

Wits engineering research threatened

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The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is in danger of losing one of its highly-rated research departments because of a breakdown in relations between the professors in charge of the department and university management.



Deputy vice-chancellor for advancement and partnerships Rob Moore said on Tuesday (12 February) that the Wits Centre of Material and Process Synthesis's (Comps's) future was in jeopardy because one of its head staff and founders is leaving this year. The centre has been involved in work with industry but Wits has argued that the administration of this work has been poor.

"We wanted to downsize Comps, but Diane (Prof Diane Hildebrandt) did not provide us with a plan of how best to do so and now she has resigned and we need to sort out a complicated situation at the faculty (of engineering)," Moore said.

He assured *Business Day* that students studying and using Comps would be able to finish their studies on schedule, even if Comps is closed.

A 2012 Infrastructure Sector Research survey by Landelahni Business Leaders Amrop SA found 74% of local construction companies were struggling to fill engineering roles. Of the 511,564 enrolments in engineering disciplines from 1998 to 2010, only 14% graduated.

Comps was founded in 1998 by professors Hildebrandt, David Glasser and Michael Moys to reduce financial dependence of research on grant-awarding foundations and to enhance scientific expertise through consulting, corporate training and process development with industry.

Hildebrandt, a highly regarded B+ rated scientist, resigned earlier this year. Moore said it was difficult for Wits to lose a key scientist.

"We would not want to part with a researcher of Hildebrandt's talent easily. We have high respect for her. However, over

the past few years, she and people in charge of Comps have made it difficult for us to deal with some of our industrial partners. This has led to legal disputes," Moore said.

Prof Hildebrandt told *Business Day* she was set to join the University of SA.

"I understand my research and projects have been seen as too risky and advanced in terms of the technology used," she said.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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