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Statement by the UCT Chair of Council on recent developments

Following recent developments at the University of Cape Town, the Chair of Council Ms Babalwa Ngonyama has issued the following statement to the campus community.

From the Chair of Council

Update from Council on recent developments

21 July 2020

Dear members of the UCT community

We are living through extraordinary times and this is testing our leadership in multiple, unprecedented ways. Covid-19 is wreaking havoc around our world, inflicting untold suffering on our global community, disrupting our international economic systems, destabilising our societies and cruelly exposing the multiple fault-lines in our communities related to class, race, gender, disability and other inequalities. The University of Cape Town (UCT) as a microcosm of society is directly affected by Covid-19; a number of lives have been lost, casting a dark cloud of hurt and pain over us, as is the case in other communities of the world.

Likewise, UCT's resilience is being severely challenged. I assumed the role of Chairperson of the UCT Council on 1 July, 2020. Before that I served as a Council member for four years and as a chairperson of the University Finance Committee. While I am relatively new to the position of chairperson, I am not new to the UCT Council. Over the years that I have been serving on the UCT Council I have come to know and understand the institution well. I have also been deeply impressed by the selfless dedication of the Council members, the exceptional talent of the senior executive leadership, the excellent scholarship of the academics, the professionalism of the support staff, the astute academic leadership of the senate, the diligence and pride of the students, the steadfast loyalty of the alumni, the incredible generosity of the donors, the consistent engagement of convocation and the widespread goodwill of the general public.

I am honoured and feel privileged to be the Chairperson of the Council of our continent's premier university with a heralded global reputation. As one of the oldest universities in Africa, UCT has had to weather many adversities but throughout its long and complex history of close to 200 years it has not only survived but also grown in stature. I have every confidence that we will not only overcome the present challenges that we are going through but we will also emerge as a stronger university with a secure future.

The role of Council is to ensure the proper and good governance of the university. Council does this through recognising the roles of the many respective university structures, including the Office of the Vice-Chancellor, Senate, the Student Representative Council, the Institutional Forum, the staff representative bodies, the Office of the Ombud and other bodies.

The Vice-Chancellor has to lead the organisation with a clear vision. Professor Phakeng took office as Vice-Chancellor of UCT at a time of great change. Many senior staff members were leaving the university. Of the eight vacant deanship positions, only two were filled. Sadly, one of the Deans, Professor

Bongani Mayosi, passed away tragically within 27 days of the new VC's appointment.

Professor Phakeng has skilfully steered the institution to more stability particularly in terms of student unrest. In her efforts she foregrounded transformation, while prioritising excellence. Under her leadership, UCT has made much progress, which includes:

- UCT is the leading African university in all the five major world university rankings for the first time.
- For the first time five of the UCT's current eight deans are black (broadly defined). This is a move that bodes well for the university's transformation agenda.
- We are also confident that we will shortly conclude the appointment of a black African South African executive director.

These achievements are just a few of many and as Council, we are pleased with the many successes that Professor Phakeng's leadership has brought to UCT. We also respect her courageous leadership. The Vice-Chancellor and the senior leadership team of the university have also boldly responded to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, making commendable efforts to ensure the continuation of UCT's academic project under very challenging circumstances.

Furthermore, we are pleased with the commitment pledged by members of the executive team to work together, as a team, in the best interests of the university. As Council, we will not only support the executive team's efforts to carry out the university's vision, but will also continue to hold the executive accountable to lead the university in the best way possible.

There are critical issues that are presently receiving much media attention. This reflects that there must have been some oversight in our leadership or in the roles of many functionaries within the university. These matters relate not

only to the governance of UCT but also to the institutional culture of the university. Among others, I would like to draw attention to the following:

1. The Report of UCT's Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission (IRTC)
 2. The Report of the Professor Mayosi Panel
 3. The 2019 Report of the Ombud
 4. The university's executive leadership
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1. The IRTC Report

The IRTC was established in the context of the student and worker protests that began in 2015 and the responses of the university management to these protests. The report reveals many challenges related directly to transformation and to the institutional culture of the university. In identifying these challenges, the report also makes a number of recommendations. Council takes the report very seriously and is working with all the constituencies to implement these recommendations.

2. The Report of the Professor Mayosi Panel

Professor Mayosi's tragic passing is still being deeply mourned by the university community. In Professor Mayosi's passing we not only lost one of our leading scholars but also a senior leader of the university. The report on Professor Mayosi's tenure as Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences draws attention to serious concerns that the university must address. Council is committed to addressing the many painful lessons learnt from this sad loss and will give serious attention to the recommendations made in the report to prevent such a tragedy taking place again.

3. The Report of the Ombud

Council respects the independence of the Office of the Ombud and acknowledges the role of the Ombud as a safeguard against abuse of all forms, bias and other improper treatment or unfairness.

The 2019 annual report released by UCT's Ombud reveals concerns pertaining to institutional culture challenges, notably around the issue of bullying. We want to assure the university community that as Council we are committed to giving dedicated attention to all the matters raised in the report.

UCT's values are based upon respect for the dignity of all its members. Any conduct by any member of the university that undermines these values is unacceptable.

As Chairperson of Council, I have engaged with the Office of the Ombud and we committed to work together to move the university forward in a unified way, especially around enhancing the university's governance and institutional culture.

Council and the Office of the Ombud have committed to undertaking the following measures:

1. Expedite the adoption of the bullying policy
2. Strengthen the governance of the Office of the Ombud
3. Put in place more robust reporting mechanisms to Council
4. Consult with the university community on the best ways to institutionalise the reports of the Office of the Ombud to ensure that the executive, deans and heads of department engage more formally with these reports.
5. Institute with immediate effect monthly meetings between the Chair of the Council and the Office of the Ombud

6. Provide for the Office of the Ombud to report to Council on a six-monthly basis instead of annually.
7. Ensure that recommendations made by the Office of the Ombud are timeously and practically followed up and given the necessary attention

Acknowledging that the manner in which the report was released was regrettable, it was further agreed:

- a. To put in place appropriate mechanisms to deal with the complaints and allegations made to Office of the Ombud
- b. Respect the rights of all the parties concerned, especially the visitors who entrusted the Ombud with their complaints.
- c. To explore best approaches to rebuilding the relationship between the Office of the Vice-Chancellor and the Office of the Ombud, ensuring mutual respect for both offices.
- d. Council commits to keep the Ombud abreast of the outcomes of the steps taken as a response to the 2019 report.

Closing remarks

Council members are appointed to serve from various constituencies. Once appointed, however, Council members represent the university in the best interests of all its stakeholders. A number of current Council members may have served in the previous Council, but the beginning of each new term must be seen as a time to take stock and reflect on lessons from the previous cycle, both positive and negative. Council thus reaffirms its commitment to good governance to create an environment conducive for all our stakeholders to be able to maximise their potential in pursuit of our shared vision. We will build on

what we have done well in the past and have the courage and honesty to improve on areas where we fell short.

Council always strives to be as transparent as possible to ensure the integrity of its processes. Council welcomes scrutiny by the media but leaking confidential matters not only compromises the ability of Council to do its work but also damages the university.

Universities are precious resources of society and its people. They are platforms for development and innovation. Their contribution to the public good is immeasurable and their potential to elevate all is unmatched. As we move deeper into the new industrialisation era that's upon us, we have an opportunity to be vehicles for the growth that will drive the transformation we seek and a scaffold for a sustainable future. We should continue to create a space for ground-breaking research, to champion thought leadership, to lead relevant conversations and even provoke ideas that compel society to reflect.

As Chairperson of the Council, my solemn responsibility is to protect the integrity of the governance processes of UCT. I will carry out this duty without fear or favour. I will contribute in any way I can towards ensuring that the university that is handed to future generations after my tenure is better, stronger, more transformed and even more widely respected. This will be the reward that I will find most fulfilling.

Sincerely

Babalwa Ngonyama
Chair of UCT Council

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