

President Joseph Castro
California State University
Fresno

Dear President Castro

Our attention has been drawn to the university's cancellation of the search for the Edward Said Professorship and the resignation letter of Prof Vida Samiian, who resigned in protest at this decision.

As South African scholars who are sensitive to our own past in which academic freedom was suppressed and scholars were denied opportunities solely on grounds of race, we find Prof Samiian's account deeply disturbing. While we readily acknowledge that our information on this decision is derived purely from her letter, we take it extremely seriously because we are aware that there is now a sustained campaign to pressure US universities into excluding from their campuses scholars who sympathise with the plight of the Palestinian people and are therefore critical of the Israeli state.

To those of us who cherish academic freedom and free speech, the idea that anyone could be excluded from an academic post because they hold to a particular viewpoint is abhorrent. That some US universities are willing to bow to this pressure is a source of great shame for those of us who value democracy and liberty. Not only does it violate the principles on which free universities are founded – it also sends a message to the world that the free speech which democrats rightly recommend is really only the freedom to express some views and is therefore no freedom at all. To say that this undermines democracy's credibility is to state the obvious.

We assume that your university would not repeat the iniquities of our South African past by excluding scholars from a post because of their ethnic origin. However, given the background we sketch here, we do not, sadly, find it implausible that a US university would cancel a search because the candidates were critical of the Israeli state. Whatever your university's motive, given this context, it is difficult to interpret the decision as anything other than a response to the lobby which is intent on denying academic freedom to scholars who sympathise with the condition of the Palestinian people. The most obvious way in which the university can refute that impression and assert its commitment to freedom and equal treatment regardless of race or creed is to reinstate the search, select one of the finalists, and invite Prof Samiian to return to her post

Yours

Prof Umesh Bawa
University of Western Cape

Prof Patrick Bond
University of Witwatersrand

Prof Jane Duncan
University of Johannesburg

Prof Farid Esack

University of Johannesburg

Judy Favish
Formerly University of Cape Town (retired)

Prof Steven Friedman
University of Johannesburg

Na'eem Jeenah
Afro-Middle East Centre
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Dr Mohammed S Mathee
University of Johannesburg

Prof Nyasha Mboti
University of Johannesburg

Prof Amira Osman
University of Johannesburg

Prof Richard Pithouse
University of the Witwatersrand/Rhodes University

Prof Lynette Steenveld
Rhodes University

Prof Larry Strelitz
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Prof Peter Vale
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Prof Robert van Niekerk
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Dr Elina Hankela
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Dr Sikhumbuzo Mngadi
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