VC AND CHAIRPERSON OF VENDA UNIVERSITY APPEAR BEFORE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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The Vice-Chancellor (VC) of the University of Venda (Univen), Dr Bernard Nthambeleni, and the Chairperson of the University Council, Mr Juneas Lekgetha, appeared before the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology yesterday to answer questions on the ongoing Oversight Inquiry into the Appointment of Prof Peter Mbati to the position of Vice-Chancellor of Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University and related matters.

Part A of the inquiry by the committee seeks to find responses on the process followed by the Venda University Council in dealing with allegations of sexual harassment against Prof Mbati, allegations of mismanagement of infrastructure projects during his tenure as VC of Univen, and part B will focus on the process followed in his appointment as VC of Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University.

Committee Chairperson, Mr Philly Mapulane, questioned the council Chairperson why the university went out of its way to protect Prof Mbati, and allowed him to use the institution’s resources to defend himself.

“The manner in which Univen handled the complaint by Prof Phendla was not consistent with policy, the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) came in because the university could not implement its own policy,” said the committee Chairperson.

The Chairperson of the university council dismissed claims that Prof Mbati used the institution’s resources to defend himself against the sexual harassment accusations.

The committee also questioned Mr Lekgetha about a decision on an application to review the report of the CGE, wanting to know who authorised that decision which was not a decision of council but ratified at a later stage.

Mr Mapulane accused the institution of going out of its way, violating its own policy and instituted proceedings that were not approved by council just to protect one man.

According to the committee Chairperson, the CGE report implicated Prof Mbati personally, and he challenged it personally using the university’s resources, sometimes acting in his own capacity against the institution.

The testimony of the Vice-Chancellor started with a little exchange with the committee Chairperson when Dr Nthambeleni told the committee that he didn’t see how his responses will assist the inquiry.

He also accused the committee of “exceeding its powers on matters outside its mandate”, saying that it “appears now the committee seeks to conduct an inquiry into my appointment as VC, acting outside the terms of reference of the inquiry”.

Dr Nthambeleni also couldn’t respond to questions on whether his membership of the university council did not give him unfair advantage to be considered for the position of VC and claims that Prof Mbati could have unduly influenced his appointment, because of their close relationship.

“As a committee we have a duty to be fair in our processes, when a serious allegation is raised against a person, we have a duty to invite that person to give their side of the story, we do that out of fairness – it is not the committee that is making the allegations. the portfolio committee must be fair and unbiased in carrying out its mandate of oversight,” said the Chairperson.

He added: “This inquiry is not probing your appointment as VC but we want to understand because it was raised in the context of good governance at Univen, it would be irresponsible for the committee not to follow up on allegation made by witnesses.

Dr Nthambeleni will appear before the committee again on Friday to respond to questions relating to his time as a member of the ubersity council, before he was appointed VC.

Tomorrow the inquiry will listen to evidence relating to Prof Mbati’s appointment as VC of the Sefako Makgatho University.

**By Sakhile Mokoena**

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