

Good afternoon.

Thank you for inviting us to this Forum.

Thank you for communicating with us via e-mail, blogs, listservs, newspapers and even social networks. Professor Spiegel, we've accepted your friend request.

We are Concerned CAS Students -- yes, we exist; we're not just virtual personalities on the World Wide Web. We are your students. And we are against the "disestablishment" of the Centre for African Studies.

Today we come to this Forum as students, clients and stakeholders of the University of Cape Town, an institution to which we are deeply committed. We come to ask questions, to establish a presence in these very important conversations and to make our voices heard.

Despite the fact that this Forum is indeed foreign to us -- though we do seek ironic comfort in the fact that it is being hosted in the Archie Mafeje Room -- we have chosen here and today because we have been reassured time and again that this Forum is for open conversation and dialog.

As many of you know, on Sunday, 14 February 2011, Concerned CAS Students released a statement, entitled "Does Post-Apartheid UCT Need a Centre for African Studies?" Our statement spoke out against the "disestablishment" of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, asserting our support for the department and its critical Humanities-driven intellectual project. We voiced our dismay in not being included in discussions or consulted on such a decision, explaining our investment in the Centre and our concerns as students, clients and stakeholders in the devaluation of the department.

We received immediate support from students, alumni, independent scholars, artists, librarians, professors and journalists from across the globe. We feel less isolated as students and emboldened to step more firmly into this space. Fears of retribution for voicing our concerns are not groundless. We have encountered all manner of cautioning, as well as obvious expressions of fear and meaningful silences in our discussions with people at UCT. But the encouragement and warm solidarity of CAS supporters have fortified us. For these letters of support, we are ever grateful; in their commitment to legitimising our cause, supporters have mobilised in solidarity, offering experience, wisdom and expertise -- an inspired hospitality to us nameless students.

Nonetheless, as UCT students, we feel it is legitimate to ask, Why are our colleagues, professors, leaders and administrators afraid to step forward to discuss and debate issues openly? Perhaps more relevant to our position today, As students, how can we engage as interlocutors in a university that does not announce openly plans of departmental disestablishment?

In response to our statement and to the numerous letters of support, the University of Cape Town, specifically the Faculty of Humanities, has offered contradictions and confusing silences. The most recent Statement by the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at UCT (21 February 2011) states: “Claims have been made that CAS and all its courses, programmes, exchange links, intellectual activities and so forth have either been, or are about to be closed down, and that students have been excluded from discussions on the matters. This is completely untrue.”

We would like to clarify that at no time did Concerned CAS Students make such a detailed statement. We could not. After all, we have been left out of all official conversations about the future of the Centre for African Studies and therefore, lack any details as to what exactly is being decided -- without our input as university students, clients and stakeholders. Rather, we spoke out about the “disestablishment” of the Centre for African Studies, which we are all here to discuss today.

The 21 February 2011 UCT Statement continues, announcing the possibility of the New School for Critical Enquiry in Africa. Once again, we never have claimed to know anything about this proposed new school. Quite simply, we once again were not informed or consulted despite the fact that discussions have been taking place for an entire year.

The Statement explains that the proposed New School for Critical Enquiry in Africa will be launched as part of a two-stage process in which “an interim placeholder name, the Department of Anthropology, Linguistics and Gender Studies” will be established. We believe we are within reason to ask, “Why?” -- Why is an interim Department of Anthropology, Linguistics and Gender Studies necessary if the ultimate goal is to establish an Africa-centred school? Why does the Centre for African Studies need to be “disestablished” at all? Because we are a “small department”? Quite frankly, we find this puzzling.

From here, we turn to the 22 February “Revised Discussion on Departmental Mergers” document, which states that:

*The Faculty Forum is invited to debate the following proposal: 1. To **disestablish** AGI, CAS and SAN as independent academic departments with effect from 31.12.2011. (our emphasis)*

Once again, we are confused. How does this statement serve to reassure us as students and indeed clients and stakeholders of the university that the Centre for African Studies as a department and as an intellectual, creative and scholarly space will continue in its current form?

We believe such a two-step strategy requires trust, a history of transparency and respect for student input. Given the fact that all UCT students have been left out of years of conversation, not to mention the Faculty’s history of downgrading our department, we quite honestly, do not have this trust.

Therefore, we stand here today, against the “disestablishment” of the Centre for African Studies. For us, this is non-negotiable.

As is evident, we seek answers and want our voices to be included in conversations about the future of our department and indeed our university. However, our questions remain unanswered despite requests for historical documents and our willingness to research and assess more than six years of discussion. The Faculty of Humanities has made it quite clear that our namelessness prevents the institution from sharing such documentation with us. In this regard, we ask “Is UCT not a public institution, accountable to all its stakeholders?” Paired with the overwhelming contradictions in explanatory narratives, this lack of transparency does not instill a climate of “open discussion and debate”.

In spite of this inhospitality, student governing bodies, such as the Student Representative Council and Humanities Student Council, have heard our voices and asserted their commitment to their constituencies and to the inter-disciplinary, Humanities-driven study of Africa at the University of Cape Town, reminding us why we are proud to be UCT students.

To the University of Cape Town and the Faculty of Humanities, we urge you to listen to your students and hear them, to include them, not as subjects, but as fully-fledged citizens in your Afropolitan vision. If a new school is what you want, make sure that it is the best that the University of Cape Town can offer. South Africa and indeed the world is watching; what do you want them to see?