



5 September 2019

CALL BY VICE-CHANCELLORS FOR A MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA TO DISCUSS THE SCOURGE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

We are experiencing an epidemic of incomprehensible violence. South Africa's universities are reeling this week from the rape and murder of UCT student Uyinene Mrwetyana and the murder of UWC student Jesse Hess at a truly tragic moment in our country's history, a moment that has moved South African society, across constituencies, to say enough is enough. This is one of many cases of gender-based harm that afflicts women in South Africa on a daily basis. This is not the society we want - the status quo pertaining to gender-based harm must change. We cannot stand back and allow women to be violated. We need all branches of society to unite and to work together to eradicate gender based harm in society. We also need political leadership and a practical agenda that works within our national and constitutional laws to ensure that we find a long-term sustainable solution to eradicate this scourge.

Our people are angry – angry about the violent abuse of women that happens daily, angry about not being heard, angry about the irrational violence that robs people of their lives, angry about the lawlessness in our country, angry about the wanton destruction of infrastructure and angry about the empty promises and lack of political leadership on these matters. We have every right to be angry.

At the same time, we cannot allow our anger to spill over in a way which reduces us to lawlessness or advances further harm. For example, a number of individuals have been named on social media as alleged perpetrators of gender-based harm, without investigation or a determination of the facts around the matter. In the last few days there are cases where individuals, including women, have been identified on social media as perpetrators of gender-based harm, with calls for people to congregate outside their homes to intimidate them. On investigation, it was found that some of these accusations were scurrilous and that these accusers used the current moment opportunistically in order to settle scores on unrelated matters. These are the unintended consequences of social media and mob justice – where people abuse a just cause to further their own agendas.

There are political forces at play who are eager to manipulate this national tragedy to fulfil their own agendas – both within and beyond the academic sector, regardless of the rules of universities or the law of the land. In recent days we have seen how mob justice against foreign nationals have left people dead and families decimated because people have no regard for the law.

It is imperative to hold those who are guilty of perpetrating gender based harm to account and we should do so through the channels and processes developed to address gender violence. Universities South Africa and its members have a zero tolerance approach to gender based harm and progressive policies are in place to ensure that perpetrators are dealt with decisively.

All complaints of gender-based harm should be referred to the respective Gender Equity Offices at the universities who have committed to investigating all complaints expeditiously.

So, what can we do as members of the academy?

All 26 VCs will engage the Presidency by Friday the 13th of September, with the view of registering our anger and developing a plan of action for addressing the scourge at the universities.

Universities are powerful social institutions with agency. They have much to contribute to transforming the culture that produces this form of cowardly violence.

This statement is issued by Universities SA on behalf of the vice-chancellors of all 26 universities.

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