



Lihle Ngcobozi, Image provided

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**Young academics need mentorship from universities**

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 05 May 2022

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South Africa's universities are failing to implement the "social component" of their missions effectively, says Lihle Ngcobozi, a former student activist in the nationwide #FeesMustFall (#FMF) protests of 2015 and now a lecturer in the Wits School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

The failure is creating disillusion among emerging young academics, such as herself, who are "left to sink or swim" amid an institutional environment that appears to prize careerism and managerialism over engaged research and the core teaching and learning mission of universities.

"Setting aside the theoretical aspects of decolonisation for one moment, a transformed university should understand its social responsibility far more deeply than South Africa's higher education institutions do at present," Ngcobozi said.

"Universities feel like factories at present, pushing students along the assembly line so that they learn whatever they learn in order to take and pass their exams – and that is it.

"Meanwhile, the social component of the university is shrinking, when [the institution] should be a space providing learning about how to tackle the present [national] crisis, offering the tools to enable students not only to diagnose the issues but also to find the solutions."

In part, she ascribes the "shrinking" social mission to parochialism and irrelevance. "In general, and outside their own research interests, a lot of academics cannot clearly define why they are doing what they do – and I think that the teaching and learning environment reflects this lack of direction."

**Managerialism**

She also cites the challenge of managerialism – "bland, inconsequential committees, which seem to have been established to enable the operation of particular forms of power rather than with any practical purpose" – and an absence of appropriate role models.

In this regard, Ngcobozi talks of academics "who seem to be more invested in their own career progression and being superstars than they are in the fundamental work of teaching".

She describes how such behaviour can have the effect of setting inappropriate standards to which younger academics may aspire – "as if an academic is not worth their salt unless they have written a number of books, or been selected for a ministerial committee or appeared widely as a public commentator".

All of which can, Ngcobozi says, undermine the belief in academia as a calling and detracts from what she describes as "the core mission for academics", which should be to teach.

A former student activist at Rhodes University before and during the #FMF protests, she compares her predicament as a junior academic with that of the protagonists of the struggle against apartheid after the introduction of democracy in South Africa in 1994 "who were presented with the keys to the kingdom but no solution to the problem of how they should use them now that their campaign was won".

From a research perspective, Ngcobozi says that her main concern is that universities are "failing to undertake the kind of work in the world of ideas that can give people the tools to think through their history in a different way – and thus be able to address the present [national] crisis ... South Africa is facing in terms of everything, including unemployment and corruption".

"The whole thing [in South Africa] is just falling apart and no one in the humanities or in the economics departments knows how to fix it, although they know how to theorise about it," she said.

"For example, although the causes of gender-based violence have been thoroughly researched and diagnosed and policies have been forged accordingly, something is just not clicking and no one seems to know what that is."

She says that it was partly in an effort to address this problem and restore value through the promotion of a different academic approach within the university that she wrote *Mothers of the Nation: Manyano Women in South Africa* published in 2020.

Ngcobozi views the book as part of an effort to promote the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in the academy.

"Decolonisation does not mean that white authors should not be read. Rather, it is saying that there are other knowledge systems that need

to be considered theoretically sound, and not to pigeonhole work around community narratives or indigenous knowledge as merely anecdotal or as just a series of stories. These representations of experience in the world should be part and parcel of the everyday theorisations produced and deployed by academics.”

“Accordingly, in my work, I have sought to broaden the scope of what is considered theoretically sound, and not to pigeonhole work around community narratives or indigenous knowledge as merely anecdotal or as just a series of stories. These representations of experience in the world should be part and parcel of the everyday theorisations produced and deployed by academics.”

#### Mentorship for early career academics

Another key challenge facing universities, according to Ngcobozi, is their failure to support emerging scholars properly.

“Pursuit of the tenure track, which is a full-time job and requires years of academic effort and major juggling of scholarly and other responsibilities and priorities, offers insufficient financial rewards compared with those for comparable levels of effort in the private sector,” she said.

Beyond the issue of low salaries, Ngcobozi decries the lack of appropriate training on how to navigate being an academic, aside from the writing and publishing aspects of the role. She says that there is little or no advice on how to establish a research project, including on how to write a proposal and where to look for funding.

Similarly, Ngcobozi advises that there is no proper training on how to develop oneself as a researcher and producer of ideas: “For example, there could be advice on responding to critical feedback so that, instead of producing insecurity, it may be used to produce growth in an individual academic, enabling them to process their thinking more effectively and improving their capacity for developing an argument.”

She further gives warning that such support as is available through mentorship is contingent on actually being chosen – “that is on whether a senior academic is prepared to help amid their other priorities” – and may have strings attached.

“Even if one is chosen, it may be as a proxy in some academic conflict – meaning that there is an expectation of loyalty to a particular faction in the university,” she said.

#### Undergraduates

Ngcobozi says that the universities are also failing in their duty of care to the undergraduate cohort, arguing that, although the university space “may be seen as a commodity, it is also a public good – and the funding model should reflect this”.

Citing her own background in the student protest movement, she describes how many of her former peers “fell by the wayside and ended up unemployed or taking drugs or suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder”.

“This is something that I do not think is being talked about,” she said. “The reality is that some students walk into the higher education space as privileged, having attended a particular school or having won a particular scholarship and not necessarily having to worry about funding their families.

“Many of these students, who have significant support, are thus able to become the ideal graduate and reap the benefits and rewards of a university education.”

Others, however, are disadvantaged. “For students from rural areas, the provision of three meals a day, shower facilities and basic security is invaluable,” Ngcobozi said. “Unless they are provided with the wherewithal to survive, they cannot be expected to undertake their studies effectively.”

Universities in South Africa, she contends, must do more to address this challenge.

“People should be able to access higher education without getting into debt and without poverty looming throughout. In this regard, universities need to take their role of offering a safety net and providing basic welfare to students from poor homes more seriously,” she said.

“The duty of care to the students goes beyond just teaching them.”

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor David Everatt for the ‘The Imprint of Education’ project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on their reimaginings of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher edited the transcript for length and focus. The full transcript of the interview can be downloaded from the HSRC’s website.*

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