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MEDIA RELEASE

UFS COUNCIL APPROVES RELOCATION OF MT STEYN STATUE TO A SITE OFF CAMPUS

The Council of the University of the Free State (UFS) approved the relocation of the statue of President MT Steyn to a site off campus during its quarterly meeting on 23 November 2018. Council furthermore requested that the relocation must be done in complete cooperation of the family of President MT Steyn.

The decision of the Council follows a recommendation made by the Special Task Team in a report to the Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Francis Petersen, that the statue should be relocated to a site off campus.

Today's decision to approve the relocation of the statue to a site off campus follows careful consideration and a robust discussion by the Council. "The decision was not taken lightly, but I believe that it was in the best interest of the university," said Prof Petersen.

Special Task Team facilitated process on review of statue's position

The Special Task Team was appointed earlier this year by Prof Petersen to develop and implement a framework on engaging with a process to review the position of the statue in front of the Main Building on the Bloemfontein Campus. The Special Task Team considered four options during the review process: (i) retention of the statue in its current position; (ii) reinterpretation of the statue and the space around it; (iii) relocation of the statue on campus; (iv) relocation of the statue to a site off campus. The review process commenced in April 2018 and was concluded with a two-month public participation process from 9 July to 9 September 2018.

Discussions regarding the repositioning of the MT Steyn statue date as far back as 2003, and it was again raised during a University Assembly on 28 April 2015. In January 2018, the university's Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP) work stream dealing with 'Names, Symbols and Spaces' embarked on a process of reviewing how space and symbolic representation facilitates or hinders social inclusion in a diverse community. The MT Steyn statue was identified as a priority to be dealt with within the mandate of the work stream.

After a student engagement on 8 March 2018, the student community, through the Student Representative Council (SRC), once again asked for the MT Steyn statue to be removed. Prof Francis Petersen, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, acknowledged the

urgency of the matter and appointed the Special Task Team to review the position of the statue. The Special Task Team was sufficiently representative of the campus communities, as well as adequately skilled and equipped, and acted with the necessary diligence, commitment, and objectivity in completing the report.

Wide consultation with various stakeholders

The Special Task Team consulted widely with various stakeholders (including the family of MT Steyn), gathered qualitative data, and appointed an independent heritage consultant to conduct a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA), which included the two-month-long public participation process that was extensively reported on in the media. “Since there are no precedents for such a process in South Africa under current legislation, this process could result in the development of a protocol to be adopted by any institution to facilitate similar challenges in the future,” said Prof Petersen.

Apart from the Special Task Team’s efforts, the Rector and Vice-Chancellor also had numerous consultations on the issue in person with different internal and external university stakeholders, including Afrikaans-speaking staff and students, alumni, the SRC, and other individuals, some of whom are experts in the field of artworks, symbols, and heritage.

Executive management’s support of recommendation by Special Task Team

“The executive management supports the recommendation made by the Special Task Team for the relocation of the statue to a site off campus and indicated that the public participation process preceding the recommendation of the Special Task Team was sufficiently thorough, transparent, inclusive, and well-publicised. The educational value of the public participation process was also commended by members of the executive,” said Prof Petersen.

The decision of the executive management to support the Special Task Team’s recommendation is motivated by one vital consideration: *The best interest of the University of the Free State*.

According to Prof Petersen, the relocation of the statue to a site off campus will best serve the university’s vision for the future. “This includes ensuring that the UFS is a place where everyone feels welcome, where diversity is encouraged and celebrated, where concepts such as decolonialisation are challenged in an academic and realistic way, and where integration is accomplished in a holistic manner – as reflected in the ITP,” he said.

As established in the ‘Names, Symbols and Spaces’ work stream of the ITP, the university’s statues, artworks, names, and memorabilia should facilitate social inclusion in a diverse community and reflect a transformed university. The visual and spatial environments should also promote inclusivity and non-racialism.

Keeping the statue in its current position – elevated and central, in front of the building that houses the university’s executive management – does not align with the core principles of inclusivity and diversity. “In fact, a large proportion of our student body is

feeling unwelcome (at least in the specific space in front of the Main Building), as it represents a period in history that they do not feel part of,” Prof Petersen said.

The contemporary university as a public space calls for innovative strategies that are different from both the controlled art gallery, as well as the *modus operandi* of the past. In the university of the past, works (e.g. symbols, artworks, and statues) were displayed fairly randomly, and this could survive since there was an assumption of a homogeneous university community, a singular public as opposed to plural publics. This assumption was not exactly wrong – it was arguably a true reflection of the singular demographic of staff and students. However, as the university’s population changes, the assumptions of this homogeneity can no longer hold.

Supplementing the statue with historically significant figures from other communities is impractical, costly, and can become a minefield of controversy about who to include, who to leave out, and what physical form this representation should take.

“The Special Task Team found that there can be no historical reinterpretation of the statue and the space around it without relocation. This finding is supported by the university’s executive management. The process will remain within the ambit of heritage legislation and will be conducted in a dignified manner. A comprehensive approach and coherent process will be implemented to reconceptualise the space in front of the Main Building. Members of the Special Task Team will form part of the reconfiguration process,” said Prof Petersen.

Relocation to a site off campus

“Although the relocation of the statue has the potential to create division within the university community, the public participation process demonstrated the potential for creating a level of tolerance, with different members of the university community listening to the views of others. The best way to counteract this imminent division and to develop a deeper level of tolerance, would be to craft a path towards a new and more defined university citizenship focusing on *caring* or *repairing*,” said Prof Petersen.

New and more defined university citizenship focusing on *caring* or *repairing*

By making *caring* the university’s core focus, a neutral value shared by all communities represented on our campuses and beyond, will be elevated. Cultivating a sense of caring – for one another and for our institution – will ensure that the University of the Free State remains a welcoming place, a place of belonging. “In this way, the UFS will continue to build on established values such as respect, tolerance, listening to one another, forward-looking, and social justice, and will truly serve its mandate of reconciliation and real transformation. This will also provide an opportunity for the university to further develop programmes focusing on social cohesion under the value of *caring*,” said Prof Petersen.

The Council furthermore approved that the necessary legislation processes set out by the Free State Heritage Resources Authority will be followed with the relocation of the statue, and that ‘*Project Caring*’ becomes a crucial focus at the UFS for 2019 and beyond.

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