Refining our policy

Contrary to Eddie Haynes-Smart’s perception (Moscow on the hill, Letters, July 6), the University of Cape Town’s (UCT’s) admission policy is indeed about finding raw talent, helping those from disadvantaged schools and compensating for financial hardship, as well as increasing diversity in higher education.

Published: 2011/07/08 07:24:44 AM

Contrary to Eddie Haynes-Smart’s perception (Moscow on the hill, Letters, July 6), the University of Cape Town’s (UCT’s) admission policy is indeed about finding raw talent, helping those from disadvantaged schools and compensating for financial hardship, as well as increasing diversity in higher education.

At the risk of repeating myself, developing an admission process that incorporates all these factors is not as simple as Mr Haynes-Smart and others imply, but UCT is working on this problem. Meanwhile, until we can properly disentangle these factors, we wish to be as fair as we can to all our applicants.

The basic point from which we need to begin is that "merit" is by itself by no means an innocent indicator. It conceals all sorts of historical effects. Central amongst these is the legacy of apartheid — systemic racism. Even though racial, and indeed other forms of discrimination, have been removed from the statute book, we would indeed be extremely naive to believe that racism, in many different forms, including self-imposed forms of inferiority, does not continue to play a role in how learners perform in school. Of course, it should not be the case that we still have to think like this. But this, unfortunately, is the reality.

So, because we believe that intelligence is not distributed "racially", we have to believe that the performance of learners who are deemed to be black has to be explained by factors other than their so-called race. There have to be, therefore, talented young people in particular circumstances who are not achieving the kinds of results that we see their counterparts achieving, even when they are in the same schools. As we have said before, we are trying hard to identify, to understand what these factors are and to work with them.

In the meanwhile, we are trying to be as fair as we can and to do as much justice to our applicants as we can with the instruments at our disposal. We are, as we have said before, working hard to refine our application processes.

With respect to the second issue about our diversity, one result of UCT’s admission policy is certainly that we see more people from a wide range of social, cultural and economic
backgrounds in our graduation ceremonies. This is a point of pride for UCT, as it is an indication of transformation.

In response to Sam Davies (No merit, no money, Letters, July 7), UCT began as early as the 1980s to establish some form of redress and transformation through our admission policy. Since the topic began receiving media attention over the last few years, the university has been in communication with alumni about the policy and the reasoning behind it.

We welcome the input of alumni, recognising that not everyone agrees with the admission policy.

Professor Crain Soudien

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, UCT