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Media Release: Universities SA expresses solidarity with Turkish academics in distress

As a show of solidarity with academics in Turkey, Universities South Africa (USAf) has issued a letter to that country's Ambassador to South Africa, Mr Kaan Esener, expressing deep concern over punitive injunctions being meted out by the government of the Republic of Turkey against academics and leaders in that country's higher education system. The situation deteriorated since January this year and this accelerated in the aftermath of the recent failed military coup.

According to media reports, Turkey's attack on the higher education sector is perceived as an elimination of an apparent opposition to the current government. This appears to have been precipitated by the signing and publishing of an Academics for Peace petition in January 2016 by 2,128 scholars in which they criticised serious human rights violations.

Protests against this attack on academic freedom and institutional autonomy have been led by organisations such as Scholars at Risk, an international network of over 400 universities and colleges in 40 countries, and scholarly associations closely connected with events in Turkey. Since the failed coup attempt of July 15-16, 2016, the Turkish government has cracked down on officials in the Ministry of Education and ordered the resignation of all university deans across the country's public and private universities. Approximately 1,600 university deans have been affected and 21,000 private school teachers have had their teaching licenses revoked. Further, reports suggest that travel restrictions have been imposed on academics at public universities and Turkish academics abroad were required to return to Turkey.

In the letter delivered to the Pretoria-based Turkish Embassy on 25 July 2016, USAf stated: "Our concerns relate both to the danger to the wellbeing of academics and university leaders and also to the impact of this on the longstanding traditions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy which have been upheld by Turkey in the past. It would seem then that this is a deeply regressive step.

"On the other hand, Universities SA is of the view that these actions will have a long-lasting negative effect on the higher education system in Turkey. Turkey's universities are well regarded and it is of concern to us that these actions will cause severe damage to the sector. Around the world universities are regarded as key social institutions in creating the conditions that lead to socioeconomic and political wellbeing, impacting both individuals and society more generally. Universities are, however, fragile institutions and the kinds of actions taken against more than 2,000 academics in Turkey may result in severe damage to the institutions and hence to their project of building a better society."

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In taking this step, USAf aligns itself with the broad international front of protestation and hopes that this form of engagement will be regarded as constructive criticism of decisions and actions that may well prove to have disastrous outcomes for fellow academics, and for universities in Turkey.

A number of South African universities have ongoing collaborations with Turkish counterpart institutions. These involve academics and students in both countries and this amplifies USAf's anxiety about what is going on, the letter stated.

USAf is a representative association of all 26 public universities in South Africa. Vice-Chancellors of these institutions constitute the association's Board of Directors.

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