

# NEWS IN FOCUS



**PLANETARY SCIENCE** Mars methane mystery deepens **p.153**

**MEDICAL RESEARCH** Cancer geneticists push to end ethnic bias in studies **p.154**

**FUNDING** Brazil's scientists reel as government freezes 42% of research budget **p.155**

**ENVIRONMENT** Ocean noise is worsening and threatening many marine species **p.158**

ASHRAF HENDRICKS/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY



Protests by students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 2015 sparked an investigation into university policies.

## DECOLONIZATION

# South African university probe finds 'rife' racism

*University of Cape Town inquiry rekindles debate about decolonizing the nation's universities.*

BY LINDA NORDLING

A damning report that says racism is entrenched at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has reignited discussions about how to erase the divisive legacy of colonialism at South Africa's top research institutions.

The report, published on 18 March, was written by an independent commission that university leaders created to look into allegations that institutional practices have led to

"unjust discrimination, domination or violence". These allegations — from students and some staff — came to the fore during violent, nationwide protests that rocked South African universities, including UCT, in 2015–16.

The commission, formed in 2016, says it has found evidence of "systematic suppression of black excellence in recent years" at the university, which is South Africa's oldest and one of its strongest in research. Submissions to the commission came from students, staff and the public, and were "rife with stories of

better qualified black academics being passed over for employment and promotion in favour of white academics".

Few members of academic staff have spoken publicly about the findings. But Tiri Chinyoka, a mathematics lecturer and acting chair of UCT's Black Academic Caucus, told *Nature* that the findings agree with what he and his black colleagues and students experience daily. "Institutional racism at UCT is practically the norm," he says. Black staff members remain under-represented in the university's senior ▶

► decision-making bodies, he says. “Until the structures change, there won’t be significant change.”

The report proposes that UCT reforms recruitment processes to make them more transparent and inclusive, and that its policies addressing discrimination such as racism and sexism be “effectively and adequately implemented”. It also recommends that the university strengthens mental-health services for students and staff, and revises its affirmative-action admission policies for black students.

UCT’s leadership said in a statement to *Nature* that it would respond to the report’s recommendations after a committee had considered the recommendations and reported to the university’s council; that is scheduled for June. In the statement, it acknowledged that the protests had raised “very serious challenges” and that “many lessons were learnt”.

### CAMPUS PROTESTS

The university set up the UCT Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission after the 2015–16 protests. These were part of nationwide campus demonstrations in which students demanded an end to tuition fees and called for a ‘decolonized’ curriculum — one that eliminates, or minimizes, the disproportionate legacy of white European thought in academic programmes.

The protests started at UCT and began with calls for a prominent statue of British colonial businessman and politician Cecil Rhodes to be removed from the university’s main campus. Later, protesters disrupted lectures and exams at the university, occupied buildings and destroyed property. UCT paid a private security company to protect its staff and property — which protesters and some staff members described as counterproductive.

Mosibudi Mangena, a former South African science minister, led the commission, which

also featured a human-rights lawyer and a retired constitutional-court judge. It drew on 80 submissions from students and staff members, as well as from institutional hearings for students who had been involved in the most destructive protests. The report concludes that racism exists at UCT, “abetted by poor management systems” which “discriminate on a racial basis”.

Robert Morrell, a social scientist who leads a UCT programme that addresses demographic inequalities among mid-career academics, questions whether 80 sources are enough to conclude that UCT is racist. “What about the other 30,000 students, 4,000 staff and the tens of thousands of alumni?” he wrote in a 1 April opinion piece for the *Daily Maverick* online newspaper.

Racial transformation of historically white-dominated universities has been high on South Africa’s agenda since apartheid ended in the early 1990s. But although all institutions have policies aimed at raising the proportion of black staff and assisting disadvantaged students, many people feel that progress in implementing them has been slow.

### CURRICULUM CHANGE

Mamokgethi Phakeng, who became UCT’s vice-chancellor in mid-2018, has prioritized campaigning for inclusivity and racial transformation. She has introduced targeted scholarships for women and postgraduates, and has cleared some students’ debt to help them graduate. But her vision will filter down to department level only if middle management comes on board, says Amanda Weltman, a cosmologist at UCT. “Some feel inclusivity is a threat,” she says, and weak management can be

a major obstacle to progress, she adds.

The report is likely to fuel tensions surrounding efforts to decolonize UCT’s academic programmes. In 2016, the university tasked a working group with creating a Curriculum Change Framework to guide this work. The framework was published in 2018, and sets out the need to forge a new identity for UCT that regards Africans as “legitimate knowers and producers of knowledge” who are central to the academic project. It says that previously disregarded texts should become core reading material for students, that people from marginalized communities should become drivers of research, and that “colonial lies embedded in disciplines, must be exposed and disrupted”.

“Central in resisting coloniality is defying colonial authority in what constitutes knowledge, how it is produced, and who is allowed to claim custodianship,” the framework states. It is especially difficult to challenge authority in the sciences, it says, and resistance from gatekeepers is acute.

UCT staff members are being consulted about the framework, which could guide future curriculum reform. It already has critics: in February, four UCT academics said that it threatens academic freedom and that if the framework became policy, it might dismiss curricula informed by “humankind’s most reliable methods of evidence-gathering and investigation” as “colonial ideology”. Chinyoka says that these fears are “knee-jerk responses”.

South African universities must strike a balance between radical change and safeguarding excellence, says Brenda Wingfield, a molecular biologist at the University of Pretoria. “We need to be very careful about keeping the functional universities that we have,” she says. Universities must inspire young Africans to be passionate about Africa, she adds. “But we also need to teach global citizens, not blinkered nationalists who cannot see beyond our borders.” ■

### FUNDING

# Australian budget fails to impress

*Science shunned in this year’s spending proposal.*

BY SMRITI MALLAPATY

Australians are just weeks from a national election, and the government’s latest budget proposal, released on 2 April, prioritizes tax cuts, roads and small businesses ahead of spending on science. Projects in nuclear medicine, environmental protection and gender equality in science

received modest investments. But there was no new money for research grants, and universities would be worse off under the proposal.

“It is not an inspirational budget for a nation that needs to transition from a bulk resources exporter to an innovation economy,” says Sydney-based marine ecologist Emma Johnston, president of Science & Technology Australia (STA), an umbrella organization of societies

that represent a total of 70,000 researchers.

Ultimately, whoever wins the election in mid-May will determine the final budget. If the ruling conservative coalition returns to power, over the next four years universities will lose Aus\$345 million (US\$245 million) that had been earmarked in previous budgets to pay for costs not covered by research grants, such as training, electricity and salaries for technical staff. The drop in funding follows a series of cuts

Australian treasurer  
Josh Frydenberg.

