UCT's new admissions policy

Michelle Jones Education Writer

AFTER a year of debate, UCT has decided to revise its race based admissions policy. The current policy will remain in place until 2015 while the university works out details of the new one. UCT called a year ago for public comment on its admissions policy — which asks would-be students to state their race. The university's council and its vice-chancellor, Max Price, have repeatedly said the inclusion of race in the admissions policy is undesirable and that alternative proxies for disadvantage should be found. Detailing the contents of the Report of the Commission into Student Admissions, Price said in an e-mail to staff and students this week that the admissions policy review task team had for three years been testing alternative admission criteria and was now able to offer some models. Possible alternative criteria included: The education level of parents or caregivers. The high school attended by the applicant and the facilities available there, such as a library or computer laboratory. The language spoken at home. The family income and whether the applicant's family received a social pension.

Price said three concerns had led to the appointment of the commission: whether UCT's admissions policy was constitutional, the increasingly problematic use of "self-declared" race, and that UCT had long been looking at alternative indicators of disadvantage. Advice had been sought about the constitutionality of the policy and it had emerged that the policy was fair. One of the commission's key findings was that an admissions system could not, at this stage in South Africa's history, be based only on high school performance. Price said that doing this would deny the "disparity in education provision". "Therefore, a commitment to affirmative action should remain. The basis for affirmative action in admissions should be disadvantage, rather than reliance on 'race' as a proxy for disadvantage. The attainability of such a system is a matter for research and consideration." Price said the university should revise its policy using alternative criteria, and the new policy should be applied to new undergraduate students from 2015.

Also, UCT should participate in a national debate on affirmative action. After receiving the report late last year, the council had resolved unanimously to: Make the report available and invite comment on it. Inform the campus community that the existing policy was not unfair or unlawful. 41 Reaffirm that the existing policy would continue unless amended by the senate and the council. Affirm the university's commitment to a policy of affirmative action that provided for redress. "How this policy changes is a matter for serious, informed discussion on many different levels," said Price. 'As we have done in the past, we invite input from all parties on campus to help formulate a policy that will maintain our commitment to academic excellence and diversity in our student population." Price said a special meeting of the senate would be held on March 15 to consider the commission's report and research. In 2011, white students represented 37 percent of the student body, African students 21 percent, coloured students 15 percent and Indian students 7 percent. The rest were mostly international students. About 25 000 students enrolled at UCT last year.