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UCT's new admissions policy uses measures of historic disadvantage to help identify merit

By Dr Max Price

The University of Cape Town has just completed a process of consultation, discussion, debate and soul-searching around a complex question: how should we select about 5000 first-year students from the more than 25,000 that apply every year, in a country that is beset by historic disadvantage and inequality?

We pursue four goals in our admission policy. Our first goal is to select the most talented applicants. Our second is to ensure that individual applicants are treated fairly in relation to each other: those with equal talent should have equal opportunity and they should not be penalised by their social circumstances. Our third goal is to address social justice issues of redress. And the fourth is to ensure a diverse learning community on campus.

With respect to merit, up to now, UCT has relied chiefly on race to help identify exemplary university applicants who have the potential to benefit from a tertiary education, but whose marks may not reflect their true merit. In other words, since, in the past, almost all black applicants came from disadvantaged schools, the best way to identify talent was not to rely on their marks being as high as those of white applicants against whom they were competing for places, but to take the top performers from within the pool of black students. They were in fact only competing against other black students. This process simultaneously addressed the goals of fairness, redress and diversity. So why change?

In the last few years, we noticed that significant numbers of black students were now coming from good schools and achieving marks high enough to be admitted in straight competition with white students, without any affirmative action intervention. It seemed that about half the black students admitted would no longer need to be placed into an exclusively black pool of applicants in order to win a place at UCT. This also means that their race becomes irrelevant from the perspective of the admissions process, which would no longer depend on their self-identified race classification.

However, we observed that many of these black students from good schools still did not perform as well in the university entrance exams as white students from the same schools. This is a well-recognised phenomenon in transforming societies: that performance, even after 12 years in a superior school, is dependent not just on the schooling, but also on other trans-generational factors, such as the educational levels of parents and grandparents, and home language compared to the language of instruction. Thus in highly competitive programmes, where a small difference in matric marks can make all the difference between being selected or not, we must level the playing fields for black students – in fact, for students of all races – by increasing the marks of those who have come from more disadvantaged home backgrounds. This requirement to take account of the impact of disadvantage on matric marks applies all the more powerfully to students from disadvantaged schools.

Thus the new policy agreed to by the UCT Council last week for the 2016 student intake, will admit about 75% of our students based either on marks alone, or on marks weighted upwards by an index of disadvantage. The components of the index include the quality of the school an applicant attended, the education of the applicant's parents and grandparents, home language, and whether the applicant's family relies on social grants. Race per se will not be a factor in the selection of these students, though it clearly is an indirect factor, since most of those who come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds will be black. The factors that challenge them educationally are largely the result of the structural racism of apartheid and its legacy today.

While this shift of policy still contributes to all four goals – selecting the best talent, levelling the playing fields, promoting redress and diversity – on its own it does not achieve what we have achieved thus far, in terms of the numbers of black students recruited. In addition, the proportion of black students from township and rural schools has decreased. To address this, we retain in the new policy specific weighting for applicants from disadvantaged schools, and we retain a stream of selection that is based on race as in the past – i.e. black students are only competing with other black students.

Why are we retaining race targets, and therefore race, as one mechanism of selection? Three reasons: First, the university remains committed to redress. We believe that black students, whose families and communities were denied economic and educational opportunities under apartheid, are entitled to compensation in the form of opportunities to earn a degree. We want to contribute to the greater representation of black graduates in all sectors. We will know we have achieved these goals when we are more demographically representative of the nation and the province where we are located. UCT has made progress, but we have some way to go.

Second, it is important for any educational institution to encourage diversity. Students need to learn not only from academics but also from each other. In this age of globalisation, new professionals need to appreciate and engage with the various points of view that arise from different cultures, languages, religions, lifestyles and upbringings. Promoting racial diversity on campus helps to achieve this.

Thirdly, race still matters in South Africa. People are still stereotyped by the colour of their skin. The lived experience of blacks is different from that of whites, regardless of whether they come from the same social class or not. Amongst other things, this affects the performance of black students even at advantaged schools, just because they are black. So being black is itself a factor in assessing performance – hence it remains a factor in our admissions policy.

There has been some vocal opposition to the new policy, primarily from those who believe this is a move away from transformation. On the contrary: UCT is more committed than ever to building a student body that, year by year, will be more diverse and more representative of the population. The goals of redress and diversity in the student intake will not be relaxed. And while increasing the number of African and coloured students every year, we will also be increasing the number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students of all races, thus expanding our focus beyond racial targets to addressing inequality too.

One of the goals of transformation is to create a non-racial society that does not privilege people, or deny them opportunities, on the basis of race. We believe the new hybrid admissions policy will help move UCT towards this goal.

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