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Speech by UCT Vice-Chancellor

(Edited version of the speech delivered by University of Cape Town Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, at a media conference held on 11 October 2018 at Mafeje Room, Bremner Building, UCT)

The University of Cape Town, like many other universities around the world, has a human skeletal collection that provides long-term safe storage of skeletons used for research.

It is not unusual for universities to receive skeletons for teaching and research purposes, with permission from the state. Usually these skeletons come to us as the result of a bequest – people who donate their bodies for educational purposes, or whose families do so – or as donations from the State.

Sometimes in our surrounding community old human skeletal remains are uncovered during development or by erosion of the soil. UCT currently has 1 021 skeletons. They are used for educational and research purposes in a variety of disciplines, including health sciences. They help us to understand how our species has adapted over time and to different environments.

The donation of human skeletons, whether they be of cadaver or archaeological origin, has always been tightly controlled at UCT, but deeper consideration of the ethical context of their collection has been a focus since the 1980s and research is now controlled by strict protocols.

However, early last year during an archiving audit of the collection, one of our academics in the Department of Human Biology, Division of Clinical Anatomy and Biological Anthropology, Dr Victoria Gibbon, discovered that our skeletal collection included 11 skeletons that were obtained unethically in the 1920s.

The very limited documentation for these skeletons indicates that these people died in the 19th Century. Nine individuals are from a single farm in Sutherland, Northern Cape and appear to have been removed by the owner of the farm in the 1920s and sent to UCT. These Khoisan people had been captured and forced to work as indentured labourers on the farm. (Sadly, this was a common practice in South Africa at the time.)

The records accompanying one of the male skeletons indicates he may have been murdered but there is no other information about the cause of death or who might have

committed the alleged murder. There are last names associated with some of these individuals, Stuurman and Abraham families.

There is no evidence that UCT staff conducted any research with these skeletons, although we cannot confirm that they remained undisturbed in the collection.

As soon as Dr Gibbon realised we had these remains a moratorium was immediately placed and UCT began investigating how we could return these skeletons to their place of origin so that they could rest near their families. The first step, of course, was to try to locate the descendants of these people in Sutherland. We were able to do so with the help of social development specialist Mrs Doreen Februarie of the Nosipho Consultancy, who is here with us today.

While it is impossible to undo the injustices that these men, women and children received during their lifetime, we hope this process of repatriation will go some way to restore the dignity that was stolen from them and to give their descendants the opportunity to remember and honour their ancestors.

As deeply distressing as this finding has been to us as an institution, we also realise that it presents UCT with an opportunity to revisit a past injustice, to reflect on and learn from our past, and seek ways to amend for past transgressions.

UCT has an incredible heritage. We are so proud of those who came before us in the history of this great institution and the many incredible achievements and inheritance that they left us. They have given us and the future generations so very, very much. We will protect that heritage and build on it. However, we have to walk our own path in further transforming the institution.

While many of our discussions around transformation at UCT tend to be forward looking and focussed where we want our institution to be, we need to have the courage and the honesty to confront our past and loosen its grasp on us. This finding presents a transformational moment for the institution – a moment in which we acknowledge and apologise unreservedly for an institutional mistake and ensure that going forward we never repeat a mistake of this magnitude and that we continue to forge an inclusive institution which operates under the highest possible ethical code.

While the university cannot erase the almost century-long period from when this incident first happened, we have been fortunate to have the opportunity to extend our heartfelt apologies in person to the descendants and do so again today on this public platform. UCT regrets its role in this chapter of history and is grateful for grace and understanding exhibited by the families affected.

ENDS

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