

Rhodes grabs barred Desai

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Rhodes University has offered Dr Ashwin Desai -- controversially barred from seeking employment at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) -- both a short-term lecturing post in sociology and a venue for his research project on transformation in South African sport.

At the same time, the heat is intensifying on UKZN vice-chancellor Malegapuru Makgoba over his role in barring Desai. In further letters to Makgoba this week, the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (Cafa) and the university's Combined Staff Association (Comsa) renewed their assaults on his reasons for his actions.

Until late last year, Desai was an honorary research fellow in UKZN's Centre for Civil Society (CCS). After he obtained a Human Sciences Research Council grant to research race and redress in South African sport, Makgoba instructed the CCS that the position should be advertised, and told Desai he needed to resign his fellowship to be eligible to apply. The CCS and Desai duly complied.

Makgoba then told the selection committee not to consider Desai's application, and when the CCS asked for Desai to be reinstated as honorary research fellow, Makgoba turned down the request.

The Mail Guardian has reported that Makgoba's reasons centre on an agreement reached between Desai and the then University of Durban-Westville (UDW) council in 1996 -- a period of massive upheavals at UDW, involving retrenchments and mobilisation against management, in which Desai played a leading role as a trade unionist. The agreement involved the dropping of disciplinary charges against him in return for his resignation as a lecturer and an undertaking not to come on to the campus without the vice-chancellor's permission.

In 2004, new UDW vice-chancellor Saths Cooper revoked the ban on Desai.

"Ashwin would bring an enormous amount to any university," Fred Hendricks, dean of humanities at Rhodes, told the M "He has been not only an activist but a major commentator on South African political life for two decades. The sorts of connections he makes are vitally important for students to understand their own place in relation to that [political life] -- an understanding that's been lacking in our universities."

Desai said: "It's a tremendous invitation. I like their emphasis on critical debate [in relation to Rhodes's reasons for wanting to appoint Desai], especially when many institutions are cutting off debate."

Cafa first wrote to Makgoba in December, deploring the banning of Desai as an assault on academic freedom. Its letter this week responded to a UKZN press release of January 9, disputing its assertions point by point.

The committee concluded that "a violation of academic freedom of this kind concerns not only Dr Desai as an individual. It has the effect of constraining inquiry more generally, by signalling that the university will act against academics whose work articulates the ideas and aspirations of poor and oppressed communities."

Comsa's letter described Makgoba's reasons as the "sparsest of technical arguments" that are "convincing no one". It also accused him of continuing "to evade the pertinent question of whether you, as vice-chancellor, are in favour of the Desai agreement [with the UDW council] being abandoned by UKZN or not".

Makgoba gave the M a copy of his response to Comsa, in which he wrote that "the university is a place of technical issue and facts and not politics", and that a resolution of the matter "lies squarely in the hands of Ashwin Desai".

He repeated his conviction that he is bound by the 1996 UDW council decision, that Cooper's unbanning of Desai was "unlawful and unprocedural", and that Desai needed to apply to the UKZN council to have his banning reviewed.