

No-to-Racism / Yes-to-Equality Pledge

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Speaker: JC van der Merwe

Let me begin by thanking President Leteane and the SRC who partnered with the Institute on this campaign. Let us also acknowledge that it was our Vice Chancellor, Prof Jansen and his management team that initiated this campaign. Thanks you to all the students who participated in marked numbers in the various engagements thus far and let's hope that more staff members will follow their example.

When the Rectorate requested the Institute in February to conceptualise a campaign against racism we had no idea of what was about to happen within the Higher Education sector, namely the Rhodes Must Fall movement. So in partnership with the SRC and in support of National Human Rights Month we launched the No-to-Racism/Yes-to-Equality Campaign in March. This campaign brings to fruition the Council's Declaration of 2014 in which it reaffirms its belief in the human dignity, equality and freedom of all people and declares its abhorrence of acts of racism, sexism and unfair discrimination of any kind or in any form.

Today we are gathered here to publicly commit ourselves to equality and to the eradication of racism. But today is not the end of the campaign. We have but just started the conversations about racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, classism and ethnicism. The Institute will carry on facilitating discussions on all forms of intolerance and othering. At the same time we will also continue to critically engage on what it means to commit oneself to the constitutional values of equality, respect, democracy, social justice, human dignity, human rights and diversity.

This campaign has generated renewed conversation and interest in the challenges we face in pursuing our goals of inclusivity and equality at the UFS. This positive productive solidarity have highlighted the urgency of much needed action in terms of making transformation a reality in the everyday lives of staff and students on all three campuses. What is emerging from the conversations is the need to go beyond dialogues and consultation processes towards active decision-making followed by real commitment and implementation.

That is why a university assembly has been called for 28 April. The aim is to deal with issues such as symbols, policies, practices and curriculum as transformative strategies for creating a university culture that supports its Human and Academic Projects. An institutional culture, which are imbedded in responsible citizenship, human dignity and democratic participation. Therefore, I call upon all staff and students to engage with one another on the transformation project of our university and to table submissions for the Assembly. Please visit the UFS web page for further guidance.

Let me conclude. In 1994 we as South African citizens drew a line and said: “We are breaking with apartheid and we are committing ourselves to new constitutional values. We as a country are going to do things radically differently now: there is no place for any form of White Superiority on this side of the line, unfair discrimination is now a crime, South Africa belongs to all those who live in it”. But that line became blurred rapidly at the UFS – some might even argue that that line was never drawn here at this university in 1994. But today – when we put our thumbprint on that canvas we draw that line anew: we say no to racism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and we say yes to equality and all the other principles enshrined in our constitution. May we all take responsibility to ensure that that line does not get blurred again.

I thank you.

JC Van der Merwe