

## Making the difference

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### **Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng weighs in on her role as UCT Vice-Chancellor and the challenges faced so far.**

Former UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price – now said to be job-hunting in London – will be largely remembered for the way he dealt with the turbulent #FeesMustFall years on campus. His successor, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, hopes to shape the university “in a completely different way”.

Interviewed in her office on UCT’s lower campus, Phakeng was firm that she did not want to compare herself with Price, saying “It’s not my business to assess my predecessors”. However, the new VC later on alluded to “a number of things” she inherited which she now sees as her challenges.



**Mamokgethi Phakeng**

Phakeng said one of the first things she did after her appointment as Vice-Chancellor of UCT in July was to meet as many different groupings of students as possible “so that I understand where people come from”.

“I had meetings with different student formations: Sasco, Daso, EFF, SAUJS, Pasma and the Palestinian Solidarity Forum. [*The SRC is now dominated by the EFF group.*]

I wanted to meet them all. I also met with labour unions, to hear about their issues are.

I felt I should introduce myself and explain how I work, because I know there’ll be a time when they are not happy about my decisions – whether students or workers. I felt it important that we meet now, when we are not fighting, so we can tell each other what we stand for and can attend to issues that are bubbling.”

With slightly raised eyebrows to demonstrate another thing she inherited, Phakeng continued: “Those weren’t the only people I met. In my first week here, I noticed there was a group of students who were not registered but were staying in residence. I wanted to know who they were and why they were still in our residences when they are not UCT students. I discovered that they are our former students who are currently not registered – many of them because they have been academically excluded and a few because of outstanding debts.

“My style is not to always start with the punitive. I spoke to these students and called up their marks. One had finished her master’s, but without full funding, so she still

owed the university about R60,000. However, she has a bursary to do her PhD but because she had not completed paying for her master's, her funding for the PhD could not kick in.

"Some cases are genuine and the issues resolvable – but in the case of some others, I said to them: 'You say you care for your fellow students... but you are occupying rooms for students who are registered and need accommodation. You must go home.' So, there are a lot of things I inherited. "

A far less diplomatic critic of Max Price in recent months, however, has been the fiery and vocal UCT Emeritus Professor of 40 years' service, Tim Crowe. In a scathing blog earlier this year, he gave Price two-out-of-ten for his management of UCT. He slammed the former vice-chancellor for focusing his efforts on a policy of "learning to engage with fallist-generated chaos" instead of looking for a successor to his ten-year tenure. He said Phakeng had inherited a "Priceful" UCT which was "declining in international status".

"If she emulates Price and 'negotiates' only with 'fallists', what will VC Phakeng do when they break the law when their demands are not met?" wrote Crowe.

In January last year, Phakeng was appointed as UCT's Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Inter-nationalisation). Prior to that she spent five years as Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research and Innovation at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

Some who frequent the corridors of UCT have noted a bit of a personality cult growing around the woman who has tattoos, who shared a desk at school with disgraced former Eskom chief executive Brian Molefe, who still prefers to clean her own house and who turned down her own inauguration ceremony. ("Why should so much money be spent on telling me how special I am when students are struggling to graduate?")

Prof Phakeng has set up the Vice-Chancellor's Student Support Fund through which she gives 10% of her salary to help struggling students.

And it is said that, without fanfare, she called up students, individually, who were victimised by fallists during exams last year, to hear their stories.

Although Prof Phakeng's tenure so far has been short, she has not managed to dodge controversy. She was slammed by students for insinuating that stress from the #FeesMustFall movement had contributed to the suicide earlier this year of the Dean of Health Sciences, Professor Bongani Mayosi. "I never said 'fallist' students were responsible... My relationship with students has never broken down."

Recently the VC tweeted congratulations to student Masixole Mlandu on his Honours project which argues that South Africa is a settler-colonial society built and

maintained through conquest – and in which he ended his acknowledgements with the struggle slogan “One settler, one bullet!”

She tweeted: “Congratulations dear son on completing this paper! I am proud of you! Way more than you can imagine! Well done!” Later, in a press statement, she distanced herself “from the threats of violence contained in the acknowledgements section of the dissertation”, saying she “could never be proud of promises of bullets”. but was proud of Mlandu’s hard work.

Although a lot of work had gone into transforming UCT over the past ten years, it was not enough, which gave rise to the #FeesMustFall movement on campus, said the VC. Transformation efforts had been mainly focused on student access (through financial aid) and employment equity.

“Both are important because they bring the critical mass, but they are not sufficient for transformation. In fact, they create a sense that you bring people into a space and you expect them to be grateful and assimilate and that’s precisely the contestation that brought 2015; there was this sense that nothing had changed. My view is that transformation is not just about equity of access, which is important but not sufficient. We should strive for equity of participation and success just as we have driven equity of access.

“We can do this by recognising that, while those who are previously disadvantaged have the potential to be successful, they need extra or special support so they, too, can achieve excellence. For example, ring-fenced funding for previously disadvantaged researchers; post-doctoral opportunities for them to gain international experience, and mentorship programmes that recognise them as bringing value to the university and not as being under-prepared.

Phakeng continued: “While some celebrate the achievements of transformation in the last years, we haven’t actually changed the complexion and the composition of the professoriate. It is still largely male and mainly white. People will more than likely say that no black people met the criteria. Well, in my view, we haven’t worked at enabling them to succeed. They were expected to just assimilate and succeed.

What has not been addressed is that they are coming to a different space – culturally and intellectually.

“Under my watch, we are going to be driving transformation that will deliver on equity of participation and equity of success so that in future when we call up excellence, it doesn’t come up only as white and mainly male. It looks as diverse as we are. ”

Citing her own experience, Prof Phakeng recalled an experience at Wits University in the late 1980s after graduating from the then-University of Bophuthatswana. She

remembered "sitting in an honours class and raising a hand to say something and just being ignored, while white students spoke without even raising their hands".

"Six months later, I realised I hadn't said anything in that class. I definitely had this identity of being someone who was not so smart. I see so much of myself in young black students. I know what it means when nobody points at you in class, so you have to learn different ways of behaviour on campus, to say to yourself 'this doesn't work' and to do something else. If you don't participate in class, you don't properly become part of the learning and your learning is limited. I managed to find a way... but I am highly aware that many students don't find that way.

"On many campuses in this country, there is an institutional culture that can result in the total silencing of a student who may have been outspoken and bubbly at high school – all because they are expected to be something else. Maybe their English is not good enough, maybe they speak with a particular accent, maybe it's the first time they find themselves in an environment where they hear five accents from all over the world, let alone just being surrounded by white people, something they are not accustomed to.

"At university, your intellectual ability is important but it is not the only thing that makes you succeed. It is crucial for a university to take into account not only levels of language and language proficiency but also culture and ways of being in different cultures. Many students have had to realise, for instance, that politeness works differently in the university environment. Students almost have to break their own cultural rules and ways of being and be something else.

"I relate totally when students say that when they go home they are no longer the same. They have to embrace ways of surviving on campus. But when they go home, they have to change again because certain behaviours are disrespectful. They are managing two contexts so they are often not competent at either. Part of decolonising a university, in my view, is to make sure that it shouldn't just be one way of being that is valued... it's about institutional culture and inclusivity.

"I see young students all the time who sincerely believe that getting a degree here will change not only their life but their whole family's life. I see students who want to succeed but I can see that sometimes they are scared. What if they don't make it and have to go back to Limpopo without a degree? I remember having those nightmares. I'd tell myself I can't go back home without the degree after four years – I've got to get this. It feels like it is your once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and you have to make it work.

"I recently met with a student from UCT who is starting a PhD in Cambridge after completing his master's there. He's from a very poor background in Khayelitsha. He told me his overriding feeling is that he'll somehow mess up and lose everything. I found it interesting because I still feel that way myself. I have moments, even in this

position, where I have that feeling that it's not really yours, you can lose it all tomorrow. This feeling can be crippling. That's why I talk closely with students, to affirm them."

Phakeng was open about the fact that she carries tablets for anxiety and depression in her handbag. "I got the prescription at a time in my life where I felt I was sinking into a dark hole. I'd rather take a tablet than let my life go down that way."

Prof Phakeng refutes the view that, by driving transformation one has to give up excellence. "The two are interdependent. We have to drive transformation with integrity so that we don't just appoint people because they are black but recruit them because they bring a particular strength to the space. And when they come to the space, you create an enabling environment for them to achieve excellence.

"With our history, even people who come to the space with the same qualifications and experience, do not come into it equally, because this space privileges a particular group of our society, and people from another side have to cross many boundaries – not only racial boundaries – but an intersectional set of boundaries including gender and social-class boundaries.

"When you're in the privileged group you don't often think of the hurdles others have to go through. But, coming from a low socio-economic background myself, I know that when I get into spaces with all my qualifications and experience, I often face intimidating situations that have nothing to do with my credentials, but everything to do with the fact that I don't have the cultural capital of the space I am in.

"Part of what I have to do is raise funds for the university, so I sometimes meet with high-profile people with truckloads of money. When you have a working-class background, you don't even know what kind of smalltalk those people do. You walk into a room and immediately know that people are looking at you and wondering about your capability. It used to happen a lot – but not so much since I became VC.

"When I meet new people I always hope they've heard some of my speeches... that they follow me on social media and have a sense of who I am. I walk into a space with baggage.

"There are multiple boundaries you have to go beyond in this space when you drive transformation if you are from a disadvantaged background and you are a small black woman."

Prof Phakeng's vision is all about securing a sustainable future for UCT. "We must do transformation with integrity, recognising people not by race, but because of the strengths they bring to the institution. We should create an environment that enables everybody to be excellent. We can only do that if we believe that, actually, everybody can achieve excellence. The challenge is: how to make that happen. The figures for success show there's a big gap between black and white students. Why? All our

students, irrespective of race, have to meet the same academic standards when they are admitted to UCT, so these students come in at the same level academically.

"I am not saying students should be passed without working but we have to ask why it is that so many black students are dropping out; why is it that black students are not succeeding as well as their white counterparts? Part of it is institutional culture, and perhaps part is cultural capital. When you come to a university, intellectual ability is important but it is not the only thing that makes you succeed."

Prof Phakeng denied there had been an exodus of top academics from UCT since #FeesMustFall. "It's amazing that some people call it an exodus," she said, pulling out a few graphs to demonstrate that is not the case. "The report (on academics leaving) has been useful because, first, it shows that black people are not resigning as much as white people and also that the numbers are not huge.

"We seem to be better at drawing and retaining African academic staff, which is good, unlike in the past. We have lost some senior staff but I feel it's been blown out of proportion.

What disturbs her most about higher education in South Africa?

"Obviously I'm concerned that the government's offer of free education is sustainable – and whether, five years from now, that will happen. The second thing that bothers me is the way people still talk about 'black' and 'white' universities – even though it is more than 20 years after 1994. It makes black people feel that UCT is not theirs – and it really bugs me. This is a public university and every South African should feel these are their universities as much as Fort Hare.

"The higher education sector needs to examine its positioning in the world. The tendency to expect all universities to be the same is problematic – as though Walter Sisulu [*University of Technology*] won't be good enough until it looks like UCT. We need an honest conversation that looks at the future; that ensures we don't destroy the strengths we have so that 20 years from now we want to redo it.

"A good example is how technical colleges, teacher colleges and nursing colleges run by the government were dealt with. Now we realise it was a mistake to shut them. We need these institutions and they don't all need to be the same. There are diverse needs in this country. We need to differentiate to make sure the 26 universities serve the country's diverse needs."

It was clear that former president Jacob Zuma's promise of free undergraduate education was on her mind and that she was aware her leadership would be scrutinised when the university determines its fee increases soon. "We are in the tricky situation of waiting for the Department of Higher Education.

“In 2016, the president announced zero fee increments and then last year the department announced a percentage... We don’t want to announce fee increments before the department. We have to wait. We know what would be ideal but we don’t want to announce anything and then get on to a collision course.

“It’s challenging because this is not traditionally how universities do it; the government does not traditionally dictate fees. But since #FeesMustFall and the intervention of government and free education, the state has become more involved in setting fee increments.

“When you increase fees, in a way you increase the money you expect from government in fee-free education. There are also issues of autonomy at stake. We have to wait for the announcement and manage it from there. It’s tricky.”

## Dedication to education

Mamokgethi Phakeng was born in Eastwood, Pretoria in 1966 and grew up in Ga-Rankuwa, where she experienced what it was like to walk long distances to school and to study under a tree. Later, at Thuto Thebe Middle School in Ga-Rankuwa, she sat next to former Eskom boss Brian Molefe, who was “clever, and good at debating”.

Her parents, Frank and Wendy Mmutlana, despite being poor, had high expectations of their three children. Frank was a “smart, funny” man who was one of the first black radio announcers at the SABC and also acted in radio plays on Radio Setswana.

Wendy worked in factories in Roslyn near Ga-rankuwa and was also a domestic worker before returning to school to complete Grade Nine so that she could study for her primary teacher’s certificate and work as a teacher.

“I was five when my mother went back to school,” said Phakeng. “We have photographs of her in her school uniform, with all the other younger pupils. All the neighbours came to make speeches and wish her well.”



**Mamokgethi Phakeng**

Now widowed, her mother still lives in the four-roomed house of Phakeng’s childhood. “My dad used to call himself ‘a poor, but proud man’. He said we must never stand at the back of the row because we were poor, and rather go hungry than accept crumbs. He told everyone we were the smartest kids in our township – which was nonsense! He told us we were born gifted and we must be the best in the world.”

The young Phakeng loved mathematics at school – and still doesn’t quite understand people who are afraid of maths. “I missed the memo that said maths was hard!”

At the University of North-West (then University of Bophuthatswana) Phakeng achieved a BA in Pure Mathematics, and then attended Wits where she earned both an MSc followed by a PhD in Mathematics Education.

Phakeng was the first black woman in South Africa to obtain a PhD in Maths Education.

She worked as Professor Extra-ordinaire of Tshwane University of Technology and was an Honorary Professor at Wits, before being appointed Executive Dean of the College of Science, Engineering and Technology at the University of South Africa in 2008. She was promoted to serve as vice principal of Research and Innovation at Unisa in 2011 and joined UCT in 2016, working as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Internationalisation.

Phakeng has served on several boards and received numerous awards, including the Order of the Baobab (Silver) for her excellent contribution in the field of science and representing South Africa on the international stage through outstanding research.

In 2013 she received the *CEO Magazine* award for being the most influential woman in education and training in South Africa. In 2011 she received the National Science and Technology Forum award for being the most outstanding Senior Black Female Researcher. In 2006, she was recognised by the National Research Foundation as one of the Top Women in Research. She has published over 80 research papers and four edited volumes, which have been cited more than 1,174 times. She is a National Research Foundation-rated scientist, meaning she has notable international recognition.

Phakeng is the founder of the non-profit organisation Adopt-a-Learner, which supports excellence in maths and science in black schools. She also supports the Thusanani Foundation, an NPO that bridges the educational information gap between rural and urban high schools.



Phakeng was married to Richard Setati for 19 years and is now married to Madimetja Phakeng, an advocate who heads the Takeover Regulation Panel, which deals with mergers and takeovers on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. The couple divide their time between Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Phakeng has five adult children, one of whom died in a car accident earlier this year. "We are one man down," she said, adding that she did not want to discuss her children in the

interview.

A Christian, Phakeng has one tattoo on each arm – the word "forgive" on her right arm and "believe" on her left. She gets up at 2am daily and hits her desk by 5am at



the latest.

When not working, she enjoys hiking, going to gym, travelling with her husband, and reading.

People who have influenced her are her “ghettofabulous” mentor, Jill Adler, a professor of Mathematics Education at Wits, who was Phakeng’s supervisor for her master’s.

“She took an interest in me early on, channelled me and believed in me. She made me understand the business of academia and made it an appealing prospect. She was generous, and never worried that I might one day be bigger than her. We remain in close touch. She’s like my Jewish mother.”

Phakeng admires Indian author Arundathi Roy and loves reading Malcolm Gladwell.

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