.”

\* For greater detail on the markers of disadvantage, how they will be used to weight applications, and how the university will select students under the proposed admissions policy, refer to page 2.

## OPINION

# WHAT WILL A COMMITMENT TO 'REDRESS' TAKE?

Assoc Prof Suellen Shay Dean of CHED & Dr June Pym Director of EDU Commerce

The proposed admissions policy entitled 'breaking new ground' is indeed a significant milestone in UCT's history.

What is particularly noteworthy is that the 'new ground' is the outcome of years of fierce debate, heated contestation not only at every level of the university – from Senate floor to residence common rooms – but in a range of fora outside the university, including both local and international media.

Whether one agrees with the outcome or not, we should all be heartened that UCT is a place where rigorous debate on crucial matters can still thrive.

The policy among other things reaffirms UCT's commitment to redress – it is necessary however to distinguish a commitment to 'redress' from a commitment to 'diversity'.

A commitment to diversity is an acknowledgement that as a university we want to attract students who are 'diverse' in terms of language, race, culture, nationality, gender, ability, age and general life experience. A commitment to diversity has become a standard feature of mission statements of many universities around the world, not least of all the so-called 'elites'.

With respect to UCT, the policy notes that given the increasing numbers of black students who come from good public and private schools, some programmes at UCT without any affirmative action already reflect desirable levels of demographic representivity.

A major critique of the proposed policy has been whether one of its unintended consequences will be to reduce UCT's diversity since middle class, privileged black students, no longer weighted for disadvantage, will compete side by side with white students. This concern has led to extensive modeling and adjustments

on the initial proposal in order to ensure that UCT does not jeopardise its current diversity profile. Thus the proposed policy reaffirms UCT's commitment to diversity.

This is not the same, however, as a commitment to redress.

A commitment to redress acknowledges the effects of inequality on educational opportunity, as well as the reality that many talented and deserving students will be not admitted to UCT if our selection process only considers marks. It acknowledges that our admissions score as calculated is not a meaningful indicator of these students' potential to succeed academically.

It notes that UCT and the broader society will be the poorer for not admitting and welcoming these students. Thus a commitment to redress is a commitment to fairness and social justice.

The critical question is, given UCT's status as the destination of choice for a growing pool of privileged middle-class black and white applicants, will UCT have the political resolve to maintain its commitment to redress? Why not devolve responsibility for 'redress' to other universities – for example our neighbours in the region – whose applicant pool is less competitive?

UCT's diversity will increasingly be an inevitable outcome of shifting demographics in wider society. In contrast, there is nothing inevitable about a commitment to redress. It requires political will at every level from the central admissions committee to faculty offices to departmental heads and programme conveners. It requires intentionality and resources.



Thus in its commitment to redress, the hybrid model recognizes that yes, race still matters. But it also boldly faces the reality that an admissions policy which continues to use race *only* may in time privilege diversity at the expense of redress.

So what does a commitment to redress mean? The focus of the policy is on additional indicators of disadvantage which can be 'weighted' to affirm students whose admissions scores may be a poor representation of their actual educational potential.

UCT's commitment to redress, largely through the work of the Academic Development Programme, has for decades argued that a commitment to redress cannot stand on 'admissions' alone.

A commitment to redress is a 'package deal' that must include selection, admissions and placement. UCT has a long history of alternative admissions testing since the mid-1980s through the Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP). Indeed this new proposed policy may be an opportune time to revitalise 'testing for potential' at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels to identify the most talented students whose real potential is masked through the standard university selection measures.

At postgraduate level this may include the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in order to attract mature learners who come through diverse pathways with rich life experience. So a commitment to redress requires alternative mechanisms for selection that precede admissions.

The third component of the 'package deal' is placement.

An admissions policy committed to redress will fail in its ultimate objectives unless it is equally committed to placement onto appropriate curricula. To take redress seriously is to address the uneven playing field – but the weighting of an admissions score for disadvantage only gets the student 'on the field', admitted to the game, so to speak.

By definition, students admitted through our redress mechanisms need additional educational, financial and psycho-social support. The leveling of the playing field only happens through placement onto appropriate curriculum and wrap-around support.

Decades of experience on foundation programmes provides ample evidence that the playing field is still not leveled for all students by the end of first year and thus support needs to run the length and breadth of the curriculum.

But there's another dimension to 'leveling the playing field'. It involves harnessing students' agency and the variety of forms of 'capital' they bring with them.

As long as we remain in a deficit model mindset, stereotyping redress, we are unlikely to achieve success. Clearly students need acquisition of a range of skills and attributes, but they also offer the academy possibilities of new ways of understanding and being.

Conceptualised in this way, redress offers a unique opportunity for real transformation to the university's practices and institutional culture.

## OPINION

# REFLECTIONS OF A CONCERNED STUDENT

Insaaf Isaacs Past President SRC (2011/12)

In light of recent developments in the discourse on the University of Cape Town admissions policy, I decided to put finger to keyboard as a concerned black South African student on the brink of graduation from UCT and share why I think the status quo should be maintained.

As South Africans we can, and hopefully do, all agree that no person is innately more intelligent than another person by virtue of the fact that they are of a certain race. However, it is clear that this view does not accurately describe the current situation in South Africa, which continues to be characterised by a racialised past. Given this context, the role of higher education in the development of South Africa is critical and it goes without saying that redress should be one of the key drivers of higher education policy and reform. However, the challenge lies in the measures taken to effect redress in a meaningful manner that is best suited for the kind of South Africa envisaged by the Constitution.

As it relates to higher education, transformation aims to ensure that all peoples who were previously denied access to quality higher education are given a fair opportunity to partake in higher education programmes, so that the human capital and ideological output of institutions can reflect the true diversity of the people of South Africa. Part of the unambiguity on this matter, which must not get lost in translation, is that transformation is some kind of institutionalised discrimination against white people. This is not true. South Africa ideologically belongs to all who live in it.

Many critics of race-based affirmative action are of the belief that UCT's approach to its current

admissions policy is a form of apartheid-style racial discrimination against white people, in favour of black people (in broad terms). Their proposed solution for this supposed 'quagmire' is to urgently move towards non-racialism in higher education, and to adopt race-blind policies for redress.

Contrary to its objectives, the noble initiative of higher education transformation has been mystified by people failing to understand its initiative of demographic inclusivity and diversity. Many misinterpret its multifactor existence by confining it to some kind of confused poverty eradication strategy. This is because incumbent critics of race-based redress argue that socio-economic status is becoming a more reliable proxy for redress since the emergence of the black middle class. This is premised on the convenient assumption that the black middle class has already managed to buy its way out of educational disadvantage, and the use of a race proxy in university admissions is becoming less accurate, and needs to be supplemented with socio-economic status, a proxy which currently reflects a negligible correlation with educational disadvantage.

International research on affirmative action has provided concrete reasons for continuing to rely on racial categorisation, which the sitting UCT Vice-Chancellor Dr Price has explained in many articles and discussions in the media on

the university's current admissions policy. Even when challenged on the Constitutionality of the current admissions policy, the university obtained the independent opinion of the Senior Counsel, and Senior Counsel confirmed that the status quo is indeed consistent with the South African Constitution and is not prejudicial.

The ideological interest of deracialising society must never come at the expense of effectively addressing the legacy of racial inequality of apartheid. Hence, I am of the view that the danger is not within a race-conscious society; what is wrong and dangerous is a race prejudicial and oppressive society that breeds discrimination.

In order to create a truly non-racial higher education system and society, the racial inequalities have to be eliminated to a point of non-existence. What race-based redress does is to provide a more inclusive higher education system, whereby the races which were previously denied access to higher education are also given fair opportunities to participate in the educational programmes of higher education. The desired result is to get to a point where the higher education system is reflective of the demographics of our country.

While I appreciate the efforts of UCT in its attempt to make a lasting contribution in understanding why schools fail and how they could begin to address the problems



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they face, with the hope of using such information to inform the development of a more accurate proxy to measure disadvantage, it remains erroneous to insist on non-racialism without having dealt effectively with the question of racial inequalities which are still poignantly reflected by the university's student and staff demographic profile. Analogically, a policy like the current UCT admissions policy is redress. It seeks to close the gap between the historically advantaged and disadvantaged and I stand in firm support thereof.

## Transforming admissions

Increasing access and indentifying potential

1980s	1990s
<p><b>1986</b> The University Academic Planning Committee asks Senate to consider the introduction of a test of potential as a complementary assessment to the school-leaving examination. Such a test would be developed to assist with the identification of talented school-leavers from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds whose school results might not demonstrate their ability to cope with Higher Education study, but who nonetheless exhibit the potential to succeed at university. This mandate is directly aligned with UCT policy focused on redress, in the context of the then-racially fragmented South African Higher Education system. The Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP) is established.</p>	<p><b>EARLY 1990s</b> By the nineties, there is a shift of focus for AARP. A constant increase in the number of writers and national writing centres creates the need for a Project Administrator. Furthermore, an increase in the quantities of data yielded leads to the development of a central data server and the post of Database Administrator.</p> <p><b>1992</b> In 1992, the Project formally becomes part of the organisational structure of the Academic Development Programme (ADP), although it retains its autonomy in terms of funding and policy direction.</p> <p><b>MID-1990s</b> A significant aspect of the mid-nineties is the design and development of a Mathematics Comprehension Test (assessing potential for</p>
<p><b>1987</b> A pilot study is carried out in order to assess the criteria being developed for selection, as well as the feasibility of pre-matriculation selection itself. At this stage, the Language Test is the only instrument used.</p> <p><b>LATE 1980s</b> In the early years, the focus of the testing initiative was solely on assessing students for alternative access. The 1980s witness growing political turbulence in South Africa; this has a significant impact on the amount of time it takes to organise and secure community acceptance of the AARP. Meetings with the joint SRCs of township schools take place under conditions of both secrecy and uncertainty. The establishment of a national testing initiative under such conditions therefore represents a considerable achievement.</p>	<p>mathematical thinking at the level required to major in mathematics) as well as a Mathematics Achievement Test (designed to assess gaps in mathematical knowledge of students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds). Also the Language Test is redeveloped as the Placement Test in English for Educational Purposes (PTEEP). At this time, AARP begins testing nationally for UCT admissions, and acquires its first external 'client' in Rhodes University.</p> <p><b>POST-1994</b> AARP recommendations are officially included in the early-offer system and the AARP resulting procedure is formally integrated into the central database of applicant information.</p>
	<p><b>1997/98</b> The Project is approached by a number of external institutions interested in using the tests and procedures. By 1998, five other South African universities have used the tests for various purposes.</p> <p><b>LATE 1990s</b> Information yielded by the AARP tests is used more frequently in a diagnostic manner. Cluster analyses are carried out, and in-depth throughput and diagnostic reports are generated for UCT faculties and external clients. The end of the nineties also heralds an ambitious phase of statistical reporting on AARP throughput data – culminating in the highly successful validation of AARP in a survival analysis report produced by the UCT Statistics Department, and independently replicated by externally contracted research.</p>

2000s
<p><b>EARLY 2000s</b> The AARP operation grows from strength to strength in the new millennium, and a number of full-time posts are created to cope with the growing workload.</p> <p><b>2002</b> Following the growing interest in and success of the work of AARP nationally, the then-South African Universities Vice-Chancellors' Association begins to consider the possible assessment of all Higher Education applicants' potential to cope with the language and mathematical demands of tertiary study.</p> <p>Seven South African medical schools meet to discuss the possible introduction of a common entrance examination for all applicants to medical schools in the country, and</p>
<p>the existing suite of three AARP tests is adopted for this purpose. AARP's work assumes national importance across a wide range of disciplinary study.</p> <p><b>2003</b> Piloting and use of a fourth AARP test – the Scientific Reasoning Test – commences. This test is initially used only for applicants to medical schools, but is soon broadened to include the assessment of all allied health professions at the seven participating universities.</p> <p><b>2005</b> The now mainstream use of AARP and Health Sciences Placement tests draws attention to debates in the Higher Education (HE) sector about tests of potential and tests of ability to cope with core academic</p>
<p>demands. It is clear that the AARP tests have proved useful in terms of identifying academic talent, but it is also clear that the HE sector needs to identify the academic readiness and preparedness for learning of all entry-level HE students. Consideration is now given to the use of standardised assessments that also offer recommendations about the placement of students in particular curriculum streams.</p> <p><b>2006</b> The National Benchmark Tests in Academic Literacy, Quantitative Literacy and Mathematics are developed as criterion-referenced assessments in selected-response (MCQ) formats, and the National Benchmark Tests Project is launched as a pilot project with an initial five-year timeline.</p>
<p><b>2007 – 2013</b> By now the work of the AARP includes involvement in four major national testing projects: the National Benchmark Tests Project (NBTP); AARP testing; the Health Sciences Consortium (HSC) testing; and the Standard Assessment Tests for Access and Placement (SATAP) Project – testing of applicants and registered students in the historically disadvantaged institutions of the country.</p> <p><b>2014</b> From 1 January 2014, AARP becomes a department within the Centre of Higher Education Development, with a new name: the Centre for Educational Testing for Access and Placement (CETAP).</p>



## OPINION

# ANTICIPATING THE REVIEWED ADMISSIONS POLICY

Nommangaliso Gondwe SRC President & Sandile Tshabalala National Executive Committee, Students for Law and Social Justice

Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price recently extended an invitation to students of the University of Cape Town to three consultation meetings where he presented the proposal for, and sought their input on, the admissions policy for 2016.

The admissions policy is subject to much debate by staff and students and remains a critical issue for the university; these consultations with the Vice-Chancellor offered students an opportunity to engage in the process of shaping university policy on student admissions.

The admissions policy is designed to be active in redressing past inequalities and be rigorous in promoting access by ensuring that the university builds a diverse student body, reflecting the demographics of our country as envisaged in our Constitution.

The current admissions policy provides for race as a proxy. In other words, black, Indian and coloured students, as previously disadvantaged racial groups, are given preference in admission to the university, with lower aggregates as compared to white students. This current policy has achieved its objective of ensuring a racially diverse campus that would have otherwise not existed without the admissions policy.

However, it appears that the current admissions policy has brought in a large number of middle-class black students, sometimes at the expense of disadvantaged black students. The current admissions policy, solely based on race with little attention to the background of students, has appeared to favour more students from well-resourced schools and with top academic marks.

The proposed admissions policy seeks to move away from race as the proxy for disadvantage, and move towards the identification of other indicators of disadvantage. In this case, the proposed admissions policy gives priority to students from poor backgrounds, under-resourced schools but with the academic potential to graduate. In accurately identifying disadvantaged students, the proposed admissions policy takes into account a greater range of socio-economic factors such as family income, education and the location of the schools in which students matriculate.

It is progressive for the university to respond to the reality of inequality and poverty that exists in our society by aspiring to redress disadvantaged students with academic potential, helping them become UCT graduates. It is clear that this proposed admissions policy will effectively no longer favour black middle-class students; rather, it will lean more towards drawing the poorest students in our society into the university.

Indeed, the university is not isolated from the socio-economic realities of South Africans; the proposed admissions policy indicates the university's desire to create a diverse student community in which difference is valued. The admissions policy, as a transformative mechanism, ideally has to redress the previously disadvantaged. Of course, black, Indian and coloured people fit into the category of previously disadvantaged. Twenty years into our transition from apartheid, redress policies based on factors other than race can be justified. However, there are still valid arguments in favour of using just race.

It is imperative that the university puts in place support structures that will assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping them succeed academically and socially. It must be the university's priority to ensure a smooth transition for disadvantaged students, so that they can fit into UCT's diverse community. In the current admissions policy, it is somehow difficult to say it is successful because a large number of black students have, over the past years, dropped out, been academically and financially excluded or extended their degrees. It is also safe to mention that the throughput rate does not adequately reflect the entrance rate of students into the university.

It is equally important to note that many senior academic staff and professors are reaching retirement in the next few years and it is crucial for the university to ensure succession of academics. The lack of black academics in the university begs the question: how will the proposed admissions policy address that? Newly admitted students should be attracted to academia as a career worth pursuing. Conversely, students from disadvantaged backgrounds would struggle to pursue such a career because of the urgency to uplift their families back home and gain income that will sustain them. Nonetheless, it cannot be taken for granted that students will always strive to succeed in what they are passionate about.

It is a golden opportunity for disadvantaged students to be finally given the opportunity to access the university, yet it remains an obligation for the university to create an environment that will ensure that these students are comfortable and can flourish. The proposed admissions policy is ambitious but a lot more critical engagement needs to take place prior to its implementation, should it be approved.



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## OPINION

# BEYOND A “WHITE” UNIVERSITY

Prof Pierre de Vos Deputy Dean of Law and Claude Leon Foundation Chair in Constitutional Governance

Normative assumptions about “white” superiority are so deeply embedded in modern South African society that they can easily appear to be normal and natural when, in fact, they are nothing more than a manifestation of structural racism.

If you care to look with a critical eye, you quickly spot the myriad of ways in which popular culture, workplace rules and practices, academic discourses, social norms and standards, rules that validate certain types of knowledge and discount other types of (often indigenous) knowledge, and commercial advertising send out (sometimes explicit and at other times concealed) messages that normalise and even celebrate the superiority of “white” Western ways of being in the world.

Because of this structural racism, UCT remains a “white” university – even as the racial profile of its student body – if not its academics – has changed drastically over the past 20 years.

Because the university remains part of the broader society, because the forms of knowledge it (by and large) engages with and promotes remain embedded in the ideology and practices of “white” superiority, it is not possible to escape the shackles of race within the university community.

If you happen to be a “white” academic or student at UCT, it may be more difficult for you to become aware of how your view of the world and of yourself is held up as the norm and as superior to other ways of being in the world. You may not realise that the forms of knowledge that are (mostly) valued at UCT are embedded in structural racism.

You might find it difficult to accept that this helps to validate you and prepares you for success in the world.

This is so because when you experience the world as an insider, as someone whose race or culture is not systematically denigrated and held up as inferior, you may not realise that you are lucky (one should say privileged) enough to have your general disposition and belief system (if not always all individual traits and actions) held up as normative, as ideal, as “just the way the world is” or “ought to be”.

You might not realise that this position of privilege grooms you for success, signals to you that success is nothing less than your due. It creates a world in which others assume that you are competent, hard-working, honest, intelligent, socially well adjusted and appropriately ambitious.

This bestows enormous privilege on all “white” people – regardless of their class, educational background or personal characteristics and attributes.

This is not to say that your class, gender, sexual orientation, language, educational background and whether you grew up in a rural or urban area do not also play a role in determining your success in life. A subtle and effective admissions policy will thus also have to take these factors into account.

However, it is my contention that these factors cannot be used to address the full effect of structural racism.

In the past, formal laws and informal rules discriminated against people based on race, gender, class and sexual orientation. There is always a danger that this will happen again in future. We should be vigilant to prevent this from occurring.

Yet, hardly anybody argues that gender or class should never be invoked to address the effects of past and ongoing injustice. This is so because it is widely understood that there is nothing wrong with invoking these categories for a salutary purpose.

However, many criticise admissions policies that rely on race to achieve the same salutary purpose – that of addressing the effects of past and ongoing exclusion and prejudice. This opposition is the way in which structural racism is maintained and policed.

Relying on race as one of the criteria for admitting students to UCT has both symbolic and material effects.

Symbolically, it signals a recognition of the injustices of past and the forms of ongoing formal and informal racial discrimination. It indicates to potential “black” applicants to UCT that the institution recognises the destructive effects of racism and wishes to address these effects. It says that for UCT the lived experience of “black” students *counts*, that the

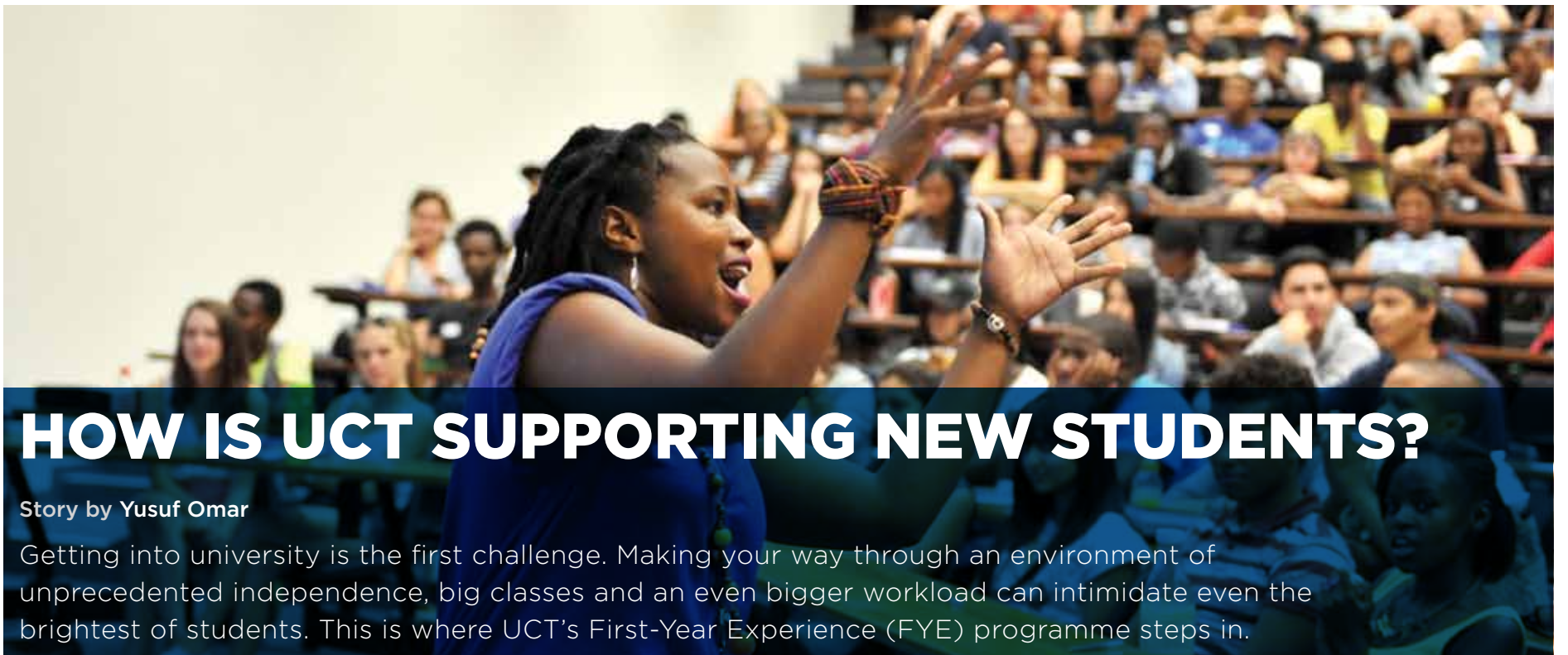


institution is prepared to recognise their experience of structural racism, which has not disappeared with the advent of democracy.

An admissions policy that takes race into account indicates that UCT does not wish to deny the past and its effects, nor the university's own failure to resist the race-based admissions policies foisted on it by the apartheid state.

Materially, an admissions policy that takes race into account – along with other relevant factors – ensures that talented “black” students who may not be “disadvantaged” in any other way are not excluded from the university because of the lingering effects of structural racism. It thus helps to counter the effects of the disadvantage that is experienced by all “black” applicants because of the insidious workings of structural racism.

“Because of structural racism, UCT remains a ‘white’ university – even as the racial profile of its student body – if not its academics – has changed drastically over the past 20 years.”



## HOW IS UCT SUPPORTING NEW STUDENTS?

Story by Yusuf Omar

Getting into university is the first challenge. Making your way through an environment of unprecedented independence, big classes and an even bigger workload can intimidate even the brightest of students. This is where UCT's First-Year Experience (FYE) programme steps in.

Launched in 2013, UCT's First-Year Experience (FYE) aims to put new students on a firm footing, in the knowledge that a good grounding during their first year of study can prevent them sliding down a slippery slope when the going gets even tougher later on.

"Once we let students into UCT and they start studying, we have to ensure that they have the smoothest transition possible from school, and at the same time that they've got the best support that they can get," says Pierre le Roux, interim director of FYE. "We look at students when they arrive, and we ask how we can make their lives better and make them succeed."

"Whatever the [admissions] policy is, we need to be aware of what kind of student we're going to get at UCT," says Le Roux. "You get a wide diversity of students. Each of these comes to the same place and needs to be catered for."

The university has a number of measures in place to ease students' transition to a successful tertiary career.

This includes an early warning system, which helps assess whether students need to be placed on extended degree programmes, based on the results of their first round of class tests of the year, says Le Roux. This streaming of students is done in conjunction with the Centre for Higher Educational Development (CHED), whose staff drive these academic development programmes.

Another key project is orientation, which in essence aims to "make it easier for the student who arrives here".

FYE works with orientation co-ordinators to ensure a network of support that catches students who might otherwise slip through the net.

"Probably one of our biggest motivations and things we strive for is where students can find help," says Le Roux. "It can be on any level – academic, medical, residence-related, with your faculty. You can never tell exactly what's going to come up."

First-year students in a number of faculties are assigned academic mentors, who are senior students who help freshers to get used to the rigours and responsibilities of academic life.

"We're pushing quite hard for this," says Le Roux. "It's not [mandatory] in every faculty yet, but we want every first-year student to have a mentor by 2015."

"The mentors report back to academic staff on how things are going, so we've got a good grapevine in the faculties through that network. This is a valuable resource."

FYE oversees the training and assigning of mentors.

Le Roux and his colleagues also work closely with the Careers Service, the CHED-co-ordinated tutoring programme, the residence committees

and Student Wellness Services – all crucial aspects of the university experience, he says.

"The earlier we can get them to be advised by Careers Services, the more beneficial to them," says Le Roux.

"One of our key initiatives is our Vula site," he adds. "We have an FYE Vula site that all first-years are on. Each faculty has its own site. They're pretty generic, although there are some small differences for each faculty."

Vula is an online portal where UCT students and staff can access and store information about all matters UCT, and can communicate with people involved in the same projects.

The Vula site makes it quite clear where to get help, says Le Roux. Students can use the chat room facility to ask questions, for example, or the email function if they wish to ask for help in private.

This leads to another of FYE's focus areas: computer and digital literacy. The process begins in orientation, says Le Roux, and support is available throughout students' time at UCT.

Heading a big programme like FYE can be tough, but it's most certainly rewarding: "From interviews and the feedback we've had from them, you can see you are making a difference," adds Le Roux.

"Once we let students into UCT and they start studying, we have to ensure that they have the smoothest transition possible from school, and at the same time that they've got the best support that they can get. We look at students when they arrive, and we ask how we can make their lives better and make them succeed."

Pierre le Roux

## FINANCIAL AID UNDERPINS REDRESS AND DIVERSITY

Story by Helen Swingler

Imminent changes to the government's student loan and bursary scheme, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), may affect the formula UCT uses to determine financial support for students from poor and working-class families, but will not derail its transformation process, aimed at redress and diversity.

Redress and diversity, at the heart of UCT's revised admissions policy, are underpinned by a broad-based financial assistance programme to ensure the best students are able to enrol at the institution, said financial aid manager Tasneem Salasa.

The government has piloted a new, centralised aid application system for 2014 at 12 institutions: seven universities, which include UCT, and five FET colleges.

"Any changes in NSFAS funding will affect UCT, as we work in a partnership, with UCT providing the balance of costs for financially needy students," said Salasa.

However, UCT remains committed to providing the best financial assistance programmes possible, to

ensure access for the most needy. "We will continue to invest in the future of young South Africans; and with the continuous and generous support of our sponsors and donors, we hope to continue to ensure the best levels of financial access to deserving students."

The centralised application pilot project is part of government's revision of its student financial aid policy, driven by demand. The NSFAS budget for 2014 will help more than 430 000 students at all 25 public universities and 50 public FET colleges.

A statement in January by Minister for Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, said NSFAS had assisted over 1.4 million students since its inception in 1991.

But demand has outstripped resources.

While the NSFAS budget has almost tripled from R3.1 billion in 2009 to over R9 billion in 2014, there is still a shortfall of R2.6 billion. Some R1 billion has been provided from the National Skills Fund, with help from the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

### Partnerships and developments

UCT's aid package for students eligible to receive financial help is based on a partnership between the students, their parents or guardians, NSFAS, and the university.

All partners contribute towards the cost of study, and assistance is usually in the form of a bursary and loan.

In December 2012, UCT's financial policy was revised to increase funding and so enable more students from lower-to-middle income families to study at the institution.

These changes targeted the so-called 'missing middle': students who do not meet National Means Test eligibility criteria for assistance, but who nonetheless need financial help.

Thanks to NSFAS funding and the support of UCT's benefactors and donors, the university has since been able to run two financial aid programmes: a financial aid package, and 'gap' funding\*.

The latter is provided in the form of a course fee bursary and an NSFAS/UCT loan offer.

The development reflects UCT's drive to continuously improve its support for deserving and talented students, said Salasa.

To provide a picture of the two streams of financial assistance: in 2011, 2 786 students received financial help from UCT, and an additional 353 recipients received gap funding. In 2012 this total rose to 3 736 students, of whom 613 received gap funding. In 2013, 3 415 students were assisted, of whom 652 students received gap funding.

\* Funding for those in the income gap between family incomes that fall within the State's income levels for NSFAS funding, and the level at which UCT believes family income – with loan support – can sustain the costs of university study.