Maties calls for 'blackface' inquiry

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STELLENBOSCH University has appointed an independent commission to investigate the case of two female students who went to a party smeared in white paint, and the university's response to the incident.

The students from the Heemstede residence were suspended pending the outcome of an investigation into their 'blackface' appearance at a housewarming event. The incident caused uproar on social media.

Open Stellenbosch members threatened to take legal action against the university for its "failure" to act more swiftly against the two students.

One of the students implicated in the "blackface" incident took to social media earlier this month to explain they were actually dressed as "purple aliens" at a space-themed party.

The students' suspension was lifted soon after, following a recommendation from the university's equality unit.

The unit said: "It is clear that there was no direct or indirect intention to cause offence or harm to any student or staff member.

There was a perception, enhanced by the impact of social media, that this was a blackface incident. This is, however, not the case."

The university's management also condemned the "humiliating behaviour" by some students toward the two students accused of "blackface". The university's spokesman, Martin Viljoen, said that the institution's management had "taken note" of the "trauma that the incident had caused" to the two students and their parents, and other students and staff.

"We have also taken note of the related public outcry... from a large number of people writing to the university in connection with allegations over the manner in which the matter was addressed," he said.

The university would seek the most constructive process to deal with such incidents, he said.

"It is against this background that the management of Stellenbosch University has decided to appoint an independent commission to investigate the various facets of the incident and the university's subsequent handling of the events at Heemstede," he said.

The commission will report findings and recommendations to the university's management.