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Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world

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Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world?

Significance:

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has given rise to strong campus protests globally, forcing many universities to meander around this difficult political terrain. While some argue this as a human rights issue, more careful consideration reveals a long-standing, controversial political dispute with extremism on both sides. Universities are advised not to take sides in such divisive conflicts that can lead to unintended consequences, particularly when strong opposing views exist on campus. This Commentary urges universities to proceed cautiously, resisting pressure to make official statements on the matter, to preserve academic integrity in the face of polarising global events, and to create an environment where differing viewpoints can be heard.

The Israeli–Palestinian matter is a long-standing, controversial political matter; there are many different political viewpoints in South Africa, and certainly within our universities. In this Commentary, I want to present a view that I believe is in the best interests of our South African universities, not in an authoritative manner, but hopefully in an empathetic way that recognises that there are many different viewpoints on this, and I wish to do this within the framework of good governance principles.

The phrase 'good governance principles' is used a great deal today, but I am not sure that we have a common understanding of what this means in a university setting, and I want to explore this in the context of the conflict in Gaza.

University systems require continual nurturing. Universities are fragile[1] and can break[2] easily. University systems are not perfect, but we are doomed if we stop aspiring to good governance principles.

'Principles' refer to the founding ideas that we hold dear, that guide us, especially in times of difficulty – a compass in our time of need. One of the enduring principles by which all good universities are governed is that they are governed in a principled way.

The principles that I refer to speak less to the legislative and legal framework in which we work, which, in the case of our universities, includes the *Higher Education Act*[3], the university statutes, the national Constitution[4], the Bill of Rights and so on. This is taken as a given, naturally. The principles that I refer to speak more to what we value as our university, and invariably these principles impinge on the policies and procedures that we set for ourselves, and ultimately the decisions that we make as a collective.

A necessary part of good governance is the soundness of our decision-making processes. How decisions are made, through consensus or through voting, how decisions are recorded and how they are implemented and monitored are an important part of our administrative processes at universities. Universities need good administrators, and good administrative systems.

And as universities are principally a place of ideas, principles largely speak to the intellectual culture of the place.

At any one time, the landmark decisions that we make should strive to be precedent-setting, should stand the test of time, and be timeless in a sense. We need to always think about what our key decisions mean for the future, until a new cataclysmic change happens when we might need to revisit the principles that we set for ourselves.

This is how evolution[5] takes place, with periods of stability followed by short bursts of cataclysmic change when the entire ecosystem needs to readjust. At our universities in South Africa, and quite possibly around the world, the Gaza matter could well be one such time when we experience cataclysmic change. With cataclysmic change usually comes fallout, and we need to be cognisant of this at our universities as we meander through this.

At any one time, we can only do as well as we can with who we are collectively. A sculptor can only do as well as the quality of the clay that they have in front of them. We, as an academy, can only make critical decisions that reflect collectively on who we are based on our own integrated values and understandings of where we are now.

If we are a band of racists, then no matter how hard we might try to mask that, our decisions will eventually reflect our racist attitudes. This is why diversity is important at our universities. Universities thrive on a diversity of viewpoints, and so imposing a hegemonic view from the top management often leads to problems in a university setting.

We should avoid making populist decisions or 'jumping on the bandwagon'. Just because some of our competitor universities have made a particular decision should not automatically mean that we at our universities must follow suit. Our leading institutions must be prepared to take the high road, even if it is a lonely road.

It is not about 'the whataboutery'[6], a term that has been used frequently recently, but about taking a principled, long-term approach, about making precedent-setting decisions that stand the test of time, that attempt to address future such situations, both real and hypothetical.

There is no blueprint for what these principles are. They are not in a textbook, nor can they be searched on the Internet. These are established through critical dialogue and debate at our institutions. These principles speak to the very soul of our universities.

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I refer to *good* governance principles as this speaks to us as an academic cohort, especially as an academic leadership, always striving for the good of our institutions. We should always think about how we can do good for our universities, for now and for the future. And this is especially important now when we look around and see so many failing institutions around the country.

Universities releasing an official statement on the Israeli–Palestinian matter is not an academic freedom matter. Even though academic freedom[7] is a right accorded to academics, a special group of individuals in society, with important rights, responsibilities and obligations, it is practised on an individual basis. We practice academic freedom as independent critical public voices. It goes against the principles of academic freedom for the university to impose a hegemonic view from the top of an essentially political matter when we have differing views on this amongst staff and students.

By university, I mean the Council, the Senior Executive Committee, the University Forum, the University Senate, the faculties, schools, institutes, the Alumni Association, and so on.

Every citizen has freedom of expression[7] and can speak their minds freely, even with little adherence to the truth, so long as they do not instil hatred or violence. However, academics are obliged to speak critically about their subject and more generally about societal matters and to base their arguments on verifiable evidence. And I encourage academics to speak up on this matter in their individual capacities.

Reputation matters a great deal at universities, and academics pride themselves on their standing in the eyes of their peers. And if an academic becomes known for being less than reliable with the truth, being less critical and more political, they will be denigrated by their peers, and this is harsh enough.

And so, when we bring an essentially political matter into a university discussion and force a decision when there is little consensus, we create unnecessary tensions amongst ourselves, and this in itself is a lesson to be learnt.

At some other university in the world where there is clear bias for one or other position in this decades-long conflict in the Middle East, I can see how it can be straightforward to pass a university-wide resolution that condemns one side or the other.

But at many of our South African universities, we know that there is little consensus on this issue. I do not think that there is anything wrong with airing a geopolitical matter, especially one that is as contentious as this Middle Eastern conflict, but for the university to officially choose sides when there are clearly different political viewpoints across the university is problematic and sets us up for failure as a university. We should strive to be inclusive of differing political viewpoints on this matter at our universities.

Yes, this is, of course, a human rights issue, and a horrific one at that, but if we take only a little step back to ask how this has come about, we enter a slippery political slope that has no end, even if we go back decades if not centuries.

To be clear, I have my own personal political views on this, based on my own understanding of the history, my own conscience, my own prejudices, my own emotions, my own ideas, however untested those might be, and my own hopes and aspirations for that part of the world. However, it would be remiss of me to impose these views on the university, through a vote, for example, when I fully know that there are differing, and probably equally valid, views on this. Making decisions on this goes way beyond the remit of the university.

No matter how hard the university may try to couch this in humanitarian terms, we will invariably be making a political statement one way or another. We should avoid playing into the hands of extremists on both sides.

Declaring upfront that we are not anti-Semitic, or not Islamophobic, or not anti-Israel, or not anti-Palestine is a sign that we know at the outset that we could be interpreted differently. If there is potential for misinterpretation of what we say in an environment that is highly polarised, then you can assume that you will be misinterpreted. So, let us be very careful of what we say officially as a university.

We should be wary of taking sides in what is a known long-standing and controversial political conflict that will clearly exacerbate divisions at our universities, no matter our own personal political convictions. Some individuals are so invested in the political outcome of this conflict that they cannot see the folly of their ways. We should be careful about using the university to fight our own personal political battles.

If we comment on one major human rights issue, then we should make every effort to comment on essentially every other major human rights catastrophe, which is hopelessly untenable to do. I wish to stress that I do not advocate this on practical grounds, but if we want to become a university that speaks up on human rights[8] matters, let us do this consistently and sincerely. That would be taking a principled approach.

Showing but a cursory interest in the conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo now is a feeble attempt to retrofit our concerns there, when there has previously been no genuine interest at many of our universities. This comes across as being insensitive and insincere, and very much an afterthought.

To the best of my knowledge, many of our South African universities have never previously established a principle of getting involved in such conflicts. But this does not mean that we should not for the future. If this is the university that we want to be, then let us decide how we can do this in a more deliberate way rather than in an *ad hoc* manner where we are selective about which issues we want to take up.

Our aim should not be to maintain unity at our universities over the Israeli–Palestinian matter, but we should not be driving disunity either. Universities are argumentative places, where individuals should engage with each other, hopefully respectfully, on topics on which they have strong disagreement. Our universities should facilitate an environment where this can happen. Our task as a university is to nurture this environment for constructive disagreements to take place, not to take sides in this, or to exacerbate divisions that we know already exist.

The difficulty with having a conversation about this conflict is that no matter what one says, one is often and very quickly put into one camp or another, and so it is hard to have a rational discussion. This environment has become polarised, which makes finding a lasting solution difficult.

We need to be careful about thinking about this in binary form. I am not in favour of our universities releasing any statement, but it should not be concluded that I am in one camp or the other.

The Academy of Science of South Africa[9] (ASSAf) has only recently developed a set of guidelines for putting out statements of this nature in response to the Gaza conflict. ASSAf has recognised different viewpoints amongst its membership and has exercised caution in terms of any perceived entry into the political area, which I think is wise.

It has condemned in strong terms all human rights violations and conflicts around the world without singling any out, so they have issued a general and timeless statement. ASSAf also has appointed a panel of experts to lead a consultative process to advise further. Perhaps our universities can learn from this?

A general and timeless statement that generally condemns all human rights violations and calls for peaceful dialogue in times of conflict would suit our universities well and enable us to focus on our core mission. Or we could develop a set of guidelines that set out clearly under what circumstances our universities can issue a public statement on a geopolitical matter, and then act conscientiously and not preferentially in this regard.

I believe institutions should refrain from making statements of a geopolitical nature if (1) there is little consensus, meaning general agreement, amongst staff and students, or if (2) these are going to cause unnecessary division at the university, or if (3) these are going to bring harm to the university, or if (4) these have little bearing on the operations of the university, or if (5) there is no feasible pathway to impact, not the negative impact that I see internal to many universities around the world. These five guidelines

that I have listed suggest that there is little basis for a university to issue an official statement on the crisis in Gaza.

If all five of these criteria are met, then we should be extremely cautious about going ahead with any public statement. However, for some other geopolitical issue, if it can be established that some but not all these criteria are met, then it becomes potentially possible for the university to put out a statement, but then it will still, in my view, need to proceed cautiously.

When there are extreme challenges at a university, I think that two things need to happen. We should go back to a principled approach, which I always find helpful as a dean of science, and we should not exacerbate divisions. Bringing people together, even those with differing viewpoints, to discuss and debate in a respectful and collegial way is an essential part of what universities are. We should not simply mimic what happens elsewhere. And we should especially be wary of forcing a decision on an essentially political matter. This is not a routine administrative matter where we absolutely must decide. For if we do, this will be interpreted by the outside as our universities taking sides in a decades-long conflict.

Let me close on a somewhat philosophical note. We see this extreme polarisation, not just amongst the chief protagonists in the Middle East, but also around the world. Rather than bludgeon our way through this, could we at our universities perhaps try a new experiment? Could we try to create an environment where the different voices do not just co-exist and grudgingly tolerate each other but where they come together to discuss and debate ways to a more viable future? And maybe that could plant a new seed of hope in that part of the world? Just maybe it will.

Here, the humanities disciplines can play a more constructive role, not just in this conversation but also in many of the challenges facing humanity on a global scale. But to start with, there needs to be a clearer distinction between political discourse and intellectual discourse, between activism and action. More and more now, I see a blurring of these lines in a university setting, often with catastrophic consequences. The principles of academic discourse are very different from those of political discourse, and if we cannot distinguish[10] between these very carefully, it will spell the end of our universities as we know them.

If any university wishes to make a more meaningful contribution to this discussion, then it can, through its proper decision-making processes, perhaps consider establishing a 'Centre for Israel and Palestine'[11] to lead a more rational discourse on how we can imagine a better future there.

Historically, our university Academic Freedom Committees played an important role during the apartheid era, and I would like to see us go back to regular annual lectures on academic freedom at our South African universities. We should not wait for a crisis before we remind ourselves of the role and function of the university and the enduring principles by which all good universities are governed, despite these ever-changing times.

Declarations

I am the Dean of Science at the University of the Witwatersrand. I write in my personal capacity and my views do not necessarily represent the views of my institution or member organisations. The initial draft was submitted to SAJS, which is published by ASSAf, on 5 August 2024, well before I was elected to the ASSAf Council on 7 October 2024. I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

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