

FAQs

Why is there still a need for transformation in universities?

For the past 15 years or so, UCT has had many more eligible applicants than there are places in our various programmes; if we were to rank applicants simply using their National Senior Certificate (NSC) marks, there would be very few black and disadvantaged students selected. In the case of the medical class of 200 first-years, there would have been about 10 black students. There are several reasons why this is of concern to us, and to society more generally:

- We want to promote fairness and social justice. It is clear that most of the variation between students' NSC marks is much more directly related to the schools they attended and other socio-economic factors, than to their ability, motivation, or hard work. So clearly we cannot use only marks because it is unfair to those students from less privileged backgrounds to further deny them crucial life opportunities.
- We want to attract the most talented students. Because many such students will have attended poor schools and have lower marks, they would not be selected if the selection process only considers marks. Yet we know that, given the opportunity, they will become high performers.
- We are committed to producing a new generation of professionals, leaders, intellectuals, political actors and analysts who are more demographically representative of the population. It would be very dangerous for society if, when the current medical or law class graduates in 2018, 24 years after the first democratic elections, a small minority were black African.
- We are concerned with social justice as it affects both the individual and the communities from which they come. We therefore need to have an approach that will acknowledge those circumstances that may impede opportunities for the individual, as well as those which operate at a broader social level and are responsible for either discriminating against a group of people or advantaging them. Our redress policies must, therefore, be sensitive to both the individual and the group experience.

We maintain – and all research shows – that the education of all students benefits from having diversity within the classroom.

How does UCT's current admissions process work?

UCT's current admissions policy is based on the principle that talent is randomly distributed in the population, regardless of race, class, gender or other demographic variables – but that it wishes to acknowledge and redress the great disadvantage at which many people were placed based on their race, as defined by the apartheid government. It uses race as a measure of this disadvantage.

How it works is that the university first sets aspirational targets for each population group in each programme. Targets are adjusted each year based on two considerations: the pool of applicants with the appropriate results in the appropriate subjects for a particular programme, and the university's aspiration to increasingly reflect the demography of the Western Cape and South Africa. The university then starts to make applicants offers for the limited number of places at UCT, in order to meet these targets, by placing students in separate baskets according to their legacy apartheid population group (black, white, Indian or coloured), ranking them academically within their own group, and selecting the top few percent from each list – depending on the number of places targeted for each group.

Why change what appears to be working?

Because circumstances have changed, and because we can do better.

The circumstances have changed in various ways. Firstly, increasing numbers of our black applicants are coming out of excellent schools with very good National Senior Certificate (NSC) results, often from wealthy families. They can get into UCT in the general open competitive pool. They do not have to be in a different application pool, but the current policy puts them there anyway. There is a legitimate question about whether they remain disadvantaged – and, if so, to what extent – and whether it is fair to other classmates from the same schools that black students should get in at the expense of white students. We get feedback from many school principals about the tensions this causes when, after 12 years of schooling in which all learners are treated in a race-blind manner, and have been taught to aspire to an egalitarian, equal opportunity, non-racial society, they find on entering grade 12 and applying to UCT, that they have to identify their race, knowing that this will substantially change their prospects of being offered a place. We also get feedback from these black students that they resent the assumption that they wouldn't make it on their own merit, and the attendant racial stereotyping – itself an apartheid legacy – that views *all* black students as suffering from an academic deficit.

Secondly, the policy depends on students self-identifying their race. This leads to a variety of problems. Many students, including disadvantaged students of colour, on principle do not want to declare their race, which they disavow. This leads to their not benefiting from the redress policy even though they may still be adversely affected by the legacy of educational disadvantage. Other students wilfully misclassify themselves in relation to the old categories. Since there is no legislated way of classifying people, this puts UCT admissions officers in the untenable position of having to decide how such applicants should really be classified. This we refuse to do. We also face the post-apartheid realities of marriages across old racial lines, producing a new generation that – thankfully – doesn't fit the rigid strictures of the past. If one parent would have been classified white or Indian, the children might legitimately classify themselves as coloured, but in reality don't suffer the same legacy of disadvantage as those classified as coloured under apartheid.

Thirdly, while we affirm the need for racial diversity at UCT, we have always emphasised the need to take socio-economic disadvantage into account. Over the past 20 years, the old apartheid correspondence of race and class has been shifting. A significant number of black students at UCT are middle class. No longer can we assume that all black students are economically disadvantaged, nor that all economically disadvantaged students are black. We aspire to greater socio-economic diversity – in the interests of fairness, and equal opportunities. We would be doing better if we could recruit the most talented poor students whose marks, we know, will not be competitive with students, black or white, from good schools.

Finally, UCT, in line with the South African Constitution, aspires to a future non-racial society where we are not always viewing the world through racial lenses. Apartheid's racial constructs were used to distribute power, to create divisions in society, to promote ethnic loyalties, to signal superiority and inferiority. There is no guarantee that South African society will not find new uses for these constructs – to define insider and outsider groups, nor that such dividing lines in society will not become the root of conflicts that may tear the society apart. We want to be part of an institution, and society, in which we do not, first and foremost, see and classify people in terms of their race. Yet currently every student is allocated to a race basket before the marks are considered in order to select the top students from that basket. If applicants do not declare their race, they are allocated to the 'open' basket together with all white students. If race-classification is necessary for redress, then we must do it. But if we can achieve the above goals while moving away from reliance solely on race classification, then surely this achieves a fairer outcome?

What are the underlying principles of the new proposed admissions policy?

The university has developed the following principles to guide this new policy:

1. The admissions policy should identify applicants with the highest potential, recognising that they may not have achieved the highest marks in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) or National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) due to the quality of the school they attended, other obstacles, or lack of enabling environments.
2. The policy should also enable UCT to attract the highest-performing students nationally, regardless of their race or degree of disadvantage.
3. The goals of redress and diversity in the first-year class should not be relaxed; that is, a change to UCT's admissions system should not reduce the number of black and coloured students compared with the current situation.
4. The first-year class should reflect a wider diversity of social-class background by increasing the proportion of first-generation university students, students from poor schools, and those from poorer households. Such diversity should span all races.
5. Students selected should have a high probability of graduating, given the necessary support and extended programmes where necessary.

How would the proposed admissions policy work?

The application form would ask specific questions aimed at developing a disadvantage weighting for the applicant: details of the school they attended; their mother's, father's and grandparents' level of education; the applicant's preferred language; and their financial background.

How are answers to these questions markers of disadvantage? The school one goes to or can afford determines the quality of education one receives, and how prepared one is for tertiary study. The level of education an applicant's parents or grandparents achieved is not only a marker of their level of disadvantage under apartheid (where educational opportunities were limited and predetermined for many groups), but also a good indicator of the kind of learning-related support available to a learner in her or his home. If one's home or preferred language is indigenous to South Africa and different to the language in which one is taught at school, the chances are that one will have more difficulty in the classroom. Finally, one's reliance on social grants and other financial support mechanisms is a good indicator of the kind of economic opportunities available to one. Using answers to these questions, the university will then compute a disadvantage weight, which will be used to increase applicants' entry-level scores. Applicants will then be placed into three separate bands, from which university selections will be made.

What are the three selection bands of this admissions policy?

- **Band A: Scores weighted upwards for disadvantage**

About 60% of the class is selected by ranking the Faculty Point Scores (FPS), weighted by the new disadvantage weight to the academic points of the applicant. The FPS is a combination of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) and the National Benchmark Test (NBT) scores, depending on the faculty in question. For applicants in this band, the new disadvantage weighting would add a specified amount to their scores. Thus if two applicants have the same academic points, the one who has achieved this in spite of a more disadvantaged school and home background would be considered the stronger candidate.

- **Band B: Based only on marks (with no mark adjustments for disadvantage)**

About 15% of a class (ranges from about 10% to 40% depending on programme) will be selected in Band B, which is based only on marks regardless of race or disadvantage. This is because UCT wants to attract the top-achieving students in the country and internationally; therefore, we do not want to turn any such students away because they have not met certain demographic or diversity criteria (see Principle 2 above). In highly competitive programmes, this group is at present primarily white and Indian, from relatively affluent families. Since we remain committed to applying policies of redress in these programmes as well, the proportion in Band A will be

small in such programmes. In less highly competitive programmes, this band by itself in many faculties yields a significant proportion of the demographic representivity that UCT seeks. It can therefore be a much larger proportion of the class

- **Band C: Target-based allocation using race**

The third band could make up about 25% of the class. This band is selected using the race-basket system that is used in the current admissions system. Modelling of the proposed system has shown that, if the university were to rely on Band A alone as the basis of redress in admissions, the proportion of black students admitted to UCT would drop. This is because Band A, while favouring African and coloured students, also brings in disadvantaged white students; and even with the disadvantage weighting, there may be a large number of white students with still higher scores. To achieve the target numbers of black students, in Band C, we will select students in the interests of racial diversity per se.

How do the three bands achieve transformation without relying on race?

This hybrid, race-conscious admissions policy achieves a substantial move away from a reliance on race in that for most programmes, about 75% of the class will be selected on a 'race-blind' basis. If students prefer not to declare their race, for 75% of those admitted it will make no difference. Most black students admitted will be admitted on merit, recognising that the obstacles they have overcome to achieve the marks they have sets them high up there with other achievers who have been made offers. Racial stereotyping will be minimised, since most black students will not be admitted because of their race. And it moves us towards the long-term goal of not needing race classification to ensure or distribute opportunities. It recognises that redress and social justice are promoted not through privileging people just because they are black, but because of how legislated race discrimination impacted and still impacts on their lives – their home backgrounds, their parents' education and ability to support them at school, the quality of their schools, and the impact of not studying in one's first language.

The university says it is committed to non-racialism, yet this policy still asks for a racial identification. Can you explain why?

We have found it necessary to keep race in the policy for two reasons:

Firstly, because at a university like UCT, where competition for places is so high, and the numbers of very high-performing white applicants is so much greater than the number of black applicants, even when weighted for disadvantage, it is necessary to select students for diversity per se – ie because they are black.

Secondly, and importantly, it is also a recognition of the fact that race still matters because there is still racism, racial discrimination, stereotyping of expectations by race, all of which actually affect the performance of black students even at advantaged schools. Removing race altogether would suggest that race no longer matters. Our ideal is that one day it will not; but for now and for a generation at least, race as cultural capital, as identity, as a basis of current discrimination, as a legacy of past exclusion, remains an influencing factor. The debates around it must be vibrant and tough. Erasing race from UCT's admissions policy at this stage would do a disservice to achieving our ideals.

How will UCT address the classification of an applicant's race?

A recent meeting of the Council Committee on admissions policy agreed that South African applicants will now be invited to indicate how their parents were classified under apartheid (ie black, coloured, Indian, Chinese or white) and that redress policies be applied to those who had a parent classified as black, coloured, Indian or Chinese.

By moving away from race as the only indicator for advantage, is UCT moving away from its redress and equity goals?

UCT is certainly not evading its responsibility towards achieving redress for apartheid wrongs. What the proposals seek to do in working with the factors of home background and school, is to begin the essential sociological process of explaining how race actually works. Home background and schooling are the direct manifestations of the process of apartheid and racism. This is a racial effect. Of course, we acknowledge that this approach does not encompass the full complexity of either the racial or the marginalisation experience in South Africa. The impact of many other dimensions of exclusion, discrimination and other forms of oppression are not brought into view with the proposals. It is for this reason that the model continues to make provision for race by itself.

What role have faculties played in the process?

The new proposals have been considered by all the faculties (specifically including a modelling exercise on outcomes) and there is in-principle support for most elements of the proposals. In addition, the faculties suggested minor modifications mostly relating to the specific circumstances within each faculty.

Is UCT abandoning race as a measure for disadvantage and redress?

UCT is not abandoning race as a factor in determining past and present disadvantage and remains fully committed to transformation in higher education. We have simply discovered over the years that the issue is infinitely more complex: apartheid's attack on the dignity of black people was mounted at a variety of levels, leaving a legacy of many sites of disadvantage. This is what we seek to address in revising our admissions policy by exploring an alternative model that defines disadvantage in ways that better capture what caused the damage and how race is experienced today at both individual and group level.

Will UCT admit fewer black and coloured students as a result of these changes?

There will *not* be a drop in the admission of black, Indian and coloured students, as some groups fear. The models being explored are underpinned by the fundamental principle that we should not lose the diversity that we currently enjoy. This principle is materially supported by the R500 million that UCT makes available, through several sources, as financial aid. UCT has been monitoring and evaluating its current admissions policy to ensure that it attracts the best students, while the policy at the same time gives effect to UCT's aim to redress past disadvantage and ensure a diverse student body.

What were the recommendations of the Howie Commission?

The Howie Commission made the following recommendations regarding UCT's admissions policy:

- On the constitutionality of the current policy, the commission recommended that UCT obtain independent Senior Counsel's (SC) opinion. This was done and SC confirmed our view that the policy is indeed consistent with the South African Constitution and is not unfair.
- UCT's goals of diversity, and redress for past disadvantage, should continue to prevail, as should the commitment to student funding support, residence support, learning support and social support.
- An admissions system cannot at this stage in South Africa's history be based purely on high school performance as measured by marks in examinations. To do so would deny the reality of the legacy of disparity in educational provision in the country. 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.

- The commission affirms the approach that the university has taken to the challenge before it and the initiatives it has set in place through the Admissions Policy Research Task Team (APRTT) in response to this challenge. The commission noted the complexities UCT faces in regard to admissions.
- The university should aim to implement a revised admissions policy, using alternative markers of disadvantage, and which policy should preferably commence with the incoming undergraduate class in 2015.
- UCT should continue to participate in and lead national debates on matters such as affirmative action, and influence policy in this regard for the wider higher education sector.
- The commission acknowledges that it is not UCT's primary responsibility to engage with and remedy the crisis in the public school system. The primary responsibility of the university is that of the production and the reproduction of knowledge. It is in this respect that the commission does feel that the university can make a lasting contribution in understanding why schools fail and how they could begin to address the problems they face. It urges, therefore, that UCT continues to enhance the important attempts it is making to intervene at a micro-level to assist individual schools, eg the [Schools' Improvement Initiative](#).

Why is the disadvantage weighted score in health sciences weighted by 20% when the other faculties are weighted by 10%?

Admission into health sciences at UCT is incredibly competitive: Top white students tend to have a 90% and 80% grade average, while top students who come from a disadvantaged background tend to come in at 70%. This gap is so great that a weighting of 10% makes little difference to the ability of disadvantaged students to compete for places, so the weighting used is doubled to 20%.

Why are Indians not included in the band C allocations?

Band C is selected using the race-basket system, which will be used to top up approximately 25% of the class. However, Indian and Chinese students in some programmes easily compete in the open category (Band B, which is based only on marks regardless of race or disadvantage). In many cases, they already exceed university targets for redress. It is in these cases that Indian or Chinese candidates will not be included in the Band C allocations.

How will we ensure that people are not lying about the criteria that count in the disadvantage score?

Part of our challenge with the existing admissions policy was that it depended on students self-identifying their race. Whether students were choosing not to self-identify, or were rightly classifying themselves as a particular race but shouldn't technically qualify for redress, or were deliberately misclassifying themselves, this system of self-identification proved a poor proxy for disadvantage. It's precisely to reduce our dependence on race as a proxy for disadvantage (and one that is easily misidentified) that we're proposing this shift in admissions policy.

We have instead identified the following indicators which have statistical significance and explain 56% of the variance in educational performance (measured in this particular model by performance on the National Benchmark Test score for academic and quantitative literacy):

- Quality of school (ultimately the measure we found most reliable, and allows annual adjustment, is a ranking according to the average National Senior Certificate score of all grade 12s of a school over a rolling five-year period, combined with some quintile and historic school authority information)
- Education of an applicant's mother, father, grandparents (as three separate variables)
- Language spoken by mother at home if Afrikaans or an indigenous South African language other than Afrikaans

- Financial indicators, such as whether the applicant's family receives a social pension or child support grant.

Based on information supplied, students will be given a home disadvantage and a school disadvantage weighting (of a value between 0 and 10). Whichever is the greater will apply in their UCT application.

The variety of indicators proposed (many of which can be readily referenced, such as the school attended and the quality of education received there, as well as dependence on social grants) helps ensure greater integrity of the disadvantage scores allocated.

Will applicants know whether their parents have degrees or other types of higher education qualifications? For example, parents who are teachers may be considered to have degrees?

In addition to using multiple variables to help balance out any omissions or misunderstandings in the application process (including the overall allocation of a home and a school disadvantage score), we will be using three separate variables when it comes to higher education of an applicant's parents and grandparents (asking for the education of the applicant's mother, father and grandparents separately).

What if someone went to a disadvantaged school for their early schooling and then changed to an advantaged school?

Even for students who are middle class and have gone to good schools, educational performance is heavily affected by one's cultural capital – a determinant of performance that crosses generations and therefore should be expected to reflect the circumstances of the parents and grandparents of our current applicants. It is precisely the race classification of the parents, whose life opportunities were structured by apartheid, which determines the degree of educational disadvantage of the children. While it would be ideal to assess cultural capital directly, this is notoriously difficult, and since it is so directly linked to the parents' race classification, that seems a reasonable basis for affirmative action. Race classification, in particular of parents under apartheid, will therefore remain a component of the proposed new policy.

UCT has previously defended the need to give advantage to black students at good schools on the basis of cultural capital being trans-generational – meaning that even middle-class, well-educated students perform less well. What happens to this argument in the proposed model since those students will now not get any benefit from the disadvantage score?

UCT would wish to move away from relying on race classification to distribute opportunities *where this is possible*. Over the past few years, our research shows that the circumstances of black applicants have changed in various ways. Firstly, increasing numbers of our black applicants are coming out of excellent schools with very good National Senior Certificate (NSC) results, often from wealthy families. They can get into UCT in the general open competitive pool. They do not have to be in a different basket competing only with others of the same race. We can achieve substantial diversity without needing to select students on the basis of race. Secondly, notwithstanding possible differences in cultural capital, there is a legitimate question about whether high-performing black students at previously white schools remain disadvantaged and if so, to what extent; and whether it is fair to white classmates from the same schools, that the black students should get in at the expense of white students who may even be less privileged.

Over the past 20 years, the old apartheid-related correspondence between race and class has been shifting. About a half of black students at UCT are now middle class. No longer can we assume that all black students are economically disadvantaged. We aspire to greater socio-economic diversity – in the interests of fairness, and equal opportunities. We would be doing better if we could recruit

the most talented poor black and white students whose marks, we know, will not be competitive with students from good schools.

However, we're cognisant of middle-class black South Africans feeling like this proposed admissions model cuts them out. That is why this class of students will continue to be admitted to UCT as part of Band C – an entirely race-based admission that will make up around 25% of the class (depending on the faculty).