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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Statement on the awarding of honorary doctorates in South Africa**

22 April 2024

Dear Members and Colleagues,

The South African Association of PhDs (SAAPhDs) has noted with concern private higher education institutions that are not officially registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) purporting to have the authority to confer honorary doctorates. An honorary doctorate is one of Higher Education's most significant accolades and should not be trivialised.

Our mandate as an organisation is not necessarily about policing each and every honorary doctorate that is being conferred. But there's a growing trend that we cannot ignore as the South African Association of PhDs, being a deeply worrying phenomenon where high profile celebrities are seen on TV and various social media platforms receiving honorary doctorates from institutions that are not registered or recognised by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

This creates confusion among less informed citizenry about the awarding of such honorary degrees. Many people cannot distinguish between an academic doctoral degree where one writes a thesis and an honorary doctorate being awarded. It is important to distinguish between an academic and an honorary doctorate.

### **Academic Doctorate Degree:**

An academic doctorate, commonly known as a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), represents a significant academic achievement obtained through extensive research in a specific field. This rigorous process entails years of dedicated study, research, and completing a substantial doctoral thesis or dissertation. Earning a doctorate signifies high expertise, specialisation, and a deep commitment to advancing knowledge within a particular discipline. The process of earning a Ph.D. adheres to standardised norms, involving coursework, examinations, original research, and the defense of a thesis or dissertation. The completion of PhD can take anything between three (3) to seven (7) years of study and sometimes more depending on your study and institution where one is registered.

Individuals with doctorate degrees are recognised for their scholarly contributions and are considered experts in their fields. This esteemed degree opens doors to numerous career opportunities in academia, research, consultancy, leadership, and board positions. It is a testament to one's intellectual capacity, critical thinking abilities, and significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge. This is an NQF level 10 qualification, which is the highest NQF level as per the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

### **Honorary Doctorate:**

In contrast, honorary doctorate degrees are those bestowed upon individuals who have made exceptional contributions to society or achieved remarkable success in their respective fields. These honorary degrees do not require recipients to fulfil the typical academic requirements of a doctoral programme.

The path to receiving an honorary doctorate varies among institutions, often entailing nomination and approval by the institution's leadership. Honorary doctorate degrees allow universities and institutions to recognise and celebrate individuals for their outstanding achievements, leadership, philanthropy, or significant societal contributions. They serve as a mark of distinction and are intended to honour recipients' accomplishments and positive impact on the world.

## **Proposed Framework and Eligibility Criteria for Awarding Honorary Doctorates**

1. An honorary doctorate should be conferred to a person who has contributed significantly to the cultural, scientific, and/or social development of the country, nation, or world. The contribution should be sustained over a period of years and should be lasting in nature. One should be able to document the national or international impact of the contributions. The mere holding of an executive position, public office, or professorship for many years is not sufficient. The creativity of the individual and the extraordinary character of the contributions must be evident.
2. The activities of the individual should contain outstanding contributions in scholarly research, teaching and learning, the arts, public service, or business. The person might be a distinguished scholar in the natural, physical, or social sciences, the arts or humanities, or a distinguished person in public life, business, the professions, or the performing arts. Evaluation will be based on the level of intellectual and professional attainment and the significance of the contributions to the enrichment and/or welfare of the state, nation, or world.
3. Persons nominated should be active in an area of activity that is highly relevant to the university or institution awarding the honorary doctorate. The honorary doctorate should reflect the values of the university or institution. The honorary doctorate should recognise the importance of equality, diversity, and inclusivity of our country.
4. The nominations of potential recipients should follow a rigorous process of being vetted by the various structures, comprised of representatives from the students, staff, alumni Faculty, Senate and Council vote on the proposals recommended by the Committee on Honorary Degrees.
5. An honorary degree should not be awarded in exchange for financial contribution.

The people who hold an academic doctoral degree (such as a PhD, LLD, D.Phil, D.Com, D.Ed, D.Tech, etc.) obtain such qualifications after fulfilment of doctoral degree requirements which includes producing a thesis and defending that thesis to a panel or external examiners who are experts and scholars in that particular field.

Our role as an Association is to safeguard the authenticity and integrity of the academic doctoral qualification and influence government policy to ensure the safeguarding the integrity and legitimacy of our hard-earned qualifications. We are elated to learn that DHET has since denounced this practice by bogus institutions, such as the Trinity International Bible University. However, the following actions must be considered:

- The DHET, Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Universities South Africa (USAf) and the South African Police Service (SAPS) must work together to uproot bogus institutions and ensure that proper actions are taken against such institutions.
- There should be punitive actions and sanctions imposed against such bogus practices and should be communicated to the public by DHET to deter other institutions and churches from engaging in such illegal practice.
- There should be public awareness and education on who can award an honorary doctorate and understand what conditions such can be awarded.
- There should be preventative measures put in place for other "Bible Colleges" and other persons from accepting such invitations to be conferred with these fake and unrecognised honorary degrees.
- The general public should be encouraged to register at legitimate and recognised universities that offer PhD and attain such degrees based on hard work and production of knowledge in a form of thesis.
- Celebrities and famous people should be distancing themselves from such bogus institutions and decline invitations to be awarded unrecognised "degrees".
- DHET should publish a list of recognised institutions and universities in the country that can offer PhDs and honorary doctorates. Any institution that doesn't have authority to award such should face the full might of the law.
- All other previously awarded fake honorary doctorates should be denounced and people who were awarded should be impressed upon to stop "demanding" to be referred to as "Dr so and so."

The title Dr is generally used both for those who hold doctoral degrees and for registered medical practitioners in South Africa.

#### **The use of the "Dr" for honorary doctorates:**

1. An honorary doctorate is awarded *Honoris Causa*, Latin meaning "for the sake of honour."
2. An honorary doctorate is distinctly different to an earned doctorate, in that it is an honour rather than a qualification, and, so as to distinguish the two, does not accord the awardee who does not already possess an earned doctoral degree the right to use the title of "Dr" in the broader community.

3. It is inappropriate for an honorary doctorate degree recipient to place the title 'Dr' in front of their name in written correspondence/documents or demand to be referred to as 'Dr'. In order to acknowledge an honorary degree (e.g., a PhD) from a particular university or institution, an awardee should use the convention such as Joe Soap (PhD, *Honoris Causa*) not as means of address, e.g., "Dr. Joe Soap."
4. An honorary doctoral degree recipient should not insist nor expect to be referred to with the title 'Dr' in a setting outside of the university or institution that awarded them. The *Honoris Causa* of honorary doctorates is not transferable to another institution or the public.
5. A recipient of an honorary degree may list their honorary doctorate in their Curriculum Vitae, resumes or biographies. In a CV or resume, the honorary degree should be listed under 'Awards and Honors', and not under 'Education' or 'Academic qualifications.'

There seems to be lack of understanding and knowledge by the public on who can be called "Dr" even in instances where an authentic honorary doctorate has been awarded. Therefore, there is an urgent need to educate the people of South Africa about PhD holders and Honorary Degree holders.

As an Association we will always strive to preserve and protect the prestige of a legitimate academic doctoral degree that has been earned. There should be no confusion in the public about the PhD and honorary doctorate awarded. We (the SAAPhDs) are prepared to work with the DHET in educating the public on how the two operate and who can lawfully award such qualifications.

In conclusion, academic doctorate and honorary degrees have distinct purposes and different meanings. Doctorate degrees embody scholarly achievements, specialisation, and the advancement of knowledge within a particular field. Honorary doctorate degrees celebrate exceptional accomplishments and contributions to society or humankind.

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**THIS STATEMENT WAS ISSUED BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN ASSOCIATION OF PhDs**

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