

Sunday Times

UCT urged to scrap race criteria

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Dr Neville Alexander, a director of a research unit at the university, says vice-chancellor Dr Max Price's race-based admissions policy is "silly" and "quite ridiculous". Deans of medical faculties at other universities said this week the policy was discriminatory.

To stand a realistic chance to study for the MBChB degree at Cape Town, white pupils must get at least 90% in five matric subjects, 80% in the sixth and 80% in a 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, on the other hand, who get 70%-79% in six subjects and at least 50% in the benchmark test stand a good chance of securing a place.

In its 2011 prospectus, UCT says it recognises the danger of perpetuating the use of race as an admission criterion, but it invites applicants to identify themselves as black African, Indian, coloured, Chinese or white.

Most other medical faculties use race quotas, but none stipulates openly that pupils of one race must score higher matric marks than those of another.

Whites wanting to study medicine in South Africa appear to be the most prejudiced. They are not eligible for Stellenbosch University's extended seven-year degree programme. The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine allocated four places out of 210 to whites for 2011.

The Sunday Times established that seven universities offering medicine can accept only 1350 students next year. Cape Town will offer 200 places (80 white and Indian, 80 African and 40 coloured); Stellenbosch 220; Free State 120; Pretoria 220 (121 allocated to African pupils); Limpopo 200; KwaZulu-Natal 210 (145 African, 40 Indian, 19 coloured, four white and two others); and Witwatersrand 180. Walter Sisulu University failed to provide figures for its medical faculty.

Cape Town's first-year pass rate last year was the lowest of the universities supplying figures - only 157 of the 199 students who wrote the exam passed.

Price insisted race was a "valid" criterion, saying: "Using a race-based policy is second-best and it is a proxy for disadvantage most of the time. Our experience shows that a black student coming from a township school who manages to get 65% or 70% in matric has overcome incredible odds.

"We know that if they had been in a good school, they would have got 90% therefore we don't want to penalise them because of the accident of the circumstances they were born into."

Price said whites and Indians would fill 150 of the 200 places if race was not used in selection. "We get (criticism) mostly from white students who were in the same school as black students where the black student gets in with lower marks and the white student doesn't. That's very hard for people to accept and to understand, but the reason is that the competition for white places is much greater," said Price.

Alexander said the admission points score should be the same for all pupils. "I don't believe in this nonsense of race. It's silly . absolutely unnecessary, nonsense basically. We need to find a better alternative .

"I think government should make it very clear to those students who don't get in, both white and black students, that the reason is affirmative action, but that the affirmative action is based on a very reasonable certainty that the students chosen will, in fact, succeed," said Alexander, who is director of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa.

Commenting on Cape Town's admission criteria, Professor Willem Sturm, dean of the Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, said: "By setting it higher, you are actually discriminating. I would never put that into our policy."

His university earmarked 145 places for African students, but on average they filled only 110 places.

"We have to find enough African students, but for years we haven't been able to do that. So the places we can't fill with African students, we fill with white and Indian students," he said.