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UCT statement on unnatural deaths

The University of Cape Town is not able to confirm the cause (of death) in any student or staff death. All "unnatural deaths" are subject of investigation by the South African Police Services and the outcome of that investigation is not communicated to UCT. UCT cannot conclusively confirm that a student has committed suicide. A number of students' death from unnatural causes are under ongoing investigation by the SAPS.

UCT has had six unnatural deaths this year (2017). In 2016, there were three unnatural deaths at the university.

Although we must reiterate that one unnatural death is one too many, we have looked at the frequency rate of unnatural deaths in the country in the 18-24 years age group. In these age groups, the country's unnatural death rate is significantly higher than that among UCT students. That is, however, not to suggest that attention should not be given to this challenge. But it might suggest that some of the measures UCT has implemented are helping to address the challenge.

UCT takes student mental health concerns very seriously and as such frequently promotes and communicates about the work of the Student Wellness Service (SWS) which offers counselling services, among other health and wellness services. Recognising the need for a 24-hour helpline UCT has partnered with the SADAG to offer a UCT Student Careline which can also be accessed by staff. Throughout the academic year the university's social media and digital platforms continually create awareness of all these services that cater for those in distress and notices urge students to make use of these services when needed.

The UCT executive has undertaken to prioritise the adoption and implementation of the mental health policy given the high prevalence of student deaths this year.

The Mental Health Task Team (MHTT), set up about a year ago, has already been asked to look at trends of student deaths and to better understand the profile of students who have passed away over the last five years.

The MHTT reviewed all of our policies and advised that we should increase services – both preventive and responsive. We have done that in a number of ways.

- We have two psychiatric nurses on duty every night for emergency call to any residences.
- We have a 24/7 SADAG hotline that students can call for free from a landline anytime they need some support. The SADAG UCT Student Careline can be accessed by dialling 0800 24 25 26 free from a Telkom line or sending an SMS to 31393 for a call-me-back. This line offers 24/7 telephonic counselling, advice, referral facilities and general support to students facing any mental health challenges or contemplating suicide. The line is available to offer support and advice to anyone who is concerned about a student who might be in distress. The line is able to advise and refer callers to both internal UCT resources and external (NGO, public and private) mental health resources.
- We have employed four extra psychologists in the SWS.
- The SWS has restructured its service to substantially reduce waiting periods. The waiting list, which was previously weeks, has now been reduced to a day or two.
- We have introduced a new immediate assessment system enabling student seeking help to arrive at SWS even without an appointment so they can be addressed immediately.

In addition, training for wardens and lecturers will commence soon. The newly appointed director of SWS will continue engagements at residences and across campus to create awareness around mental wellness.

All faculties, except the Faculty of Science, have professional psychologists and social workers that are available for consultation. Faculties, residence staff and other support staff are also approached by students in distress. Depending on the circumstances, these students are referred to the SWS and other counselling channels – such as those offered within faculties.

The SWS is involved with the prevention, early detection and treatment of all health and psychological conditions as well as the promotion of a balanced and healthy lifestyle. It provides psychosocial support and interventions to students presented with personal, social, family and relationship challenges.

The student counselling service offers predominantly short-term counselling and psychotherapy, with the aim of ensuring that whatever personal, emotional or psychological problems students experience, the impact of these on their academic studies is kept to a minimum and their capacity for achievement is optimised.

We encourage students and staff to seek help whenever the need arises. We also encourage all members of the campus community to look out for one another should anyone around them show signs of experiencing any distress. It is through the collective efforts and collective intervention of all that we can address this challenge.

UCT is of the view that more can always be done to support students experiencing mental health challenges. The university regularly assesses the services offered and the support provided with a view to making the necessary improvement where resources permit. For instance, in July this year UCT announced that the university, via the Development and Alumni Department, secured additional funding of R650 000 from an anonymous donor. The funding was channelled towards SWS.

We have done a lot and we can no doubt do more. We will continuing putting in more preventative measures as and when necessary to strengthen the support offered on mental health.

ENDS

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