

Letter to Prof. Makgoba regarding Ashwin Desai from the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa

December 21, 2005

Professor M.W. Makgoba
Howard College Campus
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban 4000
South Africa

Dear Vice-Chancellor M. W. Makgoba,

I am writing on behalf of the editorial board of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA) to express our concern over your decision to bar Ashwin Desai from seeking a position at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). This decision constitutes a violation of a basic form of academic freedom: the right for anyone to be fairly considered for a position in the academic community they are qualified for. We urge you to reconsider this decision and allow Ashwin Desai to apply and be fairly considered for paid (as well as honorary) positions at UKZN.

As we understand, Ashwin Desai applied for a research position at the Human Sciences Research Council to do paid research on black cricket. He has an internationally recognized reputation as one of the foremost researchers in the field of South African social sciences. He would clearly be qualified for such a position and should be considered. However, you instructed the selection committee not to consider Dr. Desai's application.

Your university's Centre for Civil Society also asked that Dr. Desai be granted a position he previously held as a Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre. This is an unpaid position that, however, enables one to participate in the life of university's academic community. You denied the Centre's request.

Your justification for these decisions is apparently based on the fact that Ashwin Desai was fired and banned from entering the campus of the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) in 1996. However, in 2003 Dr. Desai was appointed to an Honorary Research Fellow position at the University of Natal's (UN) Centre for Civil Society and Saths Cooper, the then Vice-Chancellor of the UDW, lifted the ban against Dr. Desai from entering UDW. In 2004, UDW and UN were merged to form the UKZN.

It is hard to understand why, if the two units that formed the UKZN welcomed Dr. Desai's presence and participation in their academic communities in 2003, a

rescinded banning order from 1996 should trump the more recent decisions. Such a justification is frankly not credible and the decision it is meant to justify is a blatant violation of Ashwin Desai's academic freedom. Moreover, many who looked to the new South Africa as a model of democracy and human rights will find it equally hard to understand why someone like Dr. Desai, who has consistently stood up for those who suffered under apartheid and neoliberal economic policies, should be victimized in this way

Therefore, we urge you to lift your ban against Ashwin Deai and allow him to be considered for the positions he has applied for at the UKZN. Such a decision would be celebrated and recognized throughout the international academic community.

Sincerely yours,

Prof. George Caffentzis for the CAFA editorial board