

UWC NEEDS TO SEEK PEACEFUL SOLUTIONS

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I ATTENDED South Peninsula High School in Old Kendal Road, Diep River and matriculated there in 1971.

Apartheid prevented me from attending UCT closer to my home in Lansdowne.

Education was segregated and most resources went to “white” schools, colleges and universities.

I was classified as a “Coloured” and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) was where I was designated to attend and study a B.Sc in Zoology and Botany.

Those of us who were there between 1960 and the 1990s know how oppressive the institution was.

Many of my comrades, due to political pressure from the then UWC authorities, left the institution. Many of them were the best intellectuals of the time.

They saw, as part of their personal and political mission, to change the institution and the country to one filled with human freedom.

UWC should honour these students. This will go a long way in healing the wounds of the past. I think of leaders like Henry Isaacs, Mackie Kleinschmidt and Alan Liebenberg, to name a few of the great student leaders.

Under the late Professor Jakes Gerwel, many progressive changes happened at UWC. It became known as the University of the Left and encouraged students to speak their minds, critically.

Unfortunately, since the departure of the late Prof Gerwel, the University of the Left has shifted.

Undergraduate part-time classes were stopped, student leaders targeted and arrested, while trade union Nehawu has all but collapsed at the institution.

Convocation leaders have been under attack while academics are increasingly under pressure.

What has shocked me is the fact that UWC leadership has lost three high court cases (2014: Judge Schippers: 2016: Judge Gamble and 2020 Judge Kollapen).

In each case, the court ordered costs against the university leadership.

I wonder why the leaders who made unlawful decisions that resulted in multi-million rand losses have not been held accountable.

I recall that in 2016, I was shocked when Judge Gamble delivered a scathing judgment against the university leadership.

He stated that “I must record that more than 20 years into the constitutional State it is deeply troubling to read of the blatant disregard on the part of the majority of members of the Council for the rule of law”.

What is happening at UWC? The university that has a long struggle against apartheid and oppression and emerged as a nonracial university under Jakes Gerwel. Does the university today stand for freedom of speech? Why is the UWC management hell-bent on spending millions to defend court cases they eventually lose?

Why do they not seek peaceful ways to resolve the crises at UWC? Fortunately, UWC Convocation has emerged as the conscience of the university.

Its courageous alumni have committed to resisting irregular action by the university authorities.

I feel that many people in SA, including myself, have been lulled into a stupor where we believe that our institutions of learning have people at their helm who, unlike the apartheid regime, know what is right and what is wrong.

We have allowed in our country's authorities to take decisions that oppress people and use public money to defend injustices.

I sincerely hope that university councils around the country act in an open, transparent and democratic way that ensures freedom of speech.

These cases where the courts have had to defend the rights of ordinary citizens against those who wield power come at a great cost to these brave individuals who are prepared to lose everything they worked for to see that justice is done.

In many cases, individuals who are violated do not have the resources to take the wrongdoers to court. I was in education for 39 years and I had to hear on several occasions from smug bureaucrats and politicians: "This is a free country – take us to court!"

If only we as the public could force the court system to make these despotic bureaucrats personally pay their legal costs when they lose a court case.

These bureaucrats would be very hesitant to go to court. The people of South Africa made sacrifices to live in a just society. Those entrusted with public power must not oppress critical voices.

I hope that the UWC Convocation members, Council members and all sectors of society will recommit to oppose injustice wherever it may exist.

Administrators in publicly-owned institutions who suppress the truth and break the law must pay court costs and must vacate their posts immediately.
