



UCT Statement (footnotes not for publication)

An article in *The Sunday Independent* (“Emergency council meeting as UCT crisis deepens”, 12 April 2021) attempts to draw a connection between the tragedy of a student’s death in the Faculty of Health Sciences, and a series of recent, unrelated events at the executive level of the University of Cape Town (UCT). In effect, a personal tragedy was hijacked to present a distorted view of the wider management landscape at UCT.

Using the tragic death of a student as the leading point for an article that is a resuscitation of previous reporting by this publication is a cheap shock tactic. By reporting unsubstantiated allegations that the cause of death was suicide, the writer sensationalises this tragedy. One of the factors identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in helping to prevent suicide is responsible media reporting¹ – something that is lacking in the *Sunday Independent* article’s flippant references to this tragedy. According to the WHO, suicide is the second-leading cause of death worldwide among those aged 15-29, behind road injury.² The WHO estimates that for every suicide, there may be more than 20 other adults who attempt it. The decision to commit suicide is deeply complex. It involves a multitude of factors that break down one’s ability to deal with life stresses.

UCT staff work very hard to monitor and support students and staff members across the university, through the Student Wellness Services, Human Resources, Occupational Health and the Office for Inclusivity and Change. Counselling hotlines operate 24/7 and we work closely with health facilities in the public and private sector.

As a publicly funded university, UCT must be held to account for its actions, including those at the executive level. Higher education is a critical sector for the future of South Africa and the world. It is also highly complex and requires a proper understanding of its environment. But journalists also need to be held to account. There are internationally recognised, ethical practices for verifying information and building a body of evidence for reporting. Instead the article treats the personal crisis of a student’s death with a heavy-handed approach that amounts to nothing less than abuse of a tragedy.

END

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1045892>

² *ibid*