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A Further Open Circular to the Alumni of Rhodes University regarding the new City Press article of 25 November 2007

28 November 2007

Dear Old Rhodians

Some of you will have noted the new article 'Rhodes university lecturer in racism row insists she was fired' carried on page 2 of the *City Press* of 25 November 2007. Below is a further letter to the Editor of the *City Press*.

I am issuing this as a further circular as I am not certain that the *City Press* will necessarily carry it although a request will be made.

The new article reinforces my view that an apology is due to Rhodes University and a separate letter to that effect will be sent to the *City Press*. In this letter, I indicate that the University hopes that the *City Press* 'will gracefully acknowledge the failure of your reporter to verify basic and essential facts and to contact the University for comment and that this matter can be resolved without the necessity of any recourse to the Press Ombudsman'.

Thank you for carrying my letter in the *City Press* of 25 November 2007 in response to your article titled 'University race row heats up' in the edition dated 18 November 2007.

It is necessary to make the following comments in response to your Managing Editor's comments in the *Grocott's Mail* of 23 November 2007 that 'our reporter is accurate and thorough', and the new article of 25 November 2007.

1. It is clear that through investigation is of little importance to your reporter and that scant attention is paid to establishing the veracity or consistency of the source/s that are used.

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Last week readers were informed by your reporter, without any attempt to obtain comment from the University, that Ms. Sishuta was 'fired'. Now, this week, your reporter informs readers that Ms. Sishuta insists that she was fired. And Ms. Sishuta herself states: 'I still believe that Monty (Roodt – the head of department of Sociology) fired me'.

Yet, tellingly, Ms. Sishuta says she 'continued with her duties because she knew the proper process to fire her had not been followed and was aware of her rights'.

Now this is most puzzling! For if, as Ms. Sishuta says, she is aware of her rights, she would also be well-aware that she cannot be dismissed by a verbal statement by her head of department (or anyone else for that matter) or summarily dismissed without there being due process. So (i) how can she have been 'fired' or can she still maintain that 'I was fired', and (ii) how can your reporter simply accept such inconsistent reasoning without any deeper questioning or interrogation?

Perhaps, had there been a serious attempt to obtain comment from the University there could have been an opportunity to point out such inconsistent reasoning.

For the record, dismissals can only occur following due legal processes and procedures and can only take effect through a written notice on an official Rhodes University letterhead. If both your reporter and Ms. Sishuta insist on maintaining that she has been fired I welcome being provided documentary evidence to this effect.

The truth of the matter is that neither will be able to provide such evidence, as Ms. Sishuta has not been dismissed and such documentation does not exist. The University strives to uphold Constitutional values and rights and will not compromise its obligations and responsibilities.

2. Last week your reporter claimed that Ms. Sishuta 'has been charged' and 'convicted of incompetence and bringing the university into disrepute'. Such actions cannot occur verbally or unilaterally but require formal processes, written documentation and must involve the person being charged. Again, I will very much welcome being provided documentary evidence regarding the charging and conviction. The truth of the matter, again, is that you are unable to substantiate your allegations through documented evidence, as Ms. Sishuta has as yet not been the subject of any form of disciplinary action and there has also been no written correspondence with Ms. Sishuta in these regards. In the light of this, how your reporter's coverage can be described as 'accurate' defies imagination.
3. Following the publication of a new article in the *City Press* of 25 November 2007, to which I will respond separately, it is clear that your reporter simply accepted Ms. Sishuta's statement that she had been 'fired' with little

attempt made to verify this by allowing the University the opportunity to respond in a comprehensive manner. A telephone call to the University spokesperson late on Saturday afternoon, effectively allowed limited time to investigate, research or consult, thereby ensuring that the article was unbalanced and incomplete.

The fact is that your reporter was far from 'thorough' and our charge of 'shoddy' journalism therefore remains valid! And in the light of the very different angle now taken by the same reporter in the *City Press* article of 25 November 2007, it also seems to me that an apology to Rhodes University is warranted.

4. Finally, reading the new article, it is most interesting the manner in which your reporter oscillates between (i) the most recent issue of the necessity to enter Ms. Sishuta's office to retrieve student assignments needed by students to prepare for their final examinations after she failed to observe a Department deadline for the marking of these assignments, and after repeated attempts had been made to contact her, and (ii) an incident that occurred over a year ago, which was investigated and to which report Ms. Sishuta has to date not yet responded.

Almost half of the new article regurgitates the incident of last year. Either your reporter is genuinely unable to distinguish between the most recent issue and that of last year or seeks to deliberately conflate the two – note especially the third paragraph of the most recent article which relates to the incident last year!

Let it be clear: some of the comments during the incident of last year manifested the racist attitudes that exist among some students. Unfortunately, Ms. Sishuta was not able to identify the particular students that made racist comments.

The persistence of racist attitudes is a matter of deep concern and was the subject of a workshop on equity earlier this year. I can only repeat: Rhodes University will not accommodate racism, sexism and any other forms of prejudice or intolerance, and the deracialisation of Rhodes and the forging of a new institutional culture are taken very seriously and will receive the strong and continuous attention of the Equity Committee that I chair.

By all means play the role that the media must play in highlighting the challenges that must be confronted and the road that must still be travelled in building a society and institutions that protect and advance human dignity, human rights, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism and other constitutional values. However, it will be a shame if this is at the expense of accurate and thorough investigation and equally responsible conduct on the part of the media.

Sincerely

Dr. Saleem Badat
Vice Chancellor
Rhodes University