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Statement by the UCT Dean of the Faculty of Humanities on the so-called “closing down of CAS” and merging of academic departments

There has been some public speculation over the past week about proposals for departmental reorganisation in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT, and the so-called “closing down” of the Centre for African Studies (CAS). Claims have been made that CAS and all its courses, programmes, exchange links, intellectual activities and so forth have either been, or are about to be closed down, and that students have been excluded from discussion on the matters. This is completely untrue. No decision, administrative or otherwise, has been made in relation to any department in the Faculty at this time, and any decision that may finally be made will be arrived at through open discussion and debate within the faculty. A statement was made about this on 14th February but it appears that further details are required.

One comment has linked the alleged “closing down of CAS” to the so-called Mamdani affair at UCT in the late 1990s. This is a very useful connection, as the Mamdani affair has powerfully important lessons for us at the present time.

Professor Mahmood Mamdani held the AC Jordan chair in the Centre for African Studies in the late 1990s, at the time that a foundation course was being prepared for the teaching of Africa to first year students. A dispute arose between himself and other members of a curriculum planning committee about what should be taught on the course. University and faculty management (of the previous Faculty of Social Sciences) attempted to resolve the dispute by suspending Mamdani from the planning committee, thereby effectively denying him the opportunity to contribute further to the course planning. Mamdani responded by insisting that a seminar be organised at which the different viewpoints could be debated by the university community. Mamdani made a dazzling presentation of his argument which in my view devastated that of his interlocutors. Many of us still remember this as one of the most exhilarating debates held at UCT.

I believe this debate holds two crucial lessons for us in the present context. Firstly, that the use of administrative fiat to stifle intellectual debate has no place in a university setting. Secondly, that what it means to study Africa is fiercely contested,

and the academic project as a whole can only flourish if all viewpoints are enabled to contend freely.

Over the past year, a group of approximately 30 academics in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT have been discussing the creation of a new department which, if it were to be born, would lift African studies at UCT to a significantly higher level. This group of academics, from the Centre for Africa Studies, the African Gender Institute, Linguistics, Anthropology and Sociology, included three NRF research chairs, a number of highly esteemed professors and leaders of major research projects. The discussions were wide-ranging and intense, and provoked such excitement that academics from other departments asked to be included. In time the group came up with a proposal to form a new department to be called the New School for Critical Enquiry in Africa. If this School were to be born, it would be the second largest in the faculty, and would draw together cutting edge research and teaching about epistemologies and representations of Africa, heritage and public culture, archive studies, language and migration, indigenous knowledge systems, feminism and violence, land reform and democracy, and much more. It would lay the basis for an extraordinary flowering of intellectual work, and lift the academic game of the faculty to an entirely new level.

The following is an extract from a draft vision statement crafted by colleagues in the group discussing the new School:

“Key to its intellectual project is the conception of the New School as a space in which we negotiate the legacies of the knowledges that we have inherited. These are knowledges in and of Africa, but they are also knowledges which place us in relation to a conception of the disciplines, as a notion of global scholarship and global theory. Part of our aim, framed as a question, is to ask: what would it take to create knowledges capable of moving African-centred scholarship into the dialogic centre of global paradigms of humanities research? The new School sets out to be a research and teaching hub, a world leading institution of its kind, able to attract top students and significant research funding.” The draft vision statement went on to say that to achieve this, the new School will be guided by five main principles: **Locating ourselves, locating theory;** [taking seriously the way in which we are located, as scholars in post apartheid South Africa in Africa, and in the global south] **Working in and out of disciplines; re-inhabiting the global; practising theory/theorising practice;** and **working together, working in new ways.”**

The group of academics involved in the discussions proposed to form the New School through a merger of CAS, the Africa Gender Institute, Linguistics and Anthropology, with the yet-to-be-filled A.C. Jordan Chair as its leader and champion, in a two-stage process. The plan is to merge the departments under an interim placeholder name, the Department of Anthropology, Linguistics and Gender Studies, as a step towards the creation of the New School. This proposal will go to the faculty for discussion at the end of February, and again in March.

It is quite true that an important impulse towards this merger has been the problem posed by the size and vulnerability of two very small departments in the faculty – CAS and the AGI – and how best to support them. CAS has the equivalent of two full

time academic members of staff; the Africa Gender Institute has three. A larger, merged department would provide a more spacious and more secure platform for staff from both of these small departments to flourish; to protect and extend the important work that they already do..

What has this to do with the Mamdani affair? Firstly, if this new School is able to emerge, it will rise to the challenge made by Mamdani, to take the study of Africa studies seriously, and to seriously institutionalise it. Secondly, if this School is to emerge, it has to grow on the basis of intellectual will and commitment, and not be driven by administrative fiat. These departments are not being forced to merge through a top-down management decision - faculty deans at UCT have no such authority anyway. The proposals that will go to faculty forum have been developed from the bottom up, by the academics themselves who are most affected.

I believe that the proposed merger holds great potential for our faculty. Whether it comes off or not will depend on the decision of the Faculty itself, of Senate, and of Council. The input of the community we serve, both inside and outside of UCT, is obviously extremely important to us, and it is for this reason that it is important that it be based on the facts.

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