

## CHAPTER 3

# Student inclusion and exclusion at the University of the Witwatersrand

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## Introduction

Since 1994, the higher education sector has been the focus of policy development and structural reform intended to transform practices that constituted a part of apartheid society, in order that this sector may both contribute appropriately to the development of citizens who are enlightened, responsible and critical (in a constructive way) (Pityana 2005) and address the development needs of society. Universities were expected to be vehicles of social redress.

The concept of transformation is not unproblematic, however, and understandings have not necessarily been clarified by policy documents. Lange (2006) argues that the White Paper 3 suggestion of 'responsiveness to the needs of society' produced a wide range of institutional manifestations varying according to individual institutional interpretations and related to institutional histories. In addition, Kotecha (2006) argues that transformation requirements that imply the replacement of one set of conditions by another within a fixed period – a set of conditions intended to bring equity and excellence – overlook the fact that South African institutions would also respond to ideas of transformation derived from the international higher education sector.

The existence of differing understandings of transformation was mentioned by one of the Wits university interviewees for the Student Retention and Graduate Destination Study; she suggested that with the changing enrolment profile in the university came a changed understanding of transformation. Of the tertiary institutions included in the HSRC's study, Wits belongs to the category of historically white and advantaged urban universities, with an established English-speaking liberal tradition.

Changed enrolment patterns are the starting point for a consideration of the manner in which the university is dealing with cultural diversity. Racial desegregation of the universities coincided with a move to increase participation in higher education. Increased participation from a broader range of social groups and classes was identified by the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE 1996) as one of the central attributes of a future, transformed, unitary higher education system. As a result, changing patterns of access to higher education in South Africa amount to one of the most rapid and socially significant demographic changes anywhere in the contemporary era (Bundy 2006).

However, access is more complex than enrolment, and is related to issues of institutional culture. In a review of the transition to a non-racial education system in South Africa, Jansen (2004) distinguishes between racial desegregation and social integration, proposing four levels in the 'migration' from one to the other. Racial desegregation is at the lowest level, increasing through staffing integration and curriculum integration to, at the highest level, the integration of institutional culture.

This chapter will consider information obtained from the Wits case study (Scott 2009) with respect to these four levels of integration. The focus is the extent to which Wits is dealing with the inclusion or exclusion of students from a cultural perspective different from the dominant institutional one. An examination of questionnaire responses has been supplemented with information derived from interviews with academics and administrators, as well as with quantitative data from the DoE's Higher Education Management Information System and from the institution's *Three-Year Rolling Plan: 2004 to 2006* (Wits 2003).

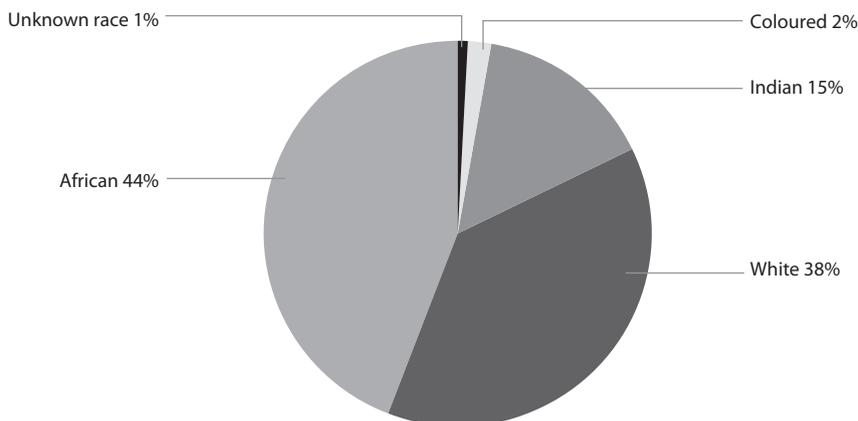
## Racial desegregation

The first level, racial desegregation, has become a legislative demand in universities, whose survival depends on the extent of transformation manifested in their student composition. But racial desegregation is as much a question of social justice as it is of student demography (Jansen 2004).

Although enrolments of Wits students under consideration in the Student Retention and Graduate Destination Study are as indicated in Figure 3.1, the targeted racial profile of undergraduate enrolment for 2004 to 2006 was closely aligned to the demography of the region, and had been achieved by the time of the study. The university operated a targeted student recruitment drive through its marketing department, initiated by the vice-chancellor. The strategy targeted students with a good chance of success, with emphasis on previously disadvantaged sectors. An important aspect of the recruitment strategy was the forging of partnerships with key feeder schools. Schools producing a high ratio of matriculation exemptions were identified and corresponding enrolment statistics monitored – on the basis of numbers of students from those schools applying, qualifying and registering.

There was a strong emphasis on the previously disadvantaged among these key feeder schools. Rural schools were also specifically targeted. While the service to these schools was reportedly of the same quality as that offered to other schools, there were essential differences in the type of service offered, since the disadvantaged schools have smaller basic information capacity. For these schools, the aim was increased matriculation exemption rates.

**FIGURE 3.1** Percentage distribution of headcount enrolments at Wits, by race, 2000–03



Source: DoE (2007)

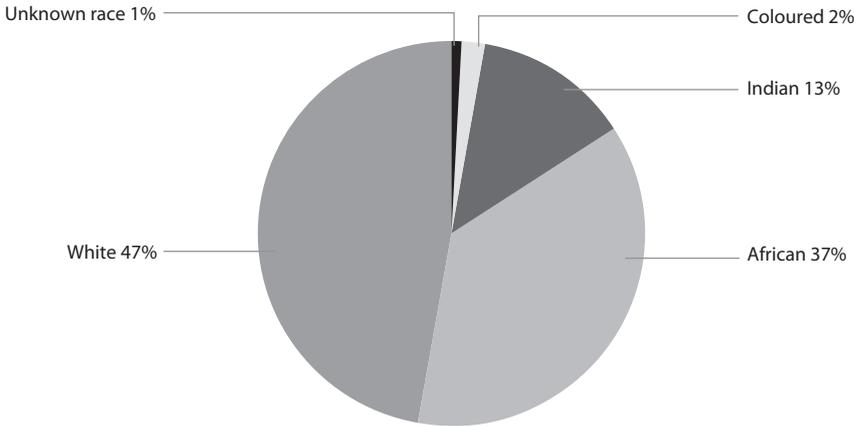
An important principle in university interactions with schools and potential students was that the university offered an information service aimed at improving the decision-making capacity of potential students as this related to their higher education. This consideration was regarded as at least as important as the marketing of the university itself, having significance for student motivation, which has been found to be a key indicator for student success (Interview with Assistant Dean for Academic Support).

Although the targeted recruitment strategy was driven from the highest level, by the vice-chancellor, support at the level of lecturing staff was uneven. While academic staff members were encouraged to participate in school career evenings that constituted a part of the engagement with key feeder schools, and many did so, participation was less than ideal. With the capping of intake numbers, and applications oversubscribed, the university was in a position to select those applicants with the best possible matriculation results, and as a consequence the need for recruitment was questioned by some.

Student admission is complicated, however, by the fact that matriculation is an insufficient indicator of potential success. Some who on the basis of their matriculation results should apparently not be admitted do succeed academically, and differences between moderately good and less good matriculation results do not produce corresponding differences in university performance. Decisions related to exclusions on the basis of matriculation results are thus difficult to defend, since they are made in the knowledge that a substantial proportion of those excluded have as good a chance of success as those who may have achieved slightly better. In addition, questions are raised regarding assumptions that can be made about levels of achievement, given variations in the quality of the learning environment across schools and considerations related to the level (Higher Grade or Standard Grade) at which a subject was taken.

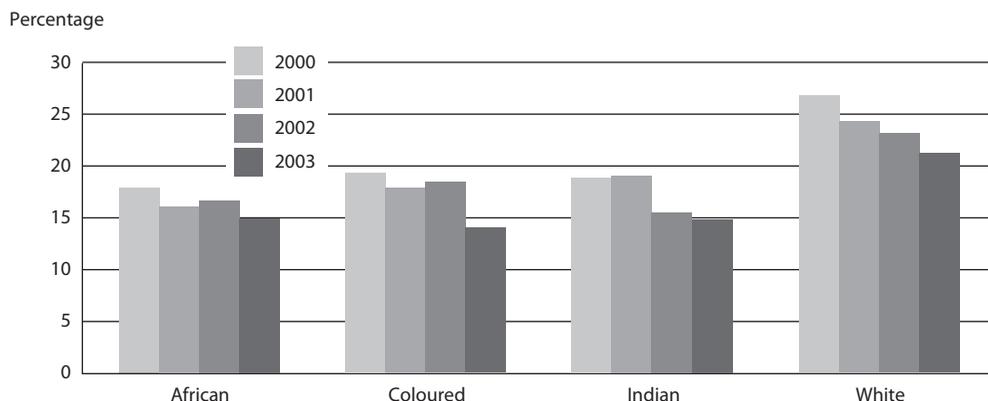
The capping of intake numbers increases the tension between the university transformation agenda and efficiency prescriptions imposed on improving throughput rates. With matriculation rates from previously disadvantaged schools likely to be inferior to those of more advantaged schools, transformation imperatives would favour greater latitude in the use of school results as an admission

**FIGURE 3.2** *Percentage distribution of graduates from Wits, by race, 2000–03*



Source: DoE (2007)

**FIGURE 3.3** Graduation rates at Wits, by race, 2000–03



Source: DoE (2007)

tool. Individual adjustment is critical at all levels – emotionally, socially, intellectually – in the transition from high school. School results are no guarantee of success.

The national disparity in graduation rates was echoed at Wits. The graduation distribution in Figure 3.2 shows a greater percentage of white than of African graduates.

Interviews with academics and administrators indicated that, as a consequence of achievement of enrolment targets, the understanding of ‘transformation’ in the university had shifted – from the prevailing situation, in which African students have a lesser chance of success than whites and women a greater chance of success than men, to one in which every student has an equal chance of success, regardless of background or individual difference. Specific graduation rates by race (Figure 3.3) show a decline for all races over the period of the study, with rates for whites better than those for other races for each of the years under consideration. The decline could be due to increases in enrolments which, between 2000 and 2003, amounted to growth of 26%.

## Staff integration

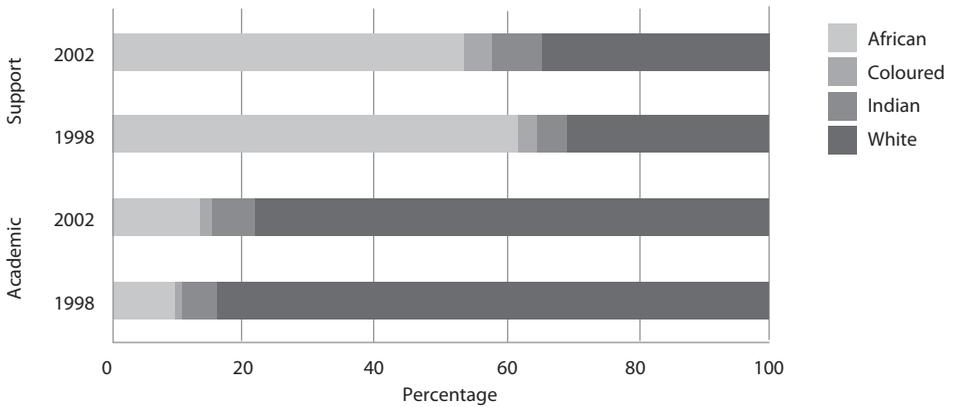
Progress made at Wits in the integration of academic staff does not match that achieved in respect of student enrolment. The demographic mismatch between staff and students is significant. This is of concern, since students ‘are without role models and mentors in academic and personal development’ (Pityana 2005: 10). The university staff profile during the period of the Student Retention and Graduate Destination Study is illustrated in Figure 3.4.

In 2002, whites comprised 79% of the university’s total academic staff, while Africans accounted for 13%. This is very much the same as the national proportions for 1995, as noted by Reddy (2004: 36), when whites made up 82% of the total university academic staff, and Africans 11%. This disparity is increased with increasing seniority, as indicated in Figure 3.5, which shows the situation for lecturing staff at Wits in 2000.

The staff racial profile for 2001 shows marginal changes in the direction indicated by targets for 2006, in which white racial predominance is slightly diminished. The targets for 2006 are illustrated in Figure 3.6.

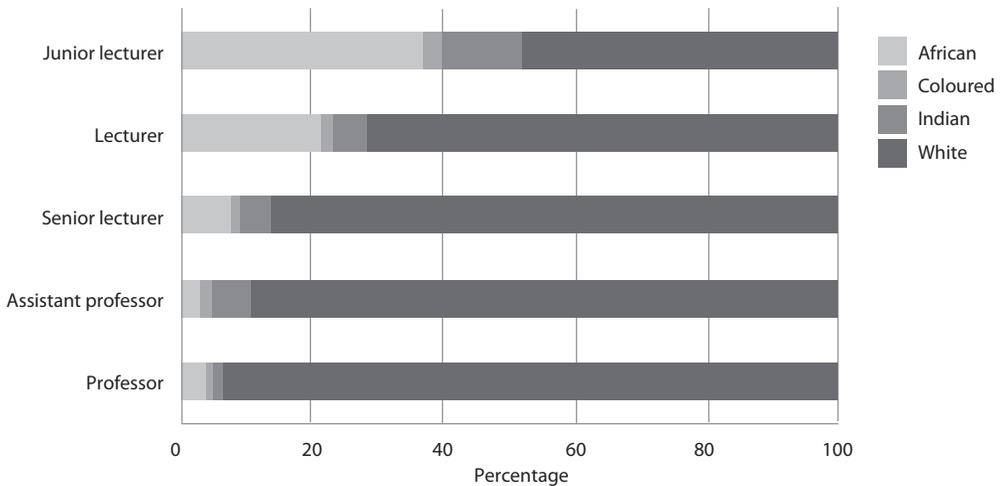
However, it should be recognised that rapid change at the senior levels of academic appointment is not readily achievable: senior academics with specialised fields of expertise and substantial experience take time to grow. In this regard, Wits is in the same boat as all universities.

**FIGURE 3.4** *Wits staff composition, 1998 and 2002*



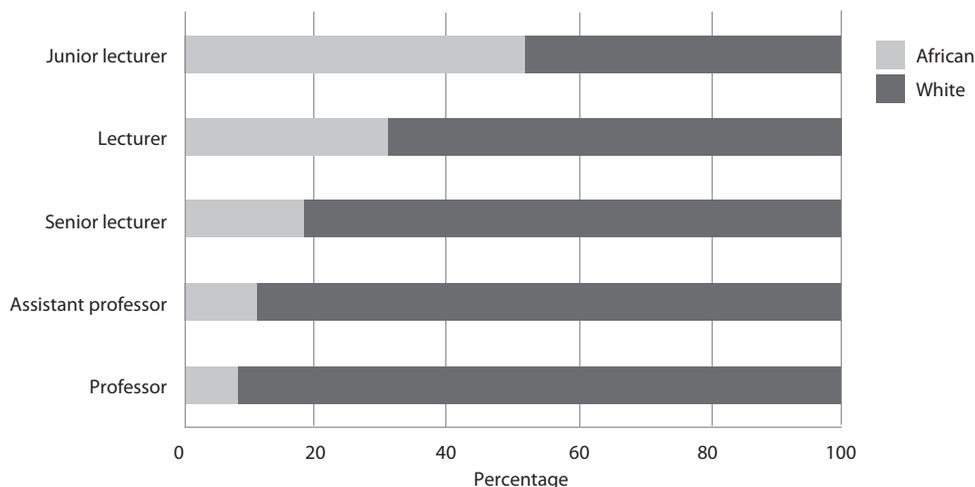
Source: Wits (2003)

**FIGURE 3.5** *Full-time instruction/research staff at Wits, by rank and race, 2000*



Source: Wits (2003)

FIGURE 3.6 Percentage African and white academic staff: Targets for 2006



Source: Wits (2003)

## Curriculum integration

At the third level in Jansen's (2004) 'migration' towards higher levels of integration is curriculum integration. The information obtained in the Student Retention and Graduate Destination Study in no way allows judgement regarding the extent to which the university curriculum reflects the 'experiences, histories, cultures and politics of marginalized, subaltern discourses as these relate to the majority of continent-wide residents' (Reddy 2004: 8). Instead, this section will focus on aspects of the university curriculum intended to provide specific student support.

Throughput and retention are of great concern at Wits. At the end of 2002, in addition to an Enrolment Planning Team, a Throughput and Retention Planning Team was established with the purpose of seeking strategies to ensure that all students had a reasonable chance of success. The university senate's Teaching and Learning Committee initiated the Success Rate Intervention intended to target courses with poor success rates in each faculty. The purpose was to reach a predictive state in which students at risk were identified early on, in order for preventive interventions to be made.

The university has a Teaching and Learning Committee in every faculty to analyse teaching and learning in the faculty, to promote teaching and learning practices, and to provide academic support for students. Academic staff with these responsibilities are supplemented in some faculties by assistant deans with Teaching and Learning, Quality Assurance, and Student Affairs portfolios. There is no central academic development unit, and so there are no central academic development policies in place. The lack of curriculum development coordination at a central level was identified as a key weakness in student support (Wits 2003).

## Foundation programmes

All faculties and many disciplines within faculties have been offering foundation courses, or extended curricula, to provide access and support for students who did not achieve automatic entrance points.

Extended curricula are of different formats in the different faculties. They do not constitute just a 'slow stream', but rather combine bridging activities with the standard curriculum. The extended programmes provide identified students with an extra year for their degree, with supplemented content in the first year that combines bridging activities with the standard curriculum (Interview with Registrar, Academic). These curricula provide a strong focus on the development of academic literacy, being embedded as they are in the schools and their programmes and disciplines rather than operating from a stand-alone unit.

Many of these programmes have been threatened by reduced funding and the capping of student numbers. As a result, there has been a move in the university to mainstream academic development programme techniques and methodologies. Consideration is being given to bringing into the mainstream core curricula specialised key resources and supportive teaching and learning functions, which were developed from those strategies introduced in the 1980s as 'add-ons' supplementary to the general curricula. In this way, a greater number of students will benefit from the strategies developed in the extended programmes, regardless of matriculation points (Interview with Registrar, Academic).

From a curriculum perspective, the pressure to mainstream the supportive strategies that were a part of the extended foundation programmes would seem to indicate a shift from the idea that those students who need such increased support are in the minority, and exceptional, to the idea that selected proven support strategies are regarded as part of the menu for mainstream students.

## Teaching and learning

From the point of view of lecturers, increasing pressure on academic staff to engage with development and evaluation strategies with respect to their own teaching practices indicates the intention of the university to achieve a broad shift away from practice that focuses on subject knowledge only.

Although independent and critical thinking would appear to be logically linked to a modus operandi in which students carry the responsibility for their own learning, many enrolled students from all types of schools are not responsible enough and need assistance in this regard. Numerous comments made during interviews related to the lack of a teaching ethic. There is concern at Wits that many students do not develop the required levels of responsibility without specific effort on the part of the university.

It was suggested in interviews that lecturers may feel that their students' lack of success is 'someone else's problem', and that this attitude is aggravated by the lack of recognition of the importance of teaching. The status of teaching as an academic function is lower in the university than other responsibilities of academic staff, particularly research and publication, which are thought to be more highly valued and more likely to result in career advancement. In an environment in which research is encouraged, academic staff experience difficulty in balancing their research work with their teaching. The most junior members of staff, or those with the least experience and the lowest status, are more likely to be given the responsibility of teaching in the foundation courses, while more seasoned lecturers offer postgraduate classes. As a counter to this, encouragement is given to academics functioning predominantly in the 'teaching track' to publish their research practice in this area.

There is also, reportedly, bad teaching, particularly where older teaching strategies have been used in the same way over long periods of time, regardless of the dramatic changes in the student cohort. Lecturers tend to overemphasise content and theoretical underpinning at the expense of a focus on study skills (Interview with Head, CLTD). It was suggested in interviews that lecturers are considered to have the ability to teach because they have been taught, and not because they have been taught how to teach.

As a consequence, the extent to which academic staff give academic support to students varies. Some staff are extremely supportive of students, others less so. The question was raised as to how prepared academic staff are for the changing nature of the student population, and to what extent university lecturers should be taught teaching methodology, which was not mandatory at the time of the study.

The Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD) at Wits has primary responsibility for academic staff development, as well as for the training of all categories of staff, including all levels of non-academic staff. Workshops are available to all groups of staff. A wide range of support is available for academic staff, including training mechanisms to help them understand the kinds of students they teach, as well as pedagogy issues such as teaching methodologies and assessment strategies, cognitive learning styles, postgraduate supervision skills, basic and advanced counselling skills, mentoring, diversity, and induction for new staff.

The CLTD, staffed part-time with students as writing consultants, initiated the Writing Centre, which provides support in writing for both students and staff. Workshops are offered, including those for academics to build writing skills into their courses. Although the Writing Centre is utilised to full capacity by students and staff, it is under-resourced (Interview with Head, CLTD). It was suggested in an interview that the existence of the Writing Centre tends to reinforce the remedial model perception of academics: that they can send students elsewhere to be 'fixed', and thus that students' lack of success is someone else's problem.

The main weakness of the CLTD programmes is that they are voluntary and dependent upon individual initiative to seek them out. The programmes are reportedly utilised more by younger staff. More senior staff are thought not to emphasise pedagogy, but rather to prioritise knowledge of their own disciplines. No tracking of CLTD programmes is done beyond participant evaluations (Interview with Head, CLTD).

Participant evaluations do, however, reveal that courses are well received. But their value may have been weakened by their lack of organisation into a coherent programme targeting long-term and sustained development. An added weakness is the lack of academic grounding in research into teaching and learning, and particularly into theories of teaching in higher education. However, a postgraduate qualification for lecturing in higher education is reportedly under consideration (Interview with Head, CLTD).

The university has a staff development policy requiring all new lecturers to be trained. Courses are on offer for new lecturers, although none are compulsory. New lecturers are supposed to be assigned mentors by department heads, although the policy is not implemented consistently. Courses are offered for mentors at different levels (Interview with Head, CLTD).

The CLTD and the senate's Teaching and Learning Committee constitute the coordinating body for drafting policy relating to teaching and learning and for disseminating exemplars of best practice in this regard. Whereas evaluation of teaching effectiveness was in the past voluntary and confidential, policy has been drafted to make evaluation mandatory, with the intention of encouraging increased uptake of development opportunities by academics. The strategy requires self-evaluation for every lecturer. Although lecturers are free to choose the evaluation method, over a three-year period a variety of strategies should be utilised (Wits 2003). In order to address challenges at institutional level, teaching, learning and assessment policies are being put in place. Attempts are being made to capture within a document the scholarly principles of the institution regarding university academic aims and values. A teaching code of practice has been drafted, in which lecturers' responsibilities with respect to supporting students' learning are defined.

By 2005, Wits staff development interventions included a series of credit-bearing workshops offered for continuous professional development, as well as credit-bearing programmes allowing for the provision of informal components to be taken up at different times according to staff members' needs.

## Students

Students' ability to think critically is seen to be paramount. Interviews with senior management of the university, however, provided abundant evidence that students' assumption of responsibility for their own individual study progress is an aspect with which many students, regardless of race or school background, struggle. It was surmised that those coming from homes in which there is strict discipline tend to overreact to the lack of overt supervision in the university, and that their academic progress suffers as a consequence. Schools across the board, moreover, appear to differ in the extent to which they are effective in preparing matriculants to be responsible and successful students.

Efforts have been made by the university to conscientise students regarding their own responsibilities within the teaching and learning process. This strategy began with university partnerships with the schooling sector, where efforts were made to support the development of students' capacity to make informed choices relating to their tertiary education. The need to formalise the teaching–learning relationship as a two-way process affected by student attitudes to their responsibilities, their motivation and their learning culture has been recognised, and the drafting of a student code of conduct for the university has been planned.

The establishment of the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) was an important strategy in the non-academic support of students' chances of success. The CCDU has a programme to sensitise first-year students to the unit's available services, and runs a course aimed at promoting adjustment to university life. Efforts are being made to formalise this course, and particularly to assign credits to it (Interviews with Registrar, Academic, and Head, CCDU).

The CCDU has an active awareness campaign targeting students who might need support, with posters displayed all over the university. A wide range of services is offered, covering therapy, advocacy, sexual harassment, a Crisis Centre, and Career Education and Employment Services.

A key weakness of the CCDU programmes, however, is their lack of academic status. The courses benefit students greatly, but are not credit-bearing (Interview with Head, CCDU). Student access to CCDU services is voluntary. Generally only highly responsible students take advantage of such services, and those that do, tend to utilise all of the available services (Interview with Head, CCDU). However, it is fairly common for students to wait until it is too late in the year for the support to be effective, or to wait for a crisis to occur before seeking out the unit. Some in this situation do not seek access to these services at all.

There was a strong feeling on the part of CCDU staff that issues of retention and prospective employability are linked to the levels of integration between support services and the academic departments. It was thought that if lecturers were to promote the CCDU programmes more vigorously, seeing their importance as complementary to intellectual endeavour, this would increase student success. Existing support across faculties in the university is therefore seen as something of a weakness. Since academic staff see students far more often than the CCDU unit does, their sensitivity to alarm signals would enable them to make prompt referrals.

Opinion in the CCDU is that there should be a compulsory fundamental credit-bearing course for student support integrated into all first-year curricula. At Wits, however, the support aspect competes with the traditional academic timetable.

## Reasons for premature departure from Wits

Information obtained from the survey of students who left the university in 2002 without completing their qualification included the ranking of given factors that may have contributed to premature leaving of the institution. Analysis of the proffered factors (31 overall) shows that the factor which earned the highest mean score was 'I was failing some or all of my courses and realised I was unlikely to pass at the end of the year' (2.8 on a 5-point Likert scale), followed by 'I did not have funds to pay for my studies' (2.6). Since neither of these is above the mid-point of 3, however, neither exerted a strong influence on students.

A breakdown of the top five factors by racial group (Table 3.1) shows that only two of the variables – administrative frustrations and failing of courses – exerted any palpable influence on students' premature departure from the institution: the former influenced coloured students (3.3), while the latter influenced white students (3.1). However, neither score is high – confirming the finding of Cosser with du Toit (2002) that students are prone to be more negative in their responses to negatively worded than to positively worded questions.

## Institutional culture integration

The highest identified level of social integration is institutional culture integration (Jansen 2004). Institutional culture is understood as the sum of the assumptions, beliefs and values that its members share, and is expressed through what is done, how it is done and who is doing it (Farmer 1990).

Interviews conducted for the Student Retention and Graduate Destination Study revealed a dichotomy of opinion on the influence of institutional culture on the academic performance of students. Some argued that, given the diversity of the student population at the time of the study, which reflected the demography of the city, institutional culture impacts on retention far less than it did in the past. Others argued that Wits has an alienating culture, leading to feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging, especially for previously disadvantaged individuals.

Jansen (2004: 8) emphasises the need to identify specific 'points of power' that sustain the status quo in universities if the problems of redressing racial divisions in education are to be addressed. He suggests

**TABLE 3.1** *Top five reasons for premature departure from Wits, by race*

Population group	Top five reasons				
	1	2	3	4	5
African	Lack of funds (2.9)	Failing courses (2.8)	Little self confidence (2.4)	No induction programme (2.3)	Admin frustrations (2.2)
Coloured	Admin frustrations (3.3)	Lack of funds (2.8)	Lecturers inaccessible (2.6)	Active social life (2.5)	Racial prejudice (2.4)
Indian	Failing courses (2.9)	Active social life (2.5)	Admin frustrations (2.4)	Lost interest in programme (2.3)	No induction programme (2.2)
White	Failing courses (3.1)	Lost interest in programme (2.8)	Active social life (2.3)	Little self-confidence (2.2)	Got a job (2.0)

Source: HSRC (2005)

that while higher education institutions are able to create diversity and signal inclusive directions at the levels of senior management and student admission, institutional culture is largely carried 'in the locus of middle management'. This level, which includes deans and heads of department, is where decisions relating to academic appointments are taken. Middle level management in the administrative sphere has the responsibility for processes of appointment, such as the placing of advertisements, convening pre-selection meetings and selection committees, and setting appointment criteria. It has been suggested that the extent of power at this level, located in the various faculties, is such that 'the very notion of a university having a homogeneous institutional culture is subject to persuasive critique' (Reddy 2004: 8).

## Conclusion

The profile across the four levels of integration at Wits in the first half of the decade varied considerably. It is clear that significant efforts have been made to advance aspects of curriculum integration in order to keep pace with the university's racially desegregated enrolment profile. Issues of teaching and learning as these relate to both lecturers and students are closely focused on improving the chances of success of enrolled students. With a significantly transformed racial profile of student participation at Wits, substantial resources have been devoted to bringing equal opportunities for success to all enrolled students.

That these support strategies are becoming part of the mainstream credit-carrying menu for students, with similar persuasive inducements for lecturers to shift their practice from one of subject knowledge presentation to increasing involvement in students' learning processes, is testimony to the transformation of teaching and learning practices at the institution.

Progress in staff integration and institutional culture integration is substantially less, however, having not been prioritised to the same extent. As a consequence, access and exclusion remain problematic for students, many of whom lack adequate role models in the university.

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## Interviews

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