

Press Release

For immediate release

7 November 2018



South African Institute of Race Relations
The power of ideas

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UCT becoming an epicentre for hate and intolerance – IRR

UCT vice-chancellor Mamokgethi Phakeng's [celebration](#) of an honours thesis which ended with the phrase "ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET!!" is symptomatic of the degree to which the university is devolving into a poisonous epicentre for hate and intolerance.

In July 2016, UCT decided to disinvite Flemming Rose, the Danish editor who had printed a series of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed, on the back of concerns that "unlimited freedom of expression" could cause damage "to the social fabric of South Africa." It was a disgraceful decision, all the more so coming from a university.

But it stands in stark contrast to the kinds of hateful ideas and attitudes which, repeatedly and often, are finding fertile grounds at UCT to grow and prosper, for the most part without repercussion.

In 2015, protesters wore T-shirts that read "fuck white people", and similar sentiments have been graffitied around the campus. Also in 2015, members of the Rhodes Must Fall movement chanted "One Settler One Bullet" as they protested a statue of Cecil John Rhodes and colonialism. In February 2016, student protesters burnt and destroyed UCT artwork and vandalised public property.

In March 2017, it was revealed that some students had been set the following exam question: “Write detailed notes on race and racism. In your answer, take care to specify the reasons for the impossibility of friendship between blacks and whites.”

In October 2017, students held a “blacks only” mass meeting in their quest to “decolonise” the UCT law faculty. In June this year, the UCT winter school programme declared that only “Persons of Colour” would be able to attend dinners, as they needed a space to “decompress”.

That these sorts of ideas are now finding their way into formal academic work is symptomatic of the university's intransigence on the subject, and its inability or refusal to take a stand in the face of a pandemic that is spiralling out of control and infecting everything. And that no less a figure than the vice-chancellor herself was willing to congratulate a student on a thesis that formalises hate, uncritically and without reservation – only in the face of a public backlash did she express any concern – is indicative of the present environment at UCT.

Ideas die in the face of violence and for a university to uncritically gloss over a call for hate and violence is anathema to its very purpose. Hate kills intellectualism and destroys the purpose of free speech – to understand and learn. But, then, ideas have been slowly dying for a while now at UCT, as violence, hate and intimidation have been given space to flourish.

UCT has been bullied into this position, and it has capitulated in turn. Its failure to take a hard line on the hate that now festers on its campus, its pandering to student unrest and violence and its refusal to recommend or uphold meaningful consequences for those students who break the law in the name of intolerance, has taught its students one simple and clear lesson: if you want to express hate, UCT is the place for you.

And yet, for all that, it cannot even bring itself to host a champion of free speech. UCT is an upside-down universe today, and it shows little prospect of right-siding itself anytime soon.

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