

Dear [REDACTED] and colleagues

Your letter of 11 October 2024 refers. While the letter was addressed to me and contains serious allegations against a senior member of the University's staff, it has come to my attention that it was also shared on social media, for example, it was posted on the Studentaction\_4\_Palestine Instagram account. My office certainly did not share this letter, and you will allow that the sharing thereof by one of your number changes the nature of this correspondence.

The condemnation of [REDACTED] in your letter of 11 October is based on a highly selective presentation of the events in the University's Main Library on 7 and 8 October 2024. I will therefore provide a more comprehensive version of these events before I address the substantive issues raised in your letter:

On the 7th of October 2024 a group of students draped a large Palestinian flag over the railing surrounding the library's central staircase; this was repeated on the 8th of October. These students did not obtain permission for their political demonstration. It is important to bear the context in mind: this large Palestinian flag was displayed in the main library of a university with many Jewish students, on the anniversary of the attack by Hamas on Israeli civilians a year ago on 7 October 2023.

The library's management and the University received multiple complaints from students and staff who were not only offended by, but felt intimidated by the actions of the protesting students in the library. These actions could hardly be considered consistent with the University's values of respect and compassion. The University's security approached the protesting students and requested that that they remove the flag. In this Campus Security acted at the request of the management of the library who, correctly, attempted to maintain the library

as a space for all students to study without provocation. This was confirmed by [REDACTED].

The protesting students were asked (not “demanded” as you incorrectly assert) repeatedly to remove the flag, but these requests were not adhered to. The Division for Student Affairs also approached the students with the same request and, apart from filming SU’s staff using phones, the protesting students also dismissed this request. While you described the action of the students as a “peaceful protest”, the library’s staff reported that they were, in fact, “threatening and aggressive”. [REDACTED] indicated that she and members of her senior team were intimidated and threatened by the students. She also indicated that the action of university officials was done in consultation with herself and her team.

It is common cause that the freedom of expression on campus is limited by practical considerations including compatibility with the normal functioning of the University. These limitations are summarised in SU’s protocol for mass gatherings of students. The library is not the space for political protest, as it is a quiet work area; the same is true of examination venues. The protesting students know this very well. They have in fact applied for and have been granted permission by the University for a number of public protests this year. These public protests included displaying the Palestinian flag. They are very well aware of the University's requirement that the venue and time for protests are regulated to ensure that the ordinary work of the University is not disrupted. This is done to ensure good order, to avoid disruption and to maintain the University priority for our academic agenda. I am therefore disappointed that a group of senior scholars would write to me in apparent defence of a disruption in the library. In recent weeks other Universities have had to act against similar tactics, as is the case with Harvard University who recently suspended students from the Widener Library for a similar protest.

Your letter ignores the University's protocol for the mass gatherings of students, even though the protesting students are very well aware of it. Your letter also misrepresents the basic facts of these events and ignores the space for protests that the University has allowed with respect to the Israel-Palestine conflict on numerous occasions.

██████████ also brought to my attention the assistance he and his team had provided at short notice in May 2024 for a meeting the S4P students had with Min. Naledi Pandor where the Palestine-Israel conflict was discussed. Following this meeting, Mr. Imtiaz Sooliman from the Gift of the Givers visited with ██████████ to thank him for his help. In addition, Mr. Sooliman described the assistance on social media as "phenomenal" and "beyond the call of duty" (see attached screenshots).

It is therefore wholly disingenuous to claim that either the University's staff or ██████████' actions were "high-handed", "authoritarian" and "kragdadig". Quite the opposite. The library's staff, the Division for Student Affairs, Campus Security and ██████████ acted with the utmost professionalism over the period that this episode unfolded.

Additionally, it is inconsistent with the values of this University to condemn colleagues without offering them the opportunity to state their case on a particular charge. Indeed, it is simply unfair and unjust. You did not reach out to ██████████ to discuss your concerns, nor did you verify the accuracy or reasonableness of your accusations. I am disappointed at the lack of judgement that was shown in your letter and your inadequate commitment to the University's values, even more so since you decided to leak it to social media.

I believe [REDACTED] deserves an apology from you for these unfounded allegations and unsavoury aspersions.

Sincerely

Prof. Wim de Villiers