

As members of the University of Johannesburg community, we wish to express our disagreement with the University's decision to sign a scientific co-operation agreement with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. We believe that this agreement is damaging to our university because it ignores the call of Palestinian civil society organisations to withhold co-operation from Israeli universities which co-operate in human rights abuses.

Ben-Gurion University is such an institution. Its president, Rivka Carmi, describes it as a 'proudly Zionist institution' which means that it actively supports the ideology of the Israeli state, which denies Palestinians an equal share of the land of their birth. Ben-Gurion University also offers partial exemption from its degree requirements to members of the Israeli military, thus bending academic requirements to the needs of a military engaged in occupying Palestinian lands in violation of United Nations Resolutions.

We are particularly disturbed that the University has signed an agreement with Ben-Gurion at a time when it has declared that it is seeking legal ways to discipline the head of its politics department, Neve Gordon, for labeling Israel an apartheid state and supporting a non-violent boycott of Israeli companies and institutions which abuse human rights. Clearly, academic freedom is not a value in which Ben-Gurion University believes: the Association for Civil Rights in Israel reacted to the threat to Gordon by expressing its 'sorrow' that 'this is not the first time Ben-Gurion University has misappropriated its duty to stimulate social and political involvement among university staff, and is instead choking differing opinions within an argument between the Israeli public', indicating that this attempt to suppress free thought is not an isolated incident.

In defence of its decision, our university leadership argues that it is being even-handed because it favours partnerships with universities in Israel and Palestine. It says this stance is, in its view, in line with the official policy of the South African government. We respectfully disagree.

The Palestinian people are currently victims of an Israeli occupation which violates their human rights as well as international law. Their plight has been repeatedly compared to that of black South Africans under apartheid by, among others, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former Cabinet minister Ronnie Kasrils. Palestinian institutions are forced to exist in circumstances which are strongly similar to the Bantustan system created by apartheid. To insist that it is even-handed to support Israeli and Palestinian institutions is thus much the same as insisting, during the apartheid period, that it was even-handed to support apartheid institutions as long as Bantustan institutions are supported too.

We do not know whether this approach is in line with that of our government – we understand it to oppose the illegal occupation of Palestine which would surely assume non-co-operation with institutions which support that occupation. But, if our government supports the signing of co-operation agreements with institutions which are complicit in human rights abuses, we wish to point out that, in democratic South Africa, universities are not bound by government policy.

In sum, we believe that signing this agreement endangers UJ's reputation as a university justly proud of its commitment to the values of a democratic South Africa because it sends a signal to the world and our Palestinian colleagues that we are unwilling to support their demand for the rights we now enjoy. We appeal to the university's leadership to reaffirm our university's

commitment to human rights and democracy by cancelling the agreement with Ben-Gurion University.

1. Prof P Alexander, Professor of Sociology.
2. Dr Z Asmal, Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development.
3. Mr I Baatjes, Senior Researcher, Centre for Education Rights and Transformation.
4. Ms S Bassadien-Lecturer, Department of Social Work.
5. Dr M Belaid-Senior Lecturer, Department of Chemical Engineering.
6. Mr M Butler, Department of Civil Engineering and Technology.
7. Ms F Cachalia, Language Facilitator.
8. Ms C Ceruti, Researcher, Centre for Sociological Research.
9. Ms F Dangor, Department: Supply Chain Management.
10. Dr M Dawson, Lecturer, Department of Sociology.
11. Ms N Dharsey, Coordinator, Academic Development and Support.
12. Dr A Desai, Researcher, Centre for Sociological Research.
13. Prof N Erlank, Director, Centre for Culture and Language in Africa.
14. Prof F Esack, Professor of Religious Studies.
15. Prof S Friedman, Director, Centre for the Study of Democracy.
16. Dr A Graham, Lecturer, Department of English.
17. Dr L Kajee, Senior Lecturer, Educational Linguistics, Department of Curriculum and Instruction.
18. Dr F Kaldine, Lecturer, Department of Psychology.
19. Ms A Kasoojee, Corporate Governance.
20. Dr T Majam, Lecturer, Public Governance.
21. Dr I Marais, Lecturer, Anthropology and Development Studies.
22. Dr Z McDonald, Researcher, Centre for Sociological Research.
23. Ms V-J Merckel-Lecturer, Faculty of Education
24. Prof M Modiba, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education.
25. Dr E Modimakwane, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health Sciences.
26. Ms M Mahomed, Head of Student Support.
27. Dr D Moore, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies.
28. Ms F Mulla, Lecturer, Department of Radiography, Faculty of Health Sciences.
29. Dr S Nalla, Lecturer, Department of Human Anatomy and Physiology.
30. Dr A Peer, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Economics and Financial Services.
31. Dr N Petersen, Lecturer, Department of Education Studies.
32. Mr C Petker, Communications Department.
33. Ms G Petker, Centre for Education Practice and Research.
34. Dr P Pfafe, Researcher, Department of Sociology.
35. Ms M Phadi, Researcher, Department of Sociology
36. Dr D Postma, Senior Lecturer, Department of Education Studies.
37. Ms N. Rafee, Lecturer, Practical Business Law.
38. Ms E Sekgobela, Centre for Education Rights and Transformation.
39. Dr L Sinwell, Researcher, Centre for Sociological Research.
40. Dr C van Rooyen, Lecturer, Development Studies.
41. Prof E Weber, Director, Centre for Education Rights and Transformation.
42. Mr F Varachia, Manager, Engineering and Metallurgy.
43. Mr S Vally, Senior Researcher, Centre for Education Rights and Transformation.