chapter 11

Hlomela Bucwa

Nelson Mandela University,
SRC public relations officer 2013/14, SRC president 2014/15

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Thierry M. Luescher & Hlomela Bucwa

Brief biography

In November 2016, Hlomela Bucwa was sworn into parliament to represent the Democratic Alliance (DA) in the National Assembly. She was then still completing her final year LLB at Nelson Mandela University. When this interview was conducted, Bucwa was the youngest member of the National Assembly. Since 2019, she is working for the office of the Democratic Alliance and has become the political assistant to DA members of the provincial legislature in the Eastern Cape. Bucwa has recently obtained her LLB from Nelson Mandela University. She seeks to pursue a master’s degree in public administration in the future.

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Thierry Luescher on 11 September 2018.

Early influences

When I interviewed Hlomela Bucwa in Parliament, she was just in between portfolio committee meetings. Settling down to reflect about her SRC leadership experience at Nelson Mandela University (NMU), she started by explaining what drives her commitment to be a youth leader.
I was always someone who has been passionate particularly about communal growth and making a difference. Having been born and raised in a township, there’s always been a lot of issues. So, I told myself given the circumstances which I was born into that I would focus at school to become a doctor and just save the next person. Among the subjects I chose was history because I thought it will be an easy thing to get out of the way, because I wanted to focus on maths and science. To my surprise it was actually challenging but not academically but in terms of my understanding of how society operates. It challenged me as a person to dig deep inside, prepared me to understand that as a young person and as a leader you have to read and understand policies.

**Coming to university and becoming politically active**

Bucwa recalls her first year at NMU, starting an LLB degree and wanting to develop herself holistically. She became involved in the debating society and by engaging with fellow students, her university environment, and her reading, she realised that there were a number of things that needed to change in her faculty and the university.

I got to varsity and in the first year I wanted to do everything except for politics because of the stigma that politicians are corrupt and they fight to go out there to empower themselves and not fulfil the mandate.

As part of the debating society, the law society toast masters school at the Nelson Mandela University in my first year in 2011, I saw people with the Golden Key and I said to myself, I want to become a part of that. I wanted to develop myself holistically, not just in books but to be holistic in terms of how you relate to society and others. I wanted to study law because I wanted to become a human rights lawyer, so I felt I’m not going to be standing there and scribbling in court, I need to debate and I need to articulate myself.

I was studying law from my first year and I did my LLB – that woke me to challenge the status quo to want to become a better human being and engage with fellow student leaders, particularly seeing some of the plight that students found themselves in. I took it then upon me to become involved actively; not in politics still, but in terms of saying how do we change the policies of the institutions, through the law society; how to challenge the law faculty to become more diverse, to become more accountable and to become more transparent.

By the time Bucwa was doing her third year of LLB, she was deeply involved in the student organisation of the NMU law faculty:

I was the deputy chairperson of the Law Student Society in 2013 and I was also the deputy chair of the ILSA, the International Law Student Association.
So, I was quite involved in that capacity and for me that’s where the passion was evoked to understand that in fact there is power and you can use politics as a tool to bring about the change that you seek. And it’s not about the stigmatisation and stereotypes [of politicians being corrupt], but about what can you bring and be the difference.

She had her first achievements in terms of making a difference, which inspired her to do more all the way to becoming SRC president.

My first achievement was as part of the Law Student Society. I was treasurer so I would see a couple of students who did not have food and some struggles and some were sleeping in the computer labs. So, I said: ‘Guys, lets raise funds!’ So, we raised R5 000 at the time and it was much because it was my first project. And we went to the street and the robots and we asked for donations like in a RAG.

To give that to a senior student who looks at you with so much gratitude … it makes you understand that your age at times has no impact. When you get the success story later and someone invites you to their graduation and tells you that because of that one meal you gave me hope and you gave me understanding that I need to continue … So, I went to that graduation crying saying, like, did I really do that? But to feel that I contributed to someone to achieving their goal, it’s what inspired me to continue to do more.

I think my ultimate favourite it must have been in the SRC as president having the ability to raise over R9 million to help student funding, and we raised R4.2 million for bail-out funding for students who have a debt and can’t register for the next year. You find that someone wants to continue with the diploma but where can you apply with, who is going to give you a proper job? So, for me that was a highlight.

**Becoming involved in the SRC**

Bucwa was elected to the NMU SRC as public relations officer in 2014 and did her second term in the SRC as SRC president in 2015. In both cases she ran as a member of the Democratic Alliance Students Organisation (DASO). Her first term in the SRC DASO was in the ‘opposition’; in her second term, DASO was in the majority.

**Partisan politics, the structure of the SRC and portfolios**

Bucwa explains how portfolios are allocated in the SRC according to party affiliation. Those of the organisation that got the majority of SRC seats – the organisation ‘in governance’ as she calls it – will get the most desirable portfolios, while members ‘in opposition’ will be allocated more marginal portfolios.
We've got about 21 central SRC members, which is the executive; faculty council, composed of faculty reps and one person becomes an academic officer; Oppidani Council, which deals with the issues of students off campus; we've got your public relations, transformation and community development and safety officers. These are the positions which are given to an opposition and because no one wants them. They just threw that at us; so, I was the public relations officer in my first term in 2014.

Bucwa also recalls how DASO lost the majority in the SRC election in 2013 after having cancelled a major ‘bash’ and other mishaps. For her, this was a moment where she realised that she loved her organisation, which put the students’ well-being before the likely consequence of the organisation becoming unpopular.

DASO was in governance in 2013, and there was an intervarsity party that collapsed due to the weather as it was outside. So, you know, DASO and the SRC took the decision – that’s where I realised that I love my organisation – it took the principled decision that we would rather lose the elections than put the lives of students at risk. Hailstorms are coming; we are outdoors with a tent that is collapsing. So, if people want to throw stones or whatever, so be it. Let’s rather cancel this event and students must be transported to go home. And people were losing it and they threw bottles and all of that. It was chaos! – ‘Pay back the money!’ by the time EFF had already been saying – ‘Pay back the money’. So, because of that and there was also promise to have tablet devices which were delayed, and so we lost that election in 2013 so you can imagine. SASCO won.

The experience of losing the election as part of the DASO team for 2013 and ending up as an opposition member was humbling, yet it made Bucwa also reflect and strengthen her resolve to continue in student politics, even against the wishes of her parents.

And to me that was a disappointment because I always contested and won things, from Law Student Society my first year I made it to the executive. So, it was very strange to experience being part of a team or campaign and lose. It humbles you; it makes you sit back and say, where did I go wrong and where can I improve? But more importantly it strengthens your belief in something – was I really interested in this politics thing? – because I could have chosen to leave it. My parents were saying: ‘Why are you putting yourself into this? You are wasting your time!’ So, I say to them I will never start something that I am not gonna finish. So, I made a commitment and I promised myself and I was campaigning to people. saying this is what I will change. So even if I’m in a different scope let me rather go.
**SRC internal organisation**

**Induction into SRC: DASO and Student Affairs**

The student governance has its own sort of a strategic planning that just tells you how the processes take place. And that was one of the gaps that we identify when I was the SRC 2014.

We started a training programme in June which is now a common thing as in DASO and has been adapted nationally, but we have a leadership training form – we said, ‘Look this is not fair that now we found ourselves in the Students’ Representative Council and we have to sit with the VC and at ManCord and we have no particular training and understanding how do we do this.’

We did this as DASO not as NMU Student Affairs; we would write to them to say look we think a more comprehensive training will be great, because we do have an induction. So, we get inducted.

Induction is there so the vice-chancellor comes and most of management to acknowledge you as SRC, and you take an oath basically. To say that we as the SRC students will abide by the constitution of the SRC and the rules of the institution and etc.

**Handover from one political organisation to the other**

Like other student leaders, Bucwa also resents the lack of handover from one SRC to another when a different student organisation wins the elections, as it ultimately is not in the interests of students.

In 2013 we had a handover because it was our peoples that were in governance before but there was no official handover in 2014 when I go into SRC presidency; there was no official handover. In fact, we found the office was locked and we had to go to get a locksmith to come and open the SRC office, just because there was no access.

And this is one of the things: the intolerance of student leaders particularly from different political parties is a huge problem, because it sets you back … It’s not only about you and the party loss, but think about the impact it has on students who are coming to get access and who are coming to knock at the door and there is no one there. So, there is someone who might have a huge predicament but there is no service or assistance.

And when I look at it, if the SRC fails, it does not fail the party, it fails the students and that’s a huge impact on the responsibility that they have. So, I fundamentally believe in running the induction. I left our files there and decided to be mature about it. It’s fine: here is access to the emails to say this is how we do it.
The role of student parliament

In the problematic handover process from one SRC to the next, the student parliament can play a positive role as it reports on matters that remain to be addressed.

For my portfolio I did not get anything; no report from the previous SRC. But what we had was a report from the student parliament, which talked about how things are going to be resolved, etc. and that’s the other thing of accountability which was lacking.

SRC performance management and accountability

Bucwa outlines how she came into her second term as SRC President and developed a strategic plan for the SRC. As a matter of accountability, she would use this plan and the performance indicators she established to report to students and student parliament on her SRC’s progress.

When I became SRC President I remember that in November and December, I was busy drafting a strategic document of what are my key objectives that I was going to achieve: access and success, social cohesion, accommodation, etc. … how do I wish to transition the SRC … Then everyone was wondering and asking: ‘Why are you doing this thing? We never had this.’

But that’s how we became so effective, because we were operating on the basis of that. I had a mission and vision and core values I wanted to look at, and the strategic objectives. And every month we would try to give an update to students, and every quarter you will have an SRC term report from the president to say, this is where we are, this is what we are doing. And I realised, ‘Oh well, this is not working,’ and I did another one for the second semester. And I had to say: ‘Here is the revised strategic document.’ And you know, that is the culture.

I took that to parliament because I had to also present a presidential report to parliament. I presented that. And there was an organisational report from the SRC secretary; there was financial report; and we would make those public on a quarterly basis. I would have the strategic report, the organisational and financial report. Because the money of the university is actually subsidised; and it is students’ money. So we have to account to them and have correspondence about it.

Student parliament

The parliament is composed of all the student societies; all the structures get a delegation, and political parties will have four because we have four different campuses and each would have a chairperson.
Campus SRCs
We did not have campus SRCs, but the new constitution now apparently wants campus SRCs. This coming election would have campus SRC elections. The thing is with us our campuses are not that much far; you walk from north to south, it’s about five minutes, and Second Avenue is literally about 10 minutes’ drive. Then the only further one is Missiondale, which is in the location, eBhayi.

Keeping in touch with students: meetings, walkabouts, emails, SMS, social media
Bucwa explains the various ways in which her SRC of 2015 stayed in touch with students, using multiple means: SRC indabas, SRC campus visits and social media.

We held SRC indabas on a quarterly basis but also every month I would plan a visit to a campus: actually it will be twice because one will be for the SRC and one for the party. I would brand it so that we associate with the achievements with the organisation so we gain our strength. It is very important for me to be always on the ground, because it keeps me abreast on what the challenges are. And because sometimes you could easily get carried away sitting in the office – you become too organisationally involved and you become administrators now more than representatives.

We had those monthly walkabouts and visits to the residences and particularly off-campus residences because some students are being exploited and being subjected to inhumane conditions because they can’t afford proper accommodation, so I wanted to check those statuses and support them.

We had quarterly mass emails to students; we also did try some SMSs but it cost us.

I also had to open my Facebook account to everyone and people would want to flock … The SRC also had a Facebook account, Twitter account, and Instagram account so that people can communicate. [Bucwa laughs] We had those accounts and we’d get DMs there and inboxes … So, we had a system that basically myself and the secretary would have access to those pages and immediately respond … the people must be responded to within 48 hours. That would help to be responsive as well because sometimes people can’t access their emails, because they are far or whatever situation that might be.

Co-operative governance and the power of the SRC
Upon becoming an SRC member, Bucwa realised that the SRC represents students in a number of important governance structures and committees and therefore has the power to influence decision-making at the university.
We realised how powerful the SRC is: We sat on the transformation committee, we sat on Senate, Council, the safety committee, the library committee, there was the IF – the Institutional Forum which makes critical decisions – we even sat on the tender committee. We sat on the committee dealing with screening the applications when we were looking for the new DVC and we sat on the selection panel as well. We sat in most ManCord and we had quarterly ManCord meetings with management.

The university also had a Student Support Services Council (SSSC), so the SRC executive met once a month with the dean of students, the director of student governance, the officer of student housing and residences as well.

So, we did have representation.

And then, the faculty reps will sit on faculty boards.

What we further advocated for that year was representation in the committees dealing with appeals and exclusion because there was previously no students. And that helped to decrease the exclusion rate, especially in that year. There was a bit of accountability. For example, there was a case in law where we took a principled decision that if a case [of exclusion] is because the student is on NSFAS, for financial reasons, they should not be excluded because what was happening with the centralisation of NSFAS was that students were not getting allowances for several months, not getting book allowances, and so forth – so that’s still a problem till now. And that made a huge impact: if we did not have a student leader there who understands the dynamics, we would not be able to convince the dean and also the panel of lawyers there.

**Key achievements and challenges**

Bucwa’s key achievements in the NMU SRC relate to matters of student finances: fundraising money for students and, in the previous year, leading a small march on financial aid which raised a lot of awareness. Conversely, key challenges relate to student politics and governance itself, SRC maladministration and insufficient financial oversight on the part of Student Affairs over the SRC.

**Fundraising R9 million in two months**
First and foremost, Bucwa considers fundraising as her SRC’s key achievement while she was president:

Having the ability to raise over nine million to help student funding – for me that was a highlight! We raised R4.2 million for bail-outs because we know if you have a debt you can’t register for the next year; and at that time BTech students didn’t have funding. You find that someone wants to continue with the diploma but where can you apply with, who is going to give you a proper job?
So, we needed to raise some funds, and we raised the funds with my team in like less than two months. Initially what we did, we had a budget as SRC of R3 million. And we asked ourselves: what is our mandate? Is it simply to host parties while we have a national crisis right now, where NSFAS just became centralised and that would have excluded a lot of people? So, we said let’s rather take R400 000 that we have and let’s go there to the institution and to Council and challenge them.

We went to our VC – very vague and very scared – and we said: ‘Look we’ve got this amount of money. Here is a list of individuals who are getting excluded, here are the photos of the young pupils who have to pack their bags and go home. You and the institution you can double this amount because you have a responsibility as a leader.’

We did not take for granted the documents of the Council or SRC policy and that we could also request the financial statements because this is a public institution, and then would see how much reserves you have. So we challenged them with that and they gave the funds and so we found ourselves with R1.2 million and we went to NSFAS and we said this is your fault, to the Department of Finance and the institutions and that’s how we got to accumulate that amount of money, because we challenged everyone. It was about giving the little that you can and with that so many people’s dreams were not going to be delayed or even denied.

Financial aid and NSFAS march
This links to her first SRC term when in 2014 she led a march on financial aid and NSFAS in July, and her personal experience of having been funded by an NMU loan in her final year.

The protest I led the year before – but it was not a protest it was a march because we had applied for permission and all – was a march on financial aid and NSFAS because they had no allocations given to students by July 2014. So, we had a march. It looked like a joke to some people because there was like 50 of us.

But the impact it had when we posted that thing on social media, when we attached the memorandum, the university responded. And our office was flocking with thousands of students who were saying, ‘I have a problem, here is my name can I sign this,’ etc. So, they had access to the Facebook account which had about 14 000 likes.

Problems with student governance
Bucwa mentions two matters that she experienced as problematic with student governance: that some students would undermine the SRC’s authority, and that there was insufficient oversight by Student Affairs over SRC spending.
I was so frustrated with student governance. I think if people want to be politicians, they must be politicians. I make a case in point: In #FeesMustFall there was a complete isolation and disacknowledgement of the SRC. People who were part of the movement now would stand up and ask: ‘Elected by who? And on whose mandate are you speaking?’ Hence you find that there were quarrels in the student body respectively. So, for me it’s something that is very problematic in the student governance as a whole.

I think for me it is important to have principled individuals in the student governance bodies: from the dean to the directors and to the deputies. The maladministration that takes place is ridiculous! To come to the SRC with the debt of over R50 000 in debt from the previous year and you starting off with that. You go through the statements and you see approved hotel rooms, bars, cars hired. So those are the things I would really like to extract.

It is a failure of Student Affairs to have a proper oversight. We had a budget of R3 million! Imagine you had never seen so much money and you’ve got access, so there needs to be proper oversight. I didn’t even have a cheque book, but you’ll go to our office and say look we need this and make submission that we would approve, there was a budget.

**Reflecting on #FeesMustFall**

**NSFAS dysfunctionality as a cause of #FeesMustFall**

When asked about the causes of #FeesMustFall, Bucwa stated emphatically that NSFAS was a major cause: ‘NSFAS dysfunctionality is the correct word.’ Being a member of the National Assembly when she was interviewed in 2018, Bucwa further intimated the following:

We had a statement today by the minister stating that NSFAS is now under administration. I think it is unfair that it took so long for the issue to be picked up. We felt it in 2015 and that’s what instigated us to raise those funds. We saw the challenge.

What we always instilled in ourselves was to become solution-driven leaders, leaders who propose – and that is something that our management always appreciated – yes, we would howl, then tell you what the problem is, and then we would propose a solution to it, because that is very critical; but at the end of the day it can’t be that there’s people who have been appointed as administrators and we have to do the work for them. It’s ridiculous. The SRC is not there to do the admin of NSFAS.

Now you take a system: Nelson Mandela University was one of the best when it comes to financial aid distribution. That’s why they were put in the pilot project to say: give us your best practices and let us adopt them. Now you find that you place this institution under a centralised system in an office.
of just 20 people and that supposed to see over 150 000 students – it was problematic!

You could call the call centre for an hour! How do you expect a person who is sitting back at home in Lusikisiki to be on the phone for an hour? It’s ridiculous! You are asking them to submit things online and they don’t even have smart phones – how much more now they have to walk to the post office to email and scan. So, for me it lacks a human understanding of the digital divide dynamics of what is happening on the ground. And it’s all got to move with transition to a technological world, etc. but if your basic principles and processes are not adopted – it’s problematic!

Secondly, there’s always an expectation created that it’s for all: ‘We can fund everyone, please come.’ But that’s not what the reality is, they don’t have money. And the reason why a lot of people don’t pay back is because they feel like I was frustrated with this process or whatever.

So, we had those challenges. And we tried to curb it. And then #FeesMustFall started.

**Leadership approach during #FeesMustFall**

I think there was not a more testing time in my leadership than that. I understood the works; I understood the dynamics of students; I understood the frustration of the students because I have been there trying to assist. And we wanted to also retaliate. But we also came from a political party that had a different stance. We don’t believe in shutdowns; we believe in resolutions and submitting proposals, and that the rights of others should not be suppressed because of a minority. And you find yourself in an institution like NMU that has a bit of inequalities and imbalances in itself, so indeed some issues would not affect everyone. Because now the response is so aggressive and people are not giving others the opportunity to answer and to understand what is the course of frustration. It just, you know, blew up!

The day #FeesMustFall started we were going to have the VC awards. I was part of the outgoing SRC. Handover had not happened yet. We had the SRC election in September, and I think two weeks later #FeesMustFall started. But if you don’t take control of this thing and show leadership, people will riot. And I asked: why do they want to protest, this is an issue of Wits? But others said: ‘We want to show solidarity.’

#FeesMustFall – I agree in principle, and we have made submissions and that time we were busy with the fee negotiation process, negotiating an increment, trying to meet the institution halfway: ‘This must not be there; no registration fees; there must be additional residence bills, there must be adequate shuttles …’ So, we were basically trying to negotiate and understand that indeed, that there is no way that the institution can’t increase. Once you sit in Council you realise what actually happens and you actually say that ‘oh shuttles cost 15 million’.
So, I went to this meeting and imagine I was the only female in this group of males. So we have a meeting unplanned then they decide they want to go crash the VC awards – Oh God Jesus! I mean I’m in front of this thing and I get a call from a constituency leader: ‘What is this? Why are you shutting down the school!’ So, I was like: ‘Look, I’m still the SRC president. What I fear is that we will let go of the issue because we don’t believe in shutdowns, then we allow anarchy; but if the SRC is there perhaps campus would be calmer.’ And also we are the ones who are going to be held accountable. And we are the ones who people would listen to.

I still was sleeping and to be woken up at five and the bushes were already burning. And that is where leadership is critical. To say: ‘Look, the issue is genuine and don’t delegitimise the issue because of the manner that we do it in. So we are going to sit here in peace. And so noone should ill-treat you if you are sitting down here. We are singing, and we are not burning anything, and we doing our own thing.’

And it was a tough time because you sit there in the heat and people say: ‘No, this is unfair.’ And there are people chirping, saying: ‘No, you are useless.’ But we’ve been there since January and we understood the issue. There was personal abuse when it comes to #FeesMustFall. There are people who hijack #FeesMustFall. Then it kills the true essence of what you are trying to fight for.

#RhodesMustFall, dialogues and language policy

Bucwa also reflected on the impact of the #RhodesMustFall campaign on student politics at NMU.

In March there was #RhodesMusFall; it touched something. At NMU, there wasn’t an institutional process following #RhodesMustFall; there were the transformation dialogues; there were discussions; to incorporate something in the curriculum: philosophy, history, or whatever, what teaches people who we are. And that this should be in the first year that you understand the dynamics. But there was nothing to the extent like it was with UCT.

At George campus, because George is more Afrikaans, we did challenge the language policy. I remember we had a meeting and they said no there is simultaneous interpretation in Xhosa and Afrikaans and we made a note to students that if you’re struggling … Hence I said we were very solution-driven. And we did believe that if you have an SRC why should you be out of class? It was about being proactive.

Key moments in 2015

The transformation summit

When asked about her experience of the second higher education transformation summit from 15 to 17 October 2015, which immediately preceded the national
shutdown as part of the #FeesMustFall campaign, Bucwa recalled the following:

I was there and it was an interesting time, in all honesty. And it started then. There was a lady that stood up and started expressing the issue involved, fees, etc. And we were told let’s go and caucus. And the only people from the DA was myself and I think Greg at the time from UCT. And we agreed in principle on the issue of no increase in funds and how do we adopt a system that can corporate to pay for the rest of those who can’t afford.

But it was a bit hostile – like we need to attack these people ‘basiqhela kakubi’ [isiXhosa for ‘they are taking us for a ride’] and all of those things. And I was like: ‘Wow, let’s not lose focus! What is it that we really want to achieve? Do we want to start a revolution?’ I know Frantz Fanon says: ‘Each generation must discover its mission.’ But I don’t want a point where the means actually violate the very thing that we are trying to achieve.

I remember when they were saying that a woman must talk, and ‘Hlohlo you will be speaking’, and I was like, ‘No, why must I speak?’ ‘Because you are a leader!’ But it was also unifying and what I wanted to emphasise is that let’s not be divided; let’s be unified as student leaders and let’s present the issues. But there was a sense of a ‘them-us’ in the presence – them being the minister and VCs; and we the movements, and the movements were very vocal: #RhodesMustFall, #OpenStellenbosch at the time, and I forget the other. So it was great being on that platform and to experience and seeing what exactly is the turmoil and the frustration.

**Meeting the minister at the transformation summit**

The meeting with the minister was very heated, no one wanted to hear anything from him. We were like: ‘Ah, this is nonsense!’ and we were not listening. Firstly, what we wanted to do, was like, ‘Chief, if you don’t resolve this thing now you’ll see what happens tomorrow.’ So he says: ‘No I don’t have authority hana hana president.’ And we said: ‘Okay sure.’ We’ll see, and then: the shutdown. And that was a dominant thing. We even had a WhatsApp group as SRC presidents.

And then there was also a frustration with SAUS because they were supposed to be representing us; they sit with these guys all the time. They just come as: ‘Comrades, fear nothing, we are with you.’

**Party politics and the NMU shutdown 2015**

At NMU, I was forced to shut down. Because remember it was also political, as a SASCO campaign. I got a call saying that if you don’t take up this thing, it might reflect badly on the party as though we were anti, that we are not pro-poor, and we are anti-black, and that’s why we do not want to support. So, I stood there and I got burnt by the sun for days.
Meeting the president at the Union Buildings

I remember the meeting with the president in the Union Buildings as well; the people were saying: ‘Why did you go?’ Wits had released a statement on the day that they are not going, so now it looks as if some of us are sell-outs for going to the meeting. But my secretary-general was there and had to take charge of everything. I remember that we had to wait outside and someone sings … we are going to throw him with stones, and the security had to say he’s not coming.

For me it was heart-breaking then, because we were standing on this side and police were shooting at our students from across. And for me this was disheartening because you are a leader, you are prepared to be at the forefront and to lead them, and not being told to move aside. That’s when I felt that this is just tripe and there’s nothing that this is going to achieve.

We are students of institutions of higher learning and there is no such thing as zero per cent increase – how does anything increase by zero? There was not even the minister of finance, so who’s going to tell us if this thing is sustainable and what’s the proposed solution to move forward? Hence I was saying that this was just to show face, to calm us down, that we’ve met the president, but nothing was going to be resolved.

#FeesMustFall 2016 and the trauma of it

Hence in 2016 again it got worse. Actually that was the worst, when people had to be now study via e-learning, which was an impact for a child who stays in Motherwell, for example, where the only access to a wifi you can get is to go to a Motherwell library. There were people who suffered and people who were traumatised who were sleeping in jail.

There was a day when I was on campus and cops came inside the premises and getting into the residences and I was like, ‘Where are we going to be safe now?’ So, there was a bit of trauma that came with it.

I would have hoped that we actually achieve more tangible solutions for the change that we want to see. Because even now, this fallacy of a free education for first-years but what happens when you are in your second year, and your third year? And hence we continue to have cases like what happened in Bloemfontein, where a student decides to take her own life because the system is failing.

The impact of the student leadership experience

Impact on academic performance

You can imagine from coming from the Golden Key and I was the academics office of the Golden Key and to finishing my degree two years later. That is the structure. Yes, it had a huge impact, I mean as an A-student I was looking
very high – jobs from the top law firms, which has great exposure and I made a couple of advocacy. But when you get to that there’s hardly any time to go to class, to focus fully on your studies because you have to be on the ground.

**Impact on career trajectory, political attitudes and active citizenship**

I don’t think I should be where I am today without it. It has formed me and contributed to the strong, independent, critical thinker I am today. It has made me understand that an issue might not affect me today, but I don’t know where I will be tomorrow. It made me rise above my own individualistic concerns for the greater good of the society.

It has made me understand how to balance life, and how to be a social human being, but also know that sometimes you need to retreat and be by myself. To understand that I can have work, I can have family, I can have relations, and I can achieve what I want to achieve.

But also it has made me not to give up, because there were many times that I felt this is too much or I’m tired or – but it made me to keep going stronger and stronger – like I said there is nothing more humbling than the post I get from people saying: ‘Look you are my inspiration, I look up to you, thank you for being the person you are.’ Or someone saying, ‘Hey Sis, I just want to tell you that I’ve got a job; you might not remember me but you gave me that fund in 2015 and then I graduated.’ I would be like ‘Wow!’ – Like: ‘Please my mom would like to meet you and we want to come back and thank you.’ I mean I’m a 21 year old and here is a parent coming at me to say, ‘Look my child didn’t have fees and has been saved by your efforts.’ Or even a plea from the parent; you understand that you have a huge responsibility. So those things have sustained me to understand that sometimes it’s not even who you are that matters or where you come from; but if you are determined you can be someone who people look into your eyes.

So, it had a huge impact and responsibility as well. Because at that time, it was like I couldn’t go party like a normal, a 19 year old or do certain things; be careful who is your partner, etc. To find myself in the space I am today, I’m more comfortable because I understand the implications, I understand I’m a public representative and the people look unto you.

**Impact on personal and family life**

Oh, my bae disappeared thanks to student politics! I never had time, thanks to student politics, I never had time! It happened, there’s no joke about it. If you don’t have a strong support base, you are not going to make it – you need it. So, my parents didn’t agree with it; after all I was sent out to study, and now what is this politics thing?! Now they are like ‘Ah – mhm’ – I made a right choice. But at the time it didn’t seem quite right.
I’ve got a great relationship with my parents, because I would often come home tired or cry to them, so they were a source of strength to me. Family, I’ve drawn closest with most of them now.

I’ve lost a lot of friends in the process because we don’t all think alike and I don’t like selfish people – not to say you must give your all – I also don’t have time. But there are also strong relationships that I sustained.

At a personal level, I mean personally I’m fine. I think God has sustained me this far and also my faith has brought me to some sanity in this chaotic world we are in. I’m quite happy with where I am.

Closing remarks

Bucwa mentions in closing some of her convictions and what it means for her to be the youngest member of the National Assembly now, and being a black woman in politics. On the one hand she says that ‘identity politics are very crucial … being known, or different’; on the other hand, Bucwa asserts that

I want to be the best candidate – not because I’m black or female – [but] because this is the most competent person. I try to always respond and not see myself as a victim, and I know I’m previously disadvantaged but I try to stay away from that stereotype of mindset. But when you are in an environment as complex like politics, which is male dominated, your voice sometimes is not appreciated as much.