



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

7 October 2022

UCT's response to incorrect, misleading and unethical claims around governance at the institution

The article under the headline "Dark days: Accusations of capture and governance instability rock UCT" (3 October 2022) contains a litany of claims that are either incorrect, misleading or unethical. These claims were – curiously – either addressed by UCT in our initial response but our responses were not reflected in the article, or were not put to the university for a response at all.

The allegations in this article are built around information from "multiple current and former UCT insiders", "UCT insiders who spoke to Daily Maverick over the course of several months this year on strict condition of anonymity", and "allegations from colleagues who wish to stay anonymous."

Out of due consideration for the internal processes that had to unfold around this matter, UCT has up until this point not responded to the falsehoods peddled. The university wishes to set the record straight on the following claims:

1. "South Africa's top university has lost almost half its senior leadership team over the past four years."

Inaccurate: As per our initial response to Daily Maverick, the UCT Leadership Lekgotla comprises 30 members (including the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Finance Officer, Registrar, Deans and Executive Directors). Only 11 of these have vacated their positions over the past four years. This is closer to a third than it is to half.

But when one considers the fact that five of these 11 retired after having turned 65 and two took early retirement (which was in our initial response to Daily Maverick and was included in the article), it is actually just four of the senior leadership members who left in the period (the other seven would have left anyway due to natural causes). This would equate for just 13% of the senior leadership members who have left – a far cry from the "almost half" that is being claimed.

A mere cursory desktop look at South African universities (**Table 1**) indicates that the departure of senior leadership members is not only occurring at UCT. In a random example, a university which had a new Vice-Chancellor taking over at the beginning of 2021 had four new appointments to its seven-team executive in the very same year. To put it clearer, there is a university which lost more than half its executive *in a single year*, while UCT lost more than half *in four years*. In other example, a university that had a new Vice-Chancellor in the past four years made at least three new appointments to their seven-member executive team in that period. In both examples, there has been no headlines by Daily Maverick around either of these institutions losing “almost half its senior leadership team”. If the departure of senior staff is a signal for governance or leadership crisis, we should expect to see Daily Maverick speaking to anonymous sources at these two universities and we therefore await with bated breath another ‘investigative article’.

TABLE 1: SENIOR LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENTS AT UNIVERSITIES

University of Cape Town		University A		University B		University C	
Incumbent	Effective	Incumbent	Effective	Incumbent	Effective	Incumbent	Effective
VC	1.7.2018	VC and Principal	1.1.2021	VC and Principal	1.1.2019	Rector and VC	1.4.2015
Deputy VC	1.8.2019*	Senior DVC	1.6.2021*	Vice-Principal	2013	Deputy VC	1.1.2021*
Deputy VC	1.5.2022* (Acting)	Deputy VC	1.8.2021*	Vice-Principal	1.7.2022*	Deputy VC	1.9.2022*
Deputy VC	1.7.2022*	Deputy VC	1.4.2021*	Vice-Principal	1.8.2022*	Deputy VC	Pre-2018
-	-	-	-	-	-	Deputy VC	Pre-2018
Registrar	1.1.2016	Registrar	1.6.2014	Registrar	1.1.2018*	Registrar	1.1.2017
CFO	1.10.2021*	Dean: Stu Affairs	1.5.2018	ED: Finance	2011	EM: Rectorate	1.2.2020*
COO	1.2.2019*	Pro VC	2021	COO	1.1.2020*	COO	2017
5/7 (VC excluded from tally)		4/7 (Five appointments in 2021!)		4/7 (VC excluded from tally)		3/8 (Five appointed after VC)	

**Appointments made in the last four years (since 1 January 2018)*

Note: The above data only focused on the executive level at these universities, at which level UCT had five new appointments in four years. It does not include a broader senior leadership level (which includes Deans and Executive Directors), where UCT had 11 appointments in four years.

2. There is “a culture of fear and secrecy that appears to have taken root under the leadership of Vice-Chancellor (VC) Phakeng and Council chair Ngonyama.”

Misleading: These assertions are contradicted by the right to freedom of expression that is exercised by UCT’s Senate, comprising more than 300 members who are appointed to Senate to represent the university as a whole, and which was clearly demonstrated at the Senate meeting on Friday, 30 September – a meeting which is the subject of the very same article. In another example, it is for the first time ever at UCT – under the current Vice-Chancellor – that the Vice-Chancellor’s report is a standing item on every single Council meeting, providing a transparent and comprehensive update. At each meeting, this report is followed by robust engagement.

3. "Since Phakeng first took office in 2018, at least 11 high-ranking UCT executive directors, deputy vice-chancellors and other senior administration members have left the institution."

Misleading: Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Deans are appointed on five-year contracts and so, by nature of their employment, more likely to leave than those in permanent positions. In case of the eight Deans, there is a limit of one contract renewal (i.e a Dean can only serve for a maximum two terms – or 10 years).

A full analysis by the UCT Human Resources Department, which examined staff turnover across the senior leadership positions and which covers the full terms of office of the previous and present Vice-Chancellors, from 2008 until the present, shows that the number of departures during Professor Phakeng's term of office has declined in comparison with the preceding Vice-Chancellor's second term of office. For example, under the preceding Vice-Chancellor, only one of the eight deans was on a substantive appointment and the rest were in an acting capacity. It therefore begs the question why a 13% vacancy rate at senior leadership level is attracting this scrutiny when under a different VC an 87.5% vacancy rate at deans-level previously was not.

In our response to Daily Maverick, we pointed out that it is important to understand that UCT is an academic institution, and the departure of staff at various levels over time is inevitable, normal, and certainly not a new occurrence. To give some examples, two staff members left UCT to become Vice-Chancellors at other universities, while one relocated overseas.

4. "Executive Director of Communication Gerda Kruger was suspended by Phakeng, pending an investigation, on what are understood to be trumped-up charges."

Misleading and unethical: The Executive Director: Communication and Marketing is on special leave pending the outcome of a confidential process which is under the jurisdiction of the Human Resources Department. Daily Maverick has no basis for knowing that "charges" are "trumped up", and has a clear conflict of interest in making this assumption without any evidence, as is clear from the declaration of interests at the end of the article given that the staff member in question is "Maverick Citizen Managing Editor...’s life partner...".

5. "Kruger's replacement in an acting capacity, Kylie Hatton, has just resigned."

Misleading: The reference in this article to the resignation of a staff member who has served in an acting capacity is only for numerical exaggeration purposes. Bizarrely, Daily Maverick includes this staff member and the individual they were standing in for in their inflated tally on those who have left. This is essentially a double count to inflate the picture and support their 'exodus of senior members' narrative. For the record, this particular staff member mentioned in written correspondence that her departure was purely for professional reasons.

6. "Chief Operating Officer Reno Morar and deputy Vice-Chancellor Sue Harrison are known to be negotiating their exits..."

Misleading: UCT will give an update about the Chief Operating Officer in due course, in accordance with internal protocols. However, the university is not aware of any exit negotiations by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Internationalisation. Both these claims were not put to UCT for a response.

7. "...while Registrar Royston Pillay has been on long bouts of sick leave."

Unethical: The Registrar has a right to privacy regarding his personal health, and this has been violated by Daily Maverick. The inclusion of this statement is intended to imply, without any evidence, that the university is somehow responsible for the Registrar's medical condition.

8. "This paranoia has led Phakeng to increasingly centralise power around her office, bringing both the Finance and Human Resources heads closer to her orbit — both metaphorically and physically: the head of Finance is now based within the VC's office — than has previously been the case for vice-chancellors."

Incorrect: The university's Chief Financial Officer leads the Finance Department and is not based in the VC's office. As with many organisations, he reports directly to the Vice-Chancellor, as the CEO of the university. The process of having the CFO working closer with the Vice-Chancellor was in fact initiated under the tenure of the previous incumbent. One of the many reasons behind this is because sustainability is one of the three pillars of the current VC's vision, along with transformation and excellence. Given the current economic climate and the funding challenges in higher education, financial sustainability is one of the focus areas, resulting in the VC having to work more closely with the finance department.

The Executive Director: Human Resources continues to report to the Chief Operating Officer, and not to the Vice-Chancellor.

The claim that Professor Phakeng had 'centralised power around her office' was put to UCT as a sweeping claim without any specific reference. Only in the article did Daily Maverick make specific reference to the Chief Financial Officer and Executive Director: Human Resources.

9. "In the case of departed deputy vice-chancellor Loretta Feris, a brown woman, she was replaced in her transformation role in April 2021 by a 69-year-old white British man (Martin Hall) championed by Phakeng. The two were paid overlapping salaries of around R2-million annually for a period while Hall acted in the role."

Incorrect: The Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Transformation was replaced by Professor Elelwani Ramugondo. Emeritus Professor Martin Hall, a South African citizen and former Deputy Vice-Chancellor at UCT, was appointed in an acting position, which ended on 30 June.

10. "The process that led to my stepping down was initiated by the Chairperson of Council... My first conversation with the Chair of Council about my future at UCT took place on 3 January 2022. In that conversation the Chairperson

conveyed to me that the relationship between the VC and me had broken down and that my tenure could not go beyond 2022.”

Misleading: The meeting between the Chair of Council and the former DVC: Teaching and Learning on 3 January 2022 was called by the Chair of Council to discuss the renewal of the Vice-Chancellor’s contract, not the renewal of the former DVC: Teaching and Learning’s contract.

11. In addition to these legitimate challenges, however, Phakeng also has some vocal and powerful supporters — notably, the Economic Freedom Fighters — who have promoted the framing of her tenure at UCT as one that only racists would criticise.

Mischievous: The Vice-Chancellor received congratulatory letters and/or messages from a number of political parties, including the ANC, DA and EFF; as well as many other organisations, professional bodies and structures. Some of them expressed similar sentiment to what is being attributed to the EFF in this article. It is therefore not clear why Daily Maverick decided to selectively single out and highlight only the message from the EFF.

12. “The catastrophic fire which raged through UCT in April 2021, after starting on the mountainside bordering the campus, destroyed the UCT library’s historic Jagger Reading Room, housing irreplaceable book collections and archival material. Phakeng has since spoken of the need to “rebuild and re-imagine the Jagger”, in service of which “imaginarium workshops” hosted by UCT’s Futures Think Tank were held with multiple different “stakeholders”, including primary school students — seemingly on the basis that they may one day attend UCT and use the library. “Interesting” ideas emerging from the workshops, according to a UCT update in August 2022, have included “knocking the entire building down and replacing it with a garden that has the best possible wifi”. The same UCT report specified that an idea favoured by Phakeng was to have an area “where people can just sit and relax while playing with Lego blocks”.

Misleading: The Imaginarium Workshops were organised by the Futures Think Tank, comprising leading academics in design fields and coordinated by the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment with the express intention of bringing as many diverse views as possible into conceptualising the rebuilding of the campus after the fire. The distortion of this exercise by Daily Maverick is clearly intended to create a different and misleading impression. This claim was not put to UCT for a response.

13. “...the fact that the normal tender process for projects of this nature was criticised by one of the project leaders as “very strict” and “very narrow”, and not sufficiently “inclusive”. An academic wrote in response: “Good governance consists of ‘very strict’ tender processes guided by leaders who are the relevant experts”.

Misleading: UCT has well defined tender processes that conform to best practice standards, fall under the governance of the Department of Finance and are subject to audit. The inclusion of this anecdote is clearly intended to create an implication of maleficence where none exists. This claim was not put to UCT for a response.

In conclusion, it is perhaps telling that in a single article that is purported to be a result of 'investigative journalism', there can be such a myriad of incorrect, misleading or unethical concerns. The article is based on a number of anonymous statements, lists unnamed reports; and makes reference to a Senate meeting and a leaked letter by a staff member – which had untested allegations but clearly Daily Maverick has taken as 'gospel' truth – something which is concerning and was illustrated in their line of questioning when they stated as fact, in relation to the contents of the letter referred to, that "the UCT Council Chair deliberately mislead Senate".

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Elijah Moholola

Spokesperson
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town