



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Re: Office furniture removed as UCT anticipates protests

Good day,

Your article titled "Office furniture removed as UCT anticipates protests" (03 September 2017) refers.

Further to our response sent on 03 September, please find a more specific version addressing in detail all the incorrect claims as reported in an article.

Removed furniture?

The story incorrectly claims that "the furniture at some administration offices at the University of Cape Town has been removed in fear of protest action that could begin on Monday". It mentioned specifically the Centre for Higher Education and Development (CHED) and the Department of Student Affairs (DSA).

Both CHED and DSA have confirmed that they have had no furniture moved at any of their offices. The last time furniture was moved at DSA was in May 2017. We reiterate that this incorrect claim was not put to UCT for a response prior to publication.

Engagements with the SRC

The story also reports that "the UCT SRC released a statement accusing UCT management of undermining the need for talks to resolve certain issues plaguing the university."

The UCT executive has continued to engage with the SRC and/or student representatives on a number of issues. These discussions are taking place through various structures, including the Rapid Response Task Team, the Free Education Planning Group, and the Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission. The executive remains committed to these ongoing engagements.

Financial exclusions?

On the “impending financial exclusion of 23 students on debt” our Finance Department confirms that these students are currently on grace period. All students on the grace period were allowed to sit for first semester exams on the understanding that their 2016 fees would be settled on or before 31 July. It should be noted that the fees outstanding are for 2016 and were due on or before 30 June 2016. Therefore, these fees are 15 months overdue.

The UCT executive has honoured the commitment towards ensuring that all academically and financially eligible students are not excluded due to historic debt.

Some of the 23 students currently on the grace period were not eligible for financial aid and others did not even apply.

A total of 1 398 appeals from students with historic debt were considered by the Student Financial Aid Office. From these appeals:

- 935 students were successfully assisted allowing them to continue their studies at UCT;
- 370 students with debt received assistance to graduate (and some have registered for post-graduate studies);
- 93 appeals were unsuccessful.

The unsuccessful applications were due to a variety of reasons. These include applicants who are not in first-year or final year but did not get the 50% pass requirement set by NSFAS; students whose family income is above the UCT financial aid and GAP funding threshold (R600 000); applicants with post-graduate-debt; SADC and international students; and students with previous qualifications.

For the 2017 appeals, the total budget committed is R18.9 million, which is significantly more than the R1 million used for appeals in 2015 and R12 million in 2016. The R18.9 million for 2017 included contributions by three donors (R2m); ABSA (R2m); FirstRand Foundation (R4.2m); and UCT (R10.7m).

Workers benefits

The story also reports inaccurately that “Even more damning is the revelation that the workers who were promised full benefits of being UCT employees are without a provident fund.”

Our Human Resources department has confirmed that ALL insourced workers are on the UCT retirement fund. The HR department also confirms that staff are given the necessary gear to carry out their duties in compliance with safety and health requirements.

It is important to state that the executive of UCT and many staff members have worked tirelessly over the last year to address issues and to ensure the smooth insourcing of workers at UCT. The executive is still in negotiations with unions and workers on issues

that can be improved and will honour the ongoing commitment to resolve any issue that may arise.

But it must be made clear that the executive has already addressed multiple issues that were raised and that the conditions for insourced workers have improved significantly, with a reduction in working hours and even more significant increases in remuneration. In the process of insourcing, all staff were brought onto UCT's standard system of monthly wages, which is different from the previous basis of pay on an hourly wage basis. The insourced staff are paid an all-in monthly package that covers all shifts and weekend work, which is between 59% and 96% more (in pay classes 2–5) than before the staff were insourced.

In addition to the increase in pay, insourced workers received further benefits when moving from Basic Conditions of Employment (BCEA), which most companies offered, to permanent staff at UCT.

We reiterate that UCT was not given sufficient and reasonable time to respond to the questions sent on Saturday, 02 September 2017. The three questions raised were on financial exclusions, claims of understaffed and overworked staff members and on engagements between the executive and the SRC. These necessitated that we consult with at least three departments, something which could not be done on a weekend. And something that we explained to Vernac News in our response at least six hours before the error-strewn article was published.

We request that the inaccuracies in this story be rectified as a matter of urgency.

Regards,

Elijah Moholola

Manager: Media Liaison and Social Media
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5674
Cell: (083) 981 7770
Email: elijah.moholola@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za