

Letter to Prof. Makgoba regarding Ashwin Desai from
Prof. David McDonald

December 23, 2005

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

Dear Professor Makgoba,

I am writing to express my concern over your decision to bar Ashwin Desai from seeking a formal research position at the University of Kwazulu Natal.

I have known Ashwin for many years and have long been familiar with his academic work. As a scholar, Ashwin has contributed enormously to our understanding of grassroots politics in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly in urban areas. His book, *The Poores*, is a ground-breaking account of what it means to be marginalized in a neoliberal world and he has contributed countless other papers and seminars on related themes throughout the country.

Equally important have been Ashwin's concrete contributions towards change, offered in the best tradition of scholarly activism. Not for Ashwin is the armchair theorization of many academics. His intellectual life is grounded in the realities of township life, and though his interpretation and methods may differ at times from others it is always a fruitful and invigorating approach to research and praxis.

To bar Ashwin from formal UKZN affiliation is to suggest that the university is not interested in grassroots scholarly engagement - at least not the type that is critical of the state. Surely this is exactly what progressive academics fought against for so many years under apartheid. To revert to the banning of academics on ideological grounds would be a massive step backwards. It has already raised many eyebrows around the world.

I hope that you will reconsider and rescind this decision as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

David McDonald

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