



**UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE**

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

10 March 2014

OPEN LETTER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE CAMPUS COMMUNITY

On Thursday a pamphlet was circulated on campus on a Student Representative Council (SRC) letterhead calling for the immediate resignation of the Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Professor O'Connell, and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic, Professor Bharuthram. Today a SRC poster called for a "no school day and tools down for all workers" and caused some disruption of classes. Unfortunately, the manner in which relatively few students sought to raise the issues leaves me no option but to respond publically.

Over the last decade the University leadership, staff and students have worked tirelessly to rebuild UWC's reputation as an intellectually rigorous university with the passion and skill to steer the institution on a path of financial recovery. Ten years ago UWC was on the brink of implosion but we succeeded in avoiding a merger with Peninsula Technikon and retaining our glorious struggle history and our name. We also moved from bankruptcy to a stable financial position and, despite the losses of key academic staff members, we managed to rebuild the intellectual leadership of the institution.

Staff at the time understood the challenges and while their salaries initially lagged behind their peers, they accepted annual salary increases below inflation until we were able to catch up and achieve external equity. We owe a great deal to all of these staff members. Currently employees, up to the level of deans, are paid at the 50th percentile of the South African Higher education market. This allows us to strengthen our intellectual project and attract and retain top academics to provide our students with an intellectually stimulating education. In this period we also arrested the declining student numbers and have since doubled the student headcount from 9 675 (2000) to 20 384 students in 2013. We have invested significantly in new infrastructure and are upgrading old buildings in our efforts to ensure that the physical environment supports our academic aspirations.

Collectively we have made significant advances which place us among the most productive universities in the country – a well-earned reputation which, if undone by public smear campaigns and factionalism, may take more than another decade to rebuild. Successive SRCs played a pivotal role in maintaining this strategic focus and sustain constructive engagement with management whilst championing the rights of students. The SRC has two representatives on the University Council, and it is unfortunate that a choice has been made to operate outside agreed frameworks and select aspects from past Council agendas and use them, void of context, in the public domain.

We have reason to protect the University and its reputation. Nationally and internationally there is broad recognition of UWC's contribution to research, teaching and knowledge creation. Recent statistics released by the National Research Foundation (NRF) place the institution 5th in the country with respect to the proportion of academic staff with NRF-ratings, with only 4 previously advantaged universities – Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand and Rhodes – ahead of us. UWC is also ranked 5th in terms of the percentage of staff with doctoral level qualifications, and 8th for research output in

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A place of quality,
a place to grow, from hope
to action through knowledge

the form of publications and masters and doctoral graduates. Our permanent staff with doctorates increased from 39% in 2002 to 52% in 2013. The impact of UWC's research in several subject areas over a cumulative period of 5 years (2007-2011) positions our university 1st in Physics; Molecular Biology and Genetics; and Biology and Biochemistry, and 2nd in the country in Computer Science. UWC is the only university in South Africa with two South African Research Chairs (SARChi) in Astronomy and a third Chair in partnership with Square Kilometre Array (SKA). UWC has increased its SARChi Chairs from 1 in 2008 to 11 in 2012, occupying joint 4th position in the country.

In spite of its lack of a medical faculty, UWC's research impact in Clinical Medicine compares favourably behind UCT, UKZN and SU. It is also placed in 5th position after UCT, SU, Wits and UKZN in terms of the average number of citations per document. It is a leader in multidisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences with a strong culture of collaboration. This is an impressive trajectory of accomplishments.

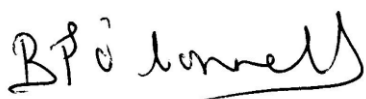
Most recently, the Minister of Science and Technology announced that the UWC proposal to host a Research Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Food Systems Change has been successful, and that UWC will co-host the CoE in Food Security with the University of Pretoria (UP). The Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities released in February 2014 in turn recommends that universities must be clustered into three groups based, among others, on their actual weighted research output performance for the past three years. The report proposes that UWC (along with UCT, SU, RU, UP, Wits and UFH) be placed in the top cluster.

The Review Committee Report further emphasises how a number of South Africa's historically black universities remain "trapped in a state of under-development", which significantly undermines their ability to provide quality educational opportunities for their students, with the majority of these students coming from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The report estimates that a total of approximately R18 billion is needed to address the resource needs of these universities and place them on an equal footing with their historically advantaged counterparts.

Despite these challenges, UWC has managed to position itself among the top tier of universities in South Africa, while still keeping its fees amongst the lowest in the country. The Report of the Ministerial Committee further states that, after analysing the 2010 financial position of all HDIs, "only the financial positions of University of Zululand and University of the Western Cape are described as strong". UWC has always been a transparent institution, and its committee structures continue to make it so. For instance, we have both independent internal and external auditors and have had unqualified audits for the last decade. This attests to our financial status and gives our donors, sponsors and taxpayers confidence in the achievements and possibilities of this university.

I therefore appeal to everyone to act responsibly, defend the integrity and reputation of the university and stay within the protocols which mark our democracy so that our actions support our vision. Our beloved UWC will be here long after we are gone, and the damage that can be done by ignoring UWC's structures and moving straight into the public domain does the institution a grave injustice.

Yours sincerely



Prof Brian O'Connell
Rector and Vice-Chancellor