

# Sunday Times

## Counting the colours

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### **The University of Cape Town's race-based policy of admission remains a bone of contention, writes Prega Govender**

Africa's top higher education institution, the University of Cape Town, lies nestled on the slopes of Table Mountain.

Founded in 1829 as a high school for boys, it started becoming a fully fledged university between 1880 and 1900.

Over the past century, it has produced distinguished alumni such as the late Professor Christiaan Barnard, a world-renowned heart surgeon, as well as three Nobel laureates, Sir Aaron Klug, the late Professor Alan Cormack and novelist J M Coetzee.

This year its enrolment of international students stands at 3572, including 356 who are studying medicine - the fact that about 65% of the university's student population are from outside the Western Cape bears testimony to its fame and reputation as a leading tertiary institution in the country.

But what has sullied its record somewhat is its insistence on applying a controversial race-based admissions policy.

At the heart of the problem is the university management's widely held belief that "race is a proxy for disadvantage".

New students are still required, when applying for admission, to classify themselves according to race.

Although the students' representative council has endorsed this policy until a "suitable alternative" is found, for many, including academics who are split down the middle, it's a bitter pill to swallow.

Over the years vigorous debates have been held on campus, including one this week, as the university continues to grapple with the problem.

A professor who attended this week's debate went so far as to question whether the university's primary values were academic or political.

In its 2011 prospectus, the university says that it uses race "as a measure for giving effect to the requirement for redress for previously disadvantaged South African applicants".

It adds: "We recognise the danger of perpetuating race as a criterion for admissions decisions, and we know we must move away from this in time."

But students, including those studying medicine, are not convinced. First-year medical student Simone Rayner likes to believe she was admitted to the faculty solely on merit after bagging seven As in matric. "But there's the hidden question: did you get accepted over me because of your colour," she said.

To stand a realistic chance to study for the bachelor of medicine and surgery degrees, white pupils must get at least 90% in five matric subjects, 80% in the sixth and 80% in the national benchmark test that measures students' proficiency in academic literacy and maths.

Indian pupils need at least 90% in four subjects, 80% in two subjects and 80% in the benchmark test. Coloured pupils need 80% in four subjects, 70% in two and at least 53% in the benchmark test to be considered for "probable admission".

African pupils who get 70%-79% in six subjects and at least 50% in the benchmark test stand a good chance of securing a place.

Rayner said non-white students who studied at posh private schools benefited hugely from the university's race-based admissions policy.

Vera Longwe, 20, a bachelor of arts student, said: "Just because we're black doesn't mean we're disadvantaged. I find the policy very patronising."

The university's vice-chancellor, Dr Max Price, conceded that its admission policy was controversial because the beneficiaries "often felt patronised".

"They feel like they are being made to be victims when they are not. So they will say, 'I can get in on my own; I don't need an affirmative action policy to get in.' When they're in, they would say, 'I don't like the affirmative action policy because most white students look at me and assume I am only here because of an affirmative action policy.'"

Despite this, Price passionately defended the policy.

"It's not intended to do anyone in. It's not a sort of blind reverse racism that, because whites were on top before and blacks were below, now whites are going to be below and blacks on top."

He said it was aimed at giving people the opportunity they deserve. "It is recognising that they, through no fault of their own, were born into circumstances that didn't allow them to perform in school, compared to others who have performed in school and that the only way we can redress that is by an affirmative action programme."

Price's response on what would happen if a student refused to classify himself or herself had the audience in stitches.

"They basically get treated as white. If anyone doesn't classify themselves, they are classified as white."

But critics of the policy, including the university's director of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, Professor Neville Alexander, and philosophy professor, David Benatar, are adamant that it should have been scrapped a long time ago.

Said Alexander: "Using race, even as a so-called proxy for disadvantage, basically perpetuates racial identity. It entrenches the basis for racial prejudice and race thinking which has very definite social consequences ... You must rather make the intellectual effort to find a viable alternative and my argument is that there are viable alternatives."

Benatar believed racial categorisation was "problematic" and "intellectually unsound" because it had all the "absurdities of the apartheid-era race classification system."

He strongly believed that race should not be used as a proxy for disadvantage.

"People who are classified as black, who are not disadvantaged, get the advantages that should really go to people who are disadvantaged."

"My sense is that from debates in the past, there are people who share my views and many others who don't. Those defending it say there is a legacy of injustice that needs to be rectified and that it can't be rectified without race-based preferences."

Among those who maintain that it is necessary, for now, is the university's students' representative council president, Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh. But according to Mpofu-Walsh, the student body was still very divided on the issue. "We did an electronic poll and found it was split half-half, slightly more in favour of race still remaining the proxy; but it's a contentious debate among students."

Of the 19978 South African students enrolled at the university this year, 9065 are white, 5250 black, 3529 coloured, 1649 Indian and 38 Chinese.

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, chairman of the university council, said the solution lay in addressing education at schools from grade R to 12. He believed that the university's admissions policy was a "temporary thing", adding: "We are trying to find a solution in very difficult circumstances."

Price said the university has spent two years conducting research into other criteria that could measure disadvantage.

"That research hasn't revealed anything useful so far. I can't imagine that within the next three, four or five years, we would have been able to get rid of the race criteria," he said.

But critics of the policy, like Alexander and Benatar, are hoping that it is given the boot very soon.