



THE RISE OF THE Fallists

The FitzPatrick Report usually highlights one of the Fitztitute's research projects. However, towards the end of 2016, the widespread media attention on the #FeesMustFall protests raised concerns about their impact on university activities. I thought it important to let people know how the Fitz is faring in these difficult times.

On the surface at least, the impact on the Fitz has not been too severe. The suspension of teaching activities at the University of Cape Town (UCT) affected mainly undergraduate classes, leaving postgraduate students and staff to continue their activities more or less unhindered. Fortunately, spring is a time when many Fitz students are in the field and so they avoided the protests entirely. And even for those Fitz students based at UCT, the protest actions had relatively little direct impact on their day-to-day activities.

The staff had to deal with setting additional exams and juggling the revised academic schedule for 2017, which sees undergraduate classes starting a month later than normal. However, the biggest impact was psychological. Although we tried to continue business as usual, the uncertainty surrounding the ongoing disruptions affected morale to some extent.

At the time of writing the end-of-year exams are proceeding as planned,

following an agreement with protesting students. This should allow the university to accept a new cohort of students in 2017. The alternative is unthinkable. UCT obtains roughly half its operating income from student fees; without fee-paying students, the university cannot continue to operate. The freezing of fees in 2016 compounded the gradual decrease in government funding for universities over the past decade, resulting in many posts being lost.

At the Fitz, only our Centre of Excellence funding has enabled us to retain a coordinator for our flagship Conservation Biology Masters programme. This course, which currently sees its 25th cohort of students completing their research projects, has trained close on 300 students from 43 countries, including 22 African nations. Many of these students have gone on to play a key role in conservation initiatives across the continent. In a time of ever-increasing threats to biodiversity globally, it is crucial that we continue to train students across the broad range of conservation sciences. However, we risk losing this course when our Centre of Excellence funding comes to an end in 2019.

Even the core Fitz teaching posts are under threat. The FitzPatrick Memorial Trust, which was set up to support the institute, no longer covers most of the Fitztitute's post costs. As a result, we



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above *The charred remains of a bakkie belonging to the Plant Conservation Unit, torched outside the Fitz in 2016, bears flowers in memory of the loss of a vehicle that supported numerous conservation projects.*

top *A small group of Fallists carry placards in front of a much larger gathering of students and staff demonstrating their desire to maintain academic activities at UCT.*

depend on the goodwill of the Science Faculty. Fortunately the income generated from Fitz student and research subsidies is more than double the cost of these posts, but we need to rebuild the Memorial Trust if the institute is to continue to flourish and work to ensure the long-term future of Africa's birds.

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