Reflections of South African Student Leaders: 1994 to 2017
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chapter 6

David Maimela

University of Pretoria, SRC member 2003, SASCO national president 2006–2008

Denyse Webbstock, David Maimela & Ntokozo Bhengu

Brief biography

David Maimela works at the Gauteng Department of Health as chief of staff in the Office of the MEC. He is trained in public policy with a keen research and specialisation interest in international relations, foreign policy and political economy. He holds a Master of Arts degree from the University of Johannesburg, and a BA(Hons) in political sciences from the University of Pretoria (UP). He was the president of SASCO from December 2006 to June 2008. He was awarded the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship in 2007 and, in 2010, he was chosen as one of the Mail & Guardian 200 Emerging Young Leaders in South Africa. David has previously also worked for the Gauteng Youth Commission and the Gauteng Office of the Premier in the Policy and Governance branch, and as a political economy researcher for the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflections (MISTRA).

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Denyse Webbstock and Ntokozo Bhengu on 31 July 2018.

Early influences

David Maimela's abiding interest in politics is reflected both in his early life choices and his academic interests, which include political systems, public policy, political economy and foreign policy.
Maimela’s story indicates that it was a natural progression for him to enter student politics after his early involvement as a student leader at school. He notes:

My involvement in the SRC was natural because of two things. I was involved with the Congress of South African Students [COSAS] at high school level. In my high school, I was also the chairman of the Representative Council of Learners [RCL] in terms of the South African Schools Act of 1996. You could have a sense that I was already actively involved in youth and student politics, and I was actively involved in community development projects and community politics. So, it became natural for me to enter the university and one of the first things I did when I entered the campus was to find out where is the office of SASCO. I wanted to join SASCO, and be active as a member there. So initially I served SASCO as an activist, and then immediately after that, as an executive member on campus.

Maimela’s political awakening was informed by early memories of two major events – in 1990, the release of Nelson Mandela, and in 1993, the assassination of Chris Hani. He remembers listening to the narration of Hani’s funeral by Noxolo Grootboom in isiXhosa, a language he really liked, and for him it was the start of the opening up of a new world, of thinking beyond his neighbourhood and province.

For Maimela, entry into student politics was experienced as a smooth transition from having been the provincial secretary of COSAS in Mpumalanga where he had been to school. But what had inspired Maimela at such an early age to become involved in representing others? In thinking about his response, Maimela highlights his passion for public speaking and a love of language as the first intrinsic factor.

He explains that he used to achieve good grades in languages – English, Afrikaans, isiSwati – so when occasions arose in which a student was needed to speak, such as at a funeral, he would be called upon by teachers and students to speak even though he was not formally a class representative at that stage.

So, all of that encouraged me to see that perhaps people appreciate the contribution I make in terms of making them imagine their realities differently.

Politics and school

The second factor he attributes to political decisions that affected him and his family directly. The first was a situation involving matric results that affected his brother, while the other involved a government decision to redeploy teachers. Elaborating on these two incidents, Maimela recounts the following:

There was a crisis of matric results that were adjusted unfairly, or rather dubiously, by the Provincial Department of Education in Mpumalanga at the
time. And my brother was affected by that because he was doing matric in 1998, and I was in grade 10. And coupled with that was the redeployment of teachers, which became an issue quite early on in the year, and then the adjustment of the matric marks wherein people were passed who were not supposed to pass, just because I guess the political leadership of the time felt embarrassed by the low performance. When that crisis arose, it affected our school so some of the students – including my brother – were affected by those results. We felt aggrieved.

They had to make sure that more students passed. So, they adjusted those marks [until they were] ridiculously high and in a manner that was inappropriate, as the investigation showed, and as a result most of the students were then affected in terms of their admission into university. Because some of the universities were like, ‘We can’t accept the matriculants of this year’s class of Mpumalanga matriculants. It’s quite shady for us to admit them.’ So, the problem was at multiple levels. Admission to university became a problem because those students were not regarded as legitimately progressed students.

And then also, just the sheer weight of the scandal itself – it was just not good for our school, for our province. And then, of course, individually students were affected in many ways – you know students who felt they did well, and then they feel that perhaps their marks were manipulated as well and so on. So, it just became a very bad situation. So that made the students restless.

In the event, Maimela’s brother did not get admitted to university. He points out the implications of the second incident for his own education and outlines the role it played in his leadership journey.

The redeployment of teachers was also an issue. We felt that they are taking the best of our teachers to be redeployed to schools that had a shortage of teachers. There was a programme that the [provincial] department instituted – I think it was a national programme actually – where certain schools were declared to have excess teachers and certain schools were declared to be having a shortage. I think we had to lose close to 10 teachers to be redeployed to less resourced schools. And some of them did leave, but some of them did not, because we insisted that these teachers can’t leave because they make the school.

Maimela felt very strongly that it did not make sense to weaken his school, which he describes as a normal high school in the township, and he took a leading role in finding ways to deal with the crisis it presented for the school.

That is where then I became to be known in the whole school. Because I took to the assembly, and I addressed students. It was just an impromptu act. I mean, the assembly was restless, for some reason we felt that we should take
the initiative and calm down the students in the first place. The teachers who were targeted to leave could not – the students didn’t want to accept their explanation. The principal wasn’t leaving, but was explaining – and the students just did not want to hear what the principal was saying. They started being restless. And one of the highly respected and admired teachers there, our history and English teacher, came forward and tried to calm the situation down. The students still did not want to listen to them.

And so we – I think at the time I must have been a class rep – we jumped to the podium and we calmed this situation down. We said, ‘Okay this affects us, guys. Can we first have a conversation amongst ourselves and agree on what should be the way forward?’ And the teachers took a step back and they watched. So, we, you know, it was a few of us – it was myself and my other comrades at the time – and that is how we then got recruited into [student politics].

This was because our school was just a fence away from the Ngwenya Teacher Training College, and the guys who were there got worried about our attitude. They heard about the fact that the learners at Thembeka High School were protesting against the redeployment of teachers. Those guys themselves were already in SASCO, and they were former graduates of COSAS, and so they came to the school and they had a conversation with us and then they said, ‘Guys, you have to understand one thing. That we are one country and we have particular priorities and particular challenges. You guys have got excess teachers, meaning that you have got more teachers than you need, and there are less fortunate schools that need teachers. You have got to understand and pledge solidarity with those schools that are less fortunate.’

And then it dawned on us, oh ja, this makes sense. In any case, these are brothers and sisters, they also need teachers. And then we said, ‘Okay fine, but we have got to negotiate which teachers go and which teachers stay.’

And then we entered into that conversation and then finally it was resolved and over a period of weeks it was agreed. And some of the teachers that we insisted shouldn’t go, stayed, and others left. We lost one good economics teacher in the process, but it was fair. It was quite okay, we understood that we were a township school – fairly resourced comparatively. The other schools were in the peri-urban and rural land and therefore needed more teachers. And we understood that, and they made us understand that.

It is from there that they insisted that we should actually revive the defunct branch of COSAS that was in the school. Then they said to us, ‘But you guys are already active and are dealing with the issues that a typical branch of COSAS should be dealing with, so we are willing to help you to re-establish the structures of COSAS.’

So that is how we were recruited and brought into COSAS and we joined and we participated and we started leading.
Mentors
Maimela’s early mentors, the SASCO members at the local teacher training college, took the young school representatives under their wing and trained them in many ways. One particular mentor, Joe Mnisi, who later died in 2004, stands out in his memory as someone who taught him about student politics and introduced him to his first copies of ‘dialectical materialism’ and Karl Marx’s writings. Another mentor whom he found really shaped his brand of politics – politics of principle and discipline – was the late Mthandazo ‘Gogo’ Ngobeni, who was a significant thinker and leader, and to whom Maimela believes many activists of his generation remain indebted for his generosity and intellect. Maimela recalls him as being very intelligent, well known and respected in the province of Mpumalanga and yet very humble and disciplined. These mentors took the young COSAS leaders along to the national congress of SASCO in Ongoye Zululand in 1999, and led them to see a world of political activity they otherwise would not have known.

In the year following (1999) when he was in grade 11, the stance Maimela had taken in the matric marks crisis and the redeployment of teachers led to him being voted into the position of chairperson of the RCL, even though he was not yet in matric. He remained active until the end of his school career, becoming also the secretary of the local branch of COSAS which serviced five schools, ensuring that members were inducted and trained, new branches were launched and that the organisation continued to run. His father was concerned about the effect the time devoted to his activism might have on his academic studies, but after much discussion, they agreed that Maimela could continue with his political work as long as he achieved academically as well. This he managed, achieving the promised matric exemption, and thanks to a particularly inspirational English teacher, a distinction in English as well. This particular teacher Maimela counts as one of his early role models.

He was one of the best teachers I ever had. In fact, he is my friend even today. The good thing about him was that he studied all over the place and he was very bright and committed to teaching for the longest time. He used different and unconventional methods of teaching. And he was a teacher that students respected and loved, but the line was never crossed in terms of respect and professionalism. So, the students liked that, that they could see in a teacher a friend who was approachable and yet firm and still could deliver quality results …

He is now in the Department of Higher Education. He is involved with the TVET colleges. The other good thing that he did which was quite unconventional, and I think he was doing it for the first time in the school, was that he progressed with his learners. The same teacher taught us English for five years. So, we knew his style. You know, he didn’t have to tell us to get into class – you know how classes are at school, if the teacher is late or …
with him, you would always find us in class. And he didn't have to shout at
us, or call us names. He had the power of discipline without having to enforce
discipline. Just his presence alone was quite enough for us to abide by the rules.

From this teacher, Maimela learnt about leadership that

You don’t always have to throw the rule book in order to get as much as you
can in terms of compliance from pupils. An example of leadership can be
more of a force to show people the way, or for people to regard you as a leader
and follow what you set yourselves as a group. So the rule book is one thing,
and must always be there, because I mean you need rules. But leadership by
example is a more powerful tool that is intangible but yet can produce results.

Family

The injustice around the matric marks scandal was a powerful early influence
on Maimela’s growing political consciousness in a family that was avowedly
apolitical. There was, however, another factor in his close family that influenced
his later choices.

None of my family members were political. I am the only guy who was
political in the family. I think I understand why, because my parents were
neither conformist nor co-operating with the system, and they were also not
actively involved. I have never seen my father wearing an ANC T-shirt or a
PAC T-shirt or an AZAPO T-shirt or whatever the case may be. And all
that my father and my mother used to insist on, is the importance of going
to school. You must go to school, education is important. If you don’t go to
school, you will basically not make it in life.

And so that kind of message, and that kind of discipline, was instilled
in all of us from the beginning. But you know at home, all three boys were
quite excellent at school. But one of them, my eldest brother, dropped out of
school partly because of, I think two things, or maybe three things. One, peer
pressure. Two, I think he started smoking weed – this is part of peer pressure,
social norms and trying to fit in and that kind of thing.

The third factor takes a while to relate. It’s the story of his eldest brother, a very
talented footballer, scouted by well-known coaches, and loved by the crowd.
Maimela continues:

He was the famous guy. He was successful in football and all of that, but then
he lacked discipline, and it’s one of the things that I kept on telling him even
on his hospital bed. I told him this sometimes, that the only reason why you
didn’t play in Europe or in one of the top leagues in the world, is not because
you are not talented, it's because you lack discipline. That is what I told [his sons]. This thing is not magic. It's not rocket science. You get disciplined, you master your craft and win. If you focus on both football and school you succeed in both. If you don't succeed in football then you've got school. But if you are going to depend on football only, it doesn't matter if you are a tennis player or any sport. But if you are going to depend on sport only, it's normally a short career, and it lasts for as long as you are still young and strong. But if you don't have a fall-back position then you will have a problem, to survive in life generally.

So, I say to them, ‘You've got to do what your father did not do. You have got to do two things. You have got to master both school and football, but at the same time you have got to master discipline in both so that you succeed.’ I can tell you now, there was nothing that stopped him.

They had a big fight, my brother and my father, about football. Because he would run away for the whole weekend, and go and play football. And my father would be upset. My father wanted all of us to be under his discipline throughout as children. It was expected, but the guys wanted him to play.

So, he would score in every second game, if not every game. But then discipline dealt with him, saw him lose a lot of things, including having to lose his life as well.

Maimela's brother passed away in 2009. He says:

Out of that experience, I was even more resolved that I would rather be the opposite of what he was, so rather he didn't influence me. His lifestyle and his achievements were quite amazing. We looked up to him. He was an inspiration in many ways, his achievements at school in the earlier grades, whether in athletics, in football, or in class he had honours. I mean he would be in the top five, the top three. We looked up to him in that regard, but he then began to drop the ball as he grew older and failed to be disciplined and all that. Some of us who were also now dabbling in politics at that early stage were now beginning to see the positives and the negatives of his lifestyle and achievements, and then began to say, ‘How do you take both and synthesise them and then produce a lesson out of it?’

So, the lesson out of it for me was, that here is a brilliant guy – academically and in terms of sport, in terms of his talents – but because he couldn't master discipline, he could not be the mainstay. So, for me that was a lesson and I said, no I am just going to be sticking with this discipline thing, because that is what I want. Because if you don't stick with the discipline, then you lose all of what this guy has lost. So that was my take-out of his life, so if you are saying the influence, that was the influence.
The lesson of discipline was something Maimela also learnt from his father and his particular upbringing. His father’s advice to focus on education, and to prioritise school uniforms over new sneakers or Christmas gifts, and not to succumb to peer pressure, was something he took to heart, and that has guided his life since.

Context of getting involved at UP
Disorientation and alienation
After matriculating well, Maimela enrolled at UP. This was a new world for him, coming from Mpumalanga to Pretoria, and facing a very different environment from the one he was used to. In his own words:

The first thing you get when you get to varsity – I was fortunate enough, quite privileged to go to a big university – so the first thing that intimidates you is the size of the place. This is bigger than my high school – this is big. I am immediately frustrated by the fact that I cannot walk through the entire university at once and know all of it. It is overwhelming to be in that space. So that is the first thing, the size is just too much to bear.

The second thing is that you are confronted by the question of sheer diversity, and this diversity ranges from geography – and this would be both foreign and domestic geography. Students would be coming from SADC, coming from Germany and elsewhere. And some students would be coming from the Eastern Cape, Cape Town and all of that. And you are confronted now by having this extremely urban, cosmopolitan environment that is a university, where everybody is there. People from the Middle East are there. I remember we studied with, and he was active in our SASCO ranks, the son of the ambassador of Palestine.

The demographics and the diversity ranges from geography, to the colour of your skin, to language, as well as to wealth. So, you find all these things together – race, class, sex. So, you are faced with all of that geography, language and all of that. So, all of that is combined in one space. And then there is the issue about the diversity being on the one hand a good to have and a nice to have – what a different world! What a nice thing to have! On the other hand, the difficulty about having to contend with the diversity, and how people have to coexist now. Here you are, at a formerly white Afrikaner institution having its own traditions, history and culture, and you have to adjust to that. Language becomes an issue, whether from a social or an academic point of view. There is a sense among students that Afrikaans is more privileged in the institution, more than English, or any other language for that matter. And this takes different forms and acute forms. There are all sorts of allegations – some proven and others not proven. I remember there were huge allegations.
from the medical faculty that the Afrikaans students in the medical faculty get more from their lecturers than when the same lecturers have to switch into the English class, or when they have to explain things in English. So that was a huge thing from a diversity point of view, from a race relations point of view, from a mere language policy point of view.

Also, I mean, the costs that attach to having a dual-medium university, you know, who pays for that? Those became the difficult and deeper conversations that we would have at SASCO with management and with the SRC and within the SRC and with other student formations. It would even be the right-wing formations, the Freedom Front student formation. At the time, we didn’t have DASO, we just had DA. So, we had that kind of thing. And when I came in, we also had young Afrikaners from far-right Afrikaans student organisations under the Afrikaanse Studentebond. It was called ASB. It has a long history in the university sector.

**University culture: opposing oppressive residence culture**

Maimela stood for the SRC under the banner of SASCO, and began to confront some of these issues through his student political activism. Two years before he entered hostel as a first-year student, there had been an investigation by the Human Rights Commission into alleged human rights violations at the UP university hostels at the insistence of the SASCO branch.

So I come in two years later, in 2001, and go into a hostel called Morula. It’s a men’s hostel. I go into Morula ... and it’s a totally different world. I mean, the place has got its own anthem, it’s got its own uniform, and it’s got its own practices, meetings, mass meetings, rules, culture, events – and the whole thing. I’m like no, this is too much. I go to this guy – I still remember it – he was the chairperson of the ‘tehuis kommittee’, you know? I mean the guy is tall, and I think in my first year I was smaller than I am now. The guy is tall. He is Victor Matfield tall. He is a big-build kind of a young man. He was the chairperson of the house committee and he was standing up there. And I look at him ... And he says, ‘Yes, this is what you have to do now. You have got to get the uniform.’ And I say to him, ‘Where must I get it?’ And he says, ‘You have got to go and buy it.’ I say, ‘I don’t have the money.’ It’s as simple as that. The first thing is that I don’t have the money. No, I mean it was R350, at the time it wasn’t cheap. ‘You know, I came with the train here. It cost less than what you are saying.’ He says, ‘Ja, but if you want to stay here and belong here, you have got to do what we do.’ And this guy, you know, he is going to create problems for me, and I am going to create problems for him.

And then my first rebellion was against the university hostel cultures and initiation traditions. That was my first issue. I campaigned for that until I
left the university. I was completely opposed to it. We succeeded in large measure because we were also backed up by the Human Rights Commission report, but over time they actually phased them out. Some of the practices they made more voluntary and all of that. Still unacceptable. They had to have a transition for some reason. This comes back to one of the big issues in higher education, which is transformation versus institutional autonomy.

Maimela describes what he considered to be abusive, backward and violent cultures at the university, which he found to be damaging to the psyche, the confidence and the self-esteem of the students, which the university seemed reluctant to abandon.

[Such practices included] that you have got to observe your senior and there is a way of doing it. So, when you go past a senior, you can’t just go past quietly or silently. You have to greet the senior and you stand up, ‘Goeie môre meneer’ and you hit your chest like this. It’s kind of militarised place. And when we were in the dining hall, you can’t sit on the chairs that are designated for seniors. I used to sit in them and the guys would say, ‘Hey, they are going to bully you and all of that,’ and I would say, ‘Let them come and bully me, I am sitting here. The amount that they paid is what I paid to be here.’ Then on an annual basis they would have – in September – they would have the annual alumni of the hostel event. So, they come together, they would have a braaivleis. So, they come – these would be guys who were in the hostel in the 80s and the 70s, and you can see now these are the ‘verkramptes’. They are wearing khaki shorts. They are in the agri-business or the agricultural sector. These are the farmers. They come with their 4x4 vans. They come in their shorts. And all of that.

It’s called the Morula annual alumni get-together, something like that. I was the rebel and it was uncomfortable to pass through a passage where the seniors and some of the house committee members were sitting. When I pass by, they would go dead silent and you can imagine how nerve-wracking that could be. Guys are old, have been at the university for so long – they are so big. I said, ‘Guys, I am not doing it [wearing uniforms, etc.]. This is not for us. I don’t belong here. I just belong here by coming to take a shower, eat and sleep and study. That’s all. Everything else – I don’t belong here. This culture is alienating me.’ They said, ‘Well, we don’t think we have an option.’ I said, ‘You guys do have an option, but you don’t want to exercise it.’

You are asking me what they do. I don’t know what else happened, but what I saw happening with my other hostel mates, was that you are requested to serve as waiters for these guys who were there in the 80s and so on. You don’t know them, they are not your friends, they are not your uncles, they don’t speak your language, you don’t understand what they say when they talk. So, they run out of rolls and water or whatever. So, you must take your meal
card, swipe it at the thing, and give them the rolls that they have run out of, because the boerewors is there but they need the rolls. I am like, guys, I mean this is wrong. So, all of these kinds of things did not make sense to me.

With my background, my political training and my experience, I simply said no. After a while the house father realised I am active in SASCO, so he just told the guys to stop harassing me. He said, ‘Guys, I don’t want trouble. If you touch this man, you are going to put me and the whole house committee into trouble and we will all be hauled before the management of the university.’ And then they just stopped talking to me at all. Everything just stopped and I mean, that lasted up to March maybe. That was it.

Becoming involved in the SRC

Maimela took over a SASCO seat on the SRC from someone who had resigned in early 2003, somewhat reluctantly, as he perceived the SRC at the time to be restrictive and narrow, exclusionary and right-wing.

The SRC was led by the Freedom Front for a good half of the time I was at the university. And the DA started leading just towards the end of my time there. The Freedom Front wasn’t taking up the issues that were affecting black students, so I felt it was a waste of time because these guys have got the majority numbers in the SRC. No matter how hard we can push for certain issues that affect poor black students, or foreign students, or whatever, these guys are not going to understand these issues. Like the safety of women and this kind of thing. So I then said, no, I am very reluctant to go to the SRC. That is why I served half a term, and another term, and that was it for me. We then developed [our own group], because we then had to be tactical at the University of Pretoria. We understood that we as SASCO, and black students, were a minority and it would take long before [we could get our issues on the agenda].

Race mattered when the SRC elections came at the university. It mattered – I mean we got more votes (certainly I think so, though it was a secret vote), but we got more votes from black students, because in the mass meetings and the rallies that we had, we would get more black students coming to our rallies than white students. We would get one or two white students who were just there to listen to find out what are these guys talking about. They would ask a question sometimes, but that was it. So, our sense was that, because black students were receptive to our message, we must build an alternative SRC outside the SRC. So the branch executive committee of SASCO had to carry all the activities, the issues, the burdens and the problems that are faced by mostly black and poor students from working-class backgrounds that needed a lot of student support for them to navigate through academic life.

So, these are students who would need NSFAS; they would need financial aid. These are students who would need accommodation. These are students
who need money to buy books, and so on. So, we then had to say, the SRC is not concerned about these things. The SRC is concerned about other things … We also got to appreciate that, as the years went by. But initially we couldn’t understand why the SRC would fight so hard for parking spaces for students. We were like, but guys, there are students dropping out of university because they don’t have money and you are complaining about parking! So, there was a rift and a division. And as I was saying, the diversity is now turned upside down. It becomes a source of frustration and a source of conflict. Your aspirations and interests and needs are not the same as ours.

You want to see where you must park your bicycle or your motorbike or your car. We don’t have that. That is not what is key in our agenda. Most of our students don’t have cars – except if these are kids from rich families, son of ministers, some of the diplomats or ministers coming from African countries or wherever the case might be. Those guys might also have cars, but the majority of our guys don’t have cars. They just need a place to sleep, to study, eat and go to class. That is all they want. And so those were the key issues – what we call bread and butter issues. But we succeeded, on a number of things – campaigning outside the SRC and running programmes there like I am mentioning now – the initiation things had to be revised and toned down. I think it’s just basically about 10 per cent remaining now.

**Representing black students’ issues outside the SRC**

Being in a minority group on a diverse SRC meant that SASCO had to use alternative strategies to highlight the issues of predominantly black and poor students. Maimela’s experience at UP is, in this respect, reminiscent of the kind of ‘racial parallelism in student governance’ that was prevalent in historically English-tuition universities from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s.43

Look, what we did – what was quite fascinating about us was that we did not just use our legitimacy, or the legitimacy of our cause, and the numbers because we could mobilise students. We could get students to gather in numbers, and listen to what we had to say. Explain to them that these are the key issues. In any case, the students come to us at the beginning of the year, in what we would call the Right-to-Learn Campaign, which we run every year on every campus. Which was what the fight was about between the #FeesMustFall guys and the SASCO comrades. That they will say but we have a Right to Learn Campaign every year. And you guys are saying

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#FeesMustFall. We have been doing this for years! To come back to the point … we succeeded because we understood that we didn’t need only numbers, mobilisation and the legitimacy of our cause. We also delved deep into the policy questions of the universities. So, we wrote papers and submissions to the university on initiation, on institutional culture, on university residence policy, how exclusionary and racist it was.

Maimela and his comrades submitted the documents they had prepared directly to management and executive committees, despite not having a formal SRC position on issues. As Maimela explains:

The universities do allow direct interaction with student organisations generally. It’s not the exclusive preserve of the SRC to interact with university leadership. We can audience directly with the VC. When I arrived, Van Zyl [the then VC] was about to leave, a brilliant chap, still brilliant even now. He was the guy who would say, ‘Welcome gentlemen. This is your meeting, so what is the issue?’ And then we would present our issues and then when he responds he gives you the sense that you know, if you are not prepared to engage with this guy, you are not going to get anything out of him. So, we had to dig deep down to actually have a conversation with him and the university management. And over a period of time, they developed a respect for us, because we could present a well-argued case of why particular things are wrong and what has got to be done. So, we presented our case, and we had to do so convincingly – even through submissions, not only through verbal representations – because the university always asked questions to us. The university is now asking that, in the place of this practice or this policy, what do you suggest should be the alternative? That is where the love for interrogating, for university, student affairs and higher education policy came from for me.

Maimela’s love of policy analysis permeated his life at that point, and continued into his future career. Later, as deputy president of SASCO at a national level, he became the head of the policy division. His student leadership experience convinced him of the power of argument and persuasion to reach certain goals.

I used to say, ‘Let’s sit down with the policy as it stands. Let’s interrogate it. Let’s see where the weaknesses of this policy are, so that we don’t just only present political arguments, but we also present well-reasoned and worked-out alternatives to the status quo. And in that sense, we will be able to give the management no room to manoeuvre because they will see that substantively we have got a political case to make.’ So that’s how it went. So that’s how we won our issues. By directly speaking to management, but also making sure we are ready in terms of the substance of these issues.
While SASCO was not in the majority in the SRC, Maimela notes that university management was concerned that only white representatives would be sent to the formal university structures, so they insisted on demographic representivity in the structures. In his view, university management seemed to be more ‘liberal’ than the university student body at the time. What it did imply, however, was that, as Maimela recalls, unlike on other campuses, there could not be a united front of students in the structures, particularly where there were two representatives, for example one from SASCO and one from the Freedom Front, representing different worlds. Despite being difficult to claim a common mandate, Maimela found the situation to be an incisive learning experience, where arguments had to be presented clearly, where new strategies and tactics had to be devised to cope in an unusual, narrow and conservative territory, which was quite unlike the situation on a campus such as Turfloop, for example. In retrospect, for Maimela this was a blessing in disguise in helping to harness his creativity and to develop his political skills.

**Strategies and tactics**

In reflecting on the events of 2015/16, Maimela notes the importance not only of winning arguments in the boardroom, so to speak, but in building groundsweil support to lend legitimacy to one’s cause. In that sense, the protest strategy was something that was common both then and now. He recounts how he led a march to the minister’s office on the Reitz matter, and organised a sit-in on the fourth floor of the administrative building of UP. He relates the incident as follows:

> We caught them off-guard. Once we gathered close to 50 to 80 students, in the foyer there of the university management quarters. We then said to one of the PAs, ‘We are here for a meeting with the vice-chancellor.’ They said, ‘No, but not all of you!’ I said, ‘No, all of us!’ You should have seen the ladies there. Most of the PAs are white female employees, and they were so shocked to see so many students in the foyer and they got so scared. They thought something was going to happen to them, and we said, ‘No, we are not here to fight. We are here to have a conversation, we don’t have weapons, we are just here.’ And if I’m not mistaken, on that day, we had comrades Abner Mosaase, Obed Mathivha and Mlimandlela Ndamase who are today senior in the movement.

> And the head of security came running, I have never seen him sweat like that. He was wet, completely wet. So, we would organise those kinds of things, many of those. The biggest protest marches that we had, one of the biggest,

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44 The main campus of the present-day University of Limpopo.
45 See fn 49.
I think it was 2004, was against the downgrade of the Mamelodi campus of the university. That was after the incorporation, because we protested and fought around the mergers for quite a while. I mean it started off with the Size and Shape report, but our position was that there shouldn’t be any teaching and learning sites that should close down because our interpretation was that it means that you are closing down on access. If you have 2 000 students in Soweto or in Mamelodi on campuses you are shutting down, it means that 2 000 students won’t have access. So, we made a massive march to the university. We got to a point where it got so massive that those of us who were in front leading the march couldn’t hear the song that was at the back and vice versa. It was confusing because it was so big.

Before Maimela was even in top leadership in SASCO at a national level, he was involved in their debates on the macro issue of reshaping the higher education landscape as a whole through mergers and incorporations. SASCO had argued that some of the proposed mergers, such as the merger of MEDUNSA and Turfloop to become the University of Limpopo, didn’t make sense. They were also opposed to a few others, as well as the potential shutting down of the Vista campuses, and they considered it a victory when, in the event, the University of the Free State and the University of Johannesburg incorporated and developed the Vista sites. With hindsight, given that the University of Limpopo has since been unbundled to form both Limpopo and Sefako Makgatho universities, and that the Soweto campus of the University of Johannesburg appears to be thriving, Maimela feels that their arguments, ignored by some at the time, have since been vindicated.

**Key challenges and achievements**

**Registration fees**

Maimela describes some of the highlights of his time as a student leader. One of the main issues at the time was whether the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) would cover students’ upfront registration payment as poor students were finding it difficult to find the initial registration fee that was required before financial aid from NSFAS was received. That it did eventually do so, after

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46 The CHE report, *Towards a New Higher Education Landscape*, 2000, that contributed to discussions on university mergers.  
47 The Medical University of South Africa was a historically black health sciences university established in Ga-Rankuwa in Gauteng province. After an unsuccessful merger with the University of the North (or Turfloop) to become the University of Limpopo in 2005, it was unmerged and became an independent university again in 2014 under the name Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University.  
48 Vista University was a historically black university with campuses in most of the large urban black townships across South Africa. In 2003, the university was closed, its campuses were incorporated into universities and its distance education arm merged with the University of South Africa.
interactions with the minister of education at the time, Dr Naledi Pandor, and the board of NSFAS, he counts as one of the main victories achieved in his time, which he experienced as very exciting. He recollects how NSFAS grew massively from its predecessor, the Tertiary Education Fund for South Africa (TEFSA), especially in terms of the amount of money that it disperses, and laments that it is often forgotten what strides the scheme has actually made since those times.

**Racism**

A second incident that looms large in his memory was the 2008 racism incident at the University of the Free State, which became known as the Reitz incident.\(^49\) He was president of SASCO national at the time. As he recalls:

> That incident became the highest representation of the frustrations about institutional culture and racism in particular. Historically white institutions continued to be racist in their culture, exclusionary at various levels, full of patriarchy, [conservative with respect to] progression of academics, progression of blacks, this that and the other. All sorts of things. And for us then, we could make a stronger case with that. We were saying, but the Reitz incident is just a representation of one of the many incidents going on that are humiliating to us. So, we said, ‘Guys, this is not an isolated thing, it is just the tip of the iceberg.’ And students at UFS and elsewhere come out saying, ‘Indeed, this is what is going on.’

Maimela narrates how SASCO pushed for something to be done about this, which contributed to the establishment in March 2008 by the then minister of education of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (known as the Soudien Commission). He tells the story of how in 2005 when he was deputy president of SASCO, they had introduced awards for the ‘most untransformed universities in the country’, indicating a long-standing concern with some universities’ lack of transformation.

He argues that:

> Some universities use institutional autonomy to defend the position [their lack of transformation]. So, they were saying, ‘But we have got institutional

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49 The Reitz incident refers to a racist video that was produced by four white students for a ‘cultural evening’ in the Reitz student residence of the University of the Free State in 2008. For details see: J.C. van der Merwe & D. van Reenen (2016). *Transformation and Legitimation in Post-Apartheid Universities: Reading Discourses from ‘Reitz’*. Bloemfontein: Sun Press. The Reitz incident was taken as symptomatic of ongoing racial (and other) discrimination in (mainly historically white) universities and led to the establishment of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions in 2008.
autonomy. We determine our policies, practices, norms, values and all of that.’ That is well and fine. Universities must have a certain level of autonomy, but what about the White Paper 3’s articulation of the proper understanding and genesis of autonomy in a democratic South Africa? What should be the model university for a democratic South Africa? When you say autonomy, we have always married it with public accountability. That you can’t then say that you have autonomy to go against what is national consensus on how we should transform our society to make it more inclusive, make it more inclusive in terms of race, gender, class and so on. You can’t then use institutional autonomy to shield yourself from the necessary changes that must happen institutionally. It is wrong, it’s absolutely wrong, because then it means that you are undermining progressive national policy, but you are also undermining the very same policy that gives you institutional autonomy. Public accountability means that you have got to account for the support, the resources, the whatever, the regulation, whatever the government offers – the incentives, and all of that. So, we can’t give you R3 billion and you tell us that you still can’t produce black professors, black PhD students and still have white hostels …

Free higher education

For Maimela, in that context, the Soudien Commission was a major victory for the sector. Another major victory he counts as the inclusion of the paragraph on progressively free higher education that was adopted in the resolution of the ANC at the Polokwane Conference of 2007.

The free education paragraph, rather the higher education resolution in that conference – now I can say it 10 years later – was literally crafted by me. Literally. I can still remember how that particular line went – there were other lines that were there under the resolutions, it was a small paragraph – but it said that the ANC-led government shall progressively introduce free education up to the first degree at university level. That’s what it says. And the reason why it was couched like that was because we understood that, in order to do this successfully and without disruption and without the pitfalls of failure, you have got to progressively introduce this thing over a period of time.

NSFAS also increased over time the bursary component, so that is part of the progression. Now it covers registration fees. That is part of the progression, right. Now it says we can exempt students [from households with a higher threshold income] – that is part of the progression. Then almost 10 years later

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the minister has not so much acted on it except with that committee that was led by Habib and others and so on. But, that for us was a big thing, it was a major victory. So, we have managed to convince the ANC to adopt this resolution and this is quite great, its huge, and then they don’t implement, and then the #FeesMustFall comes and hits them like they don’t know. And then [they] say, ‘But this is our resolution anyway …’

**Reflecting on #FeesMustFall and recent student movements**

**Decoloniality**

In reflecting on the differences between student politics of his time and the 2015/16 student protest movement, Maimela points to the following:

What for me is a pitfall of the decolonial movement is that their narrative seems to be saying that decolonisation must necessarily fix each and every issue in the sector. We will always believe in an education system that is pan-African in outlook, that responds to the concrete conditions of Africa, making sure that our knowledge production, our research and development, the skills that we produce for the private sector and the public sector, should be able to extricate the continent from all sorts of backwardness, be it in the knowledge gap, be it in the technology gap, the infrastructure gap, be it in the health and welfare gap and so on. So, our view has always been that we should do that. But from what I have been hearing – I have attended a few of the seminars and the debates – the guys seem to think that decolonial thought and a decolonial set of ideas should be the one major concept that you throw around and then all the problems are solved. And my view is that if you do that, then you are trying to rewrite history and you are doing it because every kind of body of thought or knowledge comes in to patch a particular gap, or fill a particular weakness. And the decolonial movement and decolonial thought has its place and its role to the extent that it helps us to progress. But in other elements of the debate about changing the higher education sector, you need other perspectives that are equally legitimate, equally strong and equally useful to the debate about how to take education from this point.

I mean, for instance, I think that you need to appreciate the class perspective on the lack of transformation in the sector. That at an institutional level, why do you continue to have the historically black universities as cousins and brothers or younger brothers and sisters to the historically white universities? Because let’s be honest, universities are institutions of elite production and elite values production, creating that hierarchy in society. I mean they are instruments of hierarchy to a large extent inasmuch as they are also instruments of levelling the playing field.
So, to the extent that they are institutions of levelling the playing field, they have got to take into account the class basis of our conflict in South Africa. If the government or the state continues to see nothing wrong with the funding model, then the University of Venda and University of Zululand will continue to be non-research institutions and will not go up to the level of being a so-called world-class university – they will not go to the extent of being a reputable university, a university to go to. It’s just going to remain the same, so it’s going to be sub-standard in terms of perception and in reality. Sub-standard education, sub-standard teaching, sub-standard research, sub-standard facilities and all of that. And welcoming and creating entry and access only for students who are from a sub-standard schooling system, in the rural areas, in the villages and so on.

Because the barriers to entry are lower there, and the barriers to entry are higher on the other side. So, if you have to equalise the system – transform the system to make all the universities competitive on quality – they must all compete on quality. The University of Zululand must not get the poorest of the poor students on the basis that the barriers of entry are low. They must compete on the basis of their quality offering. All these universities. And it should be possible that a student feels that, in order for me to do an agricultural degree or an agricultural programme, the university that is strong on agriculture is the University of Venda. I go there – no matter where I come from, and no matter who I am. So, I am saying that the class/economic kind of consideration in the debate is just as important as the decolonial one. So, it creates a situation where even universities like the University of Pretoria, when they market themselves, they would largely only go to the Girls High, the Boys High and the so-called best performing schools and the top quintile schools. Why? Because for them, the more students progress, because of the funding model, the better for their income, the better for their subsidy and all that. I don’t know what’s the latest now. You have got to have good participation rates, and you have got to have good success rates, in order to attract more funding, as much as you would have A-rated scientists and researchers in order to get the research funding component, right? So those kinds of things. So, it perpetuates class divide, closes out students who are from poor backgrounds, don’t have access to cutting-edge, top of the range kind of facilities, and that kind of thing.

From where I stand, those for me remain the key issues. I remember now there was a debate at the second higher education transformation conference, where there was appreciation from some of the professors there – some of them from white universities – who were so *gatvol* [fed up] and so tired of the slow-paced nature of the change at university level or in the higher education sector as a whole, that they were saying, ‘Look guys, we tried the three-year rolling plans, which the higher education department can use as a so-called
steering mechanism to steer the universities to change.’ I remember Prof. Chris de Beer for instance, who was one of the key proponents, who said, ‘I have been in the higher education sector for long. We have tried to say these universities will change by themselves. Give them the autonomy and all that.’ And there was an idea, I don’t know if it passed through, that we are now beginning to give more powers to the minister to intervene in the instances where universities really fail to change. And the minister can use some mechanism to force the university to change and adopt certain things. And we said that this can be a bit dangerous because you really don’t want to encroach a lot on autonomy, but where the frustration has now built up so much that people say, look this thing is not moving … We have tried this and the other. This thing is not moving. You have used this incentive, that incentive, three-year rolling plans, you use reporting mechanisms, whatever the case may be, but universities are just refusing to change. So, what do you do then? Then the politicians are saying, then we must revert back to our legislative power and say, what can we do about it. But then you are reverting back to the apartheid model of how universities were governed and so on.

The 2015/16 protests
Maimela reflects on the emergence of the 2015/16 student protests, regarding them as an almost inevitable moment in a long cycle of student movements that manifest in different ways. While social media, or new media as he prefers to name it, to avoid it sounding frivolous, played a large role in assisting with the swift organisation of protest action, he muses as follows:

If you look at the history of higher education instability, or rather contestation, at the ups and downs of the higher education sector in terms of stability, every few years it shows some form or another of upheaval or instability that reaches a boiling point. So, the emergence of the #FeesMustFall movement is not an outlier and it is not a new phenomenon but rather a continuation of that kind of a thing. As an example, it must have been ’95 when there was a total national shutdown of universities. Madiba called in the National Executive Committee of SASCO, and Madiba said – among other things – that your demands are basically legitimate, and we hear them, and we are going to deal with them. Agreed. And then the SASCO leadership said, ‘Agreed.’ And then the second thing that he said was that you will also call off the protest. You know students have to go back to class. There was no agreement there, because Madiba walked out of the meeting, faced the journalists, and announced that SASCO has agreed with me, and the national shutdown is called off and students are going back to class. And then the SASCO leadership was shocked, but Madiba was Madiba, so you cannot say no now … [laughs].
He relates a story about another crisis period in higher education around NSFAS funding issues in the merger period, and tells of a time when he spent the night in a cell for running the SASCO Right-to-Learn Campaign, and in that light he sees the #FeesMustFall movement as being part of a continuing pattern, albeit with its own issues and tempo.

On the #FeesMustFall movement, Maimela’s opinion is that:

It adds value. It takes the momentum forward. It has achieved great strides on the trail of issues that were always on the pipeline and were sort of not taken too seriously – and that people probably didn’t believe until there was a national shutdown. The people didn’t believe that the sector is in such a crisis. And I think it succeeded to really drive that point home to a point where for weeks and weeks Cabinet was preoccupied with this, and me and [the interviewer] were in a task team and we tried to work out something.

The sector is in crisis – not only crisis, crises. The problem of the ageing professoriate is one of them, access as you know has always been an issue, and now also the issue of institutional culture has come to a peak – suicides and rapes and all those kinds of things. Sometimes universities become a microcosm of society. What society is troubled with, is also what universities are troubled with – not to say that I associate with or condone the violence and the abuses that happen there, but I am saying if generally our society is quite an exclusive, abusive, violent society, then the likelihood is that our schools and our universities will take that shape as well.

**Impact of the student leadership experience**

**On personal life**

Asked what he takes from his activism and his student leadership roles into his present life, Maimela’s response is considered and comprehensive.

I think a combination of concrete experiences of being the outsider would always have propelled me in one way or another into some form of struggle. Because the nature of the underdog, if I can put it that way, when you feel that you are living under certain conditions or you are faced with certain conditions, and you can live better, you tend to fight back. It’s a natural instinct. You fight back.

But I always had the determination, the consciousness that was built. So, it is a combination of both: your material, lived conditions and the consciousness that was built. So, it’s not mind over matter, or vice versa. It is both. For me it is both the values of striving for a fair and just and inclusive society, free from all sorts of oppression and exploitation. Those values and that consciousness
you carry forever with you. Wherever you see injustices happening, you must always fight them. You are just the activists for life, therefore I am just committed to it.

And I take away from my experience in the student movement firstly the love for ideas – I think that’s the first thing. The love for ideas. I think if you want to be a person of substance and want to contribute, you have got to associate yourself with a search for ideas, debating ideas, reading ideas, comparing ideas and so on. I take that out of it, and that for me is very key. Because you shall be known by your character, and the character you build out of what you stand for, and if you don’t stand for anything then you are dangerous, not only to society but you are dangerous to yourself as well. Because you stand for nothing. So, the issue of ideas becomes very key.

Then the second thing is excellence. In whatever you do, you want to succeed, and the more you go through experiences of being given tasks – some of which I often think I don’t deserve, but you get given those tasks, and some I actually see as a burden – you end up finding yourself there and you swim and you go along and all of that, and you learn and then you realise that actually I am not only paddling, I am swimming very well here. To your own surprise.

On career

To the question of whether his student leadership experience influenced his career choices, his answer is in the affirmative.

If it’s not academia, its policy-making for me, because I also love the freedom associated with academics and research. I stayed in a research organisation, MISTRA, for seven years. I helped as a founding member of that and the other founding member was Tshilidzi Ratshitanga, who was also the former secretary-general of COSAS and SASCO. So, it has always been for me the passion for ideas, for debate, for policy-making, for intellectual work generally.

Some of this interest manifests itself in involvement in a project aimed at documenting the history of the student movement, but it is the values he learnt that are most abiding.

Overall impact

The other thing that it has taught me, the student movement, is that you have to take responsibility for the task given and accept it with all that it comes with. So, there will be the painful moments and there will be the joyful moments, and you have to take it all, so in that way you don’t become a Quitter. That it is tough is a simple thing which now became like a staple food for me, a kind of lifestyle. Whenever you are requested for an interview at five o’clock
in the morning, you must just wake up – you give up certain comforts. There are privileges and niceties and pleasantries and comforts that you enjoy by being a leader. Some of which you don’t ask for, but which you just get given because people recognise and respect you, but at the same time there is a hard side. Where because you are successful at what you do, you can just be accused of anything, and it is your duty then, using your character and your values system, to clarify to whoever that needs to be clarified. To say, no, on a factual basis, this is what is happening.

So that is helping me now at management level in decision-making. I mean, I work for a regulator now, a huge, huge regulator. We are regulating markets. And you are taught that discipline of appreciating the pressures that come with higher responsibility and bigger responsibility. To be able to manage about, at the time it was 26 universities and – I don’t know how many campuses – and be the spokesperson in the country and outside the country for the thousands of students that were card-carrying members, supporters, voters of SASCO, was quite a privilege and an honour. It’s an experience that you never want to forget.