Varsities' quest for right mix

TJ STRYDOM

Black students still minority at UCT, Stellenbosch

HISTORICALLY white universities in the Western Cape still look much whiter than the province and the rest of the country. But the rectors of Cape Town and Stellenbosch universities insist they are working on it. UCT's review of its admissions policy has sparked debate about the use of race as a criterion. Western Cape premier Helen Zille weighed in last month, saying it was inappropriate to only use race to determine disadvantage. But in a province where half the population is coloured, neither of the two universities reflect that demographic. There is no official target from the government, but the rhetoric from the Department of Higher Education has for years implied that the universities should change their complexion. According to UCT statistics, the proportion of coloured students has remained stable since 1994, at 14%. But the number has doubled from about 1800 to more than 3 600 students. UCT has increased its student numbers by more than three-quarters in the past 18 years. The result is that white South Africans now represent about a third of the student population, down from 54% in 1994. The number of black students has more than doubled, but is still less than a quarter of the total. Stellenbosch campus is still a place with mostly white buildings and mostly white students. Its rector, Russel Botman, said it should be about more than a numbers game. Botman is Stellenbosch's first rector of colour. But it is difficult to defend the statistics when two-thirds of the students are white. At undergraduate level, three-quarters of the students are white. Ironically, according to Botman, the strongest thrust for transformation at Stellenbosch has come from white students. An open letter by student activist Pieter Odendaal, accusing Botman of dragging his feet with transformation, received attention in the Afrikaans press last month. Odendaal said he still believed Stellenbosch "lacks the institutional will" to transform. Botman insists the will to transform exists. He aims to reach "a critical mass" of black and coloured students, but says this will not involve any sort of quota system. How Botman is going to effect change remains puzzling because doing it the UCT way — growing the university by accepting more students of colour while not lowering the absolute number of white students — does not seem like an option. The campus is already bursting at the seams. Stellenbosch's student numbers have also grown sharply in the past two decades, but much of that growth has been in white English-speaking students from KwaZulu-Natal.