

Politics Postgraduate Student Mission Statement

Preamble

This mission statement serves as a working document, presenting our immediate demands and concerns as the current Politics Postgraduate (PPG) student body. We recognise that the following is not an exhaustive discussion, but a highlighted list of demands that requires meaningful engagement. The contents of this document should be used as the framework for an open discussion within the Politics Department in facilitating a space that allows people to question the various ideological views presented in this document as it seeks to move toward finding a resolution for pursuing the decolonial project within the department and the wider university community.

In guiding our stance:

We have positioned ourselves in terms of values and principles set out by the signatories listed below.

We continuously acknowledge the role of the government of the Republic of South Africa and the private sector in dealing with the issues at hand.

We recognise the importance of numerous stakeholders mentioned and alluded to.

We recognise these protests as a moment of epistemic disobedience in which we need to acknowledge the necessity of committing to the decolonial project at a departmental level.¹

Subsequently, the aim of this document is to present our immediate concerns in illuminating the issues the department must take into consideration when using their power to put pressure on other important stakeholders for the outcome of positive and sustainable change.

Principles and Values

This grouping acknowledges the legitimate demands of protesting students and workers in engaging with the educational process of legitimate protest.

We express concern with the use of private security in this guarding of the gates of learning as counter to the project of education - most broadly conceived.

We value academic freedom and remain cognisant of an existing situation where not all voices have been afforded the same privilege.

¹ Epistemic disobedience refers to the rejection by knowledge producers of the role as the "other"; characterised by both de-westernisation and a decolonial position

We note with dismay, the prevalence of a destructive institutional culture which accommodates white students over those of their racially othered peers. This allows the privileged to dominate the learning space. Subsequently, it is important to pose the question: *How can Black students learn in a space that is designed to reject their thoughts?*

As former undergraduate students, we bring forward the experience that reveals the voices of Black bodies as dismissed.

As tutors, we have, and continue to experience that Black people are not afforded the same respect as their white colleagues from students. This discrimination is especially felt by Black female tutors.

Conversations which seek to pursue the goal of decolonial education cannot be dominated by any one voice. This requires critical engagement with the positionality that each individual holds in a space that seeks to nurture meaningful engagement.

We endorse a *culture of care* that is lacking in the department and the institution at present. Mental health and other such issues are not adequately acknowledged within the department. Students continue to suffer from these and as tutors, we do not have the necessary skills to support students in these instances. There is a need for additional tutor training that has a more holistic programme aimed at not only addressing academic issues, but also focuses on addressing issues of mental health. We are the front-line workers when dealing with students and therefore require sensitivity training to recognise and further care for the humanity of our students. The training we currently receive, particularly in relation to sensitivity to mental health and sexual assault, is inadequate. Tutors need to be equipped to be able to deal with traumatised students. We cannot defer students to Student Wellness as a defaulting action when it is well known that the service is severely under-resourced. The current practices continue to be problematic in a department that continues to operate as normal in an institution that endorses rape culture and anti-Black professionalism.

We recognise the physical and psychological effects of campus violence. Many students continue to face direct trauma as a result of both the events and systematic violence insinuated by institutional culture. This has been heightened in the past two years by the institution's response to protesting students. The department has largely ignored the impact of this.

Sensitisation to tutors' own traumatisation must be taken into consideration in moving forward in the aftermath of recent events.

There is a need for conversations around social responsibility and accountability, with a particular emphasis on socially engaged research and work at both postgraduate and 3rd year undergraduate level in recognising the existence of intersubjectivity.

Response

This grouping requests an official statement from the Department of Political Studies by Wednesday, October 12, 2016 which stipulates the progress the department has made in response to the university

shutdown and the associated issues that affect the students within the department. Furthermore, we demand an open discussion by Thursday, October 13, 2016 to clarify our position and provide an opportunity for the department to present its way forward.

We recognise how intersectionality impacts the experiences of students: there are concerns about the inequitable experiences of students in relation to various intersectional identities, this includes but is not limited to race, class, nationality and gender. We therefore need to understand where the department is to be held accountable for these inequitable experiences by the Head of the Department, in their role as a manager.

Discussions about decolonial education should not be thought of as a list of topics to be taught, but rather as a lens through which lives are lived. Out of this emerges the necessity to operationalize exactly what is meant by decolonial education. We call on *all* members of the department to put decolonisation into practice. This involves applying a critical lens to everything that we do (whether it be teaching, research or administration) and not accepting practises and views simply because they have always been so.

We acknowledge that we have seen some improvement in certain spaces: certain courses have revised their readings lists and changed the course content to reflect a more relevant and representative curriculum. We also acknowledge the support and engagement provided from certain members of the academic staff during this time. Furthermore, we acknowledge the tremendous efforts and support by the administrative staff in the department.

Sector Specific Issues

University

This grouping refuses to be made complicit in the University of Cape Town's notions of a "silent majority". This narrative allows management to forcefully open campus to this implicit 'majority' while there are students currently excluded through suspension and expulsion; as well as those protesting who were formerly brutalised and victimised by security forces while management had placed security forces on campus. We thus urge university management to seriously commit to engagement with the protesters and the greater student body, rather than solely using their efforts for bigoted "UCT News" propaganda.²

Student Wellness must stay open despite university circumstances to attend to students affected by events that have and continue to provoke distress and anxiety within the student body. We ask for there to be standardised procedures which embody the aforementioned *culture of care* when approaching cases of student traumas and criteria for dealing with said issues.

² University communication at present has problematically perpetuated a narrative of dangerous, irrational protesters, whilst simultaneously erasing the fear and harm experienced by those protesters and the people that support them. This narrative is steeped in racist notions of Black people as inherently violent and cannot be divorced from the colonial and Apartheid history of this country.

Moreover, there continues to be an insufficient support for student staff. Our mental health is taken for granted as we are expected to carry on despite how we have been impacted ourselves. We also find ourselves in positions that require us to engage with students albeit the institutional culture encouraged by the university is one of impersonal compliance - particularly in times of crisis.

Finally, the university, especially in times of crisis, needs to start a process where ableism is highlighted as a key issue and efforts are made to adequately address the needs of disabled students.

Department

The department must commit to a curriculum that deals with the postcolonial experience and prescribes a curriculum that utilises as well as critically engages with postcolonial and decolonial theory.

At present, the department provides a limited space for creating new African knowledge from Africa for Africa and place it in a global discourse. Course content should not only be based on lecturers' interests, but should also be geared towards producing African knowledge production pivoted in debunking African problems. The PPG body feel that they have not been given the space and support to do so. We strongly believe that we are the pioneers of African development and literature thus we must distance ourselves from the Western norms and culture that the department encourages. This should be implemented at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The next two weeks until Monday, October 24, 2016 must facilitate a process of decompression in order to address various issues related to decolonial education.

Furthermore, the department must review its accountability mechanisms and allow for transparency of departmental meetings. We deem representation in departmental meetings as an inalienable necessity. We believe the space needs to be open to PPG students, in order to give us a voice in decision making processes. We further call for our inclusion in the appointment process of new lecturers and call for a more transparent process of appointment; this in as far as, for example, the distribution of lists with shortlisted candidates is concerned.

Postgraduates

More effort needs to be made to encourage and support Black African students to apply for postgraduate studies. Furthermore, the department should make an effort to introduce a PG support programme for Honours students.

The department has not provided an adequate community of support for students who are interested in undermined fields of Political Studies, including but not limited to, African politics. Not only do efforts need to be made in order to consciously create an outlet for students to engage with these fields of study; interest and expertise in these undermined fields of Political Studies should be part of the criteria for new appointments in the department.

We deem it necessary to view the criteria for admission into all postgraduate programmes and how it has been implemented. The aim of this level of transparency is to examine whether the processes of

the selection committee in the department show due diligence in accordance with the University of Cape Town's admission policy.

We call for the tutor appointment process to be transparent and adhere to standardised criteria for employment. We note the following:

1. Using an equitable system of appointment is essential as tutoring salaries can be used as a financial contribution towards funding postgraduate studies.
2. Undergraduate students must be made aware of application dates and criteria for tutoring.

There is an assumption that tutors have the training and necessary skills to mark assignments. There needs to be more support for professional development in this regard. We note the following:

1. We need training that facilitates professional development and equips us with the necessary skills to fulfil our role as front-line educators.
2. The department should also make efforts to train and develop postgraduate students to take up vacant academic staff positions.

The department must commit to more frequent and democratic communication with Teaching Assistants and tutors.

Undergraduates

The undergraduate admissions process is discriminatory despite the continued action under the assumption of 'good faith' on the part of the admissions board.

Additionally, there have been issues of accountability and transparency highlighted in the postgraduate admissions process. Many students believe the problematic notion that: "if you know the programme convenor or if they like you, then you have better chances of getting into postgraduate studies". Admission should never be based on prejudiced bias.

In light of the university shutdown we ask:

1. How will the department account for deadlines that need to be met in order for students to apply to other institutions - especially those outside South Africa?
2. How will the department deal with instances where students do not have access to academic resources where they live?

The current system of extending assignment deadlines will not help these vulnerable students. In order for vulnerable students to catch up, submit assignments by the new deadlines and be in position to write the exam; tutors will need to host a series of workshops and have additional consultations. Furthermore, provisions need to be made for international students who require assistance with student visas.

The enforcement of Duly Performed status must be suspended and/or drastically amended for this semester and an investigation into the relevance of such a measure must be pursued immediately.

Additionally, all extension deadlines must be reviewed in light of the prolonged shutdown and late penalties must be waived.

Resolution

This grouping demands an open, department wide discussion on the issues raised above. We need to recognise the importance of intersectionality, and therefore need to include all involved bodies, in all levels of the echelon, and their positionalities in this discussion.

We thus pose the following as necessary measures to be adopted by the department:

For the department to present students with a plan for how it will engage with the various issues stipulated above and with all stakeholders moving forward.

Opportunities for engaged scholarship centred on the development of African knowledge that has a critical grounding in our world today.

To be part of the appointment process for new lecturers.

For a transparent admissions process in which reports reveal records of admissions for past three years. This is based on the allusion that the demographics of applicants are as a result of a discriminatory process. This process should be extended to all temporary appointments within the department.

For a two week period of decompression to reflect on the shutdown, the processes that led up to it, and the implications it has for our efforts to pursue decolonial education.

Request for a future three day departmental training processes for tutors in order to better sensitise us to issues of mental health as well as continuous evaluation from Teaching Assistants.

We have established a Black Postgraduate Caucus which engages with postgraduates from all departments within the Humanities Faculty. One of the main aims of such a body is to identify a way of organising ourselves as a holistic postgraduate student body and as employees of the department. In doing so, we recognise that the issues presented above will not be resolved as a static process. We, and the department as a whole, therefore need to create a safe and engaged formal platform for ongoing discourse between the various stakeholders in pursuit of decolonial education.

Herein signed:

Tatum Joseph, Ayanda Mahlaba, Sikho Luthango, Mamello Mosiana, Jody Metcalfe, Kyla Hazell, Mandipa Ndlovu, Menzi Ndhlovu, Nicola Doyle, Fowzia Davids, Zaid Lagardien, Timothy Geschwindt, Keenan Hendrickse, Lauren Roode, Chad Capon, Gianna Maita, Nicholas Golding, Ruth Brain, Niall Marinus, Noxolo Ntaka, Nomawethu Dumezweni, Sibabalwe Gcilitshana, Robynne Botha, Iván Suarez