‘COLOUR WAS DARK PURPLE’
Students’ ‘blackface’ apology

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STELLENBOSCH University (SU) student Poekie Briedenhann says she and her friend were dressed up as purple aliens and not blackfaces, for a residence party.

Briedenhann posted a photograph of herself and a fellow SU student – both covered in dark purple paint and wearing silver foil hats and shoes – on Instagram on Friday night.

The photograph sparked a social media outcry under the hashtag #blackface. Blackface is in reference to white people who paint themselves black to poke fun at black people.

In an apology, Briedenhann took full responsibility for the incident at the “Stellar Space” party held at the university’s Heemstede residence.

“We are aware that our actions in the blackfacing incident last night at the Heemstede stellar space party, where painting our bodies dark purple and covering ourselves in glitter, appeared as black and thus as an attempt to demean and exoticise (sic) blackness. We apologise for any offence occurred and take full responsibility for this,” she said.

In 2014, a similar incident occurred when two male students dressed as Venus and Serena Williams, and painted their faces black. No legal action was taken against them.

SU spokesperson Susan van der Merwe said the two students have been suspended from the residence pending the outcome of an investigation. Briedenhann has also been relieved from her duties as a student mentor.

Van der Merwe said a case has been registered with SU’s Equality Unit and the Central Disciplinary Committee. She said students voiced “anger, discontent and hurt” about the incident at a meeting in Heemstede on Friday night.

Open Stellenbosch (OS) has condemned the students’ actions and calls for them to be expelled, and to remove the residence head and committee “which allowed this incident to take place under their watch”.

Slamming white supremacy and patriarchy, the movement said it was disgusted in the way the university handles racism issues.

“First, they always find a black person to facilitate humiliating and painful discussions of racism in the hands of white students. Moreover, the black person is often used to police and silence the rest of the black constituency present.

“In one of the discussions, vice-chancellor of learning and teaching Professor Arnold Schoenwinkel insisted that he understands black pain despite being called to order several times by the black students present there.

“Black lives are cheap at this university... So we urge all those who are committed to the fight against all forms of injustice to join our cause,” an OS statement reads.

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