



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
iYunivesithi YaseKapa
Universiteit van Kaapstad

Dr Max Price: Vice-Chancellor

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa
Room 101, Bremner Building, Lower Campus, Lovers' Walk, Rondebosch, Cape Town, 7700
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650-2105/6 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650-5100
E-mail: vc@uct.ac.za Website: www.uct.ac.za

UCT response to calls to support anti-Israel measures

The Palestinian Solidarity Forum (PSF) and the Student Representative Council (SRC) at the University of Cape Town have called upon the University's management to make a statement on behalf of UCT in solidarity with the Palestinians around the Gaza conflict. In particular there has been a demand for the university to:

- declare unconditionally that Israel is an apartheid state;
- support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign;
- not renew UCT's contract with the security company G4S; and
- call for the South African government to cut diplomatic ties with Israel.

The University community is distressed by the loss of life as a result of the conflict and we offer our deepest condolences to all the families affected. However, after extensive discussion, UCT management has concluded that we cannot support the statement and demands of the PSF and SRC.

The reasons are as follows. Firstly, while as individuals in the management team we all have views on the conflict between Palestine and Israel, and there is significant overlap in our views, when UCT management speaks, it is necessarily a position that it takes on behalf of the institution; it is read by the members of staff, students and the public as an institutional position. So the call to management to support the above is therefore a call to the institution to take a position.

UCT is not reluctant to take such a position when there is sufficient clarity on the essential issues, and especially when there is a clear moral imperative. But given how controversial and highly contested the interpretation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict is, including disputes over the facts and interpretations of motives, we do not think at this stage that there is a shared or even dominant view on these issues.

Does this mean we can do no more than maintain silence? The answer is no.

The evidence, from on-campus marches, to Israel Apartheid Week, to the stream of speakers visiting UCT to address related topics, is that a large number of our students and staff feel involved in or affected by the Israel-Palestine issue and would like their

university to show some moral and intellectual leadership on the issue. That, it seems to us, is good enough reason to engage.

The University's role is to create and protect safe spaces for controversial and competing views, and to nurture rational debate on difficult issues in accordance with the principle of academic freedom.

We also have a duty to provide thought leadership. We will initiate a project inviting essays from members of the university offering analyses of, arguments about and possible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Gaza war. In producing an anthology of position papers from across the university, we hope to re-emphasise the point that on the one hand the university as an institution does not have a single view, and on the other, that the university is a place where ideas, argument and reason matter.

Implicit in creating the space for debate is a position on the academic boycott. While there are many in our community who may support divestment, sanctions and other boycotts, UCT (through its Academic Freedom Committee) takes the view that academic boycotts are in a category of their own and should almost never be supported by universities. The day we ban people from speaking on our campus because we do not agree with their politics is the day we sacrifice our commitment to academic freedom and the ability to protect different, unpopular, and dissident views, and set ourselves up to repeat the errors of the Galileo affair.

Finally, the PSF and SRC specifically called on UCT management not to renew its contract with G4S. The information about G4S activities and an alleged record of abuses, both in Israel and elsewhere, is disputed, but UCT will conduct its own assessment prior to making a decision on renewing the contract. As is the case with all contracts, when this one becomes due for renewal it will be put out to tender and many factors will be considered, including the findings of this assessment.

In summary, while UCT as an institution is unable to support the call to take a stand on the specific issues condemning Israel, we uphold the rights of individual academics and students to do so and will facilitate the promotion of all views and serious debate.



Dr Max Price
Vice-Chancellor
University of Cape Town