



Statement from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, pertaining to a report on Sexual Harassment released in August 2013

Wednesday, 4 September 2013

Following a spate of allegations related to sexual harassment on campus, Wits University commissioned an independent inquiry into the nature, scale and extent of the problem on its campuses. Sexual harassment occurs within a context of pervasive gender and sexual violence within South Africa, and in particular within the education system, of which Wits is a part.

The University welcomes the report for its rigour and its constructive recommendations and accepts full responsibility for the abuses committed on its campuses. The report identifies highly discrepant and diverse understandings of the nature of the problem. It critically highlights the inadequacy of the University's systems to address rumours and allegations decisively, or to support those affected by predatory sexual behaviour. In addition, it also identifies and speaks to the widespread culture of silence that enables and sustains abuse. The report also provides a set of guidelines on policies, organisational structures and systems for the University as it crafts a substantive response to sexual harassment.

The University broadly accepts the findings of the report and welcomes its recommendations. The Senior Executive Team will initiate an action plan and a broad set of interventions, driven directly from the Vice-Chancellor's Office with the assistance of an Advisory Group. This newly-formed group comprises members of management, staff, leading gender specialists and students.

The University recognises that sexual harassment and sexual predation cannot be eliminated overnight. It will accelerate a process of robust change in governance structures, policies and procedures and the problematic institutional cultures associated with sexual harassment. This will impact gender relations from lecture halls, administration offices, to social spaces such as coffee shops and residences. This process has commenced by providing professional counselling for all directly affected by sexual harassment in recent months.

The University is determined to restore trust and confidence in the institution's ability to provide a safe environment for all who visit, live and work at Wits. Safety and rapid intervention when required will be foremost in the University's strategy to ensure that any reported incident is dealt with swiftly.

On behalf of the University, the Vice-Chancellor once again apologises to those individuals who have experienced sexual harassment at Wits. The University thanks all the members of the Wits community who helped to address the issue proactively and those who alerted the University to specific cases. Wits remains committed to creating safe spaces on its campuses and developing an institution that responds sensitively and appropriately to all forms of sexual harassment.