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Wits As An Open University,
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WITS AS AN OPEN UNIVERSITY, 1922-1959

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In 1959 the Extension of University Education Act, otherwise known as the Separate Universities Act, provided that the 'white' universities could no longer admit black students, except in special circumstances and only with ministerial permission. Prior to then two of the four English-speaking universities in South Africa, the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand, had supposedly operated as 'open' universities in the sense that their criteria of admission were purely academic, and were applied without regard to considerations of race, colour, or creed. The position in 1959 was that there were 633 black students at U.C.T., including 461 Coloureds, as against 4 471 whites, and 297 black students at Wits, as against 4 813 whites. Neither Natal nor Rhodes Universities were 'open' in the sense that U.C.T. and Wits were. From 1936 onwards the Durban branch of the University of Natal did provide separate part-time classes for blacks, and in 1951 a medical school for blacks was established in Durban under the University of Natal, but otherwise blacks were excluded from the regular classes at the university. As Edgar Brookes confessed in his History of the University of Natal, published in 1966, "it is not possible to avoid regretting the failure of the University ever to concede real unhindered equality to non-European students". (1) Rhodes University, for its part, made no provision for admitting black students.

With regard to U.C.T. and Wits, what has to be understood is that they were never completely 'open' universities, and they certainly never granted 'unhindered equality' to their black students. In other words, while U.C.T. and Wits were very different from the other teaching universities in South Africa, they were nonetheless never fully 'non-racial' universities. The purpose of this paper is to examine, in the case of Wits, how the so-called 'open' universities came to differ from the other teaching universities in the country, and how and why they fell short of full non-racialism. The paper will examine first the evolution of Wits University's admissions policies, and then second the University's policies towards black students once they had been admitted. The fact of the matter is that once on campus black students were discriminated against in a variety of ways, and that it was never official University policy to grant them full equality. Official University policy was never one of integration or non-racialism; at its most advanced it was a policy of what was called 'academic non-segregation'. Under this policy black students were to be offered the maximum possible access to the academic facilities available in the University and they were to be treated in academic matters with racial impartiality, but outside of the academic sphere social contact

with white students was to be severely curtailed. A complaint of black students was that not even this limited policy was fully enforced, and that certain staff members, departments, and even faculties discriminated against them in academic matters, particularly in academic assessments.

The impression is sometimes given that, prior to the Government's intervention in 1959, the universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand had always followed 'open' admissions policies. Such an impression is conveyed by The Open Universities in South Africa, which traces the 'open' policies of the two universities back to their respective precursors, the South African College in Cape Town and the South African School of Mines and Technology in Johannesburg: "At Cape Town the admission of the first non-white students to studies at the post-matriculation level dates from back to the turn of the century; in the case of the Witwatersrand the corresponding date was 1910." (2) It is true that a handful of 'non-white' students had been admitted by the South African College, and one Chinese student by the School of Mines, and it is also true that the statutes adopted by U.C.T. and Wits provided for 'open' admissions. Statute 69 of the University of Cape Town and statute 72 of the University of the Witwatersrand alike stated that "every person shall be entitled to become registered as a matriculated student at the University" who had obtained the matriculation certificate of the Joint Matriculation Board, or a recognised exemption from the J.M.B. matriculation examination. But the impression should not be gained from this that the two universities followed 'open' admissions policies from their inception.

A study of admissions policies indicates that at its inception Wits very much reflected the prejudices of the society to which it belonged. It was only slowly and hesitantly that the University opened its doors to black students, and not all the academic doors were ever opened. The position at Wits in 1959 was that Dentistry was closed to black students on the grounds that no facilities existed for them, and the B.A. in Fine Arts was similarly closed to blacks as white models were often used in the life drawing studios. In the Engineering Faculty, all eight branches were supposedly open to blacks, but arrangements for vacation practical work were not possible in some branches for reasons beyond the University's control, notably in mining engineering, as no black could qualify for a blasting certificate.

In his inaugural address as Principal of the School of Mines in 1919, J.H. Hofmeyr suggested that the proposed new university for Johannesburg should be open to all who possessed the necessary qualifications: "It should know no distinctions of class or wealth, race or creed." (3) However, it is problematic

what he meant by 'race'. At that time the 'racial' question referred to the question of English/Afrikaans relations, and Hofmeyr was probably saying no more than that Wits should not be a university restricted to the English-speaking section of the white population. Certainly, the general understanding when Wits was finally established in 1922 was that blacks would pursue their degree studies through Fort Hare and the University of South Africa rather than at any of the 'white' teaching universities. Where the rub came was in regard to medical training, for U.C.T. and Wits possessed the only medical schools in the country, and the medical faculties of the two universities consequently became the main testing-ground for their admissions policies. In 1921 U.C.T. persuaded an Indian applicant to its medical school to go away, but in 1926 the authorities at Wits swallowed hard and agreed to admit a Coloured student, J.T. du Rand, to its medical school after they had been given legal advice that the University had no warrant under its Act or statutes to exclude a non-European from admission. (4)

The story thereafter is quite fascinating. (5) The University's Council was reluctant to admit more blacks to the medical school, but it was equally reluctant to write a racist clause into the University's statutes. In the event, what the University did was to attempt to induce Hertzog's Pact Government to introduce a general Bill empowering any university in South Africa to exclude students on the grounds of 'colour'. In other words, the University attempted to get the Government to do its dirty work for it. This the Hertzog Government declined to do, and the University was consequently forced to fall back on another expedient. This was the new Public Hospitals Ordinance, passed by the Transvaal Provincial Council in 1928, which permitted hospital boards to refuse black medical practitioners and students access to the wards in public hospitals. The University was thus able in future to deny blacks admission to the medical school on the grounds that the province would not allow them access to clinical training in the public hospitals.

It is true that from 1927 onwards, with the appointment of the Loram Committee into the training of 'natives' in medicine and public health, the University did urge the Government to finance separate facilities at Wits for the training of black doctors. This the Government also failed to do, and Wits was consequently left with the policy of denying blacks admission to the medical school on the grounds that they could not offer them clinical training.

The process by which Wits began to open its doors, or at least some of them, to black students really dates from 1934/5. In 1934 the University Council took the deliberate decision to adopt a more positive or 'open' policy on the question of black admissions. As was announced in the Council's annual report for 1934:

In the course of the year several enquiries were received from prospective students of Indian, Coloured, or native birth. Since the Act and Statutes of the University do

not make mention of differences of colour or race, enquiries were treated without reference to such contingencies and it may therefore be expected that students belonging to those categories will, in the future, offer themselves for the various courses of study. It is hoped that the exercise of tact and discretion will avoid the difficulties which are sometimes attendant upon the closer contact of the various races.

1935 was consequently to become something of a 'landmark' year in the evolution of Wits as an 'open' university. Pressure from white liberal opinion, and also growing pressure from blacks themselves, notably from Indian institutions, served as the main catalysts inducing the University to adopt a more 'open' policy in regard to black admissions. It was at the same juncture, and in response to the same pressures, that the University of Natal decided to introduce classes for black students at its Durban branch, but the Natal decision was to run those classes on a segregated basis.

In 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, U.C.T. and Wits did not boast more than about fifty black students between them, but the war itself was to greatly accelerate the process by which they were opened up to blacks. It was certainly World War II that served to open up the Wits medical school to black students. In 1938, in line with the University's decision to admit blacks to its normal lecture courses, three Indian students had been admitted to the pre-clinical study of medicine at Wits on the understanding that they would proceed overseas for the remainder of their training. What the outbreak of war did was to make it impossible for blacks to continue going overseas to pursue medical studies. They had now to receive their full medical training locally, or not at all. That fact served as the lever to open up a clinical training for black medical students at Wits.

Even before the impact of the outbreak of war was felt, pressure on the University had been mounting for it to provide a full medical training for blacks. There was first pressure from the three Indian students who had been admitted in 1938. In early 1939 K.J. Tavarua, the uncle of one of them, requested the University to secure the removal of the hospital ban that prevented them from obtaining their clinical training locally, but this the University Council declined to do. Towards the end of the year a second point of pressure emerged with the publication of the report of the Botha Committee on Medical Training in South Africa. The committee, under Professor M.C. Botha, the Secretary for Education, had been appointed in 1937 by the Minister of Education, Jan Hofmeyr, in response to the demands for the creation of an Afrikaans medical school, but had been given the directive to look into the question of medical training for all 'the various sections of the Union's population'. In its section on medical training for blacks, the committee strongly urged that such training should be given in South Africa rather than overseas, and it recommended that

ultimately a separate medical school for blacks should be established, with Durban probably serving as the most suitable centre. Until such time as a separate medical school became feasible, the committee recommended that the Wits and U.C.T. medical schools 'be placed in a position to provide the facilities for separate instruction of these non-European students'. Wits, the committee suggested, should focus on the training of Africans, and U.C.T. on Asiatics and Coloureds. (6) As a follow up to the Botha Committee report, the Institute of Race Relations, which had its offices on campus, urged the University to re-examine the whole question of black admissions to its medical school. (7)

As a purely interim measure, the Botha Committee had suggested that, until separate facilities were available at Wits and Cape Town, a limited number of bursaries be made available to blacks to undertake their clinical training overseas. By putting an end to the possibility of proceeding to medical schools overseas, the outbreak of war in September 1939 rendered such temporising unfeasible and prompted Wits to agree to admit black students to a full medical training even before the question of separate facilities had been thoroughly investigated. Crucial in allowing this was the intimation volunteered by the Board of the Johannesburg Hospital that it was prepared to make the Non-European Hospital available to black medical students. This ensured that blacks might be admitted to a clinical training without endangering essential white preserves.

The Board of the Johannesburg Hospital declared its willingness to admit black students to the Non-European Hospital in response not to an application from the University but to a direct approach from Dinshaw Tavaría, now in his third year and anxious to ensure that he could undertake his clinical training locally. The fact that the war in Europe made it impossible for him to proceed overseas for his clinical training was the key submission made by Tavaría. According to a Council memorandum of 1944, the Board of the Johannesburg Hospital responded by deciding, without prior consultation with the University, 'to permit the attendance of non-Europeans to the practice of the non-European wards of the Hospital'. From the records, however, it is evident that the medical school itself was fully consulted. In the first instance, the Board of the Johannesburg Hospital turned down Tavaría's request for access to its facilities, but it followed this up by advising the medical school that it would consider admitting black students to the non-European Hospital if the University 'would be satisfied with clinical teaching at the non-European Hospital only'. At its meeting of 20 May 1940 the Board of the Faculty of Medicine resolved that it would be satisfied with such clinical teaching, and proceeded to set up a small committee to make arrangements for the provision of clinical teaching for black students. (8)

Ever since the passage of the 1928 Transvaal Public Hospitals Ordinance, the alleged non-availability of clinical facilities had been the ground given by the Board of the Faculty of Medicine

for refusing blacks admission to a clinical training at Wits. In practice, however, the Board of the Johannesburg Hospital had always been prepared to make the Non-European Hospital available for the clinical training of black medical students, as in 1932 when R.J. Xaba, who had already completed his pre-clinical training, had applied for admission to the Wits medical school. The Board of the Faculty of Medicine had nonetheless still insisted, in refusing Xaba's application, that it could not provide "an adequate medical education to Native students". (9) What changed in 1940 was not so much Hospital policy as University policy. The key consideration behind the change in policy was the realisation that nine of the University's own medical students, two in the third year, two in the second year, and five in the first year, would no longer have a chance of completing their degrees if a clinical training continued to be denied them at Wits.

When the medical faculty reached its momentous decision to permit blacks access to a clinical training at Wits it had not as yet given serious consideration to the recommendations of the Botha Committee. At the request of the Institute of Race Relations, the Board of the Faculty of Medicine had been asked to respond to the Botha Committee report at its meeting of 4 March 1940, but it did nothing more than endorse in principle the committee's recommendations. The Botha Committee was, however, to prove a major influence leading to the adoption later in 1940 of the scheme to provide five scholarships annually for African medical students at Wits.

A major recommendation of the Botha Committee had been that, until such time as a separate medical school for blacks was established, Wits should make itself a centre for training African medical students, and U.C.T. one for Asiatics and Coloureds. It was to develop Wits as a centre for African medical training that the Department of Native Affairs set up a scholarship scheme for Africans to study medicine there. The driving force behind the scheme was Douglas Smit, the Secretary for Native Affairs, operating in conjunction with Senator Rheinallt Jones, since 1937 senator representing the Africans of the Transvaal and Free State. At the insistence of Principal Raikes, students participating in the scheme were to undertake their first year not at Wits but at Fort Hare. "Our first-year classes in Medicine", he explained to Smit, "are full to overflowing and Non-European students would be very much better prepared tutorially at Fort Hare." (10) The scholarships were funded by the S.A. Native Trust, as was the building of a residence for black students at Wits, Douglas Smit House.

By 1945 the number of black medical students had leapt from nine, all of whom were Indian, in 1940 to 82, of whom 46 were Indian, 33 African, and 3 Coloured. At the end of the year Wits produced its first black medical graduates since the lone instance of J.T. du Rand in 1933.

To meet the new influx of black students, and their access to clinical training, the basic arrangement developed within the

medical school was for white and black students to attend the same lectures and laboratories, but with black students limited to the Non-European Hospital, later supplemented by the Coronation Hospital, for their clinical work. There were, however, some exceptions to this basic arrangement. Because of over-crowding at the Non-European Hospital, it was impossible to organise clinical classes in medicine there, and for systematic instruction blacks had consequently to attend classes with white students three times a week in the lecture theatre at the main hospital. When a 'European' case was demonstrated they were required to leave the lecture theatre. They were also prohibited from carrying out post-mortems on European cadavers; indeed they were excluded from the mortuary until the European cadaver had been sewn up and covered. As is evident from this, the University was very anxious not to challenge or upset white susceptibilities, and the full wrath of the University authorities was visited on those black medical students who infringed these prohibitions. When in October 1944 two black students were present in the Hospital Lecture Theatre while white female patients were being used for demonstration purposes, the Assistant Registrar issued the following reminder:

I have to reiterate to non-European students that by such non-cooperation as was displayed by the two students concerned they are putting the University in an extremely difficult position vis-a-vis the Hospital Board, and are jeopardising the facilities at present available for training. (11)

With the outbreak of World War II, pressure was also put on the dental school to open its facilities to black students, but throughout the war and after the Faculty of Dentistry managed to resist taking on black students. The dean of the faculty, J.C. Middleton Shaw, who was something of a tyrant, was apparently determined not to have black students admitted. When the new Oral and Dental Hospital was officially opened in 1952, it included no facilities for black students, and applications by blacks for admission were consequently turned down. The Senate, the S.R.C., and Principal Raikes were clearly perturbed by this, but were bluntly told by Middleton Shaw that it was too late to change the situation. According to Middleton Shaw, at the end of the war the Faculty of Dentistry had been prepared to establish a separate dental school for blacks but had been advised by the then Minister of Education, J.H. Hofmeyr, that Durban was to become the centre for black dental as well as medical education. As Middleton Shaw wrote to Raikes on 12 December 1952:

It was decided some years ago, when we wished to develop Orlando into a Non-European Dental School, that we could not train Europeans and Non-Europeans in the same school. You will recollect that developing Orlando into a Non-European Dental School fell to the ground as a result of the decision by the then Minister to have Non-Europeans trained in Natal.

If you do not recollect the correspondence on the subject I will let you have copies. (12)

When the Nationalists came to power in 1948 they soon made it clear that they objected to the two 'open' universities in South Africa, and that they intended to impose apartheid structures on university education in the country. From the outset, the University monitored Government statements on the need to segregate universities, and from the outset the University made it clear that it was opposed to the imposition of apartheid on itself. In 1953 the Government established a commission, chaired by J.E. Holloway, into separate training facilities for non-Europeans at universities, and it is the documentation prepared for this commission that provides some of the best material for a study of the University's overall policy towards black students.

The position in 1952 was that out of a total student population of 4272, some 220 students were classified as 'Non-European'. They were made up of 131 Asiatics, 75 Africans, and 14 Coloureds. Nearly half the 'Non-European' students, some 105, were in the Faculty of Medicine, followed by 54 in Science, 35 in Arts, 11 in Commerce, and 10 in Law. There were no Africans or Coloureds in the Faculties of Architecture and Engineering, but they did possess a handful of Asiatic students. Black students were officially excluded from the Faculty of Dentistry. Within the classroom, the University's general policy was one of non-segregation. No segregation was practised in respect of lecture, laboratory, and library facilities, and while all clinical training for black students was confined to the black hospitals, these hospitals were also used for the training of white students. (13)

Outside of the classroom, black students at Wits were free to participate in the activities of most cultural and scientific societies, but they were excluded from participation in sport, dances, and other forms of recreation and social enjoyment at the University. In this respect, the University's official policy was described as one of 'social segregation'. In other words, the University's policy towards black students was that they were here for academic purposes only, and were not thereafter to participate in the social and sporting life of the University. Apart from the use of one tennis court, black students were prohibited by the University Council from playing sports within the University or for University teams against outside clubs. As the University explained its position in its submission to the Holloway Commission: "The exclusion of Non-Europeans from this kind of social contact outside the academic sphere indicates the University's recognition of the special circumstances which prevail, in the field of social relationships, in South Africa." (14)

In 1952 the S.R.C., under the chairmanship of G. Getz, and instigated by Harold Wolpe, embarked on a campaign to remove from campus the practices of social segregation, but in this they met with steadfast opposition from the University authorities. In its official policy the University had all along gone out of its

way not to unduly ruffle the prejudices of the wider white society, and to that had been added a concern not to unnecessarily antagonise the Nationalist Government. But beyond that the Principal and Council, supported by the majority in Senate, generally disapproved of social integration, and were often hostile to those radical students who wished to promote integration on campus. As Principal Raikes, who was never more than a Tory paternalist, explained his stance to Professor J.M. Watt, who was considering the possibility of having blacks excluded from Wits, he believed the University's 'middle course' of "academic non-segregation, coupled with social segregation" was the best way it could help the white race "maintain the ascendancy while the Non-European is encouraged to follow at such a pace as he can attain". In his letter to Watt on 15 September 1952 he stated his philosophy thus:

Personally I reject both Apartheid and Negrophilism, the latter for this purpose meaning equality between Black and White. I reject them because Apartheid must lead to the slow strangling of the White minority - a process which will, however, show a rapid acceleration before very long - and Negrophilism because it would result in an almost immediate descent to something like barbarism. (15)

In response to a letter from Raikes on 1 July 1952 seeking advice on the question of social segregation on campus, Professor I.D. MacCrone, a future Principal of the University, demonstrated a positive hostility to the radical students who were promoting integration:

1. Like yourself, I deplore the increasing fraternization with non-European students which is taking place on the part of a certain section of the European student body. While some of this fraternization may be well meant and arise out of sympathy with the "underdog", I am fairly certain that a good deal of it is being deliberately practised as part of a pre-conceived plan and in order to force the University authorities to show their hand, as it were, one way or the other. I am also certain that the inspiration for this attempt comes from Communist or crypto-Communist sources from within the student body itself - men like Wolpe, Getz and others who exercise considerable influence on the S.R.C. and among a certain section of the student body. Nothing would please these people more than to expose what they consider the hypocrisy and pretensions of a so-called liberal University and by so doing bring liberalism and its works into disrepute among the non-European intellectuals while at the same time enhancing the appeal of Communism.

I mention this point not in order to sound alarmist but merely to ensure that the University authorities proceed with the greatest caution and circumspection in

this matter and not allow themselves to be manoeuvred into a false position where they will appear to be denying their principles and siding with the forces of racial reaction.

2. I am inclined to agree with your view that most of the students at the University fall into the so-called "middle of the road" group, who would support the University's policy of academic non-segregation and social segregation. In any case and for obvious reasons, the University must stick to this policy as the only sensible and practicable policy at this stage. It must, therefore, quite firmly and unequivocally resist attempts by the S.R.C. to change that policy. The only alternative policy, as I see it, is to exclude non-Europeans from the University altogether. (16)

In retrospect, it is evident that this social segregation at the University backfired on the University in its dealings with the Nationalist Government. While the University tried desperately to argue that for black students their extra-curricular contact with whites was crucial for the development among them of some of the "attributes of an educated person and a trained mind", the Holloway Commission was able to point out that the extra-curricular activity was so limited as to be of marginal benefit to black students: "There are admittedly groups of European students who have extra-curricular associations with non-European students, but for the greater part the two groups, namely Europeans and non-Europeans, do not have much to do with each other extra-curricularly." (17)

Attitudes among black students to the University's policy of academic non-segregation and social segregation have yet to be fully explored, but what is already evident is that black students sometimes felt that they were not always treated impartially in academic matters, particularly academic assessments, let alone regarded as social equals. The question of academic impartiality arises out of my research into the fate of the University's most famous non-graduate among black students, Nelson Mandela. He wrote the final examinations for the LL.B. on three occasions, and failed each time. After his third failure, in 1949, he wrote to the Dean of the Faculty of Law requesting that he be credited with all the subjects he had passed, and that he be allowed to write supplementary exams in the remaining subjects. The request was turned down, and Mandela as a consequence never qualified for the LL.B. (18) In following this incident up, I have gathered that within the African community the Faculty of Law did not at this juncture have a good reputation for impartiality. The allegation is that certain important members of the faculty were positively prejudiced against blacks, or more specifically Africans, and this was reflected in the lack of African graduates in law in the 1940s. As with black attitudes to Wits as an 'open' university, the question of black success-rates at Wits remains to be properly investigated.

NOTES

1. E. Brookes, History of the University of Natal (Durban, 1966),
2. The Open Universities in South Africa (Johannesburg, 1957), 31.
3. Rand Daily Mail, 2 Aug. 1919.
4. Council Minutes, III, 2 Dec. 1926.
5. For a detailed account see B.K. Murray, Wits: The Early Years (Johannesburg, 1982), 304-11.
6. Report of the Committee on Medical Training in South Africa, U.G. 25 of 1939, chap. VI.
7. Professor A. Hoernle to Principal Raikes, 7 Nov. 1939, File NS.
8. Faculty of Medicine Minutes, VIII, 20 May 1940.
9. Faculty of Medicine Minutes, VI, 3 May 1932.
10. Raikes to Smit, 11 Dec. 1940, File NSa.
11. Circular to all Non-European students in the Faculty of Medicine, 7 Nov. 1944, File P12/B.
12. Middleto Shaw to Raikes, 12 Dec. 1952, File B19/3.
13. "Commission on University Facilities for Non-Europeans-- Reply to Questionnaire on Non-European Students", Feb. 1954, Misc. Council/24/54.
14. "Memorandum for the Commission on Separate Training Facilities for Non-Europeans", April 1954, Misc. Council/57A/54.
15. Raikes to Watt, 15 Sept. 1952, Subfile 2 to P12/B.
16. For the correspondence see Subfile 2 to P12/B.
17. Report of the Commission of Enquiry on Separate Training Facilities for Non-Europeans at Universities 1953-1954, 20.
18. Faculty of Law Minutes, 14 Dec. 1949, Misc. F.L.S. 403/49.