

From the Chair of Council

Announcing my resignation from the UCT Council

22 May 2023

Dear members of the UCT community

I write to announce that, after thoughtful consideration and deep and thorough reflection, I have decided to step down as Chair and member of Council of the University of Cape Town (UCT).

This decision, which was not a light one, will come into effect immediately.

It was taken considering my unreserved commitment expressed when taking up this role and during my tenure – which was and is to put the interests of the institution first and foremost at all times. I have also taken this decision having considered the impact of the current circumstances on my wellness and health.

You will be well aware that late last year Council put an independent investigation panel in place to look into governance-related issues at the university.

I wish to also state, as I always have, that I remain committed to the work of the panel and I have always been unwavering in my willingness to appear before and cooperate fully with the panel.

As part of the panel's ongoing work, I was invited and also informed that there were allegations made against me by some individuals who had appeared before the panel. It is one thing to focus on improving governance at UCT, it is a completely different matter to use the process in an attempt to lay blame.

As part of the process and in the interest of procedural fairness but also to ensure efficiency in how the claims made against me are addressed, I requested that I be furnished with the statements of the individuals beforehand. The request was made so that I could thoroughly respond to them and be afforded an adequate opportunity to address them. I also requested that I be allowed to cross examine the witnesses as part of testing the allegations against me. I was not afforded that courtesy.

It is important for any person appearing before the panel who needs to respond to claims against them to be given access to any statements or evidence presented by those making the claims against them. Unfortunately, the panel has been unwilling to grant me this opportunity, which conflicts with a basic tenet of procedural fairness.

In response to this, I requested the Western Cape High Court to decide on the fairness of the process and the nature and extent of the panel's powers under the revised terms of reference, the Institutional Statute and the Higher Education Act. This prompted the panel to release a pre-emptive interim report to Council, recommending that steps be taken to remove me as Chair.

As you are all aware, we as a university traversed a very difficult period since late 2022 until the first few months of this year. We have jointly with all the relevant stakeholders, worked tirelessly towards bringing the calm and stability that currently prevails.

We have spared no effort in ensuring that the governance-related issues are addressed, albeit that the process remains ongoing, and ensuring that the academic project proceeds and that the university continues to take its rightful place as a leading university in Africa.

Taking up this role is one that provided me the opportunity to serve South Africa, and the many leaders and young minds that have walked through our doors. It is a role that required selfless servitude towards building a better South Africa. It would be a disservice to see a situation where the university returns to the days of instability or sections within the university once again becoming polarised by this matter. It is for this reason that I have concluded that it was best for me to resign and deal with this matter outside Council through the available legal mechanisms. My hope is that this will enable this matter to receive the requisite attention while the academic project continues. It is important that the climate and environment of stability is maintained at the university.

Pending the resolution of the contested issues, I remain willing to cooperate with the work of the panel as it presents UCT with an opportunity to address the challenges that beset the university. What is important is that fairness, transparency, justice and due process prevails.

It is pleasing that during my tenure, the university was able to deal with some huge challenges, and has continued to rise globally. First, we had to navigate the monumental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with the rapid ramping up of virtual lectures and online interactions, as well as providing our students with assistance and wellness support. Then came the fire in April 2021, where the university suffered significant damage not only in infrastructure, but also in records of historic significance. This required focused and dedicated leadership together with the full leadership of the university.

During this period, UCT also launched the landmark Online High School together with Valentre Institute. We have continued to embark on the vision to unleash potential and create a fair and just society. We saw recently the university continuing to take its rightful place as a leading institution on the continent, as evidenced by UCT retaining its top spot on the Centre for World

University Rankings (CWUR). This is something to be proud of, and a cause for celebration. Even in trying times, the academic project remains a shining light and success.

The CWUR ranking meant that UCT remained the top ranked university in Africa on all five major global rankings. In October 2022, UCT climbed 23 places globally on the World University Rankings published by Times Higher Education, sitting in 160th place. Last year, UCT took the continent's top place in the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings, Shanghai Ranking's Academic Ranking of World Universities and US News & World Report Best Global Universities Rankings.

I remain grateful for the opportunity to have been part of the leadership of this great university, and hope that my contribution during the two terms I served on Council has gone some way towards elevating UCT to higher levels in the higher education landscape. We must protect the integrity of this beloved institution, as difficult as it may be. It has been an honour to serve the University of Cape Town wholeheartedly.

Sincerely

Babalwa Ngonyama, CA (SA), MBA
Chair of UCT Council