chapter 13

Mpho Khati

University of the Free State,
SRC first-generation and first-year students 2014/15,
SRC vice-president 2015/16

---

**Brief biography**

Mpho Khati is a fashion designer and fashion model, and the owner of the African print clothing and accessories fashion line Indlovukazi. She completed a BA in sociology and criminology at the University of the Free State (UFS), where she was also involved in various capacities in student leadership in the SASCO and ANCYL branches as well as the SRC.

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Thierry Luescher on 17 September 2018.

---

**Early influences and coming to UFS**

Mpho Khati grew up in a religious home in the rural Free State. Her upbringing, her experiences of struggling to get into UFS and her first-year experience at the university, became major points of reference for her later involvement in student leadership.

I’m originally from a small location called Kutlwanong in Odendaalsrus, here in the Free State. It is a few kilometres from Welkom. My parents don’t have any political backgrounds. They are extremely religious, so they are just like, ‘You have to study and pass and come and help us.’
So, I came to the UFS in 2013 to do my first year here. Coming here as a first year, all you just want to do is to study, you know. All I just wanted to do is study and even me getting access to the university, it was extremely difficult.

I thought I was going to get a bursary because I was a very bright student in high school. I was the best-performing learner, RCL and all of those things. So, I thought I will get a bursary but I didn’t.

I almost thought I was not going to make it to university because I was going around with a family friend trying to approach local business people in Odendaal and Welkom for them to assist. Trying to get a Department of Education bursary. But with everyone that we tried – the municipality, the church, everyone you know, local small entrepreneurs – nothing worked out.

And I was certain that this year I might have to take a gap year, which was going to be very detrimental because small towns are full of crime. And a young hopeful person that wants to make a change in a community – now you are subjected going back to the community again and possibly working at Pick ‘n Pay or other retail stores, just to save up for the following year.

So that was my reality for the first few months of 2013. And then in the eleventh hour, a local businessman said, ‘Okay cool, I’ll pay for your registration while you wait for your NSFAS or any other bursary to emerge.’ And then I registered late and I got access to the university and I was staying in the location for some time. And then eventually I got access to res as well. Later in the first semester I received a bursary from my municipality, Lejweleputswa. And as I was staying at the location, it was extremely difficult because you have to take two taxis, three taxis. And sometimes you have classes at seven, at eight in the evening. So you see how it is not fair for you to be an off-campus student. You don’t have internet. All of those other issues.

But even through all of that, I was just determined to study and pass because my parents told me, ‘You see, it was difficult for you to get in, so you can’t get in and play.’

So, I got in and the first year I was very committed to going to classes. I registered for BSocSci. I initially wanted to do law but I didn’t apply for the extended programme because my Mathematics marks were not as they stipulated in the requirements. So I then did BSocSci and the career advisor told me, ‘If you want to change in your second year, you can.’

But then I was doing psychology and other social sciences, sociology and criminology, and I fell in love with it. I liked the content; how I could relate it back to the community. So, I stuck with it. So that’s what I did.

**Becoming involved in the SRC**

Khati reflects on the way she became involved in student politics and eventually in the SRC of the Bloemfontein campus, where she served two terms, from the
end of 2014 to the end of 2016. During that time, she experienced change at different scales: from a system of non-partisan to partisan SRC elections at UFS, and being a student leader during the most testing period in the South African student movement since 1994.

Joining SASCO
Khati recalls how she decided to get involved in student politics as she gradually became aware of the history of racism and other injustices at UFS and the current challenges marring the institution.

During my first year, I was not participating in any student politics. And then in my second year I joined SASCO. I was considered the prodigy.

I joined SASCO but I didn't understand why it existed. Coming from high school you are very naive about issues.

So the SASCO students showed me a list of the things that SASCO had achieved over the years in terms of fighting racism in the University of the Free State, and how it is necessary for more people to join so that debating can continue, and the fight continues. So, what’s very interesting because I could not understand why there continue to be such social injustices still at university level.

And at the time when I was in second year, there were still separate Afrikaans and English classes. And it was one of the things that they were raising in their concerns. And even like with us, first-years, second-years, we will complain that the Afrikaans students get a better scope than us and all those other issues that would emerge.

So, I was interested and then I joined SASCO. After joining and because I'm new, I was volunteering. I was in the BEC. I was just volunteering whenever I could.

From non-partisan to partisan SRC elections
In her second year of studies, Khati was nominated by SASCO to stand for the UFS SRC on the Bloemfontein campus. However, at the time the UFS SRC constitution did not recognise partisan affiliations for SRC candidates, and hence Khati had to stand as an independent. This changed for the 2015 election. Khati elaborates:

In my second year, they nominated me to stand, but in 2014 we could not stand as political parties; we were independent candidates. But you know that you are standing under the banner of SASCO and you will champion SASCO’s interests and issues, which are generally student issues.

During my term in the SRC, I now became more conscious of the issues, and it was now difficult to pretend as if things were just business as normal – a
normal sort of situation. So, I stood again for SRC vice-president towards the end of 2015.

In 2015, political parties were now allowed. The constitution had to be amended because we felt that it contributes to student apathy. As students we are members of the broader society; this is a democratic state and people have parties that they want to vote for. We felt like a party system is more organised in terms of raising and championing issues, because you get a mandate from that particular association. And we also felt that it would increase student participation because as individual candidates, no one sort of gave you a mandate or held you accountable.

There was someone from EFFSC; it was PASMA, SASCO and DASO. There was also Afriforum. And there was an alliance with the ANC Youth League – but the YCL only started last year, at the time it wasn't yet. But broadly speaking we had a PYA.

I must say that with the change of student politics and political parties participating on campus, there was less student apathy than it used to be before then. There was a lot of consciousness on campus even when we just hosted dialogues where we were addressing issues, there was a lot of participation. Student enthusiasm was more alive on campus than I've ever seen in my stay at the University of the Free State.

Just by them being able to set up by the Bridge, which is the student centre, and singing and do all of these things, student organisations helped in making people more aware about the issues, about the imbizos. Because they also want representation. They also want to say we were there, and it is not only an SRC victory; it's also our victory. It helped a lot in terms of participation and conscientising the student movement populous.

The SRC and its relations with the student body

For Khati, the role of the SRC is to champion student issues. Hence, she emphasises the need for the SRC to continuously communicate and consult with the student body, using various means including social media, the student parliament, and policy forums (i.e. imbizos). The latter were frequently called in order to develop memorandums to hand to the university management.

The SRC is a student body that is meant to champion student issues. It is a body that mediates between the student and the university management. There is an SRC constitution which stipulates all of these issues, and there is also a student parliament where students also have a seat in there. And they can engage the SRC to say these are issues. Student parliament is more of a formal platform where students can submit their issues to say, 'As our SRC, we want you to do this and that and that.'
Even at the beginning of the SRC term, each SRC member has to approach the students to say as portfolio, these are the projects that I want to do for my term. And the students need to say: ‘Yes, you can go ahead or we don’t agree with this portfolio’s programmes.’ So SRCs are basically supposed to do that.

Social media, such as the SRC Facebook page, other electronic media, as well as physical meetings with the student body in mass meetings and imbizos were the main ways in which Khati’s SRC used to communicate and consult with the student body.

We had an SRC Facebook page. We would release statements on the Facebook page because we understood that most students were on social media. But we also used the university mediums, where the university would communicate with students on our behalf on BlackBoard, or send students emails or even SMSs, when we were organising imbizos.

We really tried to have constant communication with the students in the form of imbizos at the amphitheatre by the library. Our intention was to be student-centred. Whenever we were writing a memorandum, we would call students. Once we had the memorandum worked out and we had to canvass at an imbizo. Then we organised to march to the Main Building to hand over the memorandum. We always made sure that everyone, all the SRC members communicate with their constituencies. So SRCs of campus residences and off-campus students, they make sure that they inform all the primes and the Primes inform the house members, and then the house members come; and SMSs, emails … it is more intentional for off-campus students because they always rely on their emails and BlackBoard.

And then we would communicate a time to say, ‘Okay, today we are meeting at the Bridge, maybe to collect points for a memorandum, to draft a memorandum.’ And as the SRC, we make sure that it is well written, well structured, put all the points. And sometimes we would even read it out; we would call an emergency council meeting, read it out to all the SRC.

Co-operative governance and protest marches

Khati’s SRC had established a process of developing memorandums as a way of presenting student concerns to the university management. As she explains here, this process came about as a way of addressing their frustration of working through the structures of co-operative governance, which were not responsive.

The frustration of working through university governance structures

I was a member of the central SRC because of my position as being the vice-president. Most of the time when Lindo [the SRC president] is maybe writing
or he has another commitment, I’d have to also go to the Senate meeting and represent him as the alternate on Senate. Internally in the SRC as the vice-president I was also the chairperson of the projects committee and all of that, the policy committee and disciplinary committee of the SRC.

In my two terms, I felt like the SRC is sort of like a buffer structure between the students and university management where it feels like we are doing something materially to improve students’ lives and push for progressive policies to fast-track transformation, we are working, but management frustrates us so much that a lot is not getting done.

So, for example, you would submit an issue, like the issue of the shuttle system, or free internet. All these issues that we’ve always been submitting, to the university management as the SRC. And then they will say: ‘You have to submit it to Council, and Council will present it to the university Senate.’ But these bodies, they don’t sit every day. Now it is the beginning of your term, and they will say Council will sit in March. And the central SRC will sit in March. You sit as the central SRC including the Qwaqwa SRC president and you submit these issues. And then they’ll say, ‘Okay, we acknowledge these issues, we’ll submit them to Senate in June.’ They submit them to Senate and by the time you get a response it’s nearing the end of your term.

The new SRC repeats this same process. So, there are these many structures in between that frustrate you as an SRC and make you look like you are not doing work. But they’ll say, it’s bureaucracy; things must happen, you can’t just make decisions; it’s a university, we’re not running a spaza shop.

So, you go back like five SRCs back and we’ve been raising the same issue but nothing has been resolved, because when the new SRC comes in, they think they are raising new issues. And they raise it the same way and there’s no continuation because they have been frustrated the same way.

You try to do the handover where we explain these are the things we were trying to achieve. But even with them, they can’t say, fast-track the former SRC’s issue. They will be subjected to the same process to submit it formally: let the central SRC sit, let us submit it to Council, let us submit it to Senate, let us submit it to this body, and there … and there are always also other structures that are set in between.

**Memorandums as a tactic**

When asked how the SRC then tried to operate given this experience of the formal processes, Khati said:

> Our main tactic was just submitting memorandums. With a memorandum you would get a 48-hour response as opposed to waiting for Senate to sit. So, all these issues that we would present to Council, we would still write a memorandum because students do not understand these frustrating processes.
People get agitated – so we will present a memorandum.

With one of the memorandums, Prof. Jansen called a university assembly to respond to the memorandum and a lot of the issues on the memorandum were addressed.

So, memorandums were one of our most effective ways of getting a quick response from management. Also, when you are presenting and reading it out to the student population, they now see that these people are not just sitting in blazers in offices, but they are actually trying to effect some change.

In our term, we probably submitted five or six memorandums. They are all archived on the SRC Facebook page. We were even calling ourselves ‘the SRC of memorandums’ because we would just submit when we would get frustrated. Our intention was to also cause that agitation to them to see that these are burning issues – you can’t just sit and relax! Not that they were sitting and relaxing, but we wanted to show the urgency of the issues we were raising.

**The making of a memorandum**

We will communicate to students that today we are taking points; tomorrow at 12 we are meeting here at the Bridge and we will be marching to the Main Building. So, we would send out as much communication as we can for students to know.

Student political organisations were very much involved. Remember, there was the SRC portfolio Student Associations and Dialogue. What we would do is when we were collecting issues for the memorandum, we would call all the student formations under the banner of the SRC Student Associations and Dialogue, and get their issues. The understanding was that they represent a particular constituency that is maybe not physically there, but if the chairperson of SASCO or of another student movement or a civil movement is there, then we have them covered.

And because most people are also on campus, they would just see people gathering at the Bridge. Even the ones that were not informed, they will see that when we start singing that, ‘Okay, there’s something; there’s a movement.’ And then they’ll join. And we’ll march. But we’ll obviously communicate to the university vice-rector or the rector that we are coming, so that they are expecting us. And obviously we would get our confirmation from the secretary that the rector is there at the time, because you don’t want to march and the person you are marching to cannot receive.

**Marching and handover of the memorandum**

I think the University of the Free State students have always been very peaceful in terms of their protesting. We would march and the only thing would be that we sing or sometimes we would have a silent march, which would not end in silence because comrades want to sing.
But the reception was always that Prof. would say, ‘We acknowledge the memorandum,’ and we stated when we are presenting it that this is a memorandum of demands. Here are our 21 demands, or whatever amount. And we expect a response in 24 or 48 hours on our demands. So, he would just acknowledge it and then sign it and say: ‘Okay, in 48 hours we will convene and I will give a response.’

**The reason for singing struggle songs during a protest march**

The idea of the singing, I think, it is just to build a momentum because you don’t just want to be walking there. And most of the times, we would sing struggle songs. The songs would also remind us of the struggle that the generation before us fought, and we are the generation that is trying to take the baton forward. The singing is also, I think, a political symbol and we understood that this is a revolution and even in the past, during apartheid, people would sing. It is a protest or a struggle culture that you sing, and that you sing revolutionary songs that have a meaning: they inspire people. Most of the songs we sang had a message and the message from the song was conveyed through the march. And sometimes students would just be singing for fun, because they enjoy singing and running around.

When asked if she had read the book by Prof. Jonathan Jansen, the former UFS Rector, called *As By Fire*, in which he wrote that students were singing to intimidate him and they were insulting him, Khati responded that she had not seen the book. She said:

I don’t think it crossed our minds to say, ‘Let’s sing to intimidate Prof.’ Like on other campuses where there is a protest, there is always singing. It’s just the culture of protest for us.

Prof. Jansen thought a lot of things … But I don’t know, maybe it is because during #FeesMustFall a lot of students were raising that Prof. Jansen must go as the rector, so some of the struggle folks felt, they would change the names and they would sing about him and say he must go. So maybe he heard his name in one of those songs and totalised the whole thing, and said you are singing to intimidate him. But then the idea was not for him as an individual to be intimidated. I don’t think [he would even have understood the lyrics], but because he has African colleagues, maybe he would ask for them to interpret.

**Improving student governance**

Khati proposes that speeding up the decision-making processes in university

---

governance would be a great improvement of student governance. She also thinks that making student parliament a statutory student governance structure, and having management representation on it, would be an improvement.

Definitely I would want the decision processes to be fast-tracked. I don’t have a formula now, but it must be fast-tracked.

And I think one thing that could help is if the rector could also have a seat in student parliament and maybe come once a term to account to students. And maybe for the Higher Education Act to also recognise student parliament as a legit body where students can raise issues.

But if university management could just in general communicate better with students and be more open.

**Key challenges and issues**

During Khati’s two terms as SRC member – in 2014/15 in the SRC first-generation portfolio, and in 2015/16 as vice-president of the SRC – she was exposed to a diversity of issues that her SRCs dealt with. Some of these issues strongly resonated with issues raised by the student movement campaigns further afield, dealing with issues of racism, access and attrition, fees, and so forth.

**First-generation, first-year students**

In my first term, I stood for SRC first-year and first-generation students. Because the first part of my first year I stayed off-campus, I could understand off-campus student issues, especially the first-year issues of off-campus students, and because I am a first-generation student. At home, my parents, my sisters, no one has been to university before. That’s why my parents were just like: ‘Just study. You are the first. You are the breakthrough of the family. Just study. It will bring some dignity to the home that someone from our home is now a university graduate. And you are gonna be able to inspire your younger sister as well and many other people that come after you.’

In the office then, one of the things that I realised and that I tried to address is that first-years come – especially first-generation students – and then drop out in the first year of study. A lot. And not because the content is difficult for them and they cannot grasp it, but mainly because of the environment. Most of them come from the third-quintile schools, the disadvantaged – the previously disadvantaged, still disadvantaged – schools. They come here, and the tools of learning are very different than what they had in their communities.

It’s about adjusting to university life, adapting to the culture, using technology because most of the schools, they don’t have computers. When you get here, your lectures, your slides are on BlackBoard and you’ve never used a computer before ... So, I tried, in my term of office, addressing that: I started
a mentorship programme which was called Kovsies Succession Mentorship Programme. I think it’s still there. The SRCs that came after me, they tried continuing with it. Students in their final year of study that are also first-generation students that have made it through the odds, now they’re here to motivate other first-years.

Exposure to UFS racism and the anti-racism campaign

So throughout the term, we really, really were introduced to a lot of issues. Now in my 2014/15 term, there were a lot of incidents that happened on campus that showed that racism is still there; it is just swept under the rug of the university.

I don’t know if you recall but the issue of Damani Gwebu who was ran over by two white students with a car. This happened during the term of SRC president Phiwe Mathe. Just to give you context of the case: he was coming from the study locker or somewhere on campus, and two drunk students ran over him and then they beat him. It was a huge case. So even in our term, the case was still ongoing, the court proceedings, and we were exposed to it.

During our term in 2015, the Say-No-to-Racism Campaign on campus was also launched with the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice.

Renaming buildings, removing the Swart and Steyn statues and #RhodesMustFall

Like at UCT and on other university campuses in 2015, the issue of institutional culture and changing commemoration on the university campus – removing statues and renaming buildings – also came up at UFS. Khati recalls the way the UFS-specific process coincided with, and was reinforced by, #RhodesMustFall at UCT.

In one of the memorandums we proposed the renaming of buildings. It was not a fight that was started by us, just a continuation. And even though it was not done immediately in our term, it was done shortly after we left office: some buildings were renamed.

We were also agitating in conversations about that CR Swart statue, that it must not be there because we believed that it does not represent what the university stands for, what the university vision is.

And even in our term, we saw those things materialising, and the two SRCs that came after us, you see now that there are conversations around the statue of Steyn as well being removed. So, we were effective as much as some of the things were not immediately done, but there was change that came.

It also reflects the impact #RhodesMustFall at UCT had on this process. We learnt about #RhodesMustFall on social media during the UCT protests, and there was also a #RhodesMustFall debate that I watched on YouTube.
Hitler and the Nazis, CR Swart and apartheid compared

Khati explains how her SRC had already requested the removal of the CR Swart and MT Steyn statues from the Bloemfontein campus in 2014, having arrived at making such a conclusion independently from what happened a few months later at UCT.

You know with SRCs, there is normally an overseas trip, an educational trip for the SRC. So, in my first term, 2014, we went to Germany and we learnt about Hitler. And one of the things that we took from that and we even wrote a report to the management about that to say that in Germany now, all the statues of all these people that participated in the war, in the Holocaust, and the Nazis and everyone, they are in the museums. You don’t go in public spaces and you just randomly see a statue of Hitler or his people. They’re all in the museums. So, if you want to learn more about them, the information is preserved in the museum.

Thus, at the University of the Free State, in the context of South Africa at large, we are also saying that should be the discourse; that should be what’s happening. But obviously our focus was the University of the Free State because that’s where we were and we were saying, ‘The university took us overseas to learn. Now we’ve learnt. Now we’re writing a report based on what we’ve learnt.’

We were not saying that these statues must totally be removed from the face of history, but let them be preserved in museums. That’s where they belong, and people that have a particular interest in learning about Steyn, that have a particular interest in learning about Swart, then they’ll go to those spaces and learn about that.

Leaders like Swart who introduced so much apartheid legislation that was very oppressive; Steyn who was part of the negotiations towards the Union of South Africa which removed all citizenship rights of black South Africans; those type of people you can learn about them in the museum but we do not need to encounter them in our university space.

So, we did that trip to Germany at the end of 2014 and wrote that report when we got back. Because it was part of our tasks: you are going there to learn, and after, you have to make submissions and compile a report and submit.

The statue of former apartheid-era state president CR Swart was vandalised and removed by UFS students in the aftermath of the February 2016 #ShimlaPark riots; the decision to remove the statue of MT Steyn was finally made by the UFS Council in November 2018. The CR Swart law building is now called ‘Equitas’ and various other buildings that used to be named after apartheid-era leaders have been renamed.
Fees, financial exclusion and the Right-to-Learn campaign

Fees for us was not a major issue; we thought of it more as a government issue that is beyond us. In my first SRC with Mosa Leteane as SRC president, there were a lot of memorandums that we wrote: is it possible for the university to at least not increase the university tuition?

When I got in as vice-president with Lindokuhle Ntuli as president, the first thing that we launched was the Right-to-Learn Campaign, with the notion of raising funds for students because deregistration – financial exclusion of students – has always been an issue with all the SRC presidents. So, we wanted to raise funds.

Khati explains the UFS policy of deregistering students as a form of financial exclusion.

At UFS, if you have failed to pay after a certain time – we’ll give you maybe until the first term for you to pay a certain amount of your fees – and then if you fail, the university has no choice but to deregister you. Because you failed to pay your registration fee.

What the university does is they call ‘provisional registration’: they will say that registration for an off-campus student, for example, is R6 700. Then you can pay R2 000 to be provisionally registered. You can attend classes but by a certain date in March or April, you should have paid the remaining. If you fail to pay the remaining, then they have no choice but to deregister you, because if you fail to pay at that point, how do they know if you will have the rest of the tuition? So, a lot of students were now being deregistered – even final-year students! – which is even more painful because you are almost done but because of fees, you have to be deregistered.

The SRC’s Right-to-Learn Campaign was able to raise R1 million to prevent students from being de-registered but it was not enough.

So, we launched the campaign, and we wanted to raise funds. And we raised one million from the campaign, but you know with figures, and especially with us young people, we’ve never really dealt with such a lot of money. So, in our heads we thought one million – it’s a lot – we can help students.

But it was not enough to address this issue. We realised that the issue is bigger than us; government must intervene because we can’t continue raising funds like that. We will raise funds to help students with textbooks, other small issues, but the bulk of students will continue to be excluded.

After the Right-to-Learn Campaign and we raised money, we helped a number of students to not get deregistered, but the issue was still there and there was nothing to do but communicate with the management to say: ‘Can you please give students an opportunity to continue with their studies?’ At that time, we were still waiting for the DHET; they were going to increase
the NSFAS budget or something like that. So, we were saying, government is promising, so don’t deregister students as yet. So, let’s see what NSFAS is saying because most students have applied for NSFAS.

But there was a lot of unrest because access is a huge issue, especially with students knowing that they will go back to the same communities that they are trying to get away from.

The 2015/16 student movement at UFS

Given that her terms in the UFS SRC coincide with the emergence, first and second wave of Fallist campaigns, Khati’s reflections on her student leadership years provide a fascinating account of a campus-based timeline of student movement events in 2015 and 2016. In her reflections, Khati calls 2015 the ‘diplomatic’ period, having argued before that the UFS students were always very peaceful and disciplined. However, the #ShimlaPark incident of February 2016 changed the dynamics on campus drastically, ushering in a ‘radical’ period.

University assembly and the language policy review

In 2015, there was a big assembly, where Prof. was responding to many issues we raised. But those times things were still very diplomatic. We were just: give us a response and then we just try to work with what we have and watch how things will change.

We were raising issues of patriarchy. We would say in terms of our lecturers, our deans – we don’t see a lot of female representative. And we raised issues of access for disabled students. We raised issues of what’s happening in the medical faculty because African students would still complain that treatment for them and the white students was different, because the Medical Faculty is still a bit secluded and they have their own internal ways of doing things.

Then the language policy review was going on throughout 2015 and as the SRC and student body we had to make submissions. There was an online poll where students had to participate and there were the verbal and written submissions. There were many polls, voting polls, in the residences. I think the idea was to get as much representation as possible before the university would move forward.

For us we just saw it as a human rights issue that the playing field needs to be level. It can’t be level because of the injustices of the past, but now we have an opportunity to at least give everyone the same treatment.

And the understanding was that, even to us, English is not our first language but we can’t come here and learn in English. Therefore, everyone needs to be given the same class, the same content, so that at least we can say that if we are getting certain marks, it is not that for another group, the conditions were more favourable.
Reflections of South African Student Leaders

UFS participation in #FeesMustFall 2015 and social media

How did the UFS participate in #FeesMustFall? Khati explains:

The official shutdown was coordinated on social media. There was a WhatsApp group and there were also closed groups on Facebook and Twitter as well. I remember, even on the SASCO groups there were messages to say: ‘Okay, today shutdown!’ But I think for SASCO, the contradiction was that SASCO falls under the ANC, so they can’t sort of boycott their own government. So we were trying to be very diplomatic about the whole #FeesMustFall and #Shutdown. But other activist movements, especially in the Western Cape, the Fallist movement and other pan-African movements across the country, they were more radical because they are not ANC and they can organise these shutdowns.

So, it was on Facebook and a lot of students heard about it. And they came to the SRC to say, ‘There’s a message on this day that there is a shutdown, so what are we doing?’ I remember we called an SRC meeting to say, this is what is happening: universities across the country are shutting down. What is our position as the SRC?

So, it was coordinated on social media. And then obviously with other institutions having more media coverage, they got more coverage, I guess that’s what sustained the campaigns.

Organising the #UFSshutdown as part of the #nationalshutdown

We were new in office and we were all from different parties, different associations, and our common goal was just to lead students. Now there is this call for a national shutdown; there is a momentum and student issues can be heard. We saw it and called an immediate meeting that, ‘Okay cool, our position is that we are also going to shut down.’ And obviously in the Council there are other members that disagree and say: ‘No! You can’t shut down. Other students want to go to classes.’ But we say if we continue with business as normal then the university will not even take us seriously. And it is not just about us, but it is a call that is bigger than us: ‘We can’t be bystanders when there is a huge revolution, a moment for change, and we must also be on the right side of history and participate.’ So, we are clear that as an SRC we will shut down.

We sent communiques to students that we are meeting at the main gate in the morning and that there is a shutdown, and off-campus students and everyone must come, but there won’t be any classes.

And student associations as well had their own meetings, and they called us to their meetings to engage. The term that they used was: ‘What is the “line of march”?’ They wanted a directive from us to say, ‘Okay we are shutting down, but how long are we shutting down? What is the process?’ Because we’ve never
shut down to that extent before; it was a new experience; we've never shut down, but we are shutting down.

So, we wake up very early the next morning, obviously the previous night we gave each other tasks: ‘Please, go lock these gates.’ Because there’s many gates: there’s the medical gate, there’s the main gate, there’s the Universitas gate, there’s gate 6. So, let’s all go to the different gates and shut down in the literal sense.

We sat almost like until the early hours of the morning to devise a plan. The aim is to ensure that there is no business at the university. Students cannot go into classes, because it won’t be a shutdown [if they can]. And there were a lot of students that were not even part of the meetings that were there, mainly on-campus students. Off-campus students mainly stay in the location; when they see a message on Facebook that the SRC is shutting down, it is sort of a process for them to come to the shutdown; so they’d rather stay back.

We did shutdown and immediately there was police. There were police at the different gates and they tried to disperse us. The police came and the immediate thing was not rubber bullets, there were loud hailers: ‘Just go home.’ Just how police in South Africa usually are: ‘Go home, you can’t do this.’ They called Lindo, they called me, they called other student leaders to say: ‘Speak with your people. You cannot do this. We are giving you such a period of time to stop what you are doing, otherwise we will have to act.’

We probably shut down for a week or so, and everyday other students would see the solidarity all over South Africa.

**Disagreements over revolutionary tactics and UFS black intellectuals**

There was the march to Parliament in Cape Town, there were all these memorandums, and even us we wanted to march to the provincial government offices. You know, in student movements there are a lot of voices. And other students read this different to us and others maybe were influenced by Fanon or other scholars, and because they were influenced by other scholars they would say: ‘This is a revolution and a revolution is not a bed of roses. So, we can’t be here just singing our lungs out. So, let’s burn because the university must see that we are serious.’ And then the SRC would say, ‘No! That’s not the objective. The objective is for us to shut down.’ But you know students, they always want … we always just want momentum to say: ‘Here we are! The university is shut. But then what?’ Because we must sustain this thing for the whole day. Now we’ve shut down and it’s 10am. So, we gonna sit here and sit, what are we gonna do? Add spice to the shutdown [laughs].

**The black intellectuals at the UFS**

And there was a group, they were not really SASCO, they were not PASMA, but their whole ideological background was more pan-African, and also
very influenced by the American black liberation, Black Panther. I used to sometimes attend their group; they were more on literature and that you know. In the discussions, we would speak about what Muhammad Khalid said, or Marcus Garvey, or Dr Crenshaw.

But they were more thought leaders, thinking and not really organising. It was people that did not really resonate with SASCO politics because they thought that it was partisan, and they also did not really resonate with PASMA because of how disgruntled the mother body is. They thought, ‘Okay cool, we are in the university and we are intellectuals – let us exchange books and let us read and let us discuss these philosophies.’

But they were not really a group that had a major impact; they were always just part of the discussions. Whenever we were raising an issue, they would give their view to say: ‘No, you can't do this. Let's not repeat these mistakes.’ I think because they were exposed to a lot of literature, they helped a lot in terms of what is the approach, what is the line of march, what do we do now – in terms of just giving content to the whole student movement.

The meaning of #FeesMustFall: zero increment?

As the days went, the university management as well tried to engage us as the SRC, because when we were shutting down. As much as the call was #FeesMustFall, the call was not for all the fees to literally fall. We were fighting for a zero per cent, because there was that huge increment.

It was a #FeesMustFall movement but we were fighting for that increment. Parallel to that the university was still trying to engage us to say: ‘Let us see what we can do to explore the possibility of a zero per cent. We will put measures in place to see that as a university we can cut and what we can do and how government can also assist us.’

So, there were also those processes in place where everyone was just trying to get to a solution. But I think as student leaders we understood that the university is not the enemy, if I can put it like that, but the enemy is the government, because they are the ones that are giving universities the subsidies. It is not like the University of the Free State just randomly wants to increase fees, but the conditions are that universities must have funds and fees depend on the amount of subsidy.

Then the announcement comes from President Zuma that there will be a zero per cent increase and students go back to class.

Sustaining #FeesMustFall after October 2015

One of the ways we would coordinate #FeesMustFall is we would have meetings with other leaders from across the country. I’ve been to two of those meetings. This way we would keep in contact as leaders – both SRC and others who were just in the student movement. So apart from us seeing it on
For instance, there was one in Johannesburg, early in December 2015. It was a debate facilitated by Rethink Africa. #TransCollective was there, and #RhodesMustFall. And then during the same week, the next day or two days later, there was another one. I remember, all the students were now given transport, the leaders were flown and given transport and accommodation. And all of us we were now in Joburg. And there was also another one, but that one I couldn’t make it to.

There was this protest that started at Wits but there were student leaders from other institutions but it was only at Wits, they wanted to have like another continuation of #FeesMustFall, but it didn’t really gain a lot of momentum. So, there was another meeting that they would invite us to. And say, ‘Mpho if you can’t come, don’t you know anyone that will be able to come?’ So there was like continuous effort to meet as student leaders but it was obviously, it would be very rare to get the ones from ‘smaller-nyana’ institutions like North West. It would be Durban, UFS, Wits and sometimes UP. And obviously UCT.

We would have meetings with Blade [Nzimande] and SAUS would be there as well – in those meetings we would have with the former minister of higher education. But they also actively tried to come to campus to engage us, tried to get our issues so that they could advance them in SAUS. But it was not as effective, maybe they were just following their own processes.

**The #StopOutsourcing campaign and #ShimlaPark**

Another, different thing that happened in the context of the University of the Free State which sort of made things to escalate was the rugby #ShimlaPark incident.

So, the #StopOutsourcing campaign was happening and for the students, student issues are also interlinked with workers’ issues because it is one university; they are part of the system. We can’t watch them suffer because these people are our parents and if they are still outsourced, then they can’t even pay fees for us.

**Monday morning: striking workers, students and the police outside campus**

So, there was that incident – this was after #FeesMustFall, the following year [in February 2016]. There was that incident where workers were protesting and students were part of the protests but students were also raising other issues that they are facing.

And the university, the police came and then they locked everyone out of campus. Now, the workers and the students were trying to get to use another gate to enter campus, but the police became reactionary and started shooting rubber bullets at everyone. Extremely violent.
In the footage that one of the photographers had, the students and the workers were fleeing the scene and the police were shooting rubber bullets from behind, which is not even legal. So that happened.

Monday evening: protesting on the rugby pitch and the attack by the spectators

So as students we were like: ‘There’s a rugby match happening and we’ve been trying to get Prof. Jansen’s attention on this issue of outsourcing,’ because the workers and the students tried to engage the university on many instances and now there’s a rugby match happening and it cannot be business as usual in such a situation. And then we went there to the rugby match.

I was part of the students. There were quite few females; there were maybe three or two of us that were on the pitch at that point. But for me personally, I did not foresee the attack coming. I think none of us saw it coming. We thought we will just get on the pitch and then sing because we knew that it was live on television. So, we thought okay, let’s get in there.

But even getting into the Shimla Park Stadium was a hustle because the gates were locked and there was security and all of that. And then we finally got onto the pitch and we started singing. And then as we started singing, the rugby fans and parents started coming onto the pitch to attack us, the protesters.

Given that the protesting workers and students were black and the attacking spectators were white, the conclusion that Khati and others reached was that this was a racist incident.

I think that’s one of the things that made campus to continue in the following year, for there to be unrest. Now we thought at least we are past this thing [of fee increment], but there is another issue here, which is racism. And given the history of the University of the Free State and the racism incidences …

Surprisingly, the match continued; it was delayed, maybe like 10 minutes delayed. We obviously got off the field because now we had been attacked. And the match continued on that evening. The university released a statement and Prof. also expressed how disgusted he was and how disappointed he was with the act of the white students, and what they did, and that he does not condone that.

But surprisingly then, we were given disciplinary hearings [laughs] for disrupting the match and all of that! Mainly us that were protesting. They said the white students were given disciplinary charges as well, but how do you select in a mob of people, that this one I’m gonna give, and this one I’m not gonna give.

But with us, it was very easy for the university to identify us because we’ve always been a constant. Myself, the SRC president and other student leaders.
You know, in student politics there’s those constant people that you always see: MoAfrika will be there, so and so will be there, and on the footage of the rugby it’s more or less the same faces. So, it’s easy to victimise them, to give them charges.

**Monday night: stand-off at Vishuis**

And there was an altercation between the black and the white students at the residences, at Vishuis, and there was the police. I was there. It was intense! Even parents came. So white parents came and they had weapons. It was intense because maybe they thought it would escalate to something bigger. The police came and they tried to disperse everyone, and the black students were still very angry at what happened on the rugby field and they knew that it was mainly Vishuis students because we saw the yellow overalls that they were wearing. So, because they were wearing res uniform, we knew from which res they were. But the police came and they sort of dispersed everyone.

**The post-#ShimlaPark weeks: removing statues, renaming buildings**

It was tense for weeks because it was this ‘them–us’ thing. Even the people that were not part of it, but they just generally saw it as ‘us versus them’. The black students versus the white students. And for me, I also felt like it has taken the university back. We can’t ignore the fact that the university has been trying by introducing a lot of things for transformation but such incidences – it raises questions … if the university has not been dealing with it, if they’ve just been sweeping it under the rug … now it’s just exploding. So, it was tense for weeks.

It was after #ShimlaPark that students physically tried removing the CR Swart statue and they were trying to do many, many things to it. And I think the daughter or the granddaughter of CR Swart came and she was like: ‘If you guys are going to do this to my father’s statue, then you might as well give me the statue, I’ll keep it at my house or I’ll keep it wherever.’

And then students spray-painted the law building with a new name that they felt it was deserving. They named it Robert Sobukwe law building.

In that week, a lot of residences got new names and trees. For us renaming the buildings, the trees, everything, it was another way of representation because we exist at the university both black and white. But for us as black students, there’s no name that really resonates with the people that we know fought against apartheid and other injustices. So, you check, like female residences, male residences are all these names that are quite foreign to us and most of them are not even that progressive. So, we wanted to show to the university that we also want to be included in this space. Hence Wag’n-Bietjie was named Winnie Mandela residence and there was another one that was named Lillian Ngoyi. And there was Robert Sobukwe and the SRC building was proposed to be called Steve Biko building, which it is now called.
And some of the trees were called Marcus Garvey, Gaddafi, Robert Mugabe, Winnie Mandela … Names that students who went around came up with, and the one that has the monopoly over the spray paint [laughs].

FEM – The Free Education Movement as fallist movement at the UFS
Khati explains how in the course of 2016 the Free Education Movement emerged at UFS and eventually became the major group on campus to carry forward the demands of #FeesMustFall 2016.

The SRC could not always be at the forefront of #FeesMustFall issues, because of the nature of the SRC as sort of a diplomatic structure. So, we had to resort to another structure that is mainly for #FeesMustFall issues. Asive [who became SRC president in 2017] was one of the leading people of FEM and I think SK [who was interim SRC president in 2016/17] as well, and other students at the time.

FEM emerged on its own, but it was sort of like in alliance with the SRC, because SRC members would attend FEM meetings. It was a structure of its own for #FeesMustFall; it was not really part of the SRC, but it was in alliance.

FEM was UFS-specific. In other institutions you would see that there are Fallist movements, other movements that are not part of an SRC. I think student activists as well, they wanted a body that’s not SRC. Because the SRC has to go through many channels and they cannot be as radical as maybe they want. So, FEM was equivalent to a Fallist movement: all forms of oppression must fall: patriarchy, homophobia and all of these things because they are oppressive. Like on a campus like UCT, at UFS we wanted something to show that we are trying to raise issues.

No SRC election in 2016 and #FeesMustFallReloaded
I can’t remember the specific reason why, but in 2016 the SRC election was delayed. It normally takes place in August, but now the university wanted us to continue until the end of the year and then they will elect another SRC in the new year. I think it was because of the disruptions during the course of the year, and now they asked us to continue.

But all of us, we just wanted out. We didn’t want to continue because our studies had already suffered a lot and we didn’t understand why now we must continue. At the time, most of us were really losing interest in the SRC because we felt like we had served our term. And for me specifically, I had served two terms. I felt I just wanna get out of the SRC so that I can focus on getting my academics back in order.

#FeesMustFallReloaded also didn’t really get a lot of momentum because now it was more of a debate: the zero per cent that we were initially fighting
for … now activists are saying that access is still an issue and people generally
don’t have money to get to university. Now how practical is it for fees to literally
all of them fall? So, it didn’t get as much momentum as the initial 2015 #Fees.
But I did participate as an activist in solidarity with the movement but it
didn’t get momentum.

Militarisation of campus, victimisation of student leaders and
depression

It was very depressing to be part of it because we would constantly get
victimised. Remember the universities were highly militarised by the private
security. Everywhere we go, there’s this private security. And there were a few
incidences where at the res where I was staying, the private security was there
and they were looking for specific people, including myself. So, it was starting
to be very, very unpleasant.

So, towards the end, all of us we were – me personally I was – very depressed
and psychologically not up for activism or anything; I just needed a break. My
studies had suffered a lot, and now my worry was that I’ve lost my bursary
because I was supposed to finish that year. And also at the same time, my
parents started calling me because I would be in the media most of the time.
And my mom was like: ‘You know what, try to stay out of it, because we fear
that you will get suspended from the university and once you get suspended,
how are you gonna finish your studies?’ They didn’t understand that by being
at university my eyes became open.

The impact of the student leadership experience

The interview with Mpho Khati took place less than two years after she left the
SRC. Nonetheless, she can already identify key benefits and impacts that her
experience of student leadership has had on her life, in terms of generic skills as
well as her political attitudes and involvement, her career and personal life.

Self-confidence and public speaking skills

A key learning for her is to be self-confident:

It was a very testing period for me. I’ve really learnt to have a backbone,
because students would come and everyone has their own ideas of what they
must do and what is radical and what it means to be an activist. But we as
leaders at the time, we had to take a stand and stick with it and try to steer
students in the right direction. So, I’ve learnt to have a backbone and to trust
my decisions and to also be very consulting in the leadership style. Because
now you are representing everyone; you are not only representing yourself, as
much as personally you might have different beliefs. There are other 20 000
plus thousand students that you are representing. So, I had to be strong and
learn that you have to be firm in your ground.

Public speaking (and knowing how to prepare for it) is another skill she has
perfected during her time in student leadership:

The ability to speak in public comes with student leadership because you are
always given a platform to address students. And you have to learn to think
on your feet. In order to do that, you have to invest in yourself as an individual
by exposing yourself to more reading material so that even when you are
speaking you are not just speaking out of a vacuum but there is some content
to what you are saying.

In my case, I had to familiarise myself not only with campus issues but
issues in general, and issues that affect mainly women. I was only the first or
second black female SRC vice-president, so there was a bit of pressure as well
as an inspiration to other people. So, I always had to know what I’m talking
about.

Impact on political attitudes and active citizenship

At political-party level, I’m not leading in particular but I’m just an ordinary
member. I’m more of an activist than a party person. So, I try to participate in
all forms of activism. Now recently with the women’s shutdown, I was part of
it. So, I just try to participate like that.

Impact on academic life, professional life and career

I started my clothing line while I was still studying in the midst of
everything. I had my clothing line and then I realised, I have more passion for
entrepreneurship. But obviously as I said earlier, I studied social sciences. Now
I see my passion lies with having a boutique, having businesses in the fashion
industry. So, I’m doing a business course now so that I can get into the Wits Business School for the postgraduate diploma in business administration,
with the hope of doing an MBA in the future.

I realised that especially as a black entrepreneur, most of our business
remains a small business and they never grow to great heights like Foschini or
other big business moguls. So I thought, let me empower myself with business
knowledge so that I can grow the business, other than just being a creative
because I also feel like most creatives, we don’t have the entrepreneurial
knowledge, and entrepreneurs as well don’t have the creative knowledge. So,
I’m trying to mesh the two and focus onto the fashion industry.

Even my fashion, it is deeply influenced by my politics. It’s African fashion;
it’s another way of expressing myself without talking to say, ‘In the current
state, African fashion is another way for me that I can decolonise fashion: let people wear it as a daily wear, as opposed to always wearing ties and all.'

**Impact on personal and family life**

I wish I had found a love in the SRC – but no [laughs]. But I made new friends with other SRC comrades because for me, their pain is also my pain. I’ve made great friends even with Mcebo [Dlamini from Wits] and even other comrades. Even when they were in jail, I would make efforts to go and see them.

Even Nompendulo [Mkatshwa from Wits], we were friends. I guess ‘cos we were both female and we would meet a lot in these meetings and we would have more or less the same struggles.

**Closing thoughts: decolonising the university, decolonising South Africa**

As her closing thoughts, Khati reflects on the way her eyes were opened during her experience in student leadership and her experience of debating the challenges marring the University of the Free State and South Africa more broadly.

There is this saying in SASCO: ‘Universities are microcosms of society and they mimic the issues of society.’ I’ve always heard that in meetings but I never really understood it. But when I was in student governance, I really understood and learnt that we as students, we form part of a bigger community and the university sort of mimics that and mirrors it. So, if there’s no change in the university, it becomes difficult for us to have change in society.

I also learnt that when we were discussing the decolonisation of the institutions – if you are going to decolonise the institutions, it means we must also decolonise the country because the country in its entirety is also still a bit colonial. My eyes were opened in terms of all those issues.

And the other thing that I became aware of is, universities I don’t think were created with black people in mind, because of how it is difficult for us to navigate the university space. For example, if you come from Limpopo or wherever, and you have to look for space or for res, there is no waiting residence or area where you can stay in this window period while you are still looking for accommodation. There are a lot of students that after registering they are going back to the train station or are just trying to sleep wherever they can.

This institution, was it created with us in mind? Maybe it is one of the things that need to be addressed, now that large groups of people are still coming and they don’t have the resources like the other group. Even with these other measures in place, like NSFAS, they take time to pay. Bursaries take time to pay. And in the interim there are a lot students that fall through
the cracks and maybe they even go back home. So, it’s just an awakening of how the injustices of the past are still prevailing now in subtle ways.

If we decolonise the institution and the country is still colonial – the university produces intellectuals, scholars and a workforce for the country and the information that we are getting from the university is decolonial; but you are coming to work in a country that has colonial systems, how are you going to apply that? So, for example, if the student studying economics and they are learning maybe, for example, let’s say, socialist economics, how are they going to apply that in a capitalist country? So, for me, there is a direct link even in other ways.

Because I’m now working in the fashion industry as a designer, I’ve noticed, for example, in fashion that models, people that we see on TV, in magazines, they still have a petite structure which for me is a representation of white women’s bodies, light-skinned complexion, straight hair. It’s very rare, even as a kid when I would page through magazines, I would not see anyone with dreadlocks or an afro. I would just see a particular colonial image of what the standard of beauty is like.

Even when you go to our schools, when you go to our education system: it’s only recently that government has introduced history as a compulsory module. You still see that the history that’s being taught is more colonial – you learn more about the World War I, World War II, the Cold War than you would learn about your African history. And African history is very broad; it’s not just South African history. Even me myself, I’ve only learnt African history now when I was taking history at university at a second-year, third-year level. So, I think that the content of the syllabus is still very much colonial. Even the university content itself is still very much colonial.

And even just for agricultural purposes: In the history it shows as if black people never farmed before, and it gives a wrong impression of our existence as black people in the country, on the continent at large. I think maybe now it is because universities are obsessed with getting international standards and they forget that the local standard should first be met.