chapter 8

Zukiswa Mqolomba
University of Cape Town, SRC president 2006/07

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Brief biography

Zukiswa [Zuki] Mqolomba is a senior researcher, senior policy analyst and senior programme manager with research interests in economics, poverty and public policy. She holds two master’s degrees: MSocSci in public policy and research, and MA in poverty and development from the Universities of Cape Town and Sussex respectively. She is a Mandela Rhodes Scholar as well as a Chevening Scholar. At the time of the interview, she was the director of Social Security Schemes at the Department of Social Development, but has since then worked for the African Development Bank in Abidjan and then as the chief of staff at the Competition Commission. She is currently the Senior Sector Specialist: Economy in the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation in the Presidency. As a member of a panel of experts at the Department of Public Works, she also provides advice on the development of job creation strategies.

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Denyse Webbstock and Ntokozo Bhengu on 27 June 2018.

Early influences

Zuki Mqolomba traces the influences that led to her choosing a leadership role in student governance back to her home life and early role models of strong women
who were determined to make a difference in their lives and those around them. As she recounts,

I was raised by a single mum. My father passed away when I was six. And I was also raised by a single grandparent. So, I was raised as part of a matriarchy of strong women who understood that their role was not only in the kitchen, or in the bedroom, but their role is also to transform the society at large. That background informed my desire to lead at university because I saw strong women leading in society and at home. I wanted to be part of that generation of people who led in society at large, and basically to leave behind a legacy for women, and black women in particular.

And also at my high school, at the all-girls’ school, I used to be a prefect. So, my first taste of leadership was when I was a prefect in high school. I saw the power of student representation in decision-making structures of the school, and I realised that voices of students are an important player in shaping the transformation agenda in schools and in university life more particularly.

Apart from the values-driven matriarchal influences that Mqolomba describes, she counts among her influences a political awakening through a deeply personal and tragic circumstance when she was six years old.

My father was involved in the struggle … he used to help people who were exiled and house them in our house and keep them away from police who were looking for them. My father was shot dead by Gqozo’s people, the political principal of the Eastern Cape [the former Ciskei] at that time. Apparently, it’s because they thought that he was Chris Hani because he drove the same car as him. They shot dead the wrong person.

My father was involved in ANC politics and making sure that the education sector plays a role in the struggle more broadly, because he was the principal of the school. I think that is an influence on my life – that my father was involved in ANC politics.

**Context of getting involved at UCT**

Mqolomba’s journey into student politics that began in high school continued into her university life when she began her studies at UCT. Her initial experience was as a head girl of Baxter residence. She later became a sub-warden of that residence and the deputy chairperson of the Humanities Student Council. After becoming the deputy speaker of the student parliament, she was elected as SRC president. Her main motivation, as she recalls it, was to ensure that student voices were included in decision-making structures of the university and that they were added to the transformation agenda of the university.
What was particularly important to her was

the fact that I was a young woman. I wanted to make sure that women are also represented in the decision-making structures of an institution, and young black women in particular, their voices are heard and they’re able to shape and structure the conversations and shape the debates around transformation at the university.

**Motivation to join the SRC**

Mqolomba sees her motivation to join the SRC as being in stark contrast to that of many others.

I think most people, most students, actually enter into SRC for financial gain, because it gives you the power to influence where budgets go. It gives you the power to influence which corporates advertise on campus. SRCs get paid, so we used to get paid on campus. So, most people will join the SRC to make sure that they have funding to finance their personal lives at the end of the month because they are in need of income, and they don’t have income coming from home. The personal gain element is a strong motivation. You have to just make sure that your leadership development programmes champion ethics and the right intentions for wanting to join the SRC. And hopefully the democratic process for electing SRC is so robust that it indeed reflects the motivation of members when they campaign and it exposes those motivations to students as well.

While Mqolomba experienced that some student leaders were motivated by financial gain, she also believes it did not necessarily mean that they could not serve students and do useful work.

They were in the SRC, as long as they did the work. We didn’t care what your motivations are actually – you can always change people’s motivations by eloquently representing the correct vision and mission statement, and by having the correct programme of action, so you can channel those motivations into the right motivations. The payments, I enjoyed being paid because obviously it meant I could supplement my income and I never had to worry about issues of food, of accommodation and all those things. I don’t think there’s a need for payment but it’s a nice benefit to have, it’s a good incentive to have. There is a trade-off, because people could be working for the income, or they could be representing.

**Affiliations**

Mqolomba describes herself as a pan-Africanist, an orientation that informed her
student political life. As an example of how this shaped her projects as a student leader, she cites the following:

I wanted to make sure that the university does not forget that there are struggles being fought and waged on the African continent that require us to take a stand on human rights violations across the continent. That is why, when I was president, we put together a proposal for a special dispensation for Zimbabwean students who couldn’t afford to pay their fees because there was a problem with getting cash and dollars from the banks at the time.

Usually international students have to pay upfront. So we arranged for them to pay in instalments, just like South African students, to make sure that they were able to pay their school fees incrementally. I wanted to make sure that pan-Africanism resonates in my leadership journey and that it is part of my leadership contribution towards the African Renaissance.

Mqolomba was not affiliated to any political party until she ran for the SRC.

SASCO approached me to run under their campaign, and I became a deployee of the ANC Youth League, SASCO, and YCL, together the PYA, the Progressive Youth Alliance. So, I was a deployee of the PYA into the SRC and I was a SASCO deployee most particularly. So, my background, my SRC experience, was shaped by that political party. I campaigned under SASCO, but I also raised some of my personal convictions for why I’m campaigning. So, there wasn’t like a generic motto or generic campaign strategy. They allowed us to bring individuality to our campaign strategies.

The SRC and internal organisation

External influences

As an example of how she balanced being the SRC president as well as being subordinate to a student political organisation with its own leader, Mqolomba says that

I had a robust engagement and a robust relationship, a complementary and a contradictory relationship with my leaders. So I made sure that where we differed we differed robustly, and I presented the defence and the arguments in favour of why I think we should move to a particular direction and reminded them that this is the mandate of SASCO constitutionally and this is what we represent as an organisation on campus. So that’s basically what I did, I reminded them of our responsibility on campus and of our values as an organisation and why this was the right direction to take at that particular point in time.

As an example of how she navigated such tensions, Mqolomba describes a time
when, as a SASCO deployee, structures and events outside the walls of the university had an influence on her activities, and she was forced to negotiate between the policy of her party and her own values and concerns.

There was a time when the opposition leader [in Zimbabwe], Morgan Tsvangirai, was beaten up by ZANU-PF, at the command of ZANU-PF. So, I organised a provincial-wide strike to Parliament, asking for President Thabo Mbeki to stop with the quiet diplomacy and to basically voice out his opinion when it came to human rights violations in Zimbabwe against opposition leaders. Now, this was a problem in my party because obviously ANC and ANC Youth League and SASCO were more aligned with Thabo Mbeki at the time, and also most importantly more aligned with ZANU-PF. So obviously me going against the grain was a problem for the political party. And they even threatened to withdraw my membership from the party. And they threatened to recall me from being the president of the SRC if I went ahead with the strike. I had a choice now between the ethics of the student protests and basically complying with the mandate of my political party. And I actually chose to speak out against human rights violations because I didn't think that this went against, or was contrary or in contradiction to what we believed in as students in the political party itself. I felt that the values that informed the strike action and informed the protest action to Parliament were aligned to the values of SASCO. So that was my defence that our values are aligned.

This is a democratisation problem on the continent, and we as a democratic organisation believe that students have a right and young people have a right to inform the democratisation processes of their countries. That’s why we had to support this provincial strike to Parliament against the human rights violations that were going on in Zimbabwe at the time. Then the head office of SASCO instructed the provincial leaders, and instructed the SASCO PEC, to stop the strike action. And we continued [laughs]. They didn’t kick me out because I gave a defence that our values are aligned, this is a pan-Africanist movement for democratisation across the continent, and there’s a role for opposition parties in the governance structures and in the politics of our countries. We need to make sure that our voices are heard. And that you stop the quiet diplomacy.

In the end, a memorandum was successfully delivered to Parliament.

**SRC induction, training and support**

On the question of what support and training Mqolomba received as an SRC member and president, she has the following response:

We got training before – there was a strong Student Affairs department that ran programmes for leadership development for student leaders who are
involved in other structures of the student governance model. I was involved as the deputy chairperson of the Humanities Student Council; I was involved as the head girl of Baxter residence; and I was involved as the sub-warden of Baxter residence. So, I underwent a number of training programmes preparing me for the SRC, and they encouraged you in the development programmes to campaign for seats in the SRC. So, there is a strong, quite vibrant, student-friendly, student governance and Student Affairs department at the university that provided support to the SRC.

While Mqolomba does not remember whether there was specific training on how to manage budgets and practical management issues, she does recall training in strategic planning sessions for SRC members that were organised by the Student Affairs department. These sessions covered the different roles of the SRC, how the SRC functions in an institution, and what its purpose is intended to be. However, she notes that

they never went into the details of budgeting. But we did our own budgets; they gave us a budget and we were expected to allocate budgets to projects and to make sure that each portfolio has sufficient budget to run with its campaigns and its programme of action. We learnt by doing, hey, we learnt by doing. That's the only way that you learn.

Later on in the interview, Mqolomba qualifies that the budgeting for student societies was done by the Student Affairs department.

There was an administrator that looked after, that welcomed students. And received students and did the bookings for counselling sessions with students. So they did provide an administrator and they also provided a student governance officer who would give us counsel and perhaps mentor us, like a person who was previously in the SRC who became the student governance officer. There was also a director for student affairs who helped us fundraise for a student bail-out fund.

**Fundraising for students in distress**

We initiated a student bail-out fund for students who were distressed, who couldn't afford to pay their university fees the following year, and who could get a bail-out from the SRC. The funding came from the advertisements by companies who came to the campus and advertised their services and products on the campus. We used to admit advertisement fees on Jammie Plaza as a way of raising a million rand for the student bail-out, and we asked the vice-chancellor at that time to match the million rand with a million from his office.
Communication

Mqolomba paints a picture of a communication strategy with students in an era before social media became ubiquitous. The methods of communication were diverse. The main means was an SRC newsletter, hard copies of which were physically distributed to students on campus on a quarterly basis. The purpose of the newsletters was to inform students of SRC decisions, campaigns, and progress on dealing with issues facing students.

Then we had the student halls where we had student indabas at least once a year, where we shared with them the work that we've been doing as an SRC, and where they could hold you accountable for the work which wasn't done. We also had the student parliament which was representative of all student structures on campus. We sat at least once a quarter with the student parliament and we shared with them our vision and mission our strategy and our programme of action and how well we were doing with the mandate that they had given us as an SRC. We also had a student radio as well, we interviewed on student radio, and we had a student newspaper. So, there were a number of forums that we used. And when I left, I asked for an email communiqué with students so that we would be able to communicate broadly with the student body on the issues that we were dealing with as the SRC.

I think the current generation is lucky in terms of the social media that has become an attractive tool for them to utilise to mobilise student support on issues that they were campaigning for and championing. So, I wish that we had had that. Student social media did exist at the time, but it wasn't as popular as it is currently.

Individual students also had access to SRC members organised on a booking system managed by the student administrator on campus.

Students would make appointments with respective SRC members and they would hold sessions with them depending on availability and time. So, as the SRC we would make ourselves available for consultations once or twice a week, on this day, at this time. So, when students wanted counsel they could come at those times.

The SRC’s governance programme

Clean governance and partisan politics

Mqolombka had a strong commitment to relying on her own convictions and values to guide her choices, which she sees as an enduring theme in her leadership roles. From the campaign trail to the presidency, Mqolombka sought to practise ‘clean governance’ by means of a compact between the different student political organisations and political parties.
When I ran for SRC president, my theme was that we want to clean up the governance structures of the SRC. Because at the time there was corruption and fraudulent activities taking place at the university at the level of student leadership. Where leaders were using SRC cars for personal use, and basically leaders were being overly politicised. Calling each other out and playing dirty politics against each other. So, my campaign was a campaign for clean governance in the SRC. And basically I won my campaign on the backbone of that.

Mqolomba describes how she took forward her campaign promise through putting together social compacts for student leaders and holding them accountable for violations of those compacts, especially at the level of the ANC, ANC Youth League, DASO, IFP, PAC (Azania) – that is, at the level of political parties.

We just said that we want to have an agreement with the political parties that there won’t be any corruption activities under my leadership as the SRC president because it taints the reputation of student leaders across the board when there’s corruption and fraudulent activities on campus by student leaders and where they are accused of spending SRC resources fruitlessly, and basically wasteful expenditure. And using or making use of the SRC vehicles without due reason, and for personal reasons.

Dealing with student leaders from different political affiliations was not easy, but the message was consistent that any corruption would taint all of their reputations and cause students to lose faith in the ability of the SRC to take their struggles forward.

Mqolomba believes the SRC during her presidency was a values-led one, which was successful in that she recalls few instances of corruption in her year, and that those that were identified were reported and leaders were held accountable. She notes:

Everything managed to work out. The social compact really worked well because we got commitment from the different political parties and their deployees to make sure that we commit to a clean governance and a values-led SRC presidency at that time. My team was comprised of independents, of DASO, ANC Youth League, SASCO and YCL representatives. So, it was a mix of people coming from an array of political affiliations. But I just focused on making sure that there’s a strategy in place, so I put together a strategic document that informed the kind of programmes we would be running during the course of that year. I used that as a tool to lobby and to mobilise my team around a common vision for the SRC.
Transformation vs decolonisation

In Mqolomba’s view, the role of the SRC is to challenge the status quo – to be part of the transformation process on campus. Asked how this relates to more recent debates on decolonisation, Mqolomba has the following to say:

Decolonisation is deeper because it speaks of curriculum reforms as well and making sure that there is representation of people of colour, of women, of people with disabilities. But it is more an ideological tool that the students, the #FeesMustFall campaign used, to basically challenge the status quo. It’s an ideological tool.

The SRC and co-operative governance

Committee representation

Mqolomba feels strongly about extending student representation in decision-making structures. At the time she was in the SRC, students were represented under the auspices of the co-operative governance framework. In terms of that framework,

Students only had two representatives of students at Council level, and a few student leaders were represented at Senate level, but mostly we were represented at Institutional Forum level. We had about 10 candidates represented in the transformation committee at the Institutional Forum level. So, at least there we were represented, but at Council and Senate there was little representation. So, we struggled to ensure that the student agenda was progressively realised on the campus.

The voice of the student body was, however, influential in the student parliament.

The SRC agenda is derived from the student parliament. Student parliament discusses fees, it discusses transformation quotas, it discusses worker rights, and worker rights violations on campus; so, the SRC literally got its mandate from the student parliament, who also held it accountable for ensuring that their role is realised on campus. The student parliament was widely representative, because it comprised student leaders of different societies from across campus. It was active and busy and it was engaged, and it debated and discussed transformation at length. And also it participated in the vice-chancellor’s election process, making sure that we derive a mandate from the parliament of the kind of institutional leader needed.

As asked whether students had a voice in quality assurance matters, Mqolomba indicates that student representatives were involved in committees that did quality assurance work, but did not necessarily focus on quality assurance as an agenda item.
Involvement in vice-chancellor selection process

Mqolomba recounts the level of student involvement in the selection of a vice-chancellor to succeed Professor Njabulo Ndebele.

Our favourite candidate, we wanted uhmm ... there was Cheryl [de la Rey], there was Martin Hall, there was Max Price, so those were the top three candidates at the time. We wanted Martin Hall to be the leader as the vice-chancellor of the university because he was quite effective in making sure that the transformation agenda took centre stage at university debates, at Council, at Senate and institution-wide. So, he was responsible for the transformation campaigns and the transformation agenda on campus. And he was quite vocal about the need for UCT to transform, to become an African, and not just a world-class university, but an African university through curriculum reforms and making sure that women, people with disability and people of colour were represented as lecturers and as professors. The agenda he had for the institution and the vision that he had for the institution was the same as ours. That he wanted UCT to become an African world-class university, and literally to bring back the African in an African world-class institution, that UCT claims it is.

Mqolomba describes a difficult nomination process in which the original shortlist was amended to include Martin Hall, who had not originally featured on it.

They wanted to exclude Martin Hall simply because there were a number of professors who complained that they don’t like him. They don’t like his leadership style; it’s too authoritarian and forceful and demanding. But I think the reason why those professors didn’t want Martin Hall is because he would have been a good candidate to push transformation on campus. They wanted the status quo to remain, so that’s why we complained, and we said that we at the Institutional Forum where we had the majority representation had the power to take back the process and to make sure we start from scratch again. So, after conversations with the people who were in charge with the interview process, they then decided to revisit the list, and then they put Martin Hall and Cheryl de la Rey and Max Price as the top three candidates.

Our role in the VC selection process was to ask the hard questions. We asked Cheryl de la Rey what she has done to transform academia, and to make sure that more women and more black people are represented as professors and as lecturers at the institutions as the academic head of the university. We held them accountable on the transformation agenda, and our role was to ask the hard questions and to probe where people failed to probe. That was basically our role in the VC selection processes.
Mqolomba notes that the student voice as expressed through the Institutional Forum went unheeded, and that Max Price was the successful candidate.

**Relationship with management**
Mqolomba describes the SRC’s relationship with the outgoing vice-chancellor, Professor Njabulo Ndebele, as both ‘complementary and contradictory’.

We fought when we had to fight, and on matters of mutual interest where we agreed, we stood in alliance together. On issues of fees we fought because they wanted to introduce fee increments every year. But then we were like no, don’t increase, don’t introduce fee increments every year, introduce them every three years just so that there can be some constancy so students starting in first year can plan for the fee increments to third year. We agreed on the need for debate and discussion on campus, and on making sure that students are actively engaged on issues that are facing South Africa. On that we were aligned.

She added that,

To be honest our vice-chancellor at that time was hands off; Ndebele was not a hands-on, actively engaged vice-chancellor, pursuing an agenda or a campaign on campus. He was an administrator. He was an intellectual and I respected the fact that he was intelligent. He wrote books and engaged in the public, but he wasn’t a hands-on governor on campus. That was my critique of him – that he didn’t push the transformation agenda hard enough. He was too gentle, he was kind, he was generous. But he wasn’t hands on, he wasn’t demanding or challenging or probing or provoking and that’s the kind of vice-chancellor we needed at the time. Someone who would provoke and challenge the status quo on campus, without fear or trepidation.

**Key challenges and projects**

**Outsourcing**
One of the issues Mqolomba’s SRC decided to confront was the issue of outsourcing of services which she believed had been introduced during the time of a previous vice-chancellor, Dr Mamphela Ramphele.

There was a dispensation and a legacy of outsourcing on the campus for a while. I think a 10-year period of outsourcing. And workers were experiencing struggles of being retrenched. Not earning enough. Not having enough job security. Not having income security. So, we wanted to challenge that legacy of outsourcing on campus. And to make sure that outsourced workers become
employees of the university. So that their children could also enjoy the benefits of their parents being employed by the institution. There was a strong alliance between students and workers at the time, so workers’ struggles were students’ struggles and students’ struggles were workers’ struggles. We wanted to make sure that we used our positions in the SRC to champion a campaign that said ‘no to outsourcing’. And we basically said that we wanted to make sure that these people are employed by us. And that they can enjoy broader benefits as enshrined by the contracts that are issued out by the university.

**Forums**

Another project was the introduction of a forum for debates on campus:

> We invited speakers like Helen Zille and [Richard] Dyantyi, who was the MEC of Housing at the time, to come about issues that were facing South Africa at large. So, we would put aside funding to make sure that we could actually have a forum for debate and discussion with political leaders of our time. So, they could come and speak to students about issues facing South Africa at large. And the main topic there was transformation.

Asked whether there was any conflict with management around the speakers invited, Mqolomba’s answer was that management allowed the SRC to run their own campaigns and programmes without any interference.

**Continuity**

A particular challenge that Mqolomba faced was related to being in the SRC for only one year – the year in which she was doing her honours degree. She notes that,

> The only challenge with being in the SRC for only one year is that there is no continuity. We wanted to say that an SRC term should be at least for a minimum of two years, so that you build institutional memory and institutional capability to represent students more effectively and efficiently at the various councils and at various forums where we were expected to represent students. We wanted a three-year term for the SRC – that was basically the discussion at that time …

> Some people actually recommended a sabbatical – there should be a two-year or three-year sabbatical for the president and the SG [secretary-general], because they are the ones who occupy the critical positions, so that they can take a gap from active study life and focus solely on SRC representation. I would have preferred a three-year term to run concurrently though, because I wouldn’t want to extend my years at university, I would want to complete my university studies.
Institutional autonomy vs responsiveness

On other challenges experienced by the SRC, Mqolomba singles out the matter of institutional autonomy, which she sees as a hindrance to the transformation project.

So, there is this thing called institutional autonomy that universities use not to heed to the directive of the government when it comes to transformation on campus. They use it as a resistance tool, and resisting changes that need to be introduced on campus, that come from government. So I would like to challenge that and say that institutional autonomy needs to be challenged and that the Constitution should allow the government to transform university life more robustly without fear or favour.

I trust the legacy of our predecessors and believe that if governments are moving on that legacy, then we can actually do a good job.

The thing is that knowledge generation and production is not ideologically neutral … it's informed by people's ideologies. It is formed by vested interests and personal interests. So, the question is, who is higher education serving currently? Is it just corporate, or is it South Africa at large, looking at communities, societies at large? Is higher education in South Africa serving the purposes of responding to the needs and the challenges of the communities or is it just responding to the labour market needs of corporates? Because knowledge generation is not done on neutral grounds.

I believe in curriculum reform, for instance. I believe that we should look at what is being produced on the African continent, by African scholars, and most importantly, I believe that the curriculum should respond to the needs and the challenges of the poor people in our communities, and not just the needs of big corporates who are funding institutions.

Lessons

We asked Mqolomba what she had learnt from her leadership journey in the SRC, and how it has shaped her in her further leadership roles.

My biggest lesson out of the SRC moment was the fact that it’s important to lead people, to capture the hearts and minds of the people that you are representing and the people that you are leading. It’s not enough to capture their minds, but you have to capture their hearts as well. That is something that I wish I would have learnt, and would have known about, when I was younger as the SRC president because I was mostly a competency-driven leader, wanting to lead on the basis of ideas because obviously this is a higher education institution, and it’s about ideas, and the arena of ideas is a
playground of students and university life at large. But now, I have learnt that you have to capture their hearts as well so that they remember how you made them feel. I wish I had been a heart leader, representing both the hearts and minds of my students.

I also learnt personally that as a woman in South Africa, the world is my oyster. If I could be an SRC president as a young woman, and leading men, then it means the world is my oyster. So, the world is opening up and the opportunities will avail themselves to make sure that I take my place in society and not just in the kitchen. It literally built my confidence in my leadership abilities as a woman, making sure that I believe that women can also lead successfully and lead a group of men without alienating any of them.

Reflecting on #FeesMustFall

As Mqolomba describes it, the SRC of 2007 at UCT was involved with a number of projects related to creating greater platforms for student voices to be heard on a range of transformation-related issues. Reflecting on the difference between that period and more recent SRCs involved in the #FeesMustFall movement of 2015 and 2016, Mqolomba has the following to say:

I think the difference between our SRC and the #FeesMustFall SRC, is that our SRC was more reformist, wanting to push for institutional reforms, as opposed to challenging the status quo and breaking the status quo at its foundation. So, this SRC is more destructionist and we were more reformist. Believing that we could actually use the structures in governance.

I think frustration at the student level would account for the difference, because students became frustrated that things were not changing through mere representation of students in different forums of the university. I think it’s because you still have the old guard, the old guard is pretty much still dominant at universities across the country, in particular the previously advantaged universities. The old guard is still in charge. It’s because for most people, becoming a lecturer and a professor is a lifetime career, so bringing about changes, mindset changes and changes in numbers, is a long-term struggle because people are looking at their careers in the long haul. For instance, at UCT they still don’t have women professors and lecturers, and black professors are represented in smaller numbers. So, the transformation agenda is progressing slowly; things are not changing fast enough. And that is because the old guard is still in charge of the universities. And they are the ones who would determine the curriculum and the agenda of the universities, they are the ones taking up the majority of positions in Senate and Council.
Mqolomba maintains that in her time there was resistance even to a reformist agenda, and she describes a certain professor who,

> When we were having transformation discussions on campus, he actually had his own discussions on why affirmative action and employment equity was wrong and why it should never be introduced in society. We faced him head-on. We wrote articles in the student newsletter and in the students’ news clip. I have forgotten the name of the newspaper, but it is a student newspaper on campus where we would write our opinions of these discussions of this professor and robustly debate with him and challenge his assertions on transformation and the need for transformation.

Resistance by individuals as cited in the instance above was experienced as part of a more systemic or generalised kind of stasis.

UCT was a majority white, and a majority male university at the time. I remember saying to a friend of mine, I feel like I’m the SRC president for black women, queers. Because those are the vulnerable groups on our campus currently. The challenges of the white male students would be to do with parking, but the challenges of black young women had to do with fees, like: I can’t afford to pay my university fees, I can’t afford to pay for residence, I’m not eating at night, I’m sleeping in the library, I have to solicit money through the sex trade. Those were the challenges of students at that time.

They experienced a different set of challenges. And I felt that my mandate that I was carrying had to do with representing the vulnerable students on campus. And not to just look at issues of parking and parties and all of those things.

Mqolomba’s approach to dealing with the white male students she talks about was to try to convince them of the importance of standing for the vulnerable members of society for the good of society as a whole. Was she successful in winning some of them over?

No, I tried to get them behind me by using Nelson Mandela as a tool to champion their interests and to align their interests with the vulnerable student in the campus. There was resistance to the transformation agenda because they thought they [white male South Africans] will not have a place at the campus any more. So, I said this is not what transformation is about, transformation is not about exclusion, it’s about inclusion, and making sure that the voices and the people that were previously included in the agenda will still be included. It is not about exclusion. We are not anti-white and we’re
Mqolomba’s perspective on the student protests at UCT in 2015/16 is informed by a tinge of regret and envy.

I’m so happy that they managed to get Rhodes’ statue removed, because that also was an issue that we were championing at the time, saying that the statue doesn’t represent the current situation. We brought it up in Council but we never mobilised students on it as a single campaign like this current generation did. So, we explained that the statue doesn’t represent some of the ideals that we want to represent as an institution, and it represents the power of the old guard. And it’s actually offensive to students who feel alienated by the statue that is currently on campus. So those were the arguments that we would raise at Council.

But the fact that there were faeces, there was someone who threw faeces at the statue, and that made … oh my God, I couldn’t believe that someone would actually symbolically protest against the statue. It then became a call for action for student leaders to campaign against the statue, so that the statue becomes fully removed from campus.

**National involvement and SAUS**

Another difference Mqolomba alludes to between the SRC of 2007 and those of 2015/16 was the level of involvement across universities and in national structures. She recalls that there was a national forum at the time, the South African Union of Students (SAUS), on which she sat along with ‘ANC Youth League, YCL, SASCO, DASO, AZANIA and all those pan-African organisations’, but she feels its effectiveness was limited because

Basically it was run by the national Department of Higher Education. They didn’t have autonomy to run their campaigns. They were instructed not to go against the minister in charge of higher education because otherwise their funding would be removed. Each time they wanted to bring their minister to account for not pushing a progressive transformation agenda, they were instructed not to by officials of the department who were running the programme because the funding came from the department – so the funding would be removed. They were still trying to make sure that there were monetary contributions by SRC members to SAUS to make sure that it is an independent organisation, but they never got it running in our year.
The other issue she notes with respect to the effectiveness of SAUS at the time was the difficulty of creating a united student voice.

The thing is SASCO is a powerful presence across the country. So, they were able to basically champion the agenda for SAUS, as the deploying agent for the organisation. So whatever SASCO said had to be done, was done by SAUS – they determined who led SAUS basically.

What happened was that, the Stellenbosch University representatives then approached SASCO and said that we will support SASCO’s agenda provided that there is at least one person in SAUS who is represented by our own institution. So, they negotiated for themselves to make sure that they enjoyed representation at SAUS level by forging a political alliance with SASCO.

**Impact of the student leadership experience**

**On professional career**

Mqolomba’s reflections on how her SRC experience continues to have an impact on her life, particularly in terms of her career, include the following:

Currently I am a director in government. I became a director at the age of 28, and I have been leading men ever since. And now it’s about capturing both the hearts and minds of my team members, and making sure that I do not alienate any one of them on the basis of a demographic difference. And making sure that I build confidence in them that I can lead them even though I am a woman. That there is no deficiency or weakness in me in the basis of my genitalia, but I can lead on the basis of my leadership competencies.

I have two master’s degrees and I am doing my PhD at Wits. So first, I’m an educated woman and also I have got experience in public service, I have got five years at senior level experience, so I bring that to bear to the work that I currently do here at the department.

Mqolomba’s career choices are strongly informed by her original motivations to join the SRC – the inclination to serve and to represent those who don’t necessarily have a voice. And that has manifested itself in her leadership journey. Her academic work is concentrated in the social sciences. Her first job after completing her studies was as a graduate recruit in the position of HR administrator with Johnson & Johnson, from whom she had been granted a scholarship to cover her third and fourth years of study. She left three months later, noting that:

I realised that corporate wasn’t for me. I couldn’t cope with it. I was like, I am not happy here. I don’t want to exist for the profit motive. I want to
exist to serve the people of South Africa. And I believe that service is done through the public sector. Then I went to the National Youth Commission, as an intern. I was there for about six to nine months. And then I became an assistant director for Research Policy and Planning at the Department of Labour, and that’s where my career started.

On the careers of others who were in the SRC with her, Mqolomba notes that some have gone on to further leadership roles in a variety of spheres. One is reported to be a Member of Parliament under DASO for the DA, and to hold a high office for the Western Cape premier; another is an attorney who serves at the Constitutional Court. Another is in full-time ministry with her church, which carries out philanthropic missions, while, in contrast, another has become a multimillionaire ‘tenderpreneur’. A further colleague she thinks became a communications speech writer for the then deputy president, Kgalema [Motlanthe] as well as the current deputy president, [David] Mabuza and for Cyril Ramaphosa when he was deputy president. She agrees that serving in the SRC had prepared her and her colleagues for leadership positions, albeit in different trajectories.

On approach to leadership
In terms of her current approach to leadership, Mqolomba says she is building on some of the lessons she learnt and the reflections she has had about her experience, particularly about communicating with a team and paying attention to their voices and needs.

I have monthly meetings with each staff member where I ask them, are you happy at work, are you enjoying job satisfaction, how should I change my leadership style to accommodate your leadership needs? So, I’ve got monthly meetings with my staff members individually, to make sure that I connect with them and ask them how they feel and where they are when it comes to issues of work in their work environment. I’m drawing from the lessons that I learnt at the SRC – winning hearts and minds and making sure that I build confidence in women leadership, that I represent women effectively by being an effective manager.

Regrets
In hindsight, what would Mqolomba have done differently in her time in student governance? Mqolomba’s earlier comments on being values-led and her belief in the power of argument resonate in her responses.

I wish I wasn’t a reformer but a disrupter, someone that disrupted the status quo and shook the world at its foundations. I wish I was that kind of leader.
who shook the world at its foundations and not just tried to reform and change things through the existing structures because sometimes it doesn’t work. So, I wish I was a disrupter and not just a reformer.

I don’t know how that would work in my current life, but I think I would challenge more without fear or trepidation; I would be more challenging. I do write, I write articles for the *Mail & Guardian* Thought Leader and The Thinker. Now I want to have the courage of my convictions and not fear the backlash that comes with holding a different opinion. That’s how I would challenge – through ideological engagement.