

RESPONSE TO RECENT XENOPHOBIC ATTACK

We have all observed with abhorrence the acts of xenophobic attacks that have engulfed the Gauteng Province in the past two weeks. These have been totally against the values and principles the University stands for, and against the constitutional values this country espouses.

I am writing to express my dismay at the rising tide of xenophobia and violence against individuals and groups of individuals designated as 'foreigners' by sections of our community. These acts of extreme violence are a violation of the humanity we have strived for as a society and goes against the fundamental human rights, values and principles enshrined in our Constitution. Whatever the reasons offered, there is simply no justification or right that anyone can arrogate to themselves to violate the rights of others on the basis of origin, ethnicity, creed or any form of social difference. It is simply wrong and must be condemned in the strongest terms.

South Africa has been through its own history of institutionalised violence brought about by racism and discrimination during the apartheid era. Various methods were used to fight the scourge of racism and one of them was the mobilisation of the international community alongside the masses of our people. The African continent played a major role in that struggle. African countries suffered cross-border raids and economic strangulation by the apartheid forces. They shielded and protected our people, and their own nationals in the frontline states and died alongside exiled South Africans to ensure that one day this country would be free. It is this type of memory that makes the recent attacks so difficult to understand. It is totally unacceptable.

As a university, we have to take a public stand and speak out against these gross violations of human rights. Our university firmly embraces and celebrates the values and principles of human dignity, fairness and equality of all human beings. We regard our diversity (the many different languages, cultures, colours, creeds and places of origin of our students and staff) as a source of strength, not weakness. Our students come from all parts of the country and the world, including Africa, and our staff are increasingly reflecting this multicultural and multinational diversity. We also draw on sources of knowledge, in books, journals or internet, from many continents, cultures and languages. This diversity – of people and knowledge – is one of the very cornerstones of the idea of a university.

But even if we did not have a single international student or staff member, we would still be insisting on the right to equality of all human beings. For this reason, we view these recent incidents as a direct violation of every principle this university stands for and antithetical to its very reason for existence. DUT cannot live up to its mandate in a social context where sections of our communities seek to negate the very foundations of democracy. Ethnic cleansing is a fundamental violation of all that we stand for. If we do not speak out and work against this, how long will it take before we descend into the nightmares of Nazi Germany, Rwanda or Bosnia? This spectre surely cannot be countenanced.

There are various crises facing humanity such as joblessness, homelessness, poverty, disease, unaffordable food prices, energy and food shortages, etc. We are also dealing with the spectre of racism which has recently reared its ugly head in some universities. Furthermore, it is also important to note that on Wednesday 21 May, the world remembered the scourge of HIV/AIDS in a candlelight vigil held around the globe. It will need a combined human effort to fight against all of these and rid the world of these threats, attitudes and actions that seek to destroy the very core of humanity and civilisation.

This open letter is an appeal to all DUT staff and students to let their voices be heard and to affirm our solidarity with those whose rights have been and are violated on the basis of origin, descent, colour, nationality, or whatever makes others different. It also calls on government to use firm and drastic measures given to it within the framework of our Constitution to prevent ethnic mobilisation and bringing perpetrators of this violence to justice. And it also is a call to us, the university community, trade unions, civic bodies, media, political parties, cultural actors and others, to promote a culture within all our communities that fully embraces the principles of equality, diversity and multiculturalism.

It is hoped that our university community will find various and creative ways in which we can express not only our collective outrage at what has been happening, but also positive ways in which we can affirm our support for multiculturalism and diversity at DUT and in the wider South African society. Let the world hear our many voices!

Yours sincerely
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