

South Africa. Apartheid. On 16 June 1976 high-school students in Soweto protested for better education.

Credit: Photo by Bongani Mnguni/City Press

A young Incoming WITS SRC president Nompundulo Mkhathshwa leads the #feesmustfall protest march

Credit: AFP/Marco Longari

Six student leaders participated in a public conversation at the HSRC on how youth educational activism has changed since the Soweto student uprising in 1976, and their vision for future change and activism. The conversation took place a few months after various student movements such as #RhodesMustFall, #TransformWits, and #OpenStellenbosch captured South Africa's attention and three months before the start of the nationwide #FeesMustFall and #EndOutsourcing national student campaigns – *Sharlene Swartz, Alude Mahali and Sarah Chiumbe*

Youth (educational) activism: then and NOW

The six student leaders were UCT public policy honours student Kgotsi Chikane, National President of InkuluFreeheid and one of the leaders of Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) and subsequently Fees Must Fall; Wits politics master's student Simamkele Dlakavu, a leader from #TransformWits; UCT African studies honours student Jessica Breakey, a former student representative council (SRC) member, one of the leaders of the White Privilege Project; Petunia Mpoza from the Progressive Youth Alliance and SRC member at Wits; Simphiwe Dubazana, a member of the UNISA SRC, and Bheka Ntuli, a member of the Democratic Alliance Students Organisation (DASO), Mangosuthu University of Technology. The answers that follow are direct quotations from their discussions.

How has youth activism changed since Soweto 1976?

Everything has changed – it's now about the curriculum, African history and access for the marginalised

Simamkele (Wits): Our struggle is not just for freedom in general, but against a political and economic status quo. We are in direct conflict with existing government policies and how the economy has been allowed to function in this country.

Simphiwe (UNISA): The nature of activism in itself has changed. For instance, the generational struggle of the 1976 era was to try and create a uniform system of education that did not place one race on the pedestal while undermining the potential of the other

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race. It was more or less trying to create equality rather than a separation. We are no longer separate but we are still not equal. Now the generational struggle is, among other things, to transform the curriculum in itself. We are not only concerned with merely putting a black lecturer instead of a white lecturer, but want to be told about our history and the invaluable contributions that have been made by Africans. We also need to abolish the capitalistic system of education which continues to undermine the potential of those who are disadvantaged.

Unlike in 1976, we have to begin by showing people that change is needed; we had to overcome people's complacency and entitlement

Kgotsi (UCT): Unlike in '76, we first have to change people's mind-sets. Currently people's mind-sets are that while we have problems we are better off than before. That mind-set inhibits us from thinking more deeply and saying, 'Actually there's a fundamental issue [of inequality] that we have in this country that if we don't solve, ten years from now we will self-destruct'.

Entitlement and complacency

Bheka (MUT): Compared to the youth of 1976, today you will see that the youth and the society at large

has become politically despondent. There's a huge sense of entitlement and... Rather than progressing, we are moving backwards and we need to go out there and re-educate our society.

Simphiwe (UNISA): Young people are interested in contributing to this society. They are not actually complacent – they're denied the opportunity to contribute. We have a National Development Plan that young people have not contributed to, it's a farce. Imagine a 65-year-old writing a document about the future that they will not form part of. Young people are trying to find a space to contribute. If no-one is willing to fix this country, we will. Regardless of race, or class or background because it is our future children and our grandchildren who will inherit this country.

We have the privilege of drawing on the experience of the 1976 activists

Kgotsi (UCT): When we started Rhodes Must Fall, we lacked organisational skills. It was of benefit to meet people face-to-face that were involved in 1976. It helped us learn... Parents [Kgotsi is the son of apartheid activist Rev. Frank Chikane] helped us in terms of organising, mass mobilisation and also practicalities – having enough water and food on the day, how to be peaceful in the face of

violence... Also today there's no clear enemy for you to fight. Back in the day there was a clear enemy so we also had to find new ways to mobilise.

Simamkele (Wits): We can't have the same conversations that the '76 comrades were having. We had to ask how we are adding to this conversation. We looked at the way that they did things. We looked at their mistakes, their way of mobilising. In our mobilisation we tried to learn these lessons. We also learned from the experiences that happened in the world – especially in the global south colonies. In the University of Nairobi, for instance, in 1968, they had a similar struggle led by the renowned author Ngugi wa Thiong'o where they transformed their university space.

Jessica (UCT): It's always important to go back to the archive. I went back to the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) archive because their experience of white people and black people separating in order to wage separate struggles was very similar to what we were doing with the White Privilege project. This was like when Steve Biko told NUSAS that it was time to go on his own and he formed the South African Student Organisations (SASO) and the Black Consciousness Movement. The same conversations were happening about critical whiteness and about white privilege... So whilst the RMF self-emancipation dialogue was happening, we wanted to have the white privilege dialogue happen as well as a form of allyship.

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Social media is a new addition to activism and is critical in numerous ways

Kgotsi (UCT): Social media is probably the most fundamental aspect of how youth activism has changed since 1976.

People think the turnout at our RMF protest was a random act of luck. But a lot of us read articles on how previous student movements and protests use social media to their advantage. We had 5 000 'likes' on our Facebook page in less than a week – 5 000 people who are interested and with whom you can communicate directly. ... This helped spread the idea to other student movements across the country as they got going. Then during the protests we were able to control the rhetoric itself through Twitter and Facebook – about university and police responses. This was completely different to 1976 when it was only the government who got to communicate about what was going on. But we also had to remember that social media excludes lots of people. Not everyone has Facebook or Twitter.

What should the future of youth activism look like in South Africa?

We need an overall and shared vision of transformation

Jessica (UCT): It would be so much easier if we just knew what the future is that we wanted. The activists of 1976 had one common vision. Now we want transformation, a future where everyone can be human... But I think the difficulty is trying to get to this end goal without stripping away each other's humanity. This is an intersectional struggle – it's class, and race, and economics, and sexuality, and gender. I really do believe that no-one is free until we are all free. I think that allyship is needed in all of those struggles.

We need a networked and united struggle, with practical solutions

Petunia (Wits): We must network and work together to solve these multi-faceted problems. I also believe that all of us can advance change in the little spaces that we occupy – be it in

academia, in the townships that you come from. There's hope – look at the calibre of young people advocating for change... A good start I think is to revisit the Freedom Charter which was a community charter. It will unite us across the political spectrum... regardless of race, creed or educational background.

Kgotsi (UCT): We don't have to be a multi-issue generation. We don't have to try and solve every single problem that exists. It is okay if your group focuses on a single issue.

We can all be a part of this knowledge generation and knowledge production.

Simamkele (Wits): Academics frequently silence us saying that the issues need experts to solve them, but that's not true. Anyone can contribute and everyone can be a part of it. We need to go out into our communities and learn what people want. We can all be a part of this knowledge generation and knowledge production.

Economic emancipation is a key outcome

Bheka (MUT): I am driven by my own experience of having had little freedom to express my views and opinions in the past. I want to see an open society, where young people are drivers of change and advocates for development and transformation. I want to see a system of education that creates an economically independent African child.

Authors: Professor Sharlene Swartz, research director, Human and Social Development (HSD) research programme, HSRC; Dr Alude Mahali, research specialist, HSD; Dr Sarah Chiumbe, African Research Fellow, HSD.

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of racism

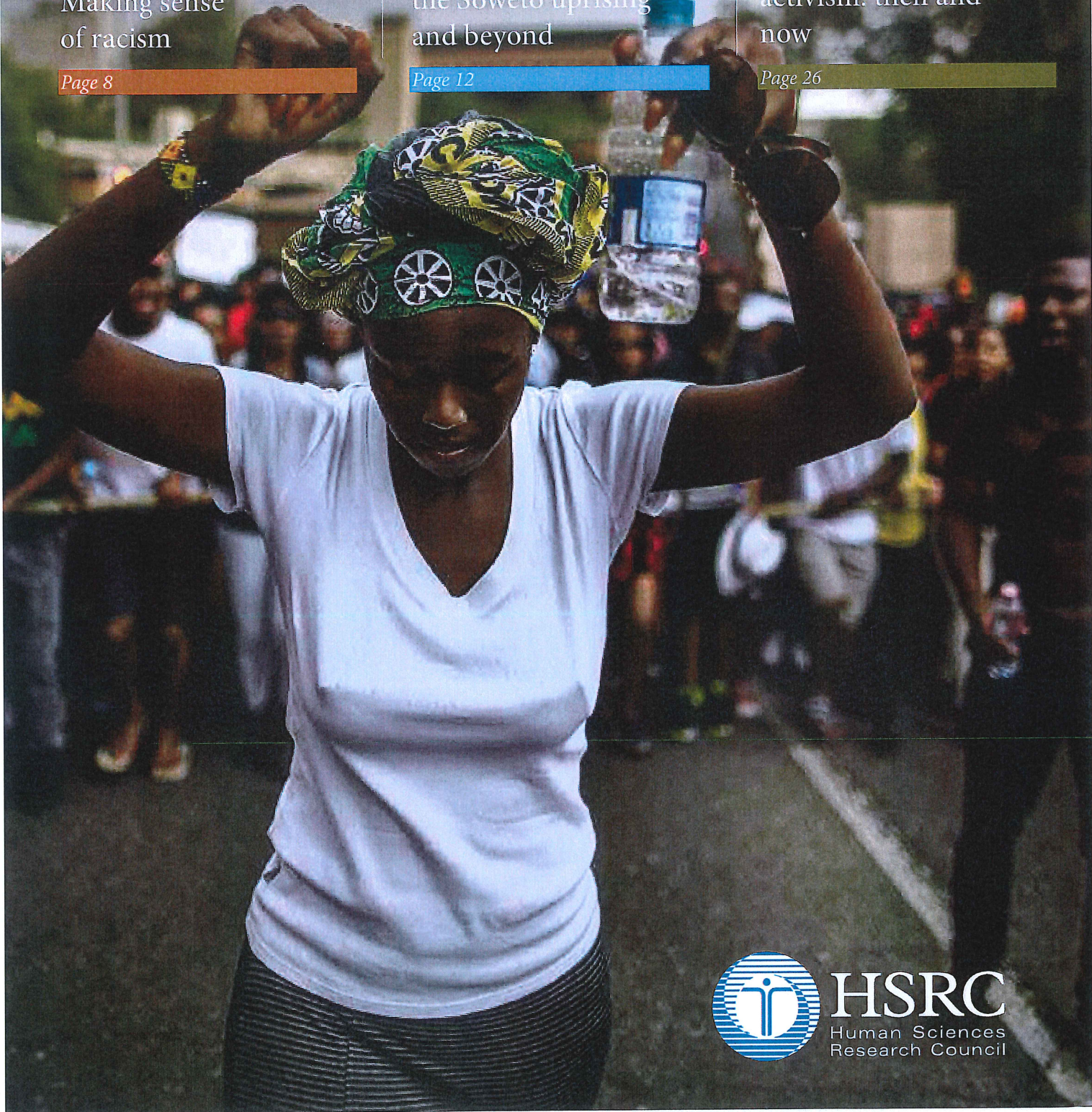
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