Reflections of South African Student Leaders: 1994 to 2017

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chapter 7

Xolani Zuma
University of Zululand,
SRC member 2005/06, SRC president 2006/07

Denyse Webbstock, Xolani Zuma & Ntokozo Bhengu

Brief biography

Xolani Zuma studied at the University of Zululand (UZ) from 2002 to 2007. He obtained his LLB degree in 2006, and was admitted as an attorney in 2010. He currently runs his own law practice, Zuma and Partners, in Durban.

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Denyse Webbstock and Ntokozo Bhengu on 6 September 2018.

Coming to university

Xolani Zuma grew up in different parts of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) – his mother was from the north of the province and his father from Newcastle. He matriculated in 2000 from Thanduyise High School in Ngwelezane, which is just outside Richards Bay, and after a gap year (basically as a result of financial constraints), he began his studies at UZ. As part of his background, Zuma describes the lack of opportunities in a rural community, both in Swaziland and later in northern KZN where he grew up.

In general, there was poverty there. I think that what you could experience on a daily basis was to wake up, go to school, and then you go and herd cattle, and then you go and play soccer. But you are not exposed to, you know, the things
that you would find in an urban area. So, like your IT, technology and all of those things were not there.

In 1997, Zuma went to live with his mother in eSikhawini outside Richards Bay. In his view, the ‘township background was even worse than the rural one’. As he says:

There you are exposed to violence, you know. You are exposed to serious crimes. And almost everyone within your generation is either committing crimes or they are in prison. And very few people succeed. If you go there now, the people that we grew up with are either sitting at home doing drugs or drinking. Some, obviously, are successful, but you know, most of them don’t make it because of the material conditions. That also motivated me to say, I think we can change things around here.

Getting to university at all was to prove a trial of finding the requisite funding through part-time work. Zuma relates the story of gaining access to university as follows:

So, what happened was that, I had about R1 000. And registration at the time for off-campus students was R2 700, and for students who are residing on-campus it was about R3 800 or so. And then there was a friend of mine who was actually already at the university. And he said, ‘Look, maybe you can come and negotiate. There is an SRC there, so you can come to varsity with R1 000 and see if you can convince them that you have to be registered.’

So, I spoke to the SRC at the time, which was led by a lady who is now an advocate. She was the president of the SRC, and the SRC at the time was led by independents who had broken away from SASCO. I said, I have R1 000 and I want to register. And they said, ‘Unfortunately, you can’t register. We only negotiate for first-year students. You must have the full registration. We don’t negotiate for second year upwards.’

The SRC then referred him to the financial aid office in the administration building, but Zuma found his way to the office of the acting vice-chancellor (VC), whom he thinks was Professor Hugh Afrika at the time. Zuma explained that he wanted to register, but did not have the registration fee, and when he was referred once again to the financial aid office, he proceeded to outline three options to the acting VC.

The first option is for you to register me, because I want to be a lawyer, and then I become a student, and then I contribute to society. The second option I have, which I do not want to do, is to go back to my township, and join the many other young people like me, who I actually grew up with, who are
now criminals. Some of them are in prison. And then you might even be so unfortunate that when I commit these crimes, you might even be a victim. You know, when I start hijacking and doing all these funny things. And then, I remember, he called his secretary, and said, ‘Look, tell Finance to sort out this guy.’ And I went to Finance, and then they actually registered me. And that is how I became a student.

Once registered, Zuma was able to cover his tuition fees through NSFAS and through the SRC, which took care of his debt in his second year.

**Context of getting involved in the SRC**

Zuma served two terms in the SRC of UZ: first as an ordinary member in 2005/06, and then in 2006/07 as president. Zuma’s decision to become involved in student politics and to become a student leader was informed largely by his circumstances, and a particular incident which fortified his resolve to participate in bringing about better conditions for students.

Most of the decisions that I took, as a student, now and as an activist, were informed by the material conditions which I found on the ground. My first experience was not the nicest one when I arrived, to literally be told by a person who should actually be negotiating on my behalf, to say, look, we don’t deal with first-year students. And then, the question that I asked myself was, ‘Are these first-year students not going to become senior students and vote for the very same student activist?’ And for me, it didn’t make sense. Then I looked at a number of people who may have been coming from the same background that I had. And I said to myself, maybe justice could be served if I also join, and then try the obvious thing, start from the political side of things. It started at a basic level.

The impulse to improve the experiences of students was born of Zuma’s need to achieve justice and ‘prove a point’, as he puts it, that no matter what your circumstances are, you can still become something better. Zuma didn’t know his father until he was 17, but grew up in Swaziland with the sister of his aunt, whom he viewed as a grandmother. He describes her as ‘a beacon of hope’ who had ‘all the elements of a person that wanted justice’, who raised him with love, and developed in him a sense that it was important to fight for a good cause. Zuma saw his potential contribution lying in education.

**From class representative to faculty council**

Zuma’s journey into student political leadership took a slightly unusual route, as it began as an informal class representative in 2002, dealing with issues of teaching
and learning, and a lecturer who was apparently teaching the wrong subject—
civil procedure rather than criminal procedure. After some demonstrations, the
lecturer was subsequently fired.

Immediately after that situation, we then decided to have [elected] class reps
now. People that are going to represent us, to discuss whatever our needs as
students are. The Faculty Council of Law at the time would conduct the
elections for class reps. I was then elected to lead the first-year students. And
around September there were elections for the faculty council—the council
that represents the entire student population within the Faculty of Law. And
then I was elected to serve in that committee—the faculty council—which
obviously sits in the Faculty Board and all of those committees within the
department. Now you are looking at the broader issues of students within the
Faculty of Law.

That is when I was recruited and I joined SASCO. The joining was just
a peripheral issue. How I then got to be poached, when we were going for
SRC elections, is that there were guys who were actually within the Faculty
Council of Law—we were mainly men in our university by the way—people
were leading in the SRC, almost 70 per cent were law students, interestingly
… Then they said, look, you need to be active in the structures of SASCO.

Motivation to join the SRC

Zuma's entry into the political structures was motivated by his concern around
teaching and learning issues.

For me, that was the most important issue, that the reason why we are here is
that we need to excel academically. And the quality of education must be such
that when we leave the university, we must be able to use it when we are out
there. Because it is no use to have a certificate but you can't apply your mind, or
you can't apply what you have been actually taught at varsity. Even when I am
now invited to talk to students, I have been battling again about the same issues.
The quality of students that we are producing sometimes … I employ candidate
attorneys, and I am so worried that the quality of our students is not [what it
should be]. I think that there is more that we need to do. In terms of how they
apply themselves. In terms of how they apply even the law that they have been
taught. It may very well be challenges from basic education as well.

That is where my passion really was. What do you do after having obtained
the degree, post the university life? But, obviously, the issue of financial
exclusions as well was one of the things that was a driver. Because remember,
I didn't have money to go to varsity, so for me, I knew that I am not the only
child who did not have parents who could actually afford, or in fact, were
willing, to pay for these fees. So those were in the main the drivers. Obviously
the issues of residences, the issue of safety becomes part of the package when you fight for the right of students.

Partisan politics

External influences

The political context of the time in KwaZulu-Natal province, of divisions between the ANC and the IFP, was mirrored on the University of Zululand campus.

The reality of the matter is that UZ is a highly politicised institution. Both from the student side, even to management. And the only way you could be able to transform or do whatever that you want to do in terms of the advancement of the interests of students, is through the set structures. Obviously, if you want to go into the SRC, you have to go via your political formations. But because of the historical challenge in the university between the ANC and the IFP from the 1980s, when the IFP stormed the university and killed a lot of people, when you get into the indoctrination of politics, even if you agree about what we want to achieve as students, as long as it comes from the IFP, I am not going to agree with it. Particularly because of the political violence that had engulfed the province.

Zuma paints a picture of a university that at the time was highly politicised right to the level of Council. Asked to explain what that means, he paints a picture of subtle influence being exerted at all levels.

If you have a VC, for instance, that would be inclined to listen to a particular grouping, they then make friends with those people that they believe are going to defend them. If you have a premier of the province being from that particular group, then it becomes inevitable that the VC would think, ‘Maybe this guy, through the ministerial appointees, may be able to influence decisions of who goes to Council, and then my position is secure.’

And as students, you then find yourself in that sort of buffer situation, where you have this Council, you know, where it is highly politicised. I mean, obviously, if you look at the set-up of councils, even today, I mean you have your ministerial appointees, and so on. But whatever is there, I don’t believe that you have actually focused on the academic aspect of such institutions.

At the level of Senate, it was not necessarily political party allegiance that dominated, in Zuma’s view.

You may very well find your own academics and management having their own factions within the university. And those factions will then be used to
also buy the support of student leaders so that they get whatever they want to achieve. I saw that happening a lot of times, to the extent that even when we were in the SRC, you would find that a VC would have a grouping within your political formation that is not in the SRC, but that she or he will listen to. I had an issue with the dean of students at the time, who would always listen to a colleague of ours, who was not in the SRC. You know, you call a strike, and then you get a call from this gentleman, and he says, ‘Call off that strike, I have spoken to the dean of students and he says he is going to give you what you want.’ And I say, ‘But how does he tell you that instead of talking to the SRC?’ So you know, you always had those issues. And I think it’s something that we need to look into going forward as a country in terms of having institutions of higher education being purely reservoirs of knowledge, as opposed to them being used as a space for political battles. Unfortunately, when you do that, even for the students that come out of institutions, it becomes very difficult.

As a former activist, I always find it difficult to employ someone who has not been politically rehabilitated to come and work for my business. Because I am not expecting somebody to come and give me politics in my business. I am expecting someone to come and deliver service to my clients. So, universities can’t be wards … or municipalities.

How does Zuma understand the purpose of different groups seeking influence?

Well, from my own observations, power goes with positions so that you secure your future, in terms of employment. But, again, there were a lot of things that were going on in terms of corruption within our institutions, particularly at UZ at the time. You will know that we have always been fighting around the issue of selling degrees at the university. You can’t have academics selling qualifications because then it eats away the credibility of the university. That power is for people to sustain themselves within the institution. And remember, I’m told they have changed it now, during our time, as president of the SRC and the secretary-general, you would sit in the tender committee of the university. That is where you will see the issue of power at play, where people decide which company is going to be appointed for security on campus. At the UZ, for instance, there is catering, and someone will say, I need someone to distribute meat for this university for the next five years. I need someone for cleaning. And all those sorts of things. And those are some of the sins of incumbents, which in most cases have actually destroyed student leaders. It happened to me at some point, when I was actually lobbied by members of management. I wanted to leave when I was finishing my term of office but I was approached by a gentleman who said to me, ‘Look, we want to retain you in the university. We know you are doing your master’s. And you might not get it at the pace at which you are going. But if you do the thing
that we want you to do as management, we are going to pay you monthly, R15 000, to make sure that there is stability on campus.’ And I said, ‘I am not going to do it, and if you want me to do that, come and tell the students.’ And I did tell the students that I have just been lobbied by the management, that I am going to be paid so much so that I can sell you out. And that created a lot of tension between myself and senior management of the university. That was one of the challenges, in terms of managing the financial resources of the university. And I am hoping it’s no longer there. But in our times, they were the challenges that we had. And management would be sure that they divide the student leadership so that they were able to get their way.

ANC–SASCO vs IFP–SADESMO and IFP municipal bursaries

The very strong identification with different political formations tended to determine the nature of student politics at UZ at the time.

Either you are ANC–SASCO, or you are IFP–SADESMO [South African Democratic Students Movement]. And we would obviously fight. If you go to a student body meeting, you would be lucky to finish the student body meeting. Because there would be fighting. Unfortunately, what didn’t help the situation, is that when we had issues on campus, leaders of both political formations, at the level of the ANC and IFP, would come to campus. And that would actually spike and fuel the tensions.

It was something very strange happened at UZ. From 2002 to 2004, the IFP was not very strong. They were just non-existent. In fact, AZASCO was stronger than the IFP. But my assessment is that they started, through their municipalities, to issue bursaries for students. Through the government obviously; remember the IFP was leading in the province. So they started having more students within the university from rural areas with bursaries but with their indoctrination … as a student coming from Ingwavume, for example, and you got a bursary from the municipality, the first thing that comes to mind is that the mayor gave me this, therefore, I owe them something. And my parents are IFP … and that is how they then grew.

Another factor in the IFP’s growth was a particular leader who was able to ‘lure students to the IFP’ and to SADESMO, but since then, Zuma explains that SASCO has been able to maintain power, albeit with internal divisions that result in different lists that contest against each other.

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51 The Azanian Student Convention (AZASCO) was founded in 1990 as the Azanian People’s Organisation’s official student wing.
Lobbying ANC-aligned Council and SRC members as ‘deployees’

Zuma explains how the politicised environment of the university at the time affected the functions of the SRC.

When I was in the SRC, we had members of Council who were in leadership positions in the ANC at the time. So that would work for us in the sense that, if there is a position that we want to advance, we would request to meet with them outside the formal structures of Council. To lobby them for our position. But again, if you want to advance a position that is so radical and that creates a sort of discomfort to the elders within the political terrain, within the ANC structures, it works against you, because then you would be summoned to the structures of the ANC, to tell you not to raise that issue. Particularly around the issue of appointments. The issues of deployment are there, and they would say we expect that this one has to be the VC, and we would say, ‘No, with our experience, we do not want her to be the VC.’ And then you get summoned, and told to stop that thinking. That thing is not going to fly, this is what you are going to support. Now, unfortunately, you have to remove your cap as an SRC president. And wear the cap of a deployee now. Which then creates a sort of problem for you in terms of managing the real issues of students. It was good at the times where you want to achieve something, but it was also bad where the leaders, the political leaders, did not believe that what you want is a genuine cause.

For instance, the issue of fee increment, they would not actually subscribe to that. In most cases they would say, ‘As much as you want a zero fee increment (the issues of #FeesMustFall are not new … we had always been calling for zero fee increment), instead of talking about 10 per cent, why don’t you negotiate and cap it at maybe 5 per cent?’ We would say, ‘We don’t want that.’ And we would be at loggerheads. And they would give you an instruction, and then you would have to implement whatever they said. Even the calling off of strikes sometimes. You would go to the VC’s office during the course of the negotiations, and she would send an SMS to the leaders, whether within the region or within the province, and then you get a call. And then you go outside. And they would say, ‘Call off that thing and then go and address the media outside.’ And then that creates a problem for you, because students are waiting for you outside for you to give them the feedback in terms of whether you achieved the goals or not. But you have these political imperatives now, where you have to go and convince students why this thing can’t go ahead. Without them having achieved what they want. So it was a bit of a problem.

SRC internal organisation

The SRC model at UZ was an avowedly parliamentary one that students had to
learn to manage. To what extent had there been training for student leaders and support for the management of SRC affairs?

Interestingly, there was never any support in terms of how to manage. We just hired an external service provider to conduct an induction for the SRC. I think we got someone from KZN, in Durban, who had a company that used to train people. So he trained us, but again not in depth in terms of financial management. I think what we did in the main was the responsibilities of the president, the SG [secretary-general], the treasurer and so on, and also the drafting of the programme of action. That is where they focused. But financial management – nothing much.

**SRC budget**

We had a budget of about R1.7 million, which came from the student levy – students were paying a particular portion towards the SRC. And we accounted for that budget, and I think we got a clean audit, I will have to check the financial statement, but what we did in the main is that we started going to other universities to benchmark as the SRC. We started also interacting with companies. I remember at some point we had presentations from ABSA, from Standard Bank, just to enlighten us about these issues, because we thought maybe we need to think ahead, and envisage a situation where we are outside campus now. And even leading, you know outside campus, how are you going to run the budget and so on? So that assisted us a lot, but in terms of support within the university, no. You just got a budget, and then there is a bash, you go to the dean of students, he approves, you come with three quotations. Because at that time we were actually sourcing quotations ourselves, which was a bit of a challenge for me, because then it exposes you, because if you get three quotations and these guys want to say, ‘If you give it to me, then I am going to give you something.’ And then you get that quotation, they approve, then you have a bash.

We were never taught project management. When you have a bash, when you have a Miss University of Zululand – how do you normally do it? Do you have security? How do you deal with issues of protocol, this and that? We were never taught all of those things. So you had to actually navigate and find your way.

Asked what the SRC budget covered, Zuma is direct, and applies the wisdom of hindsight.

I won’t lie. The only way at that time that you would sustain your power was through entertainment. At least 70 per cent of our budget was spent on entertainment. I will not lie and say we were innovative and 90 per cent
went to bursaries, no. It went to entertainment. We had a proportion of a presidential discretionary fund, but it wasn’t much. And it would, from time to time, be abused by your branch leaders. Because they would say, ‘Here is a list of students [to receive the funds],’ and some of them would not even meet the requirements. But in the main, what we did, instead of having bashes, the social ones, we tried to mix programmes. In the sense that, your religious sector as well, they would have their own programmes. For sport and so on. And even the academic programmes, for faculties, they would create their own programmes and then submit to us and we funded those programmes. But in the main, I wouldn’t say the budget went to something meaningful. It did not. It went to entertainment.

**SRC electoral model**

Zuma elaborates on the parliamentary governance model and the electoral system for the SRC at the University of Zululand, and the dominant roles of two political groupings.

Basically, we had a system where you vote for political parties. Obviously, you will have the names of people, but basically, you are either voting for SASCO or you are voting for SADESMO, and it was the winner takes all. If SASCO gets, say 3 000 or whatever votes, they then take the elections. But what then we did during our time, we said, look, as much as you are voting for the organisations, let’s use it more for voting for individuals. Meaning, you vote for Zuma as the president and then, the general members, you vote for Thabo and for Cuba and so on. So that you count votes per individual. So we changed the constitution to be like that. That is why, during our term of office, you had two people from the opposition, because they were able to beat two of our people. No, in fact, it was won through the actual votes. And then, you had the religious sector, they would vote for the chairperson of the religious council, and then he sits in the SRC as a member of the SRC. And the sport as well, they would do the same.

The management of the elections, according to Zuma, was sometimes problematic, with questions of external political influence coming to the fore.

At the time, it was the IEC [which managed the electoral process]. The one for the country. Appointment by the university, and there was nothing wrong, in actual fact we had pushed for the IEC. But what then became a problem is that the presiding officer would be appointed and the staff who he would appoint (because remember the IEC would not ordinarily have full-time staff members that are running the elections) would be people from the area. And those people then would have political affiliations. So we had that
problem that, for instance, this guy that was a presiding officer, he works for a particular municipality, stationed there from the IEC. He then brought people, and you can see, I know this guy, he was just campaigning the other day – he was wearing the T-shirt of the IFP. And here he is, counting.

And there was an incident where big boxes of ballot papers came in, and they were already voted on. And we tried to raise that, and I think about 200 of them were then destroyed. And we said, but if they have been found, then it nullifies the whole process. And the university would say, let’s vote and see whether it is going to be material at the end of the day. If the margin is too huge, then we will disregard that. But I said, the margin might be huge precisely because there are about 1 000 of these ballot papers that came in! So that was the challenge.

Unfortunately, we may also have used that system as well at some point, where you are in the SRC then you also want to push that the people that are appointed within the IEC must not be people who are hostile to your thinking. So I don’t know how – I know it is the IEC, but for me it presents a problem, because if you go and take a teacher or principal somewhere, that you know that this person is IFP or ANC, why do you think that they are not going to take a position or a decision or posture that seeks to assist their political formations? And it happened.

But obviously, I must also put a disclaimer there, that as much as that might have happened, we probably contributed as well in terms of divisions. So, losing, yes, they may have been rigged, but also the manner in which we had disintegrated [following internal battles], we probably were not going to win convincingly anyway.

**Relationship with management**

What was the response of university structures and authorities at the time to students raising issues of teaching and learning quality and other pertinent issues?

It depends on who is dean at the time. You will find some dean of students who is receptive and willing to listen, and some who would be very dismissive. And they will tell you: ‘Look, there is nothing you can change here. These things have been like this for many years. You can’t just come here and change things overnight. Your purpose is to go and study. So, stop causing havoc unnecessarily.’ I had a number of encounters with lecturers. I know there is one that I had to now repeat one of the modules because he was saying, ‘I am not convinced that you want to be a lawyer. Yes, you don’t attend classes sometimes, but you are passing. But I don’t know where you gain this information. So, you have to repeat the course.’ And that was not necessarily because I was not performing, but it was just to ensure that you don’t continue with the path that you are taking.
And I remember that at some point there was a gentleman who was heading security at the time who called me into his office and he said, ‘Mr Zuma, look, I have your transcript here. I have your academic results. First year, you are doing so well, you are getting 80 per cent and 70 per cent, and since you joined the student activism, with your politics and your faculty councils, they have dropped. We are warning you, stop these things, or otherwise you are going to leave this university without a degree. And you are likely to be expelled.’

These are things that were said. And I said, ‘I know that it is not you that is saying these things. Who has sent you to tell me these things?’ And he said, ‘Management is not happy, both at the faculty level, but also at the senior management level, with the manner in which you are conducting yourself.’

### SRC strategies

As Zuma explains, there were many strikes on campus at the time, about issues of accommodation – ‘you would not have hot water, whether it was winter or summer, and then the buildings themselves were just dilapidated’ – of food, NSFAS, financial exclusions and teaching and learning.

In hindsight, Zuma recognises that some of their issues may have resulted from the university’s financial challenges, but the main issue at the time was that students wanted to live in a safe environment.

The university was not fenced. We once had a huge strike around that. We live here, and the university is not fenced, and then we get mugged every day. And then we were told that the traditional leadership within the area, that donated the land, said that you can’t have a fence here, because the people must be able to move across the university. And we didn’t understand that. So those were real struggles at the time.

One thing we realised during my term in office was that the meetings per se don’t tend to be productive, because we tend to fight our political games within the student body meetings. So, we created a weekly newsletter for the university for the SRC to report to students. We put them on all noticeboards. We would have a number of issues, maybe today we would be reporting about transport for off-campus students.

In addition to those strategies, Zuma felt it important to connect with students in the faculties where the issues relating to teaching and learning were felt most keenly and where he thought the SRC could make a difference.

And then I said to the SG of the SRC and the team – let’s have a student body meeting, whether you have it once quarterly, or once a month – but I want to have a meeting with faculty councils. Because that is where students are. So, instead of going to a student body meeting, if you go to the faculty council
of Law, you will have the students sitting there genuinely expecting to hear about their own issues within the Faculty of Law. There will be elements who will try to ridicule the whole process, but there are those who are genuine, who want to know exactly what they will become after graduating. They will start telling others, look let’s deal with real issues here, you can go and fight on politics outside. That is when we were able to deal with the real issues in terms of transformation. Go to the Faculty of Education – there were bursary issues there, Fundza Lushaka, and many other challenges – the placement of students and so on. Even the faculty with the social work department, because you had a number of students who were not being placed … So, we are dealing with those issues. And those are bread and butter issues.

So when you get into a student body meeting after a month, you would have dealt with all of these issues. You then prepare a report which encapsulates everything that we have dealt with during these meetings. And remember, after these meetings we go to the youth/student parliament. That is where you then find these political leaders. And then you brief them there. And then you take resolutions in the student parliament. So, when I go to a student body meeting, then I simply say, ‘We have engaged on these things with your leaders in the student parliament, and these are the minutes that show we have agreed on these things.’ So it would then be disingenuous for them now to say they don’t know anything about these issues.

In that way, the possibility of contestation was diminished and student participation increased. The strategy was similar when it came to students in residence.

After supper, we would call all the residents of that res, and then we briefed them about academic issues, and about issues in that particular residence. You go to east, you go to west – they were categorised like that. So, we dealt with them there. So, by the time that they get into the student body meeting, they already know exactly what you are going to say there. So even if somebody tried to be innovative and smart, they would simply laugh at them. Because the president has been there to brief them. I tried to be a bit innovative, that instead of having an organisational report by the SG, we would prepare a sort of state of the campus address by the president. So, when I delivered that, I sort of covered everything. And then the report from the SG would just be on programmes. But in terms of where we are in terms of students’ issues, I would have covered that. And then when you answer questions, they respond purely on those issues. So, it sort of cripples you if you want to come with some political agenda because we would have dealt with that.

While strikes were an obvious strategy, and in Zuma’s memory there were many in the 2002–2004 period, they were related to different leadership groups and the extent to which they were willing to listen and negotiate.
Personal journey in the SRC, post-election ‘war’ and prison

Zuma relates how the SRC of UZ was going through various changes at the time he was on campus, with SASCO taking the SRC back from the independents in 2003. Then SASCO had its own internal squabbles, as Zuma puts it, with at one time an SRC president being expelled. In 2005, Zuma contested for the SRC president position, but SASCO lost to SADESMO, the IFP student wing, which Zuma attributes to divisions within his organisation. SADESMO in turn experienced internal struggles, and the president was not able to see out his term of office. At the end of the year, for the 2006/07 term, Zuma became the president. The period was not without controversy and trauma.

In 2005, we were arrested. I spent about 31 days in prison, because when we lost elections there was a huge war at the university. It was all over the news. And we believed, I will say we believed, whether there were facts or not, that we had won the elections. But the elections were rigged. And we had a strike, and we demanded that the VC retire – the late Professor Rachel Gumbi – and that she must not declare the elections valid. And she declared them. There was a huge war between us and the IFP and management. There was a bit of burning of cars and all of those things. And we ended up in prison. And the trial ran for about two years.

Zuma faced charges, as he reports:

It was intimidation. It was conspiracy to commit murder. It was attempted murder. It was public violence. I think it was, yes, malicious damage to property. It almost destroyed me. Because had I got a conviction, I would not be where I am. Fortunately, I won the case. But my two other colleagues – accused number two and three – they were not so lucky. They were convicted, and they got five-year suspended sentences. And the other colleague was doing law, and he just gave up. He didn’t even finish his degree. But fortunately for him he is working for a municipality now, don’t ask me how – but he is holding a senior position. The other one is working, he was doing economics. So at least it didn’t affect him so much.

I was so fortunate because the magistrate said they couldn’t find evidence in respect of accused number one, which was myself, and therefore I am acquitted. And the two were then convicted. That’s how I got lucky.

Zuma relates the story leading to his arrest, highlighting the underlying tensions of the time that sometimes escalated into violent protests:
We actually wanted to negotiate with the VC. And she said she is in Durban. We were supposed to meet around 2 or 3pm, and it couldn’t happen. I remember the time, in fact I got delayed, because we had been summoned by the former premier, Dr Sbu Ndebele, to Maritzburg, to come and explain what is happening.

When I got back on campus, there was already a meeting of SASCO, and a decision had already been taken that must be mass rolling action. I tried to explain to comrades that here is some intervention from the leadership of the ANC in the province and we should tone it down. They said, ‘You are the face of the organisation (at the time I was actually the deputy chairperson of SASCO in the province), but it doesn’t mean that we are going to listen to you. We are going to do this thing. We are going to go to the VC’s house.’ So that is where the attempted murder issue came in. Because obviously students went there, and then they started throwing stones, and there were some petrol bombs, but obviously they couldn’t reach the house. But you know, when you are being charged, people will bring all sorts of charges.

Well obviously, some of the things, the malicious damage to property [were real] – students did vandalise, you know your library, your SRC offices. And all those sorts of things. But when these things were happening, I was also busy negotiating with the security, the police and so on, I was not part of the actual strike. Hence the police said, this one here, he was actually working with us trying to calm things down, but obviously the doctrine of common purpose applied – you were leading these people. But it really affected me.

**Key challenges**

**Teaching and learning matters**

A major issue that occupied Zuma in terms of the quality of teaching and learning was the matter of apparently non-accredited programmes being offered.

During our time in the leadership of the university we realised that there were two challenges. The first challenge was within the Faculty of Commerce. That people were being taught accounting, but the university was not accredited to actually teach accounting for people to become CAs [chartered accountants]. There were not even professors within the Faculty of Commerce.

Zuma explains how they created a group of researchers within the SRC to find out how many professors there were in the faculties of commerce and law, and to verify whether they had the requisite qualifications, and in law, how many of them had actually practised as lawyers to help students gain some practical understanding as well.
Within the Faculty of Commerce we realised there is a problem. These guys are not accredited, and we went to the management and we said, ‘Prof., why do we have these programmes being offered, but then we are not accredited?’ And she simply dismissed the issue, and said, ‘You guys don’t understand these issues. I have been going all over the world to try and get money for exchange programmes, and here you are coming with petty issues.’

Unfortunately, if you had to do the research, you would realise that most of our students who were doing commerce ended up teaching or working for government because they couldn’t do anything, otherwise you had to go to UKZN or other institutions. Either do you honours there, or even have to redo some of the modules for you to then get a BCom degree, and then do your honours, and then you can then start dealing with issues of serving your articles as a CA.

But then again, one of the other issues that we were raising was around the issue of law. When you go to other universities that are doing accounting for lawyers, they are doing maths lit. And those are things that you will need when you run your own practice, but I had actually done research around this and I realised that most people who fail the board exams had not done accounting. And we wanted them to introduce accounting at the university, and they refused point blank. And I think it was introduced later on, in about 2008 or 2009, just after I had left.

**Curriculum issues**

And I must tell you that that experience really destroyed me later in life. Because when I did my articles, I had to do PLT [Practical Legal Training], which is a course for six months, which you have to do to write your board exams. Now, I was introduced to this animal called accounting, which I have never seen in my life. I failed Accounting three times. And had I done accounting at varsity, then it would have prepared me for the board exams. So many people run away from the profession and become prosecutors because they can’t stand these exams.

So those were challenges that we had been tackling. If you go to the Faculty of Science as well, most of our students there ended up teaching in high schools because their qualifications were only as good as the paper they were printed on, but nothing to write home about. So, we said, we can’t take these things any more. We want these things to be transformed. Remember, the university has just transformed after the mergers of universities, we were now referred to as a comprehensive institution, with an Act, to have a bit of

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52 South African universities are officially classified in terms of their programme and qualifications mix (PQM) into three types: traditional universities, universities of technology, and comprehensive universities.
theory and a bit of practical, I think it was 70/30 or so. And we were asking the university, and the Faculty of Law, where is the practical side of things here? All the people who are teaching us have never practised law. I can't be taught by someone that has never stood in front of a judge, you know. It is a battle I am taking on now as an attorney with the university, that they must stop teaching students theory only, because when you get into my own practice, everything that you were taught on campus, the first thing I tell you – take your books and throw them away. Here we are dealing with real human beings; we are dealing with real things.

Moot courts were there, but you would probably do two or four per year for your marks. But that is not what happens at court. Because when you get to court you are going to have to … let me make an example. As a student, I knew nothing about something called ‘conveyancing’, I knew nothing about something called ‘liquidation of estates’, nothing! We were never taught anything about that.

Now, you get into your articles, and then you are told, here is a file and you are to make sure that this estate, you know, do an L&D account. And then you ask yourself, what is an L&D account? So, the quality of education is still a problem.

In expanding on his view of the quality of education, Zuma points out what from his perspective were problems with what is taught at universities, and how far it is from what is needed in practice.

It’s too far from reality. Well, particularly from the experience I have in my own profession. What we get taught on campus is too far from reality. I have done hearings at the UZ for student leaders, and there will be a dean of students, dean of the Faculty of Law presiding, and then the prosecutor will be a lecturer from the Department of Law. And then you realise this is far from reality, what they are saying here. The procedures and everything is just flawed. Then that is what we produce for the country. That is how that issue came about. The issue of quality of education. Which I think, for me, is something that we still need to look into.

Achievements
What does Zuma count among his main achievements as a student leader?

I think for me, it was to try and change the mindset of students. Because my observation at the time was that some of the systems that we were using as student leaders were flawed. Even before you negotiate, you start by fighting, you start by burning tyres. You start by destroying property. I don’t believe in that. And I think at the end of my term of office, in fact for the duration of my
term of office, not even a teaspoon was ever destroyed. Because I said, when we have to negotiate with management, we have to do that. But when we strike, let’s have peaceful demonstrations. I think that was the first achievement.

The second one that I think is something that we achieved, was to bring back the culture of teaching and learning. To try and restore the dignity of our universities, because those are reservoirs of knowledge. So if you have people who are focusing on politics, but when it comes to their academic programmes, there is nothing, then unfortunately you have a society that is doomed, and is not going to succeed and the democracy that we have is not going to be sustainable.

And the third issue that we tried to achieve, was to make sure that students do not become dependent on the system, but they try to sustain themselves. Because everyone thought ‘I must get NSFAS’ and ‘The SRC must find a way of making sure that I am comfortable’. No one talks to students about a plan for a bursary. No one talks to students about getting part-time jobs over weekends where you can then come back to school. You know, and unfortunately I think it is a culture that we have in society, and if you don’t deal with it, you will always have the vast majority of our people on social grants. And I think we really tried to deal with that issue.

I think the last issue was to demystify the myth that was there, that once you become a student leader, you become a traditional leader in student politics, and you are not going to leave. I said, I need to get one term, get my degree, and leave within that period, and it was so fulfilling for me – when I graduated, I was the president of the SRC. So, I addressed the graduation ceremony of the university as a president who was himself graduating. So, it was something that was so fulfilling.

Lessons learnt

Ethics

From his student leadership experience, Zuma realised the importance of standing up for what one believes in, and keeping to one’s own code of ethics. This is not always easy.

Sometimes you want to stand for the truth, but you must realise that not everybody around you believes that this is the truth. But if it is the truth, then you have to stand for it. And I think that is one thing that I learnt. No matter the circumstance.

But one of the painful experiences that I learnt from student politics, which then translated to my life post the university, was the manner in which politics is so polluted. That it tends to take away from your inner being in terms of
how you view life and how you want to live your life. Particularly around issues of scheming, issues of always plotting. You know, with politics, blue is not always blue. Someone’s blue eyes may be green. But it’s the politics of convenience that I think I have learnt. It is the painful part of student politics. I have learnt that you would have people that you believe, you know, you are supposed to be with them, and they are supposed to be supporting you, but because of some tactical manoeuvres and certain goals they want to achieve, you become an enemy. Because either someone outside the university believes you are a loose cannon, which I think that is one of the challenges that I had, that people believed that I was a loose cannon. I cannot be controlled. And that poses a danger in terms of their power. And unfortunately, I said to myself, that is who I am. For you to control me, I don’t know how or what it is going to take. Because I think it is only God that controls me. Because I think what He did, He decided to hide what becomes eternal life. So, I don’t know what is going to happen post my life on earth. So, I need to work on a daily basis to ensure that I have my space in heaven.

In making decisions as a student leader, Zuma drew extensively on his faith to guide him, which, as he recounts, was not always easy.

I am a Christian, and I am very strong in terms of spirituality. And it is one of the things that guided my thinking, even as a student leader, because I didn’t believe in lying. Of course, as a leader, there are certain lies which you will tell to protect your people and so on. But I believed that making sure that you stand for the truth and your ethical applications, and accountability as well, I think that is one of the things that I learnt from my life as a student leader. That the most important thing is accountability, and if you don’t account students will punish you. And I saw that in 2004, when we lost elections to the IFP, to SADESMO. That we were not accounting to the students. We were a group of SRC members that would go to the SRC office, then to our rooms, then people would start drinking, there was alcohol there. It is fine, but there was no sense of accountability. No sense of urgency. And I think that was one of the challenges that I experienced as a student leader, and that is one of the issues that I said during my presidency, that we are not going to have SRC members drinking in public. And as a result of that, I was actually labelled as one of the people that are very old. They were saying, look you are very conservative, maybe you need to leave the university, and it is one of the reasons that I didn’t finish, technically finish, the term of office in 2007, as I took up the post at Legal Aid as a candidate attorney in about June or July. Elections were in September. So what I would do is I would then come back on campus on Saturdays and Sundays, and do my work. And student body
meetings would be on Saturday or Sunday. And then the deputy-president would do the day-to-day running.

I graduated in 2007. My plan was to leave in 2006, as soon as I got my degree, but then I was approached by the ANC not to leave. They said that the influence that you have on campus is what we need at this point. And therefore, please come back, win elections for us, and then you can decide to leave after you have won the elections. Because, I think they believed that my popularity at the time was the only hope that would actually save the organisation at that time.

I came back and I said to them, look, we had a condition, and I want to go and start my own career. And I didn't want to delay it. And I had observed student leaders during my time at varsity, spending 10 years, 7 years, and I said to myself, I did not come here for this – this is not my permanent home. I remember in one of my speeches, during the graduation, I said when you arrived here, during registration as a first-year student, you came through that door, at Bhekuzulu Hall. And when you leave, it is important that you leave through that very same door. Which is the graduation. And I said, and I put an emphasis on it, that this can't be a permanent home. Yes, it is a home away from home, but it can never be your permanent home.

Zuma relates how some leaders did indeed stay for many years – he cites one example of someone who arrived in 1999, but completed his degree only after Zuma had left campus in 2007, and names a few others. At one point, he and others had introduced the idea that SASCO executive committee members must demonstrate academic progress, and while there was 'a huge fight' about it, eventually it was adopted as part of SASCO's policies. He explains how having leaders there for many years tended to create divisions in an effort to continue securing positions and resources. While there were contestations about which leader to support at many points, Zuma firmly believed that differences at an ideological level should not become personal.

Because we understood that if I differ with someone as a deputy chairperson, it doesn’t mean that it becomes personal. It means there's something ideologically which I don't agree with. And unfortunately, if we don't teach the current generation that, we will always have a serious challenge within the higher education sector. But overstaying yourself is a problem.

Infighting

In reflecting on the external political interference that affected the SRC at the time, and the infighting within the SRC which was also a challenge, Zuma sees them as an opportunity from which to draw some lessons.
Some of the issues that we were fighting about, particularly amongst ourselves as student leaders, today I normally refer to them as nonsense, because I don’t see a reason why we were fighting between SASCO and SADESMO. We may have had different ideologies, but the enemy was exclusions, the enemy should have been poor quality of higher education, and so on and so forth. So, we should have fought around issues of our thinking and the approach in terms of fighting these issues. As opposed to us saying, ‘No, you come from the IFP, I can’t listen.’

In retrospect, factionalism seemed to have obscured the real issues that needed solutions, and as Zuma reflects on the time, he points out what he has learnt from it.

It is something that I have learnt, and unfortunately we can’t erase some of the things that we have done. What we have done now at least is to create a group of that time. I sat working with the colleagues within other political formations to say, maybe we need to go back to these universities and talk to the younger generation, and say look, when you grow up, these things are going to affect you anyway. You fight each other to the point where you become so personal, but post your student life, you want to apply for a position and you find him sitting there. He comes from the other political formation – you tried to destroy him, now what is he going to do? And fortunately, during our time, or during my term of office, one of these guys who were from SADESMO was in the SRC, so we started creating this sort of relationship. Which we have even today, so we chat on social media, we have lunches now and then, but I have a fear that with now the emergence of the EFF, now you have the new challenge, which is now SASCO, YL and the EFF. And it’s something that is going to create a lot of problems for institutions of higher learning.

Politics and real issues

During my term of office, we had two colleagues from SADESMO, and those are guys that I am saying are best friends of mine as we speak. In the boardroom set-up, we never had real problems although we differed ideologically, because when we went to the meeting, we dealt with registration, with getting reports from the faculty councils, and so on. Those were the issues. But that was the boardroom. Because there were no students there. No, when we went to the student body meeting, that is where the problem starts. Because they would go to their own structures to report. So then, information starts leaking, and then they want to advocate for something totally different to what we would have agreed upon in the meeting. And then it creates problems.

But fortunately, I started a new thing. I said, ‘I want to have one-on-one meetings with all SRC members.’ So we began to have those one-on-one
meetings, and then created some social programmes for the SRC. So apart from dealing with the day-to-day running of the SRC, we had a weekend out, and chilled, and got to understand our personal lives. And I said, ‘Beyond you being a member of the IFP, we also are young, African children, who still are going to leave the university.’ And interestingly, those guys, I work with them now. But it is not everyone. In fact, some of them were even ostracised by their own people within their political formations, because they believed they had actually sold out. I was actually forced, at some point, I remember during our term of office in 2006, I had to suspend one of them, on Christmas day, because calls were coming in that this guy was stealing from the SRC and you have not done anything after so much information was leaked.

This guy was actually from the same township in Newcastle, so I had to call him and say, ‘Look, I have suspended you, but you know I have nothing personal against you, it is just a political thing.’ But it had a serious effect in terms of how we were dealing with issues. Because you get into a student body meeting then it becomes something else, and I then become something else, because you are trying to please the students, and trying to make sure that our power is actually sustained and maintained.

I am not saying politics should be totally abolished in institutions of higher learning. But politics must be used as a vehicle to champion the interests of students, not to divide students. Because people go to Parliament and they debate there. But during breaks I am sure they go and sit and have lunch together and crack jokes about what they were doing. But what the society sees on TV, they then implement at grassroots. Unfortunately, they wouldn’t know what political leaders do behind closed doors. Because, I meant they chill together. They take overseas trips together to go and work. But if you go to a township somewhere in KZN, they believe that Julius Malema must be dealt with, or Mmusi Maimane, or that we are not the ANC or so on and so on. The manner in which we use our politics sometimes is a problem, particularly for young people because what happens in universities is what is going to be the picture of the country in the next few years. So, if we don’t deal with it there, my fear is that we are going to create a country that is not sustainable. A democracy which won’t be sustained because of the nature of young people that we are creating. So, I think that is one of the challenges.

Not making it personal. And understanding exactly what politics is. Because I think SRC, and student leaders generally, don’t understand what is the essence of politics. I believe all political formations, if you are to sit down with them, while they have different ideologies, what they want is to see the lives of people changing. The question is: which methodology do you use? So, it doesn’t mean you need to fight each other.
Access to resources
But also, one of the challenges in my observation, is the issue of resources with the SRCs. I mean people want to be in the SRC for all the wrong reasons. You want to have a university car for 24 hours a day. You want to have bashes. Even issues of kickbacks. I mean, those are issues that you can’t shy away from – that service providers for all these bashes and all of these things … You can talk about state capture at an apex level of things, and not deal with these things at a grassroots level. I mean, if these kids are getting these things there, then in fact, if you couple corruption with sophistication, then you are creating the most dangerous citizen. Because they know how to hide it, as opposed to a politician with a grade 11 or a grade 12, who would not actually understand how to manage the systems. At the SRC level, I think this is one of the issues that needs to be dealt with.

Corruption
In elaborating on his view of the devastating effects of corruption, Zuma describes how he draws on the fundamental set of values that he believes should inform one’s behaviour and practice.

Well, I have seen a lot of that, and unfortunately, post my university life, I have worked for government as well, before opening my own practice. One of the things that made me leave government was because of that, because there were certain things I wouldn’t agree to. And precisely because I have an ethical obligation; as a lawyer, you are an officer of the court. And when you take an oath you are told that you are accountable only to the Constitution of the Republic, and nothing else. So, if I don’t believe that something is within the ambit of the law, then it ends there. But also, growing up as a poor person, you understand that taking something that should be going to someone who is needy, is in fact, and should be, a crime. So, I have actually observed that, and I don’t think that it is something that is nice to observe.

Reflecting on #FeesMustFall
As a former student leader who had been arrested and charged, before being acquitted, how does Zuma view the 2015/16 protests, and more particularly, how arrested student leaders should be dealt with?

Look, for me it is twofold. Obviously, in terms of the law, you are not going to pardon someone prior to a conviction. In fact, that would amount to interference in terms of the systems of our justice system. But I think that there is something that can be done by institutions of higher learning. One,
around saying students have a right to demonstrate. They have a right to picket, they have a right to fight for what the cause – because in any event, if you look at #FeesMustFall, these are issues that we raised over a long period of time. So, it is not something new. So, government ought to have known that at some point, this thing is going to boil up, and it is going to get out of hand. And it needs to be contained. And I think government is partly to blame for that. Student leaders, again, are partly to be blamed in terms of the conduct. Because I don’t believe that, for you to show the world that you are serious about the strike, you must then burn the university. I believe that you can close down the university without even a single car burning. You can make sure that the institution is ungovernable, but no one is dead, no one is injured, but you are just putting a message across peacefully.

A toxic and violent society reflected in the university

I don’t believe we should look at the issues of #FeesMustFall and student leaders in isolation. Our country is a highly toxic and violent society. When we look at the service delivery protests, I think it was around 2013 or so, if you look at the research, in one year you had about 10 000 service delivery protests, and all of them, they turned violent. Now, these kids at varsity, they are not learning these things from varsity, they learn these things at home. From the society where they come from. So, the set-up at grassroots level where they come from, you know, their family structure, the structure of the society, how society deals with issues, is going to translate into institutions of higher learning. But again, there is a need for political organisations to stop using students to achieve their political agendas.

#FeesMustFall for me, from where I am sitting, the issues of access to higher education, the questions of whether it is sustainable or not, is a debate on its own, whether the country is ready. From where I am sitting, I don’t think we are fully ready for totally free education in the country. As long as you still have social grants, more than 10 million people on social grants, we are not going to be able to achieve that. Unless you want to create a society where people are just dependent on the state. But, I think the cause is justifiable, that students must have access to education, but the approach and the system used, is for me a problem.

Discipline

Around the issues of the discipline, I am dealing also with a lot of discipline – you know within institutions of higher learning, I am representing students. Now, there is a case that is at court, about a university manager who says he was assaulted by student leaders. And I think again, management sometimes fuels these things in how they respond to the needs of their students. And how they engage them. Because just being hostile doesn’t help.
But also, there is no training. Remember we spoke about training. I was never trained in how to go and negotiate with a professor. I mean, meeting a professor for the first time as a student, now you must go and engage. Remember, this person has written papers. These are people that are sophisticated in their thinking. So how to engage them, you have never been trained. So, what then happens, is that when you get there and you say – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and they say, ‘substantiate’. You say, ‘But if you don’t want to give this to us, then we are going on strike.’ Because there is no training. So, I think there is a lot to be done in terms of transforming both our higher education sector and our society in terms of how we view life, and how we view our demands. Why can’t you have a specialised team of negotiators within these institutions to engage with these student leaders? And if it can’t then be resolved, then you escalate the issue to Council, to the minister and so on, and resolve the issues. Some of the issues are, for me, poor management, which we see everywhere as well. So those are some of the challenges that I think are there.

**Impact of the student leadership experience**

Zuma’s experience of student leadership taught him many things that he took forward into his career and life after university – the importance of rational decision-making, on the need to have the strength of one’s convictions, and the importance of fighting corruption.

**Impact on professional attitude**

Firstly, not to be too hasty in terms of taking decisions in life, your thought process. Think before you act, or take decisions, and that has actually assisted me. Particularly in my own business, to be able to make sure that how you deal with things properly, you first apply your mind. You don’t just speak without first thinking about what you are doing.

But also, the issue of putting yourself in other people’s shoes. When you are about to deal with a particular situation, and say, if I was in that situation, how would I be feeling? And then, what do I then do, if I am that person? Basically applying a principle of reasonableness, as a reasonable person in that position what would I have done? So, if I think about the challenges that we were facing as students, I would have translated that and taken that to the challenges of people that I deal with in my day-to-day life now as a professional.

Some of the things, of course, were negative. But I have taken the positive things. And I have actually learnt lessons which I am using now. That judging people and taking decisions on the basis of the posture of other people, does not assist in life. You must take decisions on the basis of what you think is right. Whether a person does not believe in your thinking, or whether they support your thinking, but if what you think what you are doing is right, you have to do
it. And I have learnt that during my time as an SRC member, I have always frowned upon corruption. And I have experienced those things growing up now. That corruption is rife in our country, not only in our country, but in the global village. And as a person who is a professional, you need to always make sure that you find yourself on the side of the law.

**Impact on personal life**

The importance of being self-reliant is also something that Zuma tried to exemplify in his own life choices, for example in choosing to run his own law firm.

I refer to myself as a person that is self-made. And I always say, if I was able to achieve what I have achieved now, it means any African child, whether from a suburb or a rural area somewhere in South Africa, regardless of your religion, race, colour and so on, can do it. The only difference between the successful people and those that are not going to be successful, is the attitude. Yes, there will be obstacles. But the question is, what do you do with the challenges?

And I think, with my experience in life, and the challenges I have been exposed to growing up, without a proper family structure and without money to go to school, and the challenges as a student leader, probably I would have given up after my arrest and said I am not going to do this thing any more. I persisted, and then made a choice to leave the public sector when I thought I couldn’t do that any more. I think every South African has a potential of being a successful person despite the challenges.

Zuma’s tale of how he saw a stark choice between becoming a criminal or becoming a student and making something of his life as he fought to enter university, echoes in the lessons he outlines for others.

My wife was saying to me just the other day, that some professionals will prefer to go to the hospital and buy a medical file from a nurse or someone, and get a client and get R2 million. And I have always said, I don’t mind if it takes me 10 years to get to the R2 million, but at least I’m able to sleep at night. So, I think, it really depends on what you want to achieve. The material conditions cannot necessarily define what your future looks like. It constrains your choices, yes, but not the ones you make.

I said to a chap I had just got acquitted – I don’t ordinarily do criminal law, but the Legal Aid, sometimes you do that for just to contribute – ‘Look, you just survived a 20-year jail sentence of attempted murder, and you are 21, and you have got matric, so you have now achieved the first phase of actually getting out of prison. The second thing that you must do, is to get out of the conditions within your township, get away from the bad influences. And change your life.’ And I was saying to him, ‘It’s not only you. I grew up
with friends that were criminals, and most of them are serving life sentences, and some of them are back. But they made choices, based on the material conditions at the time. I could have decided to do the same, but obviously some of the things, I always say, it’s also God’s grace as well.’

I remember in 2001, it took me almost six months looking for a job. There is not even a single pub or restaurant that I went to – I went to all of them in Richards Bay and Empangeni, and everyone was saying, ‘Sorry, no job.’

And I say, maybe that was a lesson, because had I got a job there, I probably would have been comfortable. I would have been a bartender even today. But God was saying, ‘Look, you are not going to end there. I’m going to give you something that you are going to be able to create a legacy, and live with that permanently, and be able in fact to contribute and build and bring more Xolanis in society.’ And I think everyone does have that potential. It depends on how you look at life. And again now, it is even more possible with the new systems with NSFAS and so on, with it being a bursary.

Regrets

Zuma is refreshingly clear about what he would have done differently as a student leader.

The first thing, I would not have spent more than 70 per cent of the received budget on bashes. That is the first thing. I would have used that money to teach students how to write CVs. Which they can’t do today. They don’t even know how to present themselves in interviews.

And then, secondly, I would have tried to influence even more to ensure that the fights that we had at university did not polarise the situation in the manner in which it did. Because I can assure you, there were guns at varsity during my time, illegal firearms. People were arrested – there were attempts on their lives and so on. For what good reason? I am sure we can’t tell you even today. So those are some of the things that I would have changed, given a chance.

Maybe also, to try to understand exactly what it means to be at varsity as a student. For all of us, because I think we didn’t really understand the importance of the three years or the four years. Because it impacts in your future immensely. So those are three things that I think, given a chance, that I would have changed.