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UCT: LITTLE REAL CHANGE

Race still the yardstick

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UCT's adoption of a new admissions policy (to be implemented for the 2016 admissions cycle) is to be welcomed in one way only – it reflects nascent institutional unease with the use of “race” in determining who should be admitted.

When, in 2007, I initiated a debate about UCT's admission policy, arguing that the use of “race” was both intellectually and morally odious, my antagonists unashamedly supported racial preference.

There are still some who are stuck in that mindset, but that is not true of the current institutional leadership, who at least recognise that the use of “race” is troubling.

They have invoked a “necessity defence” of the university's continued use of this category. Their view is that ideally we should not employ racial preference but that unfortunately it is still necessary in order to pursue redress and diversity.

The university has been goaded to find alternatives, including giving some preference to those who are educationally disadvantaged (but not so disadvantaged that they would be unlikely, even with academic support, to succeed).

The new policy, which is the product of years of research and discussion, may seem like a move in the right direction. Under this new policy, one band of students, constituting approximately 60 percent of admissions, will be admitted on the basis of marks weighted by disadvantage (rather than “race”).

A second band, constituting approximately 15 percent of those admitted, will be based on marks alone.

Thus, we are told that under the new policy the great “majority of offers (will be) made without reference to race”, although approximately 25 percent of offers will still be made with reference to the applicants’ “race”.

The change, however, is merely cosmetic. Although most offers will be made on marks weighted for disadvantage, in fact the indicators and formulae for determining disadvantage have been carefully gerrymandered to ensure that the racial profile of the student body does not become less “black”.

(Shortfalls are to be rectified by the persistence of the small band of explicit racial preference.)

In other words, the university has been researching proxies for “race” rather than proxies for disadvantage.

That is why, for example, an applicant earns six points if his or her mother's home language (as opposed to his or her own home- or first language) is a South African language other than English or Afrikaans.

This is calculated to favour “black” South African applicants – even those who are not in the least educationally disadvantaged because they are fluent first-lan-

guage speakers of English, attended top-tier schools and have educated parents.

Institutions do not change quickly and are certainly susceptible to powerful social and political pressures, even though those pressures may be only implicit.

It would thus be naïve to expect UCT to formulate its policies as though no such pressures existed.

Thus, to test how sincere the commitment is to moving away from racial preference, I proposed that the policy at least be amended, such that no applicant would receive preferential consideration if he or she had a parent who was employed in an academic post at a tertiary educational institution.

There is no reason why the children of academics, who suffer no educational disadvantage, should be favoured on the grounds of their “race”.

Excluding such applicants from preferential admission would likely affect very few people (not least because their educational advantage would make many of them competitive among those admitted purely on the basis of marks), but it would have been a real, even if modest, gesture towards non-racialism.

The university would thereby have acknowledged that there are at least some cases in which applicants should not be favoured on the basis of their “race”. However, no such acknowledgement has been made.

Those who believe that racial preference may permissibly still be part of an admissions policy defend their view by arguing that UCT's admission policy aims not only at redress but also at “diversity”. However, UCT could have a diverse student body – including a critical mass of “black” students – without racial preference.

What UCT seeks is not diversity but something different – a student body that better reflects the racial proportions of the broader South African population.

That is a worthy goal. In a normal society, the student body would more closely resemble the country's demography. However, a worthy goal does not justify every means employed to attain it.

20 years after the end of apartheid, schooling in South Africa remains appallingly inadequate. The government fails to deliver basic education while expecting the student and staff racial profiles at universities to ‘transform’. There is simply no way that universities can compensate for the government's deficit. Nor should they be expected to do so

In any event, UCT's commitment to reflecting the country's demography seems equivocal.

It does aim at a better racial representation, but seems uninterested in a better gender representation, at least where the significantly under-represented gender is the male one.

The law faculty, for example, has nearly two female undergraduate students for every one male undergraduate student. The gender imbalance of undergraduate students in the faculty of health sciences is even more marked.

(In both faculties, females also significantly outnumber males at the postgraduate level, although not by quite the same margins.)

The number of female students in the humanities faculty is more than double the number of male students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

In response to this, it might be argued that unlike males, “blacks” are a historically disadvantaged group.

However, this argument misses the mark because the “diversity” (or, more accurately, the proportionality) argument is not the redress argument.

It is intended (or at least needed) to pick up precisely where the redress argument runs out.

If demographic proportionality is an independent value, then there should be efforts to rectify the relative absence of men (including “black” men, who are lost from view when one focuses only on “blacks”).

It is true that, in general, men at UCT are not as unrepresented as “blacks” are. However, if that fact is invoked in defence of selective attention to proportionality, then it can be noted that there are some programmes of study in which men are massively under-represented.

Another argument employed to defend the ongoing use of “race” claims that disadvantage can permeate down the generations.

This, it is said, is why “black” students who attend privileged schools may nonetheless be at a disadvantage. They

might lack the benefit of parents who had a university education, for example.

That may be a good reason for using parental level of education as one marker for disadvantage, but it is not a good reason for using “race”.

There is also a danger in overestimating the disadvantage that such factors cause. The children of minimally educated immigrants to many countries have flourished academically without any affirmative action – and often despite discrimination against them.

It is true, of course, that good quality primary and secondary education was crucial to that success.

By contrast, 20 years after the end of apartheid, schooling in South Africa remains appallingly inadequate. The government fails to deliver basic education while expecting the student and staff racial profiles at universities to “transform”. There is simply no way that universities can compensate for the government's deficit. Nor should they be expected to do so.

There is, of course, a class of “black” students that is now enjoying excellent primary and secondary education. Many of those are at least as educationally advantaged as the children of immigrants who have succeeded without preferential admission to university.

They have educated parents and cannot plausibly be thought to suffer from “stereotype threat” – a self-fulfilling internalisation of stereotypes about the group to which one belongs.

There is no good reason to grant such applicants preference on the basis of their “race”.

Indeed, it is possible that granting such preference, as UCT insists on doing, may have perverse effects.

First, it may reinforce the very stereotypes it claims to be countering, by implying that all “black” applicants are academically inferior and thus in need of preference on account of their “race”.

Second, it is possible that holding academically privileged “black” students to lower standards may actually contribute to their doing less well.

Insofar as they are rational actors those “black” students may simply realise that they don't have to do as well in order to win a coveted place at university.

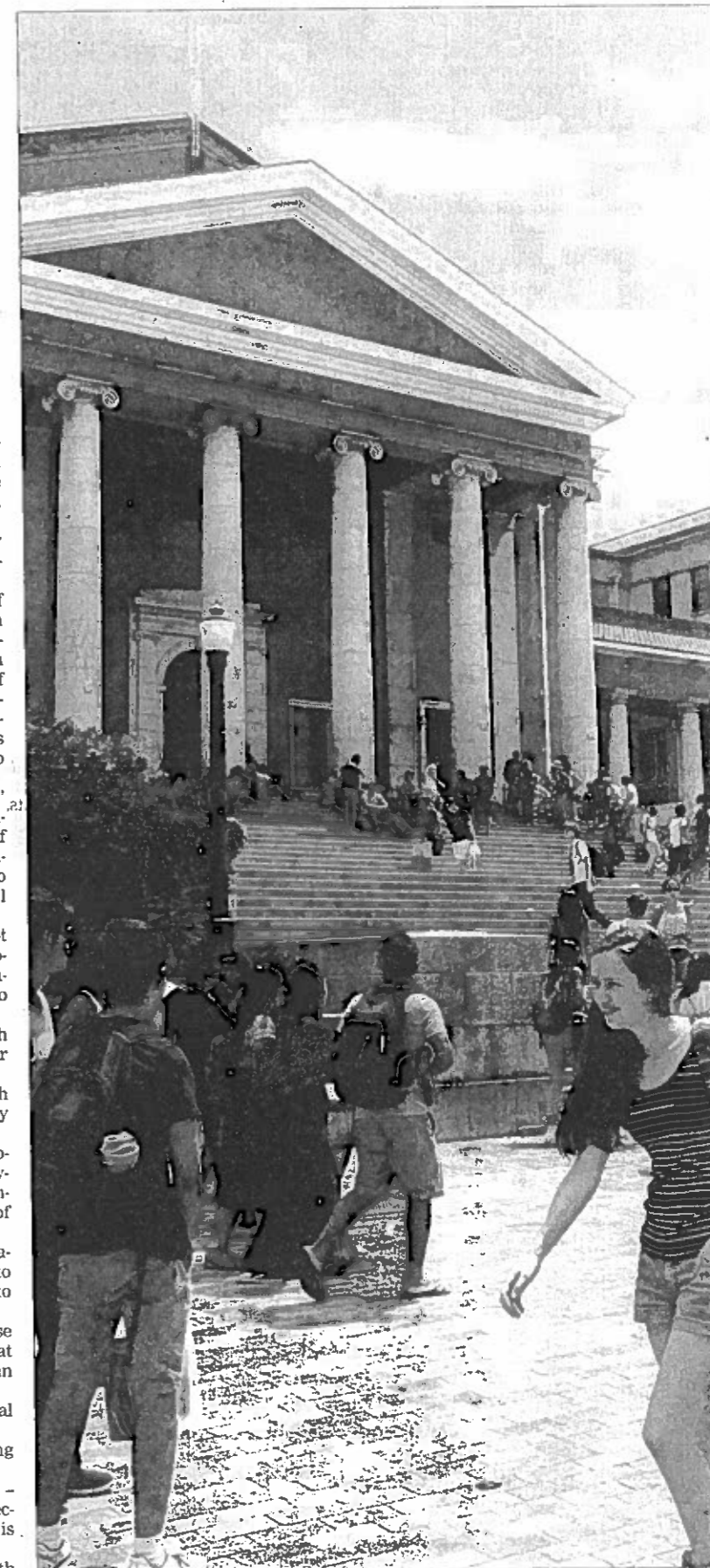
The use of “race” to distribute social benefits is repugnant and corrupting. It is not necessary for redressing injustice.

Quite the contrary, desisting from it – while simultaneously undertaking intellectually honest redress for disadvantage – is what justice requires.

Perhaps some day enough South Africans will realise this.

We can only hope that by then it will not be too late.

● Benatar is professor and head of philosophy at UCT.



IN THE MIX: Although most admission offers using the new policy will be made on marks weighted for disadvantage, in fact the indicators and formulae for determining disadvantage have been carefully gerrymandered to ensure the racial profile of the student body does not become less “black”, says the writer. Picture: TRACEY ADAMS