

SEARCH

Past month

Friday, 03 February 2006

SOME NEWS WON'T WAIT



- Home
- Daily sections
- News
- Sport
- Business
- Entertainment
- Careers
- Motoring
- Education
- Mobile Games
- Sunday's Paper
- Special reports
- Photo Galleries
- Help desk
- Useful tools
- Search

Location: Home - Sunday's Paper - Opinion & Analysis

The vice-chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal is said to have blocked a senior academic appointment for political reasons. Chris Barron asked him ...

29 January 2006

Malegapuru Makgoba

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Why have you blocked Ashwin Desai from an academic post?



I have not. And there is no ban on Desai.

Did you contact the selection committee when you heard he'd applied?

No. I don't do that. I was actually approached by the chair of the selection committee on this matter because he had a candidate and he knew the history of this candidate. He came to my office asking for a legal opinion because he knew that Desai had an agreement with the previous university (Durban-Westville), one of the merger partners.

And he asked what he should do?

He asked me, what is the status of that agreement?

What did you tell him?

I had a legal opinion that the agreement could only be revoked by council.

Did you tell the committee not to appoint him?

No. I told the chair of the selection committee to share this information with the committee. That's all.

And then the committee decided not to appoint him?

Yes.

You didn't call the selection committee?

Sponsor

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Services

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No, no, no. Look, the university has got 5000 staff. I don't know what jobs are on the line.

There have been complaints that you micromanage.

I don't. I come from a discipline of science where you do things thoroughly. You monitor and you follow up things. The academics are left alone.

Did senior academics send you a letter recently complaining that you were autocratic?

No. I don't know what constitutes senior academics. I've never seen a letter from senior academics.

Have you received a letter lately from any academics?

No. I mean, I've just seen a letter that was not signed.

What did it say?

The letter was, I think, indicating that there is a growing culture within the university of closing down the space for free debate. Or something like that.

Did it include the suggestion that you were autocratic?

Well, I think it was implying that.

My understanding is that Desai was banned from the UDW because he mobilised students and staff against fee increases and retrenchments.

There is no ban. There was a termination of employment.

So how do you feel about that?

The termination was brought about because of activities that had taken place in which Dr Desai had been involved. They were related to unrest and disruptions and other things that bordered on criminal activities within the university.

Didn't the vice-chancellor agree to rescind his termination?

There is no such agreement on record that I can find.

Because he was fired 10 years ago, should he be barred permanently?

For his termination to be revoked it has to go through the council of the university.

Have you approached council?

No. I have asked Desai to approach council.

Why don't you ask council to revoke it?

Why should I?

You'd save the university a lot of negative publicity. Even Noam Chomsky has written in support of him.

Does it matter? How old is he?

Does it matter?

But let me tell you this. He qualifies his letter by saying he is not au fait with the basic facts of the matter. He is not a fool.

Why do you ask how old he is?

Because I think even clever people sometimes do make mistakes at his age. Dementia sets in.

How do you feel about staff engaging with local communities?

That's one of the strengths and goals of this university.

How do you feel about them being questioned by the intelligence services?

That saddens me, if that's the case.

Surely you know that it is the case?

No, I don't. None of them have come to my office and said they're being questioned.

You read the newspapers, don't you?

I haven't come across that information.

It's been in the newspapers.

Okay.

Now that you know, how do you feel about it?

Upset. I'll obviously try and follow it up.

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