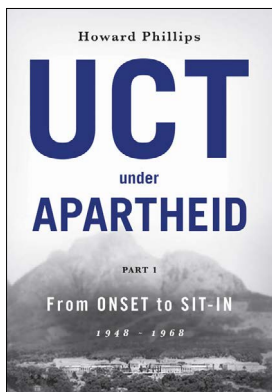




Check for updates

**BOOK TITLE:**

UCT under apartheid. Part 1: From onset to sit-in, 1948–1968



**AUTHOR:**

Howard Phillips

**ISBN:**

9781928232858 (hardcover, 424 pp)

**PUBLISHER:**

Jacana Media, Johannesburg; ZAR359

**PUBLISHED:**

2019

**REVIEWER:**

Tilman Dedering<sup>1</sup>

**AFFILIATION:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of History, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**EMAIL:**

tdedering@me.com

**HOW TO CITE:**

Dedering T. The University of Cape Town: Between apartheid and academic freedom. *S Afr J Sci.* 2021;117(1/2), Art. #8625. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2021/8625>

**ARTICLE INCLUDES:**

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

**PUBLISHED:**

29 January 2021

# The University of Cape Town: Between apartheid and academic freedom

Howard Phillips's history of the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 1948 to 1968 covers a period that is not only remarkable for the gradual consolidation of the apartheid regime but also for important changes in post-World War II academe. The advent of Nationalist Party rule coincided with a phase of increasing professionalisation in a number of scholarly disciplines as well as in the rise of new ideas on the objectives and methodologies of tertiary education. The author has scrutinised the academic, political and social facets of this history by providing a careful examination of the fluctuating trajectories of the University's management, colleges, and departments. Drawing from a wealth of primary, secondary and oral sources, this book also provides plenty of space for the voices of former staff and students. Written in a fluid and elegant style, which efficiently navigates the obstacles of a potentially tedious institutional history, this book takes the reader on a multidisciplinary journey through the South African academic landscape during a period of increasing political oppression.

As must be expected, therefore, the fractious race relations at UCT are never absent from the narrative. The period under discussion saw a vigorous transformation from an institution centred on teaching to one of the most respected research universities in South Africa. This development was accompanied by a remarkable rise in the number of departments from 59 to 105, as well as by the growth of staff numbers from 521 to 893. The development of the different academic disciplines was shaped not only by changing scholarly trends but also by the strengths and weaknesses of more-or-less colourful members of the teaching staff. Occasionally, the author deviates from his studiously diplomatic tone to convey the disappointed reactions from students to pedagogically incompetent teachers or to professors who became stuck in outmoded methodologies.

During this period, the student population increased by 73% to 7392 learners (p. 337). The initial hopes of more liberal-minded academics of creating an environment that was more responsive to the educational needs of students from the majority of the South African people, including those classified as coloureds, Indians and Asians, were shattered when the relations between the University management and the government became progressively tense in the 1960s. The author comments on the cherished self-image of UCT as a liberal haven in a sea of racially based injustice with more than a grain of salt. The impressive modernisation of UCT's teaching and research facilities happened without providing the same kinds of services or support to black and coloured students that were afforded to white students. Thus, a sense of alienation was rife among those students whose right to a first-class tertiary education was constantly questioned on racial grounds. While the numbers of coloured and Indian students, who constituted the majority of 'non-white' students, increased from 2.98% in 1948 to 12.4% by 1959, this section of the student population dwindled to a mere 5.5% by 1968 as a result of the intensifying enforced separation between black and white (p. 338).

It has to be acknowledged, as the author does by mentioning individual cases of white defiance, that open confrontation with an increasingly authoritarian and ruthless government was easier to demand than effect. But despite the University's attempts to exploit grey areas and loopholes, its 'timid brand of liberalism', which often glossed over the many instances of segregation in and outside lecture halls, does not lend itself to heroic tales of principled white liberal resistance (p. 253). What often stuck in the minds and memories of African students was that segregation percolated through a liberal veneer to infest most social spaces as they usually characterise campus life. In the wider context of apartheid South Africa, the University's reputation as the most liberal institution (next to Wits) was well deserved, but this also shows what little space the regime left for academic and civic freedom. These political conflicts did not only affect the relations between black and white but also between English and Afrikaans students. Over the years the latter increasingly turned to enrolment at institutions with a pronounced Afrikaner identity because they felt estranged from an English-speaking academic environment that extolled the virtues of a 'foreign' liberalism. Afrikaner nationalist circles did not tire of painting the despised 'Moscow on the Hill' as the hotbed of revolutionary activities, especially when the global wave of student unrest began to lap at the feet of the apartheid colossus in the late 1960s.

This book also provides many insights into gender relations in the academic world during this pre-feminist period. Here the University was very much in line with the Western institutions of higher learning which it always tried to emulate. During the period under discussion, there were only five women among the 65 members of Council, obviously all of them white. The author frequently alludes to a culture of unbridled masculinity that seemed to have been taken for granted by most male and also by female students. For many women, condescending and sexist treatment at the hands of their 'superior' male co-students was a daily experience, especially if they dared to step outside their pre-ordained roles as rag queens and drum majorettes.

For all its engagement with the political and social context, however, this book is a fascinating study of the development of an academic institution during a turbulent period. Experts in the different scholarly fields may find Phillips's succinct descriptions of the emergence of new trends and the concomitant infighting in the different disciplines instructive. It is these struggles against intellectual conformity and stagnation that shape the reputation of a leading university. The author, himself a UCT emeritus professor and a renowned historian, hints at the necessity of a second volume to continue the history of UCT under apartheid. It remains to be hoped that such a volume, bringing up this history to at least the beginning of the democratic South Africa, will indeed follow soon.

© 2021. The Author(s). Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.