



**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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VC's agreement upholds UCT core values

By Dianna Yach

Gwen Ngwenya's call for a motion of no confidence in University of Cape Town Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price is based on a largely erroneous understanding of an agreement signed between the UCT executive and students representing a group of protesters. The agreement is explained by Dr Price [here](#). This response addresses specific points Ms Ngwenya raised.

She refers to the agreement signatories as "unelected and unrepresentative students" and to "the lack of representation of the broader student body". The agreement does not pretend to represent the views of the broader student body but specifically to address some of the articulated issues which partially led to disruption on the UCT campus. It was intended to create a quiet space, after weeks of disruptions by protesters, for two processes: first, to allow for the completion of final exams for students in November 2016 (in which it succeeded); second, to create a platform for establishing a process to address a range of underlying issues that have fuelled protests on campus for the last 18 months.

The agreement makes clear that the Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission (IRTC), which will oversee this process, will call for contributions from all university stakeholders. It will allow for different voices to be heard. The terms of reference for the IRTC, its scope, modus operandi and its process forward, are now being drafted. The commissioners themselves will be

independent of UCT and the protesting students. All members of the UCT community are encouraged to contribute to this process – individually and in their various constituencies.

It must be noted that after the signing of the agreement, disruptions did cease.

Ms Ngwenya claims that the agreement allows “lawbreakers who have been party to violence on campus [to be] party to their own disciplinary process”. This is not true. The possibility of clemency has been agreed for 12 students who were involved in protest-related activities in February 2016 (during “Shackville”). These students were all brought before the UCT Student Disciplinary Tribunal, found guilty and sanctioned, which included some rustications and some expulsions. Clemency would only be granted on an individual basis (not blanket for all) if the students sign a clemency declaration admitting to their actions, acknowledge that these actions were wrong, commit to refraining from such behaviour in future and agree to abide by the university’s code of conduct for students in future. The clemency can be revoked if students are found guilty of similar offences in future.

The IRTC will assess each individual’s actions and context and determine whether the seriousness of the actions, the proportionality to the context, motivation and other factors justify granting clemency. This will involve the commissioners, not the students, assessing the disciplinary process that was followed.

Ms Ngwenya complains that there is “no agreed definition by the university on what decolonisation entails”. Certainly this should be viewed as a strength rather than a shortcoming: rather than imposing one definition of a term with wide ranges of meaning, UCT is seeking different views from across the campus, to gain deeper understanding of the issues. The university has called for discussion on what decolonisation might mean in practical terms, for instance for various curricula requirements in the different faculties. What the agreement allows for is discussion on this term. This strikes to the very heart of the academic project.

Ms Ngwenya says that “the university has not asserted its own values in the agreement”. On the contrary: academic freedom and the right of individuals to freedom of expression are very strong values of UCT. By establishing a process for an IRTC to take place, the university is creating a platform where all members of the campus community, including alumni, staff, students, unions and other stakeholders, can speak on the issues under discussion, free from the intimidation that has been one of the characteristics of protests and disruptions this year.

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