chapter 3

Prishani Naidoo

University of the Witwatersrand, 1995/96 SRC vice-president [Internal] & 1996/97 SAU-SRC president

Brief biography

Dr Prishani Naidoo is director of the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP), a research institute of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). She has held this position since January 2019. In 2008, she joined the sociology department at Wits in a lecturing position. Her contribution to knowledge production includes research, writing and teaching across a number of academic fields and disciplines and across the academic–activist divide, addressing primarily questions related to poverty, protest and social movements, political subjectivity, in South Africa and the global South. Prior to rejoining Wits, Naidoo worked in and with social movements and organisations, including Indymedia and the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg. Naidoo holds a BA in English and sociology and a BA(Hons) in comparative literature from Wits, and a PhD in development studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Ntokozo Bhengu, Thierry Luescher and Nkululeko Makhubu on 19 February 2019.

Early childhood influences and upbringing

Naidoo grew up in a politically involved family where both her mother and father were medical doctors, and her father was involved in the Congress movement...
in Natal. This inevitably had a major impact on her political consciousness as a young person.

I grew up in a political family. I grew up in a Natal Indian Congress [NIC] family. My dad was the first secretary-general of the NIC when it was revived in the 1970s, Dr Dillie Naidoo. Both my parents are doctors: my mom worked in the public sector mainly, and my dad experimented with community projects. He had also grown up close to Steve Biko and Black Consciousness people. So, I grew up with my parents’ friends being BC and ANC-aligned, and so I grew up always having a political sensibility and always seeing myself as contributing to effecting change in society. There was never a question about that, but I was confused as to how I wanted to act.

I went to a state-aided Indian school until I was 11 in Port Shepstone, in a small farming community. Then my parents decided to send me to a private all-girls’ Catholic school in Durban, which I hated, but I did not question my parents at the time. I was one of three black girls in my class. I refused to make friends with the white girls; I refused to get involved in anything beyond my academic involvement. So, I was considered a very shy, quiet girl, who did well at her studies. My dad had also withdrawn from the NIC in the seventies when he was threatened with banning. So, he withdrew and went back to his hometown in Port Shepstone and did his medicine and in very underground ways supported stuff but although we had a political home, there was no real direct involvement until the 90s when things changed. Then our house in Durban became a base for meetings and I was in matric at that time and being told by my parents, ‘Stay away, stay away,’ but I was aware of what was going on. But, I only really got actively involved in the 90s and, in 1991, I started taking up organisational positions.

Political involvement at the University of Durban-Westville and beyond

Against the background of her family’s political involvement and the political environment of the early 1990s, Naidoo’s own political journey and finding herself continued when she entered higher education in 1991, joining the University of Durban-Westville (UDW, now University of KwaZulu-Natal).

I started university in 1991 at the University of Durban-Westville. I was unsure of what I wanted to do. I think I was a very confused person and I think my dad was thinking this was a kind of gap year because I had a scholarship there. He said, ‘Do whatever you want and take the year to decide,’ which is what I did. I did five Bachelor of Arts subjects and by the end of the year I
decided that I wanted to do medicine, because it’s the only way that I could imagine myself contributing to change.

So, I went to UDW and there I threw myself into student politics. It was the time when the ANC branches were being established, ANC Youth League branches were being established, after the unbanning of political organisations, the freeing of political prisoners, 1990 ... so that was the context which influenced me. For a young girl in that kind of atmosphere … For example, I can remember Operation Vula. I was sitting in the backseat of the car when Mac Maharaj was fetched from prison by my father. So, it was that kind of introduction to politics.

Carving her own path in student politics

Growing up in this environment, I took on certain traditions, certain approaches without questioning them. I eventually started to see myself as independent in a political formation when I joined the student movement. So, 1991, I joined the South African National Students’ Congress [SANSCO] at the time; I also knew certain older students from being involved through my parents. I was always the kind of ‘laaitie’ tagging along.

I actually did SRC work in that first year. It was a different time as well because it was the time of mass movements and organisations. There were real functioning sub-committees; there were functioning spaces through which you could produce media. For example, I got involved in what was called the Free Press Collective, which at the time produced a newspaper called Free Press at the University of Durban-Westville. Many of us living in the community were also mobilising and attending meetings to establish ANC and ANC Youth League branches.

Expanding political relationships and experiences of factionalism

Naidoo’s political involvement extended beyond campus politics and some of her political connections were established off campus as an active member of an ANC branch. This broadened her understanding of party politics and internal party contestations.

Malusi Gigaba was someone I met hitchhiking for example. That’s the kind of time we were in; he was hitchhiking. One day, my mum stopped and gave him a lift and we realised that we were neighbours, and then we found each other in the ANC branch. Then, there was a very contested ANC branch – western areas – in Durban, which I was part of; I realised later that there were people with big names in that branch: Alec Erwin, Pravin Gordhan, Fatima Meer. It was a really vibrant branch and a contested one. I learnt in that time that there was contestation within the movement; not everybody believed in the same
thing. There was a huge divide between the unionists and those belonging to the party [the South African Communist Party/SACP].

The ANC and this idea of a broad church – you started seeing those kinds of differences … and then we established the first ANC Youth League [ANCYL] branch in that area. Malusi was chair and I was secretary-general. So, I also started to get to know the bigger ANC because he was also involved in the provincial ANCYL executive committee at that time. I started attending some of those meetings and that’s where I learnt about the bigger organisation and then in 1992, that’s when I decided to do medicine and I got into Wits.

From UDW to Wits

Naidoo’s journey took a turn when she moved from Durban to Johannesburg, now having set her mind on what to study, while Congress politics and student politics continued to be an integral part of her life. Coming to Wits opened a new chapter in her life that brought about new challenges.

I came here to do medicine and the first year was fine because it was the general kind of subjects and I threw myself again into student politics. It was the time when SANSCO and NUSAS [National Union of South African Students] were merging to form SASCO.

I got involved in all of those debates and discussions and once again it was a really vibrant branch. You could speak of it as mass politics. There were functioning sub-committees and you would come in and join either a res [student residence] committee or another sub-committee.

I was taken under the wing of some senior male comrades and then very quickly I was put on the branch executive committee. I had no organisational skills, no sense of what was really happening at the time and got thrown into the position of res coordinator.

Gender discrimination in residence life and becoming a house committee member

The residence life at the university was characterised by the separation of genders. There were separate male and female residences, which had discriminatory norms that did not settle well with Naidoo and which she confronted.

I lived at res, Jubilee Hall, which was an all-girls’ res. At the time we were a minority of black students. In my first week here during orientation week, I got confronted by a white house committee member (who acted like a prefect) and a kind of house committee initiation. I think in that moment I started to realise the ‘problem’ of being a woman or the problems related to gender.
Just to give you a sense: orientation week consisted of all of these separate activities that would bring us together as the girls’ res with what was called our brother res: Ernest Oppenheimer Hall. So, the very first night of orientation week, we were summoned by the house committee to the dining room and the house committee from the male res arrived in white coats and introduced themselves and asked us to separate ourselves into virgins and non-virgins … That’s just to give you an example and that kind of thing continued for the week.

You can imagine, I had already had my experience at UDW and I wasn’t going to shut up. So, I started organising black students in the res and then eventually contested house committee elections. A few of us black students got on to the house committee … it was a split house committee – racially.

**Experiences with the SASCO branch at Wits, key issues and demands**

Naidoo recalls a number of matters in her reflections on the SASCO branch at Wits, starting with the strategies that some comrades used to recruit women into the branch, the way the branch established a reputation for challenging the ANC leadership, and SASCO’s call for broad transformation at Wits.

**Recruitment strategies**

Naidoo’s reflections of her SASCO experience at Wits start with the different ways in which women were being recruited into SASCO in the early years.

At that time, recruitment strategies in SASCO were non-existent. There were too few women in the branches. So, my comrades told me much later on that they would come to the residences at the time of TV news and see how many women were watching the news. That was a recruitment strategy.

Here we were trying to transform society, but amongst ourselves, our own practices, our own forms of relating to each other … speaking about recruitment, many comrades used to be proud of the fact that they recruited female comrades through starting up relationships with them. It was seen as a recruitment strategy and as nothing wrong. We laugh about it now, but those kinds of things happened.

**A radical branch, challenging ANC leadership**

The Wits SASCO branch was seen as radical to the extent that it challenged some of the ANC leaders at that time; it was also a branch with close ties to local community organisations. Naidoo recalls:

Wits SASCO branch became notorious over that period from the early 90s to about 1997/98 for questioning the ANC leadership from within. I was in the middle of that and cut my political teeth during that time. The divisions that I had started to see back home started to manifest on a much bigger scale.
in my university life and the contestation that we now see today, I started to experience then.

But there was also commitment from within SASCO to the idea of student politics that weren’t always driven by the Alliance, particularly here. For example, we fought every year about whether there should be the establishment of ANC Youth League branches on campus and in my time that didn’t happen. It happened only recently. How we fought about that, whether we were autonomous or not. That is how we were trying to make sense of the matters at that time.

*Participation in the National Education Crisis Committee campaign*

From 1993, the SASCO Wits branch was also part of community formations. We always saw ourselves as embedded in broader structures and we used to talk about the MDM, the mass democratic movement. So, the National Education Crisis Committee [NECC] at the time made a call for the occupation of white schools and the SASCO branch at that time undertook a campaign to call for the resignation of all Council members.

We linked our campaign to the NECC campaign and started to talk about what kind of forms this campaign should take in the university context. The vice-chancellor was away and the deputy vice-chancellor, June Sinclair, was put in charge. They started anticipating violent forms of action, but nothing had happened yet. They started mobilising their forces against anticipated action. But to cut a very long story short, after the first mass protest which was just a march on campus, Sinclair called the police on campus for the first time in many years.

*Protest action, ANCYL intervention and SASCO’s call for a transformation forum*

After challenging the university management and Council on various transformation issues, including the call to dismantle existing governance structures seen as illegitimate, SASCO eventually demanded the establishment of a broad transformation forum at Wits.

Our demands were whittled down to making this demand for broad transformation. In that time, our demonstrations were starting to get uglier and that started to split the movement. I mean its laughable now – after what we’ve witnessed since 2015 – but at that time what was seen as the most problematic form of action on the part of students was littering campus.

So, Wits started the first ‘Operation Litter’ and that’s when the ANCYL Provincial Committee and National Executive Committee were here in our branch office, scolding us students like high school scholars. And the branch was also split. Our demonstrations started to be related to the broader approaches of the alliance and what was acceptable in the alliance – acceptable
forms of action. The branch also started to experience problems, started to fragment, and attendance of meetings started to dwindle.

Demand for broad transformation and the establishment of FFACT

Then the broad transformation demand became central. Over time, Wits established what we can debate was a broad transformation forum or not. And over that time student leaders started to get caught up in, and most of their time started being taken up by, negotiations around the actual character of the forum and there were really some ridiculous discussions.

So, for example, the name of the forum eventually was, because that was fought over, the Forum for Further Accelerated and Comprehensive Transformation [FFACT] because Wits administration wouldn’t concede that they had not been committed to transformation in the past. After all, they had fought the apartheid state …

So then, in that time it also became more important within the branch to contest representative structures on campus.

Becoming involved in the SRC

After serving in SASCO and various other student political structures, Naidoo was now set to step up to serve in the SRC. As part of the context of such involvement at the time, it is important to recall that the question of the role of the SRC was one that continued to be debated.

Deliberations on the role of the SRC and the campus as site of struggle

Naidoo recounts the contestation over whether the SRC is part of the governance structures of the university or more of a student union.

So that also changed over time at Wits: moving from the black students’ society to the Students’ Representative Council in that moment of the merger between SANSCO and NUSAS. I am speaking about those two because they were dominant at that time. They really pushed and participated. There were always divisions, always debate, always contestation about what the SRC meant or what it would become. I think to the detriment of SASCO, the SRC was seen as another representative space that SASCO could gain another voice through.

Advancing the national democratic revolution

If you also think of my generation coming onto campuses, imagining ourselves as contributing to this mass struggle and seeing campuses as what we used to call ‘sites of struggle’, we were thinking about how our agenda would enable
the university to contribute to the broader transformation of society. If you came from the Congress tradition, it was building non-racialism, non-sexism, democracy, and in this branch, in a few SASCO branches, we used to have the principles of African leadership and working-class leadership and that also related to the theory of the national democratic revolution and so on. So, supposedly representative structures were to further that big agenda.

You also imagined yourself as having the correct line, as having these solutions, having these answers. You were going into the SRC to take forward a predetermined agenda. It was to convince everybody else. At that time, it was a majority of white students. How the hell were you going to win? There was a sense that the SRC was also not taken seriously by white students outside of NUSAS.

So, people used to talk about apathy: people are apathetic, that’s why they don’t vote. I think that’s another discussion to be had in this current day. But, at the time that was it, so you played with the SRC; you played with the processes of the SRC; you didn’t necessarily take it very seriously in following the rules and so on. It was your agenda to get your people into that structure so that you can get access to resources and so that you could do the work that’s determined in the branch.

Debating university governance: toward a non-hierarchical system of governance

As time goes by, you get your people on Council and Senate, and involved in what was unfolding in terms of this broader policy agenda and policy transformation agenda. So, that’s why it was debated every year. There was also a group within SASCO that thought this policy transformation process was not the way to go: we should be opposing it and we should be insisting on broad transformation forums as they were initially imagined, or we should be contesting structures of governance as they exist completely, down with councils, down with Senate, down with the professors towards a more horizontal, non-hierarchical kind of approach to changing the system.

And you’ll recall, the first non-racial SRCs came at the beginning of the 1990s. Prior to that there were black students’ societies. So, SASCO came from the merger, and with the principle of non-racialism came the prioritisation of SRCs. At its Wits branch that was the debate every single year. There were some who were committed to the idea of SRC as a student representative structure. It made a difference whether you came from NUSAS and that tradition, that you fought in different ways from the majority of black student leaders and activists who saw the SRC as a means through which we could get another voice on the campus.

SASCO was still recognised and we fought very hard for SASCO to be considered as a separate entity in FFACT. So, there was always a debate on how we contest SRC elections … the imagination of this ‘new student’ and
so on. It was funny, because there was some kind of imagination that you
must choose those who are popular, those who hung out at parties, those who
would be able to speak to a broader mass to contest elections.

I had been on a house committee and all of that, so I knew a lot of people on
campus and so on. So, I got forwarded by SASCO to contest SRC elections,
but there was at this time this contested sense of the SRC.

**Election into the SRC**

In 1995, Naidoo was elected onto the Wits SRC for 1996. Elections happened at
the end of 1995, and leaders’ terms of office ran from the end of 1995 to the end
of 1996.

I got elected as vice-president internal, which meant I had to take responsibility
for FFACT. Here it became the matter of debating Council and who would
sit on Council. So, for years it was how many representatives from each
stakeholder should there be on Council, and so you’d get bogged down in
those kinds of discussions – ridiculous debates – because sitting on those
forums were also people like Charles van Onselen, who at the time formed
part of a group of 13 academics who were challenging change, the need for
change on campus. So, for example, he would bring in the race–class debate
and then keep us occupied with that for sessions and sessions.

**Support and training for SRC members**

Naidoo reflects on her preparedness and training and the level of support they had
during their term of office in the SRC.

There was no support – like I said. I was shivering when I had to go and speak
on the report of the National Commission on Higher Education with Jairam
Reddy [who had been the vice-chancellor of UDW from 1990 to 1994 and
was the chairperson of the National Commission on Higher Education]. I
think I didn't sleep that night before, reading the entire document. You got
to think on your feet, and we relied on certain comrades. Like I said you get
taken under the wing of some senior person and you are young and fearless,
and you have these big ideas which make you act in certain ways but then you
can't deal with the consequences and what comes after.

So, no, there was no real support but there were some attempts from Wits.
For example, at Wits the dean of students at that time was Ron Carter, who
had come from Boston University in the US, got together resources and made
connections with the United States Information Service and USAID. And
Elaine Sacco and them were the student drivers of this.

When I came into SAU-SRC [South African Universities Students’
Representative Council] there was something called the National Centre
for Student Leadership and Development that was housed here in Ron Carter’s office and operated from here. He got all of us student leaders onto a committee that used to meet quite regularly with people from USAID. It was SAU-SRC, PASMA, Ignatius Molapo at that time, AZASCO, SASCO, all student leaders. And they used to give us resources and organise for us to run these training sessions across Johannesburg for SRC leaders. But, we did not have much training ourselves, and then it collapsed in that time.

Ron Carter was problematised here at Wits. To cut a long story short, they organised a trip, the first real training trip for all of us to the US. It must have been 1995 or 1996. And we were taken to mainly private colleges, African-American, along the East Coast of the States, so Morehouse College, Spellman College and then eventually we got to Howard. So, it was a slightly different experience for us.

The training started with us being asked to role-play engaging with our vice-chancellors. You can imagine, we are coming from these crisis-ridden institutions and we are told ‘to make ourselves available’ and ‘hold our vice-chancellors’ hands’. So it was that kind of thing. By the middle of it we were just completely disappointed and alienated and I decided to leave the group. I was the only woman in the group and it was made out that, ‘She is leaving because she is a woman and she is not dealing with stuff.’ But I left; I refused to continue. I asked an activist in New York to hook me up with people and I ended up staying in Harlem and I got much nicer training from an older woman activist and academic, living with her and meeting other people. But, yes, that was the only real kind of training.

**Student representation in university governance**

Naidoo’s time in the SRC was the period when black student activists not only debated new ways students should be involved in governance but also eventually entered various committees within the university for the first time.

It was in my SRC’s time that the discussions and debates started happening about whether we sit on Council or not. And there was actually a debate about it because some people felt that we were becoming part of the university management and we will be making decisions about other students, not just representing students.

But, I think there was also a debate that got lost in the time of transformation because there was this idea that the Broad Transformation Forum would replace the Council. Instead, these forums became the spaces in which we discussed transformation of existing structures of governance. So, the whole critique that was there from the early 90s about existing structures of governance got lost.
I didn't follow this process, but I think there is still a university transformation forum but it's toothless. No one hears about it. I don't know what they discuss.

‘The student voice has been heard’ – not
The experience of student representation in the committees turned out to be frustrating.

From about '95, '96, you got, I think, two representatives to Council, two representatives to Senate. I think I actually sat on it but I hated those discussions and I dropped out of them. I remember we receive these thick documents with pink, green and yellow pages [the agendas].

Look, we tried, we would put things on the agenda, and I can remember one of the senior professors saying that, it was in a debate on fees, he said, 'your voices have been heard and you have been consulted'. And I said to him, but consultations don't just legitimise a process.

It means if you were heard you must have some impact on the process. I think we got disillusioned in that time because we were being frustrated by buying into a process and then not having our grievances addressed in ways that we thought were acceptable. So, there was this thing at the time: you will never win anything at the table that you can’t win on the streets.

Internal organisation, communication and changing ways of mobilising

As a student representative structure there is an indispensable obligation for student leaders to be well informed of the needs, demands and issues experienced by the student body. During their time, Naidoo and other student leaders employed various means to communicate with the student body and student structures. At the same time, there was also the rise of a new character of student leaders.

SRC, residence councils and faculty councils
There were debates and engagement with the general student body using various platforms of engagement.

The mass meetings and so on seldom happened unless there was a crisis. The All Residence Council and the SRC had a much closer relationship at

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38 With the HE Act of 1997, the university transformation forums that had been established on some campuses became formalised in the Institutional Forum as a statutory advisory body to Council.
the time. You can imagine, the All Residence Council and the Students’ Representative Council had that close relationship because of the growing accommodation crisis. Also, members of the All Residence Council tended to be far more active and politically engaged. They would also see themselves as holding the SRC to account.

Then the faculty councils, there were very few engagements between SRC and faculty councils. I think that faculty councils have only very recently started being taken seriously by students.

**Communication spaces of engagement then and again during #FeesMustFall**

There was a SASCO newspaper that used to be produced in the 1990s called *Mamela*. There were many spaces for debate, spaces for students to actually critically engage each other about issues.

I think social media has given the current political space a different character and we have seen its successes in terms of hashtags and so on. But I think there's also more space for engagement with that form of interaction. Face-to-face engagement isn’t that necessary and that has many effects.

There's on the one hand the rise of a kind of celebrity student leader. Then on the other, you have this faceless engagement when bigger numbers of people access information not necessarily because they are members of a group, party or whatever, but because they are connected to a particular issue.

We saw #FeesMustFall here at Wits brought together a range of students, many who had never been involved politically before and came together around #FeesMustFall. They didn’t gather because SASCO had put out pamphlets or made a call. Some of them didn’t even know about SASCO and for many weeks there was some kind of general assembly in Solomon House where any student could speak.

For a time we saw some of those old traditions, old ways of speaking. I think that also then allowed for women to come together and say, ‘You know what, we have been silent, we don’t represent ourselves in these platforms and we don’t speak in this kind of language, your forms of organising are masculinist.’

Not to romanticise that, but I think there was a time that started to happen but then that space itself started to close because the older traditions started to become more dominant. We don’t also have an imagination beyond party politics. So, people withdrew into the party-political formations. Those students who didn’t want to get involved in parties kind of withdrew into their own little spaces; they formed for the first time ever at Wits a branch of the Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania [PASMA]. It’s never been there before. There was AZASCO at Wits but not a PASMA branch and AZASCO was a very small number of people.
From mass mobilisation to factionalism

At the time in which I was also involved, mass mobilisation started to fade. When I came to campus, like I said, it felt like an active branch. How organising happened then was through regular meetings of SASCO members at residences. At medical school there was a local meeting and regular branch meetings in addition to the branch executive committee meetings, and those mass meetings were really vibrant because they didn’t just deal with the day-to-day organisational stuff but real questions.

I remember debating the sunset clauses for example. That document was very real for us, and we were imagining ourselves as actually contributing to the debates. Then our leadership would go participate in the provincial, national debates and discussions, and of course, because it was such a contested space and it came with access to resources, it was significant if you were to get on the SRC and so on.

The branch became notorious for cabals and cliques. So, people were aligned to different traditions within the Alliance, setting up little groups and so on. I think that killed the movement over time.

Then, communicating with the general body of students used to happen through what was called the General Student Council, and that used to happen regularly and so I can’t remember how often but it was the SRC’s duty to call that General Student Council.

In crisis, if there were crises – and we had many crises in the 90s – generally that’s when the general student body would come and debate things, and it was the same at the University of Durban-Westville. I can remember the main hall being packed around 1991 … even Chris Hani’s death … it was, like, how we were mobilising. Those kinds of events, major issues and so on.

That started to change over time, I would argue, partly because of factionalism and also because of the change in political space and the introduction of ‘broad transformation’, the move away from protest to policy formulation … because, what started to happen here was that the branch became divided between leaders and the rest. Your leaders would be occupied by these protracted negotiations, which hardly any of them were interested in and mass participation dwindled.

The Boom Shaka generation and the SRC

I spoke about my generation on the SRC and there was contestation and so on, and I have also spoken about how over that period during which policy formulation started to be prioritised, there was a decline in mass protests. But I think at that time, SASCO leadership also started to see the importance of the SRC no matter how contested it was because it was being given more priority by university management than the individual political organisations.
I think there was a paper written about ‘the new student’ in SASCO and how this Model C – I hate to use this term but – the ‘coconut’, needed to be approached and how that group needed to be brought into politics.

So you needed music and sport and parties. SRC needed to play that role in bringing these ‘new students’ into the political space. So, the SRC started to be characterised as partying … But, at the same time you did have this idea at SASCO that you needed activists to be sent to the SRC who understood that the university still needed to be transformed, that you still needed to factor in things like fees, exclusions and so on.

Graduating into national student leadership structures

After Naidoo got onto the SRC of Wits, she was elected onto the SAU-SRC NEC which then exposed her to a host of national student issues and gave her access to various platforms. The South African Universities Students’ Representative Council (SAU-SRC) was the national body which brought all SRCs together.

I got forwarded by SASCO to the Wits SRC and things were also happening nationally. Elaine Sacco [from UCT] was the first president of the South African Universities Students’ Representative Council, now South African Union of Students [SAUS]. I got elected after her.

Naidoo served two terms as SAU-SRC president in 1996 and 1997.

The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) and free education

During that time, SAU-SRC often made what were considered to be more radical demands than SASCO, and tensions were high both at campus level and at national level as students voiced their demands.

At the same time as we were contributing to debates related to the NCHE, a new macro-economic policy was being introduced, GEAR [the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy, critiqued by many for being neoliberal in its approach and introduced by the ANC government in 1996]. So, we started from within the Alliance formations arguing against GEAR and against its impact on the transformation process in higher education.

But, in that time, interestingly enough, SAU-SRC became more radical than the SASCO NEC. It was partly because a few of us were from Wits and those from Gauteng were challenging it from within. I started getting disciplined by the SASCO NEC as someone seconded to SAU-SRC for participating in this national debate. You must remember, things really got hectic at national level in 1996, 1997, around GEAR, around the Commission
on Higher Education, and around what was happening on individual campuses, particularly around fees.

I remember the first march for free education started at Wits and was going to Stanley Avenue where the National Development Agency offices were to demand bursaries, and following that came TEFSA [Tertiary Education Fund for South Africa] and following that came NSFAS [National Student Financial Aid Scheme] and student leaders were also drawn into that process; first starting to insist on bursaries and then slowly moving into the loan scheme.

Reprimanded by Mandela
The radical approach towards addressing student issues adopted by SAU-SRC did not go unnoticed and didn’t settle well with the higher structures of the ANC and the ANC government.

The last part of this picture was the kind of discipline that I spoke about coming from higher structures in the ANC. I think it was in 1995 that Nelson Mandela summoned all student leaders to the Union Buildings and he met the SASCO leadership, SAU-SRC and SATSU [South African Technikon Students’ Union] at that time and I remember sitting around this long table and he sat at the head.

He just lectured us for like 45 minutes about the need for us to be more disciplined on campuses in that kind of fatherly reprimanding voice: ‘I will bring my army and police onto your campuses if you do not stop with this nonsense. Just tell me what you want, I will go to Anglo American, I will go and get the money for you. It’s too premature to be talking about deracialising campuses like the University of the Western Cape. Your demands are too early, just be patient and go get your degrees,’ that kind of thing. ‘Get your honours, get your masters, get your PhDs.’ That was his line. ‘Leave it to us to do the other work.’

I can remember getting five minutes at the end to respond. How do you respond in five minutes to someone that you have held in awe all your life and who was just now giving you the line? … I was very apologetic but saying we still must fight on … And at the end of it, all of us lined up for his signature.

Another Mandela story
I will give you another story, ’93 or ’94. So, at the time I think we were young, and seen to be young, and Wits was at the heart of capital. Mandela was addressing businesspeople in Johannesburg and we were protesting at the time, and he said, ‘No, he will deal with the students, and students must just behave.’ And we came out as a branch with a pamphlet with the title ‘Mandela Messianism and the Media’ and you can imagine what happened.
So, you get ANC province, ANC national, at the height of the protests here, when ‘Operation Litter’ started, I think, Cheryl Carolus and Walter Sisulu were deployed here to calm things down. So, you would be summoned by people within the ANC at various times, but I think when Mandela intervened it was also then at a national level that the policy agenda of the ANC in government was starting to be challenged. So, it wasn’t just about institutional protests.

Reflecting on #FeesMustFall

For Naidoo, #FeesMustFall opened a new chapter in student activism and a new hope in the struggle to confront neoliberalism and its impact in society. Being a Wits insider, Naidoo recalls the October 6 anti-outsourcing protest as part of the lead-up to 2015 #FeesMustFall and the first occupation of Solomon House. She reflects on her experience, partisanship, and the new forms of protest that surfaced during the momentous #FeesMustFall protests at Wits.

From #October6 to #FeesMustFall

One of the ongoing debates which re-emerged prior to and during #FeesMustFall was the issue of outsourced university workers. Meetings amongst workers, students and academics in small groupings were taking place at Wits, which led to what became known as the ‘#October6 protest’ that took place a week before #FeesMustFall.

Prior to #FeesMustFall, a few of us started meeting, initially to see how we could link worker, academic and student struggles, and link up to what was happening at the time around the idea of a United Front. We had our own differences but we agreed, let’s prioritise one issue. So we started organising for a demonstration on campus against outsourcing on the 6th of October 2015 and then we became known as #October6. So … exactly a week before #FeesMustFall broke out, was the October 6 demonstration against outsourcing.

That saw a few of the students getting involved in a shutdown, shutting down The Matrix on October 6, which is where all the shops are at Wits, to enable outsourced workers to join the protest. That was a non-partisan protest. It brought together SASCO, EFF, independent students who didn’t want to join a party, and that’s also increasingly becoming and became quite evident in #FeesMustFall. We were questioning party politics, questioning the party model; we wanted something different.

From the #October6 group came the slogan ‘Towards a public African decolonised university’ and the discussions around decolonisation included
structures of governance and the need to imagine a very different system of working together that doesn’t reproduce hierarchies.

I am still on the WhatsApp group and demonstrations are still possible. They keep on saying, ‘Let’s revive #October6’ but we thought about hosting a long series of discussions and debates and seminars that would confront these questions, because we were also saying, we don’t have models any more. We are not coming with predetermined solutions any more. Many of us had been defeated around those.

Those issues are still there, and in the 2015 moment in a very new way, through the discourse of decolonisation, black students and African students in particular, bringing together all those demands around curriculum transformation, language, outsourcing and bringing together fees and free education, and bringing together worker and student issues, and then also seeing themselves once again as part of a community being in the university. That moment was really interesting, exciting, but also sometimes a bit scary, because no one knew what was happening.

I was on sabbatical and my partner teaches in politics and I just came to fetch him, and we ended up camping here for the next three days. Also, student leaders were not expecting this, you speak to Shaeera and others who led, they will tell you that they would have been happy to have had 200 students on the day. They were not anticipating this.

Experience on the ground during #FeesMustFall and the prevailing campus issues

No one had anticipated that the #FeesMustFall campaign at Wits would become a movement and attract so much attention. Many issues that came with such a massive protest wave had to be addressed on the go. They ranged from daily logistics and catering for students in Solomon House to the political differences that surfaced again and again, and the common ground found in a new discourse centring the notion of decolonisation and new ways of seeing each other. Naidoo recalls the first days of occupation:

Food, toilets, basic things – you started being called by students who had a relationship with a few of us.

Also, in that time, I spoke about this open space that had been created. But even on the first night, EFF and SASCO protested in circles next to each other, singing the same songs but refusing to engage with each other.

And you were also dealing with that kind of thing on the night that Adam Habib [the vice-chancellor of Wits] was held here in Solomon House.

It was actually crazy to witness what was going on between different student factions because there was no sense of how we were going to get out of this. Yes, we have our demands, but how do we move beyond this particular
moment. So, that entire night there were people going around different groups of students trying to bring them together to some kind of consensus that eventually ended up being the statement that was signed.

The issues are still there. They have taken centre stage in a very different way and there is a new discourse that has emerged that has allowed for that newness: decolonisation.

If you sit in meetings you will hear students referring to workers as their mothers and fathers, as their daughters and sons, you know. It’s not comrade any more. It’s about how we are seen in this space, how we feel in this space, how we able to be, and how are we able to become, and that comes from many different individual experiences and groups, and encounters with knowledge itself. Biko became prominent on campus, graffiti and slogans; Robert Sobukwe; the renaming of these buildings.

The birth of the new movement and the aesthetic of protests during #FeesMustFall

Naidoo reflects on the intellectual work, the political imagination and creativity that went with the protest movement. There was a revival of former struggle icons and graffiti and artistic performances became an impactful form of protest.

It started on October 6 first and then it just grew and grew. In the months before there was also a group called Black Thought. When you walk around you will sometimes see the Black Thought graffiti, things like that.

Solomon Mahlangu is a very interesting example. You can’t explain how a Congress icon suddenly becomes a figure for an entire movement of a generation that didn’t grow up under apartheid, that has no real concrete relationship to this history, for many of the students who were not involved in a Congress formation or any political formations.

The majority of them who came together in Solomon House would not have been part of any political formation. If you walk around campus, you will see the Solomon Mahlangu signs. On the day we came back from the mass protest by the Union Buildings, Solomon Mahlangu’s image was there and you just saw the ‘Project Hoopoe’ logo below it – I don’t know who they are, where they come from, but they also made a significant impact – they linked Marikana to the Wits struggle in some of their stickers. There is now only a trace of the image that remains after the university management tried to have it erased.

In addition to the graffiti, there were lots of kinds of artistic performance. For example, when the private security was brought on campus the entire Great Hall was fenced off. Arts students brought together other students and put on a performance where there were banners linking up all the different struggles, from Andries Tatane to Marikana, and then a group of them
In her reflections on #October6 and #FeesMustFall, Naidoo could not hide her pride in the new crop of student leaders that it brought to the fore and her cautious hope that 20 years after her own experience in student leadership, the stalled transformation project may regain some momentum.

**Changing the world as a scholar activist**

Naidoo came into student politics from a family background of anti-apartheid and liberation politics, steeped in the Congress tradition. After completing her studies at Wits, she continued her activism including by helping found and organise the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg. She explains how she sees herself today, having returned to Wits in 2008 as an academic in the Department of Sociology.

**From student leader to full-time community activism**

I graduated here with my undergrad. I had the possibility to stay on but decided not to and went to work in movements. I worked at Khanya College and did contract research and so on, and started connecting up with the unions and community organisations. Then, in 2000 Wits introduced its first plans for neoliberal policies and some of us started to protest against those and then Wits SASCO branch got divided over that. Academics, workers and students came together at Wits, at the same time the city was introducing ‘iGoli 2002’ which was its first set of neoliberal policies and so we got together with other activists in the city and started demonstrating against conference here called ‘Urban Futures’ which was showcasing these policies and in those struggles the Anti-Privatisation Forum [APF] was born.

So, I threw myself into the Anti-Privatisation Forum between 2000 and 2006. If you look at the initial makeup of the APF, one of the first chairpersons of the APF was from SASCO, but over time certain activists withdrew. COSATU and so on withdrew. I remained active there and kept the link with outsourced workers and activists on the campus. I was also relating to other activists in SASCO at Wits who started to go through some of the experiences I had had in relation to taking on some policies of the alliance and being constrained by the transformation process.

And then in 2008 I took a contract job here as an associate lecturer in sociology and I really felt at that moment completely defeated, I mean like I am not giving you the whole story … the APF does not exist any more. For a
whole lot of reasons it declined, and I withdrew feeling completely defeated and said okay I am heading back to my studies and went into a master’s programme at UKZN, but my research was here in Orange Farm. So, I was struggling for library access in the first year and application for the job was one way to get library access and I got back into the space.

**Returning to Wits and continuing to work with student activists**

On describing herself based on the roles and various hats she has worn in her journey, Naidoo states that she would like to be called a ‘scholar activist’, as she continues with her recount of her life back at Wits, connecting the impact of her student leadership, her community activism, her scholarly work and the #FeesMustFall movement.

The value of being back here, and over time was just to have student activists coming over and knocking at my door because of what I was teaching in the classroom, this seemed huge. After a little while, well, this is a little space: you get to know who’s here and who’s there. So, people like Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, the EFF spokesperson, came to me as a struggling activist from SASCO, you know; he’s been threatened with expulsion and so on. How does he deal with this, so those kinds of engagement … Vuyani Pambo, so those kinds of people … some ended up leading #FeesMustFall. So, I started having those kinds of engagement, started reconnecting with people, with the solidarity committee that was taking up the questions of outsourcing. All those issues that I felt defeated around, people were still taking up in very small groups and they were often not having a lot of success.

**Confronting oneself as academic and activist in #FeesMustFall**

It is definitely a significant moment that shaped my life overall, because it’s in that moment where I had really to confront who I was, who I wanted to be, who I could be, and how I could answer that question that I came to university with, which was, ‘How do I contribute to effecting change in the world?’

Knowledge itself and knowledge production I started to see as very important and central in that idea of changing the world. I never imagined myself as an academic because ‘academic’ was a swear word in my house and in the movement.

The first time I was ever made to confront that I am an academic was in the #FeesMustFall protest because students identified me as an academic. There were few who knew me and knew where I came from. In such a mass of students you are an academic, the enemy. So, yes, it became very real in a different sense which made me confront who I am. I have been really lucky, I think, to have had the experience of 10 years teaching in the social sciences and humanities. I didn’t ever imagine myself as applying for this kind of job
and to be in this space. The Society, Work and Politics Institute is one of the Wits research institutes that has been able to sustain itself in the space of the university whilst continuing to do more activist work. So, yes, I still struggle with that title of academic.

**Scholarly activism and the classroom**

How one imagines oneself in the world also changes in different forms of interactions and engagements. I gain the most from being challenged in the classroom about what I am presenting. I am lucky to teach the sociology of work and theory around that and then social movements and collective action, and sociological theory.

The race–class debate, gender, feminist thought, student movements, the new social movements, these have been the kind of issues I have interacted around – with this generation that has not grown up under apartheid. Many of them not coming with the kind of baggage that most of us carry having grown up in that period and many of them not coming with the knowledge that is produced within political parties and political formations, means that they have a much broader set of understandings of the world that they then want to bring into the classroom and then speak to the theory or make the theory speak to their experience. That opens up a very different set of conversations.

**The future of representative politics: what is the alternative?**

I think the moment is now (it might even be too late) to be confronting the challenge of representative politics because I think a lot of our students are struggling with what might come after or what’s the alternative. Voting or not voting today, as it applies to SRC elections as well as national elections, is not necessarily apathy. It’s about questioning the very political system itself … and then there is withdrawal because there is no alternative space to actually confront the questions.