

Open letter to the VC

25 September 2016

Dear Vice Chancellor Dr Max Price,

The Humanities Transformation Committee wishes to express its serious concern over the university's response to the current situation on our campus. Over the past week, we have heard and witnessed divergent responses to the student protests. On the one hand, we have heard of negotiations towards a restorative justice approach to the students who have been expelled and rusticated through disciplinary processes through an institutional reconciliation commission; on the other hand, we are witnessing the increased presence of private security on campus. Our reading of the situation is that these conflicting approaches are fuelling an atmosphere of distrust between members of the UCT community and contributing to its polarization. We request that the university executive provide clarity on its approach.

We wish to state unequivocally that we support the call for a reconciliatory approach. The current protests can only be read in the broader context of the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall campaigns that took off in 2015. At the root of these movements are calls for a free and decolonized higher education system. The issue of access to higher education is not simply about demographics and financial viability but fundamentally about creating an atmosphere in which all students and staff are valued, affirmed, and identify with the university. For this to happen, the university must commit to an approach that fosters trust and mutual respect towards the advancement of social justice. Alternative mechanisms to the current disciplining and punishment of students must, with urgency, be explored in ways that restore the legitimacy of institutional policies and processes and the context in which these are instituted.

We submit that the university executive should signal a commitment to engage with students in a reconciliation commission and initiate this process without further delay.