



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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Crowe's derogatory rhetoric about UCT's Price ignores the facts

By Dianna Yach

Like every other university in South Africa, the University of Cape Town is grappling with a serious financial crisis, caused primarily by the shortfall in government subsidies. The higher education sector also must respond to the rise of an appropriately vocal student constituency calling for social change in the sector, such as insourcing, access to quality affordable education and a decolonised curriculum. These issues can be resolved with careful consideration, the will to effect necessary change, informed input from experts, consultation across the spectrum of stakeholders and the ability to engage with the various constituencies involved. Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price and his executive have demonstrated all these qualities in the process of steering UCT through the past two difficult years. They have not worked in isolation but have engaged with Council and other stakeholders. Considering the sensitivity and importance of the issues under discussion, it is not surprising that they have attracted criticism, and UCT welcomes the exchange of different views on the issues.

The multiple criticisms from Emeritus Professor Tim Crowe, however, rely on language that is derogatory and arguments that have little basis in fact. For this reason, there has seemed little to be gained in engaging with his arguments in a public forum, except to ensure that the correct facts were presented. But now that Prof Crowe is using his disparaging rhetoric as the basis of a no-confidence motion against Dr Price, it is necessary to respond.

Prof Crowe argues that UCT's austerity process will force the departure of core academic and support staff. The vast majority of the voluntary separation and early retirement packages have been taken

up not by academics but by professional and administrative support services staff. This follows an extensive consultative process that involved all UCT faculties and departments, to determine where financial savings can be made most efficiently and with the least harm to UCT's core functions of teaching and research. Each application for voluntary separation or early retirement was carefully considered on that basis.

Prof Crowe describes Dr Price's strategy as "at best, helter-skelter and, at worst 'equal misery'". He ignores Dr Price's communications to the campus community about the critical relationship between the austerity plan and UCT's strategic plan. Dr Price has said: "Most funding for new strategies comes from the reserves generated through the annual surplus, not from the operating budget, which is being cut. It is this surplus that has been eroded and will be restored through the austerity measures. The anticipated success of the austerity programme will enable us immediately (from 2017) to increase the surplus and thus to support a strategic fund of approximately R100 million over four years, hopefully more. Austerity, greater efficiencies, and new income generation are necessary to put the institution on course towards generating a surplus that can be used for strategic investments required to meet the goals of the plan."

Prof Crowe blames the decision to insource support staff as the reason for UCT's financial shortfall. However, numerous communications by higher education experts have made clear that the major underlying cause for financial crisis in the university sector is the poor state of government subsidies.

Prof Crowe expresses concern for the value placed on academic standing at UCT – this in a year when five more UCT academics have been awarded an A-rating by the National Research Foundation (NRF); and when UCT has again recorded the highest number of NRF-rated researchers in South Africa (514, against 481 last year and 293 in 2008). UCT's total number of A-rated researchers is now at 40 (up five from last year) and our total number of P-rated researchers is eight – up by one from last year. (P-rating is given to young researchers, usually younger than 35 years, who have the potential to become leaders in their field: a sign that a university is nurturing new talent.)

This year UCT leapt 50 places to 112 in the 2017 Best Global Universities rankings. Last month Times Higher Education (THE) announced that UCT and the University of the Witwatersrand were both ranked in the top 10 out of 300 universities ranked by the THE BRICS and Emerging Economies University Rankings report. UCT is ranked first in Africa by both THE and the QS World University Rankings, where it sits among the top 150 and 200 ranked universities respectively.

Indeed, it is because UCT values such rankings that we have programmes like the Next Generation Professoriate, to assist young academics with high potential to succeed in their respective careers. This is an example of how UCT is seeking to both transform and grow the academic sector while upholding the high standards we are known for.

Such an approach is more effective than a simplistic, law-and-order stance that only exacerbates tension on campus. Following a restorative justice model while engaging different points of view is the most reasonable way forward in the difficult circumstances facing universities. This is the approach taken by UCT's executive, with positive effect.

Byline info: Dianna Yach is a member of Council and Chair of the Alumni Advisory Board at the University of Cape Town

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Patricia Lucas

Tel: (021) 650 5428 Fax (021) 650 5628

Cell: 076 292 8047

E-mail: pat.lucas@uct.ac.za

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Website: www.uct.ac.za