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UCT interim VC's first 250 days in office bring stability, equanimity

On 19 November, the University of Cape Town (UCT) Vice-Chancellor (interim) Emeritus Professor Daya Reddy marked 250 days in office.

Reflecting on this period, Reddy has emphasised the need to continue restoring stability within the university and acknowledged the UCT community's resilience and commitment to keeping things on track.

Reddy, who previously mentioned that he was 'extracted' from peaceful retirement to take up the role earlier this year, explained what persuaded him to step into the challenging role.

"The approach to me came completely out of the blue. But that being said, it didn't take me too long to decide that I would agree. I'd had conversations with various colleagues, some of whom were quite persuasive. I'd had such a long association with the university and was very concerned about the direction of events... Once I'd recovered my composure, I chatted with my wife, Shaada. That was the big thing because it was clear that this decision would turn our lives upside down. So, once she assured me of her support for me to make myself available, and I thought through the implications, it was clear to me that I should do this."

Reddy pointed out some of what has been the most significant challenges of his first 250 days in office.

"It had been put to me formally and informally that what the university needed, more than anything else, was to ensure that the institution functioned in stable circumstances and in a stable environment. Broadly, I saw that as my number one goal: to ensure that we had a stable, well-functioning executive, including the deans and the executive directors, and that everything stayed on course, particularly our academic activities, ie teaching and research," said Reddy.

In the 250 days under his leadership, the university has recorded a number of standout success stories.

“Research is high on the list of activities and accomplishments that we can feel happy and proud about. There have been several research achievements that have been very well reported on internally and beyond. The academic programmes and activities have also proceeded well.

“We hosted a huge set of graduation ceremonies in late March and celebrated 5 400 graduates. In July, we capped 104 PhD graduates and awarded four honorary doctorates. And that was so affirming. It was a concrete expression of the fact that our students have done well; that things have been on track.

“Another highlight is that during this period we’ve received some significant donations. I mention these as success stories because, after everything that has been said about UCT and after all the upheavals here, we have a very clear expression of confidence in and support for the university. And that augurs well for the future.”

Having served in the UCT executive leadership before as Dean of Science and stints as acting DVC, the experience gained in those roles have been useful for Reddy in these 250 days.

“I served for seven years as a dean, and in many ways, a deanship could be considered as a microcosm of the vice-chancellorship. I say this in light of our devolved structure, as a result of which deans have responsibilities that go beyond the academic and include finance, human resources, physical planning, and so on. In the case of the VC, in a simplistic way, that is the case as well. But the degree of complexity, the scale, the demands of the position, are just something altogether different!”

In addition, there is the level of complexity that derives from the external environment, with the VC having a range of responsibilities pertaining to other stakeholders such as the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Universities South Africa, civil society, the business sector, alumni and donors.

“UCT is a huge community of just under 30 000 students and 5 000 staff. It’s like a town. What I do find slightly frustrating is the limited extent to which I’m able to get out there and chat with colleagues and students. I try to do as much of that as I can. But it feels to me that I’m not seeing enough of my colleagues and our students and I continue to work on that,” he said.

Reddy added that 250 days was a good period to reflect on. “First, I’m certain now – not that there was any doubt in my mind – of what a good, fine, strong institution UCT is; an institution that has been through a rocky time. There is an almost contradictory way of looking at all of this in the sense that we talk about the fragility of academic institutions and the fragility of the institution’s staff during periods of turmoil, and that is so. But at the same

time, I've had good reason to reflect on the resilience of the institution and its people. And it's because of that that we are where we are now.

"The staff have done a great job under difficult conditions, and we must recognise the impact that this has had on their well-being, their health and their ability to function effectively. But they have come through.

"I'm asked very often about how things are going, and in my responses I indicate that most of the time I'm enjoying myself. And I'm happy to be doing this and I do find it rewarding. Part of the reason for that is the collegiality that I have experienced [and] the wonderful support from colleagues, right across the university," remarked Reddy.

The university has commenced the process of appointing a substantive VC, and Reddy looks forward to its conclusion as it would signal his return to retirement.

"When I stepped in as VC (interim), I did have various commitments, and put some on hold. Some I could not, and I had to see those commitments through, which has not been easy. But it's worked out. I hold various positions on boards, advisory boards and so on, both in the country and internationally, and I've retained those. I look forward to devoting more time to those activities.

"I'm also looking forward to getting back to some of my research activities. And I'd like to spend some time just staring at a blank diary, to remind myself what that looks like! And functioning without a routine, spending more time with my family," he concluded.

ENDS

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