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Is silence in the face of global injustice in the “best interests” of South African universities?

Significance:

Invited to respond, we write here not to rebut every argument advanced in the provocation piece ‘Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world?’. This would presuppose alignment with the issues raised as the only ones germane to questions of academic neutrality in the face of injustice of genocidal proportions. Rather, we probe assumptions we consider central to the ethical responsibilities of South African universities when faced with immense human suffering. Rather, we ask: what is the cost of silence to our society and academic communities if, as once beneficiaries of global outrage and action against apartheid, we now comfortably look on so as not to be seen as taking sides?

In a recent *Daily Maverick* piece, University of Cape Town (UCT) Law Professor Pierre de Vos warned against turning discussions about “the appropriate role and function of a university in a neoliberal society, into disputes about procedures or the purpose of the decision (in the form of rationality reviews)”¹. De Vos was responding to litigation lodged by his UCT colleague against that University Council’s decision in June 2024 to endorse two Senate resolutions on the Gaza conflict, challenging that institution’s moral position about the role of the university in society. To us, this warning can equally apply to the short-sighted and avoidant stance outlined in the Commentary ‘Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world?’²

Public universities in South Africa have an “obligation to serve the public good”³⁻⁵. Although the “public good” can and should be debated, whatever that constitutes surely includes an obligation by academics to align with the human rights framework contained in our Constitution’s Bill of Rights⁶ and, similarly, to be guided by the aspirations of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁶. Within our South African context, commitment to universal human values has never been axiomatic; democracy and its attendant values of equality, freedom and dignity were hard won. Emerging from decades of a racialised educational system, former ‘white’ universities had direct roots in South Africa’s colonial history and were at the forefront of the civilising mission that perceived and treated Indigenous inhabitants of South Africa as less than human and unworthy of the dignity endowed on white European settlers.⁷ These legacies endure. Many black colleagues within the academy actively remember what it was like to apply for ministerial permission to study at these universities; when educational exposure and opportunities for black students were separate and unequal; when differential wages for the same work were legislated based on race; and when social spaces were segregated. Further, and most egregiously, they remember when engaging with the politics of liberation was perceived as state treason, leading to the deaths of inter alia Steve Biko, Victoria and Griffiths Mxenge, Abu Baker Asvat, Fabian and Florence Ribeiro, David Webster, Neil Aggett and others⁸⁻¹¹, as well as to the detention and banning of thousands of students and some university academics.

This history and ongoing struggle to restore humanity to the victims of coloniality within higher education must be borne in mind when we examine events in Palestine. In April 2024, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) warned about the “scholasticide” in Gaza, the “systemic obliteration of education through the arrest, detention or killing of teachers, students and staff, and the destruction of educational infrastructure” including the organised destruction of universities, libraries (including the Central Archive of Gaza), heritage sites, hospitals and scientific facilities by Israeli Defence Forces¹², as well as the killing of 119 university academics since October 2023¹³. The West Bank has also not escaped incursions with damage to seven universities and colleges.¹³ The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has expressed “deep concern” following its damage assessment of 64 cultural properties (historical buildings, religious sites and museums).¹⁴

In early 2023, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) released a *Guideline* to consider the “impact [of conflict] on scientific infrastructure, including scientific collections, laboratories, libraries, digital resources, or communications” before issuing a position statement.¹⁵ Despite a recent ASSAf Council decision not to release any statement about the scientific impact of war in Gaza, we argue that the bombardment of academic, cultural, medical and educational infrastructure in Palestine indeed meets the organisation’s own criteria for action.

To be clear, other ongoing global conflicts are equally deserving of condemnation. Rather than avoidance on the grounds of potential divisiveness, institutional and organisational failure to respond appropriately to other scholasticides such as those in Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine and elsewhere¹⁶⁻¹⁹ necessitates institutional introspection and conscious self-study. What should be questioned is not the position taken by some South African higher educational institutions denouncing the ongoing scholasticide in Gaza but rather the insistence and defence of silence by others on the grounds of “academic neutrality”. To do so is to claim that public institutions of higher education in South Africa can afford to be non-committal in matters of life and death.

Furthermore, the practice of science is never apolitical, although the myth of empiricism would have us believe otherwise. All our endeavours are embedded in a much larger social context, forcing us to balance our freedoms to teach, research and pursue avenues of scholarly enquiry, with our ethical responsibilities. Accordingly, it becomes our moral duty to call out all attacks on the academy and the pursuit of knowledge itself, wherever this may occur, and most certainly in the context of the “plausible genocide”²⁰ taking place in Gaza. All people’s cultural



and historical memories are sacrosanct, and the erasure of the means to educate, research and preserve historical records is as grievous as other war crimes.

At the time of writing this, 6 of the 26 South African public universities (Nelson Mandela University, University of Fort Hare, University of the Western Cape, University of South Africa, University of Venda and University of Cape Town), have, in various ways, resolved at the institutional level to sever ties with Israeli institutions, either in line with the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) guidelines²¹ or other criteria. Such resolutions are not without precedent; and we must recall that South African institutions were on the receiving end of similar isolation during apartheid, when the United Nations, pursuant to declaring apartheid a crime against humanity, issued its resolution to “cease any cultural and academic collaboration with South Africa”²².

To oppose intolerable human rights violations is not to jump on some “bandwagon”, but rather to recognise that academic institutions in Israel operate in direct service²³ to a state and/or its military whose policies and actions are “beyond the pale”, as has been found by the International Court of Justice (ICJ)²⁴. Furthermore, scholars at Israeli universities have themselves called for solidarity against the censorship and assault on freedom of thought and expression at the hands of the Israeli state.²⁵⁻²⁷

We acknowledge that taking a position on conflict is not without consequence. Internationally, particularly in the USA, Europe and Canada, university presidents endured severe scrutiny and at times forced resignations when previously issued statements and/or unending student protests did not align with powerful interests. The subsequent chilling effects on freedom of expression have been well documented.²⁸ Israeli scholars are speaking out about the isolation their universities are facing, with fewer foreign students and exchanges with the outside world; and, as one Israeli academic put it, “If your science is not connected to international science, if you’re not in dialogue and collaboration with scholars and students around the world, then science cannot happen”²⁹.

The costs and consequences of taking a principled stand on Israel’s relentless war in Palestine must moreover be weighed against the cost of inaction. What is the price of South Africa’s higher education institutional conscience? What happens if the academy loses its critical stance, shies away from controversy and dances to the tune of the powerful who wield immense financial and cultural capital?

In the case of a South African boycott and/or selective severing of institutional and individual ties with Israel, there most certainly will be local and international backlash. This is the inevitable ‘cost’ of exercising academic freedom. Notwithstanding its recent submission to the ICJ, South African institutions have long-established and productive relationships with the higher education sector in Israel. Alumni and donors are threatening to and, in some instances, have already withdrawn funding and other forms of support because of such positions. Confronting this requires robust and nuanced debate rather than mere capitulation to economic manipulation.

The question then turns pragmatic. Debates on institutional values, rights and responsibilities are often polarising; however, rather than failing to engage, we must develop the skills to contain these while remaining true to our core mandate. With universities under relentless pressures of the fiscus and creeping managerialism³⁰, space to connect with the myriad wicked problems of our times is limited, especially as this requires transdisciplinary approaches that fit poorly with our disciplinary silos. Nevertheless, the nettle must be grasped, not just for the sake of academic integrity but for the continued relevance of universities as sites of critical inquiry in South African society.

Declarations

Our views are our own and do not necessarily represent the views of our institutions or member organisations. We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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