Reflections of South African Student Leaders: 1994 to 2017

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chapter 9

Kwenzokuhle Madlala

Mangosuthu University of Technology,
SRC general secretary 2009/10, speaker of student parliament 2012,
SRC president 2012/13

Thierry M. Luescher & Kwenzokuhle Madlala

Brief biography

Kwenzokuhle Madlala completed a National Diploma and a BTech in human resources management (cum laude) at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), and a Master of Management Science specialising in human resources at Durban University of Technology (DUT). He is currently the president of the MUT Convocation, a member of the MUT University Council, chairperson of the MUT Human Resources Committee of Council and deputy chairperson of the MUT Institutional Forum. Madlala works for the eThekwini Municipality’s human resource department.

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Thierry Luescher on 9 October 2018.

Early influences

Kwenzokuhle Madlala was born and raised in Port Shepstone (KwaMadlala area), where he grew up in the early 1990s. It is from his experience of the conflict between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC) in the area at the time, that he traces his first political influences.

So, there were serious rival wars between the IFP and the ANC. I think my first interaction with the ANC was when a house was burnt down at home
because we were accused of being ANC, and my cousin Sfundo Madlala was killed by an IFP mob and my grandfather brutally assaulted. We then moved from that section which was called Esabelweni to this place called KwaMadlala where I stayed and grew up from those early ages. From then I was involved in the ANC as a young boy of about seven, eight years. We were up and down toyi-toyiing every Sunday and all of that. So, I sort of grew up in the African National Congress. I grew up in that kind of an environment.

**Context of getting involved at MUT**

Initially when Madlala came to MUT he did not participate actively in student politics. However, after SASCO lost the SRC election of 2007 to the IFP-aligned South African Democratic Student Movement (SADESMO), he was taken to task by his ANC comrades back home. He then became involved in organising SASCO at MUT in order to regain control of the SRC.

I went to Mangosuthu University of Technology in 2005. It was a technikon then. I came there for my diploma in human resources management which I completed in 2007 cum laude.

I then started my BTech in 2008 and I had not been involved in student politics for all that time. When I came in 2005, because in the village I come from, these things of career orientations and so forth were not done – I didn’t even know that SASCO existed or anything like that. But when I came to the university in 2005, I saw a group of students with an emblem of the ANC. And I know the ANC. So, I did join SASCO, but I was not actively involved. I don’t think I even attended one meeting because I was staying off-campus.

But in 2008 for the first time at Mangosuthu Technikon, SASCO lost to the IFP, to SADESMO. They lost to SADESMO; actually I think that was 2007. So, now when I go back home, it was news all over KZN. I go back home and people say: ‘Hey, you are a comrade.’ In a way, you know, you are made to feel bad. ‘Hey, you are a comrade here, but there? What are you doing in that university?’

Because now it was IFP students who were in charge. And I think 2008 again they won. So, for me, that is what sparked my involvement. I then started to come close to those that were leading SASCO to say, ‘Why are you guys losing? What is happening?’

We then started mobilising and I was instrumental in developing a programme of action, starting from my own building where I was residing. A programme of action which detailed how we were going to take back that power: door-to-door programmes; understanding how many students reside in this building and that building; locating the responsible people. There was also a point where we decided in SASCO, us as activists, that we were going
to launch the sub-committees of SASCO. This meant, every building must have a sub-committee of SASCO that is responsible for organising.

And then 2009 happened. Actually, I had still not availed myself for the SRC election because I was doing an in-service training with the municipality which I started at the beginning of 2009. Now, doing an in-serve this side, residing at a residence and being actively involved there, and doing my BTech at the same time. It was my first year in BTech because BTech was two years, but in 2008 when I started it, I had TB, so I had to go home and then I came back. And then I got involved.

Reasons for supporting SASCO

Why I was not involved in the first place until this point? Well, my own observation was that SASCO had always been ahead of student issues. They understood the background of students: the socioeconomic background of students, the particular student that is attracted to that university. And they managed to ensure that they delivered, in terms of facilitating access as well as success of students on campus. Now with SASCO not being in power the students were struggling, to be quite honest. One of the most difficult things to experience as a person that is politically conscious is an acceptance of financial exclusion for students. When you see people financially excluded, it is unacceptable. It’s a different case when it has got academic issues involved in it. But if it’s purely on financial basis … this is part of the things that also made me want to get SASCO back into power. It was not about me being in that collective, but it was about getting SASCO the right voice, giving it the right voice, in terms of institutional structures where it can continue to advance the interests of students.

Inasmuch as there were many demonstrations and fights, SASCO was still advocating the student issues – even during the period when they were out of power. There would be that particular demonstration and then management would say: ‘SRC, what are the issues? Students are on strike.’ Now the SRC is not the one that is raising the issues. So, a different voice goes up there, which we do not know what it says. And it made things very difficult.

And also, I think maybe the level of comprehension at that point, of issues, from the opposition party was not really at a level that inspired confidence from us that it would be attended to.

Becoming involved in the SRC

Madlala reflects on his first nomination as SRC candidate for SASCO and the strain that the campaigning took on him – to the extent that he decided to resign from his in-service training at the municipality. He also explains the SRC electoral system at MUT at the time, where voters vote for individual candidates.
Nomination as SASCO candidate

Now there was a Branch General Meeting [BGM] that was electing candidates for SASCO. They called me on a number of occasions when there were mass meetings, saying: ‘Please take a day off today, there is a mass meeting, we need you to come …’ So, I would come there and I guess some people were impressed. So, in a BGM that was electing candidates, I was not there. They said I must come, and I said I was not going to come – I was at work. So, these comrades, what they did is they availed me in my absence.

I was nominated from the ground. But I had not accepted nomination because I was not there. But they said: ‘No, he is available. He has informed us, and he has apologised.’ So, when I came in the evening I was told that: ‘You are a candidate.’

So, I got myself in that kind of a situation. Even though I just wanted to support them, because I had other responsibilities, now I am a candidate.

SRC electoral system and campaigning

As a candidate, I had responsibilities of campaigning actively. We then campaigned and we were actively involved, because we wanted to really regain that institution, so that it is back in the hands of progressive forces, if I may say. The campaign was very intensive: it was class-to-class, door-to-door.

That time, the system of voting was that students voted for an individual candidate. So SASCO will release 12 candidates but on a scale of 1 to 12. So, it was important that every face is known by almost everyone in the university. So, it’s unlike people voting for an emblem. Now they are going to ask: ‘Who are you? Who are you?’ So, you have to go to each and every residence, about nine residences, to ensure that at least you are known in all these residences. And you also have to go class to class. You go class visit, you articulate issues, you explain the agenda.

On the ballot there were about 24 candidates because there were just two organisations, if I remember correctly. SASCO could nominate up to 12 candidates. And you could only vote for 12 candidates. As voter, you can cross, or you can be disciplined and just chose 1 to 12, because you know these 1 to 12 are from your organisation.

So, the campaign was very intensive; it became very heavy on me. Now I have to be at class, now I have to be campaigning. Ultimately, I resigned from the municipality, my in-service training here. It was not a very easy decision to make, but you know, the way that growing up under those conditions, you know, politics was not just this thing of saying it’s not personal. It was not just a game. I came to learn later, through my own observation, that for some people it was playing a game. Maybe I took it a bit too serious. But I had that thing in me to want to participate.

So, we won the elections then, 100 per cent, in 2009. All the 12 seats.
Overall involvement in MUT governance
With a gap of a year, Madlala was involved in student governance at MUT for over three years; he continues to be involved as a member of Council from Convocation.

So, I was for one term SRC president. The election took place 2012; for 2012 to 2013 I was SRC president. But before that I was the secretary-general of the SRC in 2010. Which will be 2009 to 2010. In between, in 2012, I was the speaker of the student parliament. I had completed my BTech in 2010, and also went for my in-service training with eThekwini [Durban] Municipality. So, I was out of the institution and came back. Now I sit in Council as a member of Council because I am a president of Convocation currently.

SRC internal organisation
During the interview, Madlala not only reflected on his first experience in the MUT SRC as SG and how student governance operated at MUT, but also his work as SRC president and the way the SRC organised itself internally, in relation to the student body, and representing student interests in the governance structures and committees of the university.

Portfolio allocation
We won in 2009 and then we got into office. When I was elected, that's when I was deployed. You sit down in portfolio allocations and I was given the responsibility of being the secretary; the centre of power [laughs].

Student parliament and mass meetings
It was in 2010 when we started to try to put things into proper context in terms of the student governance of the university. There may have been a student parliament before 2010 but I don't really know what its role was. Part of the things that we had to do was to review the SRC constitution.

When we came into power, we realised that there was a constitution that was in place probably from 1980 sometime when the institution was first founded. We worked to review it, to revive the student parliament to give it some power, because before then, I can assure you, it had no impact. So, it couldn't bridge the gap where you have an organisation that is raising issues and then an SRC, which is led by a different organisation, then miscommunicates and misrepresents that particular voice to the management. It becomes a problem.

The student parliament, how it is constituted, involved basically all structures. It was two representatives from all recognised structures: your political organisations, your churches, your cultural organisations, the sports union. We further extended it to faculties, to have faculty representatives, because we also said there must be faculty representatives. We had three
faculties, so two representatives from all three were sitting in the student parliament. We had a residence committee, which is formed of all chairpersons, so we asked for representation from there as well. And then we had the SRC obviously that sits in there. So that became the composition. And it had a clear mandate of holding the SRC accountable, approving the budget and all of those things. And holding the SRC accountable in terms of having input to the programme of action of the SRC.

We also had all forms of meetings. We had mass meetings. We had res-to-res meetings as the SRC; each res, going to each res to address the students there. In mass meetings, we’ll have every student coming in there; and then we’ll also meet with the student parliament which would be the leaders.

**SRC and social media**

Reaching out and communicating with the student body does not only involve mass meetings and student parliament, but also updating students on key dates and events using social media. Oftentimes the handing over of social media sites from one SRC to the next is a problem if the social media accounts are not institutional, as Madlala’s reflection also shows.

As an SRC and SRC president we had a Facebook page. Unfortunately, after me, we tried handing it over but because it was administered, it was very difficult. If it is administered by the institution, it is easy because an institution is always there. Now if it’s administered by a student, because I’m the administrator, it is difficult. In 2013 as the SASCO SRC, we had it; we communicated with it things like the closing dates for NSFAS submissions; opening bashes and entertainment; the res applications start now, ends here, these are the documents you must bring; all sorts of things. So, we used it heavily. But it had about maybe 2 000 people. In an institution of about 12 000 people, that was not enough. But we did have a media page that we communicated by.

**The role of the SRC: micro-level vs macro-level issues**

Madlala argues that an SRC should be involved in broader, institutional issues of policy and governance, but often gets bogged down by ‘micro-level issues’ that should actually be dealt with by SRC sub-structures such as a residence house committee or a student faculty council.

I have my own view in terms of what the role of the SRC should be as opposed to what it is, relating to that university. Mangosuthu is a very small university, it has only about 12 000 students. And also in terms of its design, it’s very intimate if I may say. There is one campus and another one is just across
the road. You basically walk to the other one. So, it’s more like one campus: Umlazi campus. So, if you are an SRC there, you are a trade unionist [laughs]. You have all the structures, housing committee, faculty reps and so forth and so on, but if a student has a problem with a roommate, they want to see the president of the SRC; if there’s a problem in the class, there is a class rep, but no, they would want to see the SRC. So, as a result, you become very grounded, very operational. It has its advantages and disadvantages.

One of the advantages is that you are in touch with the reality of the people on the ground, on a constant daily basis – you touch them every day. Some of the disadvantages are that there are broader issues in the higher education sphere that you as student leaders must make a contribution and input to. And if you are not on campus for two days, it’s an issue; they don’t see you, they want to see you.

One of the things that we always complained about which comes into being when we are speaking about the role of the SRC, is that you would sit with Council. A decision is made. Council leaves, you go and sit with executive management to deal with the issue of the same decision. You move there – you have to deal with – even the tutor – to still deal with the same issue of that decision. And that makes you now get involved in all these parts, as opposed to you dealing with those issues at that level.

You communicate with your other structures in terms of governance – those structures – you communicate so that it goes in terms of levels. You know I used to say the only time when the president of the SRC should deal with an issue of a faculty is when the faculty rep and the dean have met, and they could not find each other.

Or when it becomes a Senate-level issue, not when it’s still a class rep issue. But like I’m saying, the role did not evolve that much. Because even in 2013 from 2010, even in 2013, it was still activism – more activism – more and more operational activism. Even though we really made significant progress in terms of certain internal proposals on various issues of student development that will improve student’s lives. I still feel that we were too confined to operational matters.

Co-operative governance

As per the Higher Education Act, the MUT SRC is involved in the key governance structures of the university: at the level of Council, Senate and Institutional Forum. Madlala recalls other committees the SRC was involved in and the need for student representatives to be trained well in order to participate effectively. He also reflects on the modus operandi of his SRC when allocating student representatives and preparing for committee meetings.
Key university governance structures and the need for training

In terms of representation, we were represented at all levels. Council is very critical for the SRC to be involved there. The manner in which it happens, still today, I feel that there is a lot of training and development that needs to take place so that student leaders understand their involvement and participation at that level.

It is important that they are there; it is another debate what their role should be when they are there. Some issues that are dealt with there are confidential; some issues that are dealt with require a particular level of comprehension of issues. And there’s not a single training that you get before you go and sit in those structures. And you are just a student, you know. But I think Council is very important.

The second one I think is the academic board, or now I think it is called Senate, which deals with academic issues and so forth. A very important structure as well because we have long adopted a concept of ‘Nothing for us, without us’. That is where issues of curriculum are dealt with; issues of academic exclusion and inclusion are engaged. So it’s important that the students’ voices are heard there, because they are the end-user of that product, so if they are engaged upfront, it makes a really meaningful contribution.

But also other committees are important. For example, we had an academic calendar committee which deals with how the academic year is to go, when there has to be recess, when it’s going to be exams. It’s a very important committee as well, because there are sometimes realities that the SRC brings into perspective. For example, it’s easy for the institution to say, ‘Classes will commence on 23 January,’ but the reality is that the registration will not be closed by then because of some financial difficulties and all of those things. You may end up now having people that are attending and some people that are still trying to register, and already they start on the back foot. So, there are many, many other important committees.

Allocation of SRC members to committees

Given that the SRC constitution did not prescribe which SRC members and other student leaders represent student interests on which governance structures and committees, the SRC allocated committees according to the portfolios of SRC members as well as their interests and expertise.

In terms of our constitution, there is nothing enshrined in there about committee allocations. How we used to do it, is that we were identified in terms of the responsibilities of the portfolio. For example, in the academic calendar committee as well as the Senate, we would have our faculty officer in there, because the faculty officer deals with academic exclusions and all those kinds of related academic issues.
We would also maybe go a bit beyond just the portfolios of the office and look into each individual’s knowledge and expertise. So if, for example, we had me who is in HR and we had an HR committee, then I would be representing there. Each member sat in two committees. And then at Council level, we would have the president and the secretary of the SRC.

Caucusing SRC positions for agendas and meetings

I put in place a modus operandi of the way things should be that we caucused committee agendas. But sometimes it becomes impractical with the kind of load, particularly in the kind of university where the SRC becomes too operational.

Sometimes you remember *today* that there is actually a meeting. So, at times, it would happen that we do sit down and look into the agenda items and give input and advice and guidance. Ideally at times, we would call in the Progressive Youth Alliance, we would call the chairs and secretaries and say we are going to Council in a week’s time. Or maybe even before that, because you need to put in agenda items too, which closes some time before Council: ‘What are the issues that we need to put in the agenda?’ We did at times.

Key challenges, issues and protests

Rather than listing all the issues his SRC had to deal with, Madlala reflects on the injustice of student leaders identifying a key issue, raising it in various formal settings, eventually organising a protest about it and then being disciplined by the university for protesting (e.g. by being suspended or even expelled). However, when eventually the same issue is taken up by the management and implemented, management takes the credit and the student leaders who originally put it on the agenda remain without any acknowledgement and restoration.

NSFAS meal allowances and purchasing food off campus

I remember at some point, we had proposed back in 2009 that firstly, there was no funding from NSFAS. Funding was coming from NSFAS but it was not covering meals for students at that time on our campus. We got NSFAS to assist with covering it; we wrote memorandums and so forth – and ultimately meals were covered.

Now, we had an issue that when we did some benchmarking at one of the other universities, we realised that students were getting some money into their accounts to go and buy groceries. And now we said as an SRC: ‘No, we need to get this thing to happen here.’ Why? Because internally we have just one cafeteria, which does not accommodate people who are vegetarians and all of those things. You just have standard meals at highly exorbitant prices that are unreasonable basically. But now we don’t have an option because the money is in your student card. Whereas we have got stoves on campus at the
same time, which means that you are allowed to cook, but what am I gonna cook? So, we wanted to introduce that.

**Student protest, management intransigence and taking it to Council**

It was going to be under IntelliCard at that point. So, when we fought on campus, we striked and all of those things, but management told us that it was impossible for that to happen.

So, we had those kinds of issues as part of the agenda for Council to say: ‘This is a proposal; this is the background to the issue; we have tried to engage management; they are not coming in. We have done the benchmark to ABC. This is feasible.’ Then we’ll add those issues to the agenda for Council.

**Management claiming achievements without acknowledging students**

Madlala laments the fact that when students protest, many are expelled; yet the protests are for legitimate matters, seeking to get management to be responsive. Once they are addressed, management claims the achievement, while the students remain expelled without any restitution.

Some of the disadvantages of being a student leader is that during our own protests, many people were expelled from the university – they are still expelled today. But you know, now I sit in Council as a member of Council, because I am a president of Convocation currently. Now you sit there and the university communicates this and that as an achievement: students are able to dish at Pick ’n Pay and that; and no one is worried about getting those people [who were expelled] back because basically that means you fired those people for wrong reasons.

There are still students who were expelled because of the protest about this very issue. Now for the university having achieved this, it says: ‘Wow, look we’ve done great,’ but credit is not given nor is there any restitution given to those students. No one remembers those people. And even when the university speaks about it, it will never speak about it as an initiative from our students. It becomes an institutionally owned thing; ‘We are helping our students.’ No one speaks about the struggle of getting there. How did we get to that part? How many casualties did happen? And during the student struggles, the same managers were standing opposite saying, ‘It will never happen. It’s impossible.’ It has happened because we had to sit down, write proposals and all of those things.

**Management’s attitude to student issues and lack of responsiveness**

I think because I’ve been involved with almost all angles of the university now, except university management, being a student, a student activist, and I’ve been on the other side. Let me tell you what is the case – the case is that no one
pays attention to details in this university. They are not, I can tell you why; it’s not only in Mangosuthu University of Technology. When I speak about attention to detail, I mean first of all the attitude of management in most cases towards student leaders is not a positive attitude. So, whatever they raise, is normally met with resistance – uncalculated resistance – because student activists, if they are properly orientated, they create work for management. A lot of work.

When we come with these proposals, you’ve got your own standard as well that you are involved in. And then you need to go and test this benchmark. Go and look into the feasibility of this, go and start engaging Pick ’n Pay, engage Shoprite. And if you are a lazy person, you are not going to want to do that. So, the easiest way out is to say, it cannot be done.

Management presenting a rosy picture to an uninformed Council

Now when it ultimately happens, what management does to counter is management always seeks to present a good picture to Council. So, they will say: ‘No, the university is stable; everything is okay, students are happy.’ And Council sits down, because Council is also at the very higher level there, in the ivory tower. They don’t take their time to understand even the universities that they lead. They just come in for a meeting and out. And papers, in most of the cases, are not a true reflection of what is happening on the ground. Remember this manager cannot say: ‘Ay, I’m failing, things are not working out.’ They will always project a good picture.

Management and Student Affairs taking credit for student ideas

So now, when things ultimately happen, for example, that proposal thing, when things ultimately happen, now this manager is going to argue that, ‘As the Student Affairs department we have introduced an initiative of getting students to now …’ Because they want to take credit. Because remember, they are on performance pay as well; they want to get recognition as well. And now I’m going to be honest and say: ‘Where does this initiative come from?’ I’m telling you, most Student Affairs departments survive on ideas of students who unfortunately cannot copyright their ideas.

And they then present these things only when they have succeeded of their own. I don’t think it’s a breakdown of institutional memory; I think it is more of they want to claim these things and then they get a round of applause. And no one asks: ‘But where did this actually come from?’

The pain of students not being credited and expelled from university

I’m telling you that the pain that I feel when people had to go on a demonstration and fight for something to happen, and then when it happens, no one speaks about them. No one speaks about the fact that they are still unable to access
any university in South Africa because they are expelled from one university. But everyone just celebrates that: ‘Wow, the university is doing good; taking care of its students.’ As though someone sat down in a corner out of care and sincerity and said, we need to get our students to have this.

The need to transform councils

Talking about the problem of a lack of responsiveness of governance structures and management, Madlala makes the example of a burning issue coming to Council. Yet, because councils are too removed from the student experience, they don’t see urgency in dealing with a matter, which eventually causes student strikes and protests. Hence, he proposes that councils need to be transformed to reflect a generational mix including more and younger members.

Lack of urgency

The issue here is that councils need to be transformed. When we came into Council last year, we started introducing more, younger guys to Council. And it’s a positive thing. You need a generational mixture; you need expertise, experience and so forth. But you also need younger people with an open mind. Councils in most cases, don’t find a sense of urgency.

Let me tell you what happened the other year – I’m not sure if it’s 2011 or 2010. You follow these processes or even if you don’t follow them, but you get a burning issue on the Council agenda towards December – an issue probably related to fees for the following year. Council has a long agenda, they deal with their issues, and they then say: ‘No, this one we will defer to the beginning of the year.’

They are not time-effective. They are not thinking about the fact that at the beginning of the year – even if you have a special Council meeting – it is going to sit around. End of January, students would have started registering. This is a fees issue which has got cost implications. So you are now a student leader, the university does not have a declaration in terms of fees. The year begins and this is where strikes come in, because you have made proposals on where you’ve answered some questions.

Lack of transparency

And also the transparency of Council when it comes to student leaders is an issue. You are just told that there’s no money in the university, but there is an increase of 10 per cent to executive management. You know, you think, I mean, ‘Does this thing make sense?’ You just check some of the privileged universities. They are giving some people 7 per cent, not even 10. You are an underprivileged university, which has got students predominantly from poor backgrounds. Management gets 10 per cent and your issue is deferred – the one
that you are proposing – deferred to the following year. It becomes frustrating.
Come beginning of the year, if Council wants, it can postpone that meeting
for March. And you think but you are then to now go and retrospectively
apply any decision instead of us having dealt with this thing immediately.

Reasons for protests

Having discussed his experiences with management and Council, Madlala
outlines what he sees as the two main reasons why student strikes happen: the
lack of responsiveness of management and the University Council, and partisan
contestation among student organisations.

Student frustration with management and Council

That's where strikes come in, because now the frustration goes to you as student
leaders. The registration fee has increased and all of those things. And they go
ahead in some cases and implement what you had contended against.

And in some instances, you find that the delegation of authority is not
working in favour of students. So, you got certain decisions that can only be
taken by executive management. And maybe there are four, and two just take
leave beginning of the year – January. They are coming back in February.

I remember at some point, one of the demonstrations of the many
demonstrations we had: the registrar at that point was the only one who can
extend registration – authorise for the extension of registration – who can
take certain decisions also in terms of academic exclusion; and he took leave!
He took leave, there was no acting registrar, there was nobody. He took leave,
and there was no deputy registrar; there was a post, but the position was not
filled. And he took leave! And we said: 'You've got the whole year, we don’t
want to go into what you do the whole year. And management, why do you
approve leave for someone during registration process?' That is where this
feeling comes from, that you are not taken seriously as student leaders.

I think an underlying issue there is that they don’t necessarily want to take
a decision; but they won’t be honest. For example, they don't want to extend
registration, but they don't want to tell you that, 'No, we don’t want to extend
registration,’ so they rather say, ‘No, the issue is that the registrar is not here.’
And we can’t do anything, you know. So that unwillingness to take decisions
is a factor there.

That is where the issue of strikes comes; the principal aspect of strikes.

Partisan rivalry among student organisations

There is also a different aspect of strikes, which is a political aspect of it,
which is a reality of most institutions where there is serious political rivalry.
Students are never going to be satisfied with everything, so at times it happens
I’ll be quite frank here – that strikes are used as a political campaign for you to legitimise yourself or to inspire confidence as an organisation.

Reflecting on #FeesMustFall

At the end of 2013, Madlala left MUT to work for the municipality. Around 2015 he registered on a part-time basis for a master’s at MUT. Taking the long view on student struggles for access and funding, Madlala argues that #FeesMustFall was not new at MUT.

#FeesMustFall was no surprise – it is a long-standing struggle

By 2015 I was not any more involved on a day-to-day basis, but I was in support. What we raised during the #FeesMustFall was that for us this was not a beginning of the struggle. For us, MUT when I first came there, the registration was R1 000 for an annual course. I think up until 2014 or something, for a long period of time.

We have always fought for access and we have always fought to ensure that fees were kept to a bare minimum. For the institution, as we speak, it has some negative consequences because there is a heavy student debt for the university. We are advocating that there must be other means of covering for that student debt. We are predominantly a university where 80 per cent of people are NSFAS dependent. So, we fought to keep prices low, we have basically always fought for free education.

Only historically advantaged institutions are heard

So, the call for #FeesMustFall did not catch us by surprise, but I think it caught the entire media and the entire South Africa by surprise because now these previously advantaged institutions were starting to speak. Because only then they were feeling the pinch of it. We had long felt it; we had long fought for it. But obviously, because we speak in the dark corners of Umlazi, no one actually cares about it until it is there …

So, it’s the same thing: whatever we raise and strike about, it’s different. We can strike and burn down the university for all that matters. But if Rhodes holds up placards for two seconds, the media, eNCA, everybody is there: it’s a national crisis. It illustrates – it exaggerates but it illustrates – the issue around having a voice that projects into the broadcasters.

Marikana and the unresponsiveness of government

Sometimes we say in order for issues from the marginalised to be heard, they need to burn down a library or they need to burn down a community centre. And then everybody cries: ‘Oh, why you people burn down a community
centre?’ Meanwhile we’ve been protesting for three months already but nobody listened.

The reality is, no one really cares. We strike there for the whole week or whatever, it’s the same thing for people of Marikana: no one cares. The people of Marikana striked for four months and no one cared, until they were shot and died and then some people were acting as if they did not know that these people had been on strike for four months.

Renaming and removing statues is not a priority issue at MUT
When asked whether there was a decolonial, intersectional campaign at MUT before or alongside #FeesMustFall – something like #RhodesMustFall, #OpenStellenbosch or #AfrikaansMustFall – Madlala chuckled.

No, that was the least of our worries. Look, someone may argue against what I’m saying but our issues have always been bread and butter issues. We’ve always laughed when students in one of these universities were striking for parking. You know we understood though: they are privileged.

We’ve got many buildings that are named CR you know … Even the name of the university and the possibility that it may be changed. But as students we never really had energy to focus on those kind of things because at the very hardcore essence is the issue of access: a student needs to get into a class.

Prioritising access to higher education as a way out of intergenerational poverty

There’s nothing more difficult than seeing a student carrying bags and having to go home because they are poor. And that is what we experience – those are our realities. And go home to what? Because obviously the family cannot afford education. Go back to poverty and do what? Go and look for a job at Shoprite? Perpetuate the same generational intergenerational poverty?

So those were our issues, those have always been at the centre of our hearts.

So, we support these calls for decolonisation; we’ve supported them, but we’re not at that level. And it’s the same thing when people are talking about the fourth industrial revolution. It excites everyone and for them it is something they need to deal with. And then there are some people who are not even in the second or third industrial revolution. So, we can’t really put our energy there and say we want to put down a statue. It is the correct principle but let’s focus on the basics first: financial access, academic access, retention, progression … to improve the infrastructure to better the lives of students. That has been at the heart of the struggle that we had to fight.

It is a matter of prioritising. That is the argument. It’s the same argument I’ve always had against the multimillion costs for renaming roads, changing
street names. I'm saying, it's important but is it urgent given the current economic status and so forth? Is it something that we must say is first priority? We take money and instead of building clinics, we are renaming the street. I don't think it should be our priority.

Management supporting students during #FeesMustFall

In 2015 and even before that, the management of the university had said: ‘We can give you buses because this problem is beyond us. We understand the issue that the students can't afford.’ And it was actually going to happen.

It was at that point that NSFAS when there was some funding that was left from these universities that normally underspend, these privileged universities, NSFAS would take it and give those monies to us. So, I think there was actually some intervention. There was actually a programme of action that was committed to by both students and management.

So, the call was a genuine call. We even said we are not going to close down campuses, just so that we appease those who now have all of a sudden woken up to this reality that fees are a challenge.

Decolonisation and decommodification as two sides to freeing education

#FeesMustFall was a good thing to be raised but it was not properly guided. Firstly, I don't think that it went the right direction. I also don't think that it got the necessary results, because there was not enough debate around it.

You see, when we found the discussion on the tables of SASCO around the issue of fees, it was within the context of free education. But free education had two components to it: the content of it, which I believe is even more primary, and then the financial aspect of it.

The aspect of freeing educational content is decolonising education in a different way. The question that the country needs to respond to is whether we want to have many graduates of this calibre that we have. It is a dysfunctional calibre of graduates outside the context of employment. It is only functional within the context of employment. So, the education system teaches these graduates that you must be employed to be a productive citizen.

Or do we want to focus on changing the education system such that it is able to produce a community activist, a person that is able to invest their skills, ability, knowledge and talent for the development of their society? We need an education system that responds to the needs of society more than it responds to the needs of industry, which cannot absorb the number of graduates that are produced by the education system. You see, that is an approach which will then move over to say that that particular kind of education must be accessible so that we get more people of that nature, moving us as a country to where we want to go.
The outcomes of #FeesMustFall

But the manner in which #FeesMustFall was approached – it came with a zero fee increment – I mean what was the outcome of it? It was a no fee increment.

Ultimately what we received from our former president was a declaration that there will be free education; but that does not exist. You see some people are even celebrating it, as if it is already in existence. They are celebrating the declaration as if it is in existence, when it is not practically there. And it is going to take us maybe 10 or 15 years for it to be there, unless certain things change with our economic structure as a country as well as in the political willingness.

Improving student governance

When he was asked what he would like to change about student governance, Madlala reflected on his initiatives to change the SRC constitution to establish and operationalise student governance sub-structures.

When I came in as president of the SRC I already knew what I would like to change. The first project I wanted to have was to launch structures of the SRC to properly constitute student governance. Student governance is not the SRC; it is all the structures that are involved in the governance of that particular university. So, I wanted to get residence sub-committees in place; I wanted to get the faculty reps which would then be responsible for ensuring that the class reps are functioning accordingly; get everyone in place and then hold a workshop.

My hope was that we were going to develop a booklet on each and everyone’s role. You can blame some of these class reps, but they don’t know what their role is: they think it’s just to do projects and notes when the lecturer is not there. We wanted to form a booklet and workshop with these people on their responsibilities. Train the class reps so that they know what their role is.

The need for SRC training

Given that student leadership development is a typical function of Student Affairs, Madlala was asked if this is not done by the Department of Student Affairs at MUT. He said:

No, they are not doing it. And unfortunately, sometimes these deans of students, these people, they interfere with SRC things.

Madlala then recalled that as SRC they received some induction organised by Student Affairs:
As an SRC, you go for an inauguration training; they call it SRC induction. What it does is that you just get different heads of departments coming to communicate to you what they do. Someone will first tell you the vision of the institution and all those big plans, and then you get someone who will come and tell you about what Student Affairs and these departments do.

After reflecting on the induction his SRC receives, Madlala outlines what he feels are key training needs of an SRC, including the need to be trained in time management skills, counselling, negotiation skills, and so forth.

But I don’t feel that this is a training. Because in a training on what it is to be an SRC, you should be getting a two- or a three-day training, where you get an expert in the area of leadership or whatever the case is, coming to make presentations to you, coming to tell you about time management, how you juggle your studies and this; emotional intelligence; how to deal with problems of people here.

Students who have been raped, have got AIDS — come to the SRC office … how do you deal with that? They trust you, they pour out their problems to you. So, you are not trained in those things. Negotiation skills; basic skills.

They expect us to sit with management and their departments and everyone there, and negotiate on fees or whatever the case is. But no one ever comes there and says: ‘Here are negotiations skills. These are things you must look for. These are bargaining things.’

Publicising and giving recognition to student representatives

So, student governance: get the structures proper. And then give them the necessary recognition. By that, I mean, if you go to a faculty, there must be a picture of a faculty representative there. Students must know, if you go to residence whatever, there must a picture of a student who’s a representative with their contact details. The student population must know who their first point of contact is, so that it is not only the SRC that has got calendars in the entire university. But you expect students to go to a class rep. Some don’t even know who their class rep is.

Have a chart with the entire student governance with the president on top, SRC officers, how it goes down in terms of your functional structure. Legitimise them and introduce them to the necessary officials in the university. Your dean must know, here is the faculty rep, here is the person you will be liaising with. The head of Student Affairs must know here is the chairperson of the housing committee, the head of sport. If you do that within the first month or two, you have got your governance in order. You then are able as the SRC to focus on certain things and monitor the functionality of this governance to ensure that it really performs.
A concerted system of student governance and administrative support

Madlala thus envisions a concerted student governance system.

Once you have that structure, you can have structured meetings that are going to be part of your student governance structure. You know that every month your faculties sit, or your sports union or whoever sits. Then all these people need to submit their reports to the student parliament via the SRC, because the SRC must sign off everything.

However, when it comes to the administrative support for such a system, it has not been forthcoming.

We had one person from Student Affairs as administrative assistance. They did all of that, except the minutes which were the responsibility of the secretary. What this person used to do is basically everything. If we wanted transport, we would requisition it and give it over to her, for her to process forward. But we understood also that there was only so much that she would be able to do. But part of that, I think administrative support is very important because it feeds into the success rate of SRC members in terms of their academic work. Because if they have not got sufficient support structures, they do all these things and then they end up lacking on their academic work. And the only thing the country does is cry: ‘SRCs stay for long and they don’t graduate.’

The need for academic concessions

Madlala felt that it was unfair for SRCs to have the kinds of responsibilities and pressures that they do on their time without getting any academic concessions.

I still do cite the example of how unfair it is when you are an SRC. I remember over a number of occasions, you just get a call from the vice-chancellor saying: ‘I know you’ve been wanting a meeting with me. I am now available.’ And that call comes at exactly the time when you are about to start a class. And he tells you, ‘In the next two hours I’m leaving; I’m gonna be off.’

So, you obviously have to cancel attending the class, and no concession is made for that. No one is going to be giving you special attention for that class that you did not attend or anything like that. And there are times when you get a call once you are in class, you see it’s the vice-chancellor, and you go out, and you leave your class. And there are no concessions.

Lessons

Madlala offers a number of lessons from his student leadership experience. For future student leaders, he recommends that they get their first degree before
getting deeply involved in student politics and SRC, in order to have something to fall back on. He also cautions future student leaders not to become affected by the ‘celebrity syndrome’. For management and University Council, he recommends that they recognise the importance of student leadership and focus on the content of what student leaders put to them.

**Lesson for aspiring student leaders**

It is not easy when you are an activist at heart, to be a student leader. Some people take this as an extra-mural activity. I think it’s better for those that do so, because they don’t put their hearts in it: if students want to see you and you are not there, you are in class, you switch off your phone. But if you are an activist, it’s not a very easy role.

Some of the students are coming from really disadvantaged backgrounds. Your family is waiting there for you to finish but then you get involved in SRC and you find yourself not finishing in time. That’s why we said for you to be an SRC, you must pass at least 60 per cent of your module to qualify. We put it in the constitution.

We put two things in the constitution; some people were not happy with those two clauses. The first one of 60 per cent, the second one we said, ‘No first year will be able to contend.’ First-year students can’t contend. At Mangosuthu right now, it’s still the same. If you are a first year, no matter how much potential you have, you can’t contend for SRC.

But I would go further and say, ‘Have your first degree.’ I would recommend to someone if they wanted to be part of the SRC, get your first degree. Obtain your first degree because should anything happen, you have something to fall back on. We cannot limit you how far you go in terms of activism. Should you get expelled, for example, you have a degree and you can still get a job.

**Caution against the ‘celebrity syndrome’ of SRCs**

SRC members at the same time must guard against the celebrity syndrome; you can easily get carried away! The celebrity syndrome is when you suddenly feel like a celebrity when you are in the SRC. You can easily feel like a pop star and you can get carried away. And some people get carried away and they lose it forever.

You are known on campus; you’ve got girls liking you; you’ve got everybody.

And you forget about your studies; you forget about your background; your success chances are then diminished; you are excluded. You then become basically a person that has no direction.

So, it’s very important that student leaders are able to absorb the excitement that comes with those responsibilities as well as the benefits that come through, so that they are able to mature and also still study whilst advocating for student issues.
Recommendations for management and Council

The existence of student leaders is very important. Management and councils need to take a different approach to student leaders. These student leaders are the same ones that become future leaders at some point. How we treat them now and build them, whether we build or break them now, has an impact on the future we try to create.

When I first sat in Council, the very first meeting we sat in Council, we had prepared a memorandum of two, three pages on various issues. Council took about two to three hours correcting grammatical errors on our document. Grammatical errors! The content – they could see what we were trying to say. We tried to write this document in English; we are not English speaking. But they took about two to three hours, and that is breaking young students who have got a potential to become something in future. So those kinds of things; these bureaucratic processes and all that; the university must guard against.

The impact of the student leadership experience

Looking back at his two terms in the SRC and his term as speaker of student parliament, Madlala describes his student leadership experience as having had a positive impact on his life. In terms of his career trajectory, the impact has been mixed to date because of the time he lost when he was in the SRC; in terms of his overall development, the impact has been very much in his favour.

Impact on career trajectory

Having been in student politics has impacted on my career good and bad. When I resigned at the municipality’s in-service training to go and be in the SRC that was a shot in terms of my career because it took me about four, five years before I could get back in the system of working. So, it really, really worked against me. People who I was with at that time are far ahead of me. It was really a drawback for me in terms of my career and I have not been able to recover.

But the knowledge that I’ve learnt and my state of thinking and all of that – I know that at some point in the future I will recover that time. But currently I’m not deployed; I’m not a spokesperson in some office. So, I’ve not got any work through political deployment or anything like that. But I gained knowledge and experience which is very valuable for me as a person.

One of the things that I learnt during student politics was negotiation skills, presentation skills, the whole of 2 000 students that you address. These are things you learn down the road. You have to think on your feet: they ask you any question, any time, and you have to think on your feet. So, as a result, I always say, if you don’t want to employ me for a position, don’t call me for an interview because once you call me for an interview, you’re going to be forced
to employ me. In my world, I’ve been through seven interviews and I’ve been employed every time I’ve been interviewed.

It really works in my favour. Your ability to express yourself. For a person that studied in a rural area, it has also improved my vocabulary in a very good way. Also, the ability to write, because you have to write memorandums there. You have to write a lot of things. And the understanding of government. So, there’s quite a number of good benefits.

**Impact on political attitudes and active citizenship**

Having been in student politics has broadened my mind. Like I said, I come from an ANC background, but I did not understand certain things. You start to understand the different economic theories, different political philosophies. You have a broader outlook on life. You understand your class differences and the structure of society.

It has not changed my political outlook but it has more sharpened it for me to now say, I understand where the country is and I have a view about where I think it should be. It even helps, when there are these commentaries that are called for on land issues, on the National Health Bill; I’m able to make my contributions because of my outlook now to life.

I do consider myself as an active citizen. I’m currently not leading anywhere or any structure for that matter, except in the Convocation of the university and in Council, but outside of that I’m not in leadership. But I get involved in a lot of activism work. Recently we’ve had to assist one of the street kids, go back and find their family in the Eastern Cape. We had to help her with a lot of things – reshape her current order, arrange for psychological assistance that side. So there’s quite a lot of things that you get involved in because now you’ve got this consciousness different from a person who’s never been involved. You know, they just mind their own business. So, right now, when you hear that the workers are striking, you say eish …

I do participate in protests, not all of them, and I definitely vote. I’m a member of the ANC and the ANC is in good standing. So, I actively am involved and where I’m called upon to lead, I’m available to do so.

**Impact on personal and family life**

It has impacted on my personal life; I did find a fiancé but unfortunately we broke off some time. There is quite a lot of love in the SRC [he laughs]. And also you learn a lot of things: in power, out of power, in power, out of power. You learn that people in most cases are not attracted to you, but to what you have because you get people, even in your relations with business people, your relations with women, for example, when you are in power, it’s a different thing. When you are out of power, it’s a different thing. But it allows you to be able to test people’s consistency in your life.
So you get a girlfriend when you are in power. You lose power, you lose her. She wants to come back when you have power again, you know those kinds of things. But you get to understand.

Fixing the education system: people's education for people's power

At the close of the interview, Madlala shared his views on how the education system in South Africa needs to be reformed to better serve the country’s needs, namely to produce graduates that are not only employable but who can apply their competences in different contexts.

Producing graduates who can apply their competences for societal development even outside the context of employment

I think the education system partners have got a lot to discuss. The flaws in our education system are at the centre of what we find ourselves as a country and no one seems to be paying attention to the quality of education.

I hear of task teams left, right and centre; but I have not heard of a task team that is looking into the curriculum that is offered. The entire education system, from primary education to the higher education system, has been hugely compromised. A person that will graduate today is still a product of a post-apartheid era.

We should be fully responsible for the kind of citizen we produce today. If a citizen that goes out with a qualification today, let’s say a qualification in accounting, but in a spaza shop at home they can’t calculate their finances, we should ask ourselves what we have taught this person.

If that citizen is a lawyer, but sits at home and people are abused, and this person does not assist because he’s waiting to be employed by a particular law firm, we must say there is something wrong with our education. We must take full responsibility to change the curriculum so that it responds to the needs of our society.

Putting society’s needs before those of industry

And industries must also respond to the needs of our society. It must be society first. In the current order, it is industry first. We teach people so that they can respond to the demands of industry. And when these industries cannot absorb these people, they are loose cannons; they are just floating in the air because they are waiting for industries to absorb them.

That is what we should be talking about in terms of how we restructure our curriculum, because the reality is, education is a critical sector. These are discussions that must be honest between society, government, industry, student leaders, vice-chancellors and everyone. This thing of academic freedom: to
what extent does it go and to what extent does it benefit our society? As well as this institutional autonomy: autonomous from what? These institutions are a section of our society that must be able to breathe life into the society that they should endeavour to develop.