



## Racial quotas at UCT

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12 May 2011

James Myburgh on how the university betrayed itself

Over the past few months the American media has taken something of an interest in the race-based admissions policy of the University of Cape Town. In late November the *New York Times* [ran an article](#) on the topic, and in the past week National Public Radio has run a similar report.

UCT requires that applicants classify themselves according to the old apartheid designations of white, coloured, Indian and black. Differing admissions criteria are then applied depending on which of these racial categories the applicant belongs to.

For instance, for entry into the MBChB programme a "Black" applicant needs to score 36 points on their matric results and 15 (out of 30) points on the National Benchmarking Test; a "Coloured" applicant 40 and 16 points; an "Indian" or "Chinese" applicant 46 and 24 points; and a "White" applicant 47 and 24 points.

The ultimate goal of the policy is to ensure that composition of the university ultimately comes to reflect the racial proportions of society as a whole. As the University states: "As a matter of policy we aim for a student body which has a significant number of international students and where the local component of our student body increasingly reflects the demographics of the South African population."

Perhaps not surprisingly both the NYT and NPR view the debates, within the university, around this policy through race conscious American lenses. The *Times* states that UCT is "engaged in a searching debate about just how far affirmative action should go to heal the wounds of an oppressive history." The NPR report meanwhile begins by stating: "Universities in South Africa are wrestling with an issue familiar to many Americans: affirmative action."

By framing their articles in this way - as an issue of "redress" for past wrongs - both reports morally prejudge the debate and, in many ways, miss the point. It is useful, from a historical point of view, to contrast UCT's current policy with the principles articulated in the early 1980s when the National Party government moved to begin desegregating the English universities.\*

Up until 1983 a person who was not white had had to apply, individually, for a ministerial permit if they wished to study at a 'white' university. Clause 9 of the Universities Amendment Bill, introduced that year, provided for the permit system to be replaced by a quota system. The number of black students allowed in each 'white' university would be stipulated annually by the appropriate Minister of State.

Although representing something of a practical improvement on the existing system UCT, Rhodes, Wits and Natal all objected to this "quota clause" on principle. The Vice Chancellor of Wits, Daniel du Plessis, stated "The fundamental issue is that the Witwatersrand University holds that race, colour, religion and gender are not

academic criteria, and that no non-academic criteria should intrude into the selection process of an academic institution. This is basic to our philosophy and policy."

UCT meanwhile took out advertisements in the Cape Town newspapers objecting to the government's transfer to the university of this "obligation of denying admission to black students who qualify on academic grounds" and involving the university in the enforcement of "objectionable discriminatory laws."

The Vice Chancellor of UCT, Stuart Saunders, stated that the reason the four universities "find the Bill totally unacceptable" reflects the fact "that these universities have, for more than a quarter-century, actively rejected racial criteria for admission to university." He also claimed that the legislation was "imposing upon the university itself the distasteful and objectionable task of rejecting students on racial grounds because of a quota imposed upon it"; and argued that, "race classification is an objectionable and irrelevant consideration whether it be applied through permits or quotas."

In parliament, in June 1983, the Progressive Federal Party MP, Alex Boraine, also spoke passionately against the Bill. He stated:

"The quota system is a system which restricts admission on the grounds of race. It is based, therefore, on race classification on the Population Registration Act. When one applies for a permit or when one applies under the quota system one produces one's birth certificate. That is the kiss of death, as it were, for a young Coloured, Indian or Black student, because the moment he applies he is not asked for his matriculation certificate—they do not ask him how well he did at school or what his symbols were, but he is asked what his colour is. That is the quota system. It is racially enshrined."

He then asked rhetorically, "What are we to make of this quota system? Where does it come from? What is its inspiration?" His answer:

"In the 19th Century this was imposed in order to limit the admissions of Jews to institutions of higher learning and was applied in the 19th Century by Tsarist Russia and extended in the 20th Century particularly to countries in Eastern Europe but also to others. It is perhaps not without coincidence that during the rule of Stalin [in the Soviet Union], such a system was also applied. This hon. Minister has learned well from what has taken place in Tsarist Russia and in the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most infamous of all took place in Nazi Germany."

Boraine proceeded to cite the Law against the Overcrowding of German Schools and Higher Institutions adopted by the national socialist government in Germany in April 1933. This had decreed that, "In the admission of new students attention is to be paid to the number of German students who are not of Aryan descent ... may not exceed in each school and faculty the proportion of non-Aryans to the entire German population [1.5%]. That proportion will be uniformly determined for the entire nation."

He commented: "Whenever they admitted a student after the rise of Hitler and the Nazis they had to produce a birth certificate in order to determine whether they had any Jewish blood. This was a racial decree and I want to say to hon. members on the other side that this quota system is nothing more and nothing less than an approximation of the Hitler decree."

When an MP objected that this was untrue, Boraine responded:

"It is the truth. Tell me why it is not the truth? Exactly the same approach is being followed here. What I am in effect saying, is that members on that side have sat at the feet of the Soviet Union and of the Nazis and have learned, and now they are introducing a quota system where Blacks are denied entrance into our universities, not on the basis of academic merit, but purely and solely on the basis of race."

Although the legislation was passed by parliament, allowing direct black entry into the formerly 'white' universities, the quota provision was never actually enforced. As Saunders stated in 1986 "I think the Government came to realise how repulsive a quota system based on race is for any university and has wisely decided not to apply it. They would be even wiser to repeal the legislation. For as long as it stands on the statute books it must be recognised in principle. Using it would do enormous damage to our universities in the world of international scholarship recalling that the Stalin regime and Hitler imposed racial quota systems."

In April 1991 the Education Minister, Louis Pienaar, announced that the offending section was to be removed from the statute books: "Although quotas were never determined, the deletion of this provision indicates once again the government's commitment to recognise the autonomy of universities and demonstrates its undertaking to abolish racial discrimination from the statute book."

From the mid-1980s UCT applied a corrective action policy based upon *real* disadvantage students had suffered at the hands of apartheid discrimination (but not, on principle, on race). The university pursued this policy of 'equal opportunity affirmative action' up until the mid-1990s. According to its pre-1996 mission statement UCT strove "to maintain a strong tradition of non-discrimination in regard to race" both in the constitution of its student body and in the selection and promotion of its academic and administrative staff. Students would be selected on merit, although special criteria would be used to identify disadvantaged students with potential, and they would be given extra assistance to help them succeed.

In 1994 the African National Congress came to power and increasingly asserted, under Thabo Mbeki's leadership, its African nationalist agenda. Like many other racist movements through history it made the demand that the universities, along with all other sectors of society, limit the proportion of minorities to their percentage of the population.

Instead of resisting or opposing this principle UCT adopted it as its own. Where it moderated it, and balanced it against other competing considerations, was in its application. This may have been a shrewd decision, politically and tactically, given the power of the ANC, and its racial demands, at the time. (UCT *does* seem to have done much better than some other universities in manoeuvring, albeit in a somewhat slimy way, through the transition.)

But its decision to place race at the centre of its admissions policy, and apply (in all but name) racial quotas, represents a complete betrayal of the principles it once invoked in the struggle against Apartheid-era discrimination.

Perhaps more importantly it represents a profound intellectual failure. The contribution of our universities to public debate in South Africa, over the past decade, has been pathetic.

Perhaps the main reason for this was that so many academics simply floated along, as UCT did as an institution, with the tide of the ascendant racial nationalism. South Africa is now dealing with destructive consequences of that project. It is difficult to see what contribution UCT can make to understanding and correcting these, for as long as it clings to the odious racial principle that lay at the heart of it.