

Policy development, sustainability of higher education are priority concerns of Prof Thandwa Mthembu

Professor Thandwa Mthembu's appointment as chair of Universities South Africa comes at an opportune time.

The academic year for the country's 26 public universities that fall under Universities South Africa (USAf), has barely begun but it's the broader politics that makes the timing so strategic.

Mthembu's appointment, announced on January 3, is sandwiched between two presidential announcements, and then followed by the budget. On December 16 last year, then-president Jacob Zuma made a shock announcement about higher education. Despite the Heher Commission finding the state could not afford free higher education, and suggesting instead government-guaranteed bank loans contingent on income, Zuma went ahead to make a unilateral announcement. He declared, that as from this year, higher education would be free for poor and working class students who would now be defined as those from households with a combined annual income of up to R350 000, which ultimately meant fully subsidised free higher education to 90% of SA youth.

Student activists who had been clamouring for this felt jubilant, which was perhaps the kudos Zuma was aiming to achieve, but university vice-chancellors were more cautious. Where was the money for this? Where is a well-thought out policy and plan for this?

Mthembu is critical of the fact Zuma's statement was made without any context of policy preparation. "Yes, they are policy announcements but if you have not sat down to look at all the ramifications, you are bound to have a policy that may be well meant but difficult to implement or lead to unintended consequences...There may be confusion as students express their own interpretation of what he said. It's free anything-you-can-think-of, it's free for everybody who is registered at the university this year... but it's not....and that is the problem."

While still reeling from that, on the day Mthembu and I meet, Cyril Ramaphosa had been President of South Africa for one day and was scheduled to make his first State of the Nation address that evening.

"Our engagement with the new government now, under President Ramaphosa, is an opportunity for better policy development around free education," says Mthembu. As it turned out a few hours later Ramaphosa's comments about higher education were merely to reiterate Zuma's statement, and adding that the number of students in higher education had grown to almost a million from just over 500 000 in 1994 when the ANC government had taken power.

Higher Education needs a solid policy

Perhaps it is inevitable because of the volatility of all these political developments. Perhaps it is because he is a mathematician, but it seems Mthembu prefers structure and a clear framework from which to operate.

He bemoans the lack of clarity about the way forward. "There was a commission and we all made presentations but perhaps government ran short of another process of transparent development of policy. We all know how government works: it works with green papers,

white papers and then thereafter there should be a proper plan. We never had any of that. If there had been a policy development process with government engaging with various stakeholders including USAf, I believe we would have had a better plan. Instead, we are developing policy and plans via circulars.”

Finance Minister Malusi Gigaba has since announced in the budget on February 21 that R57-billion has been allocated to cover fee-free higher education, the bulk of which will come from the increase in Value Added Tax (VAT) from 14% to 15%; something that is controversial in that it affects the poor whose consumption is not limited to VAT-exempt foods.

Where will the students sit, live?

Mthembu sees another challenge emerging and creating yet another crisis: infrastructure and with it, insufficient accommodation for students. We laugh as he tells how one of his friends, Prof Siphoo Seepe, talks of “education by rumour” – a result of crammed classrooms at even top universities where students are forced to stand against the windows and spend the lectures asking – and here Mthembu goes into a loud, dramatic whisper: ‘What did he or she say?’ as students enquire among themselves what their lecturer may have said.”

It’s good to laugh but we know it’s not a joke. Neither are the tragic tales of students sleeping in campus libraries or the proliferation of illegal suburban student digs, often at exorbitant rates for over-crowded facilities, a case, as Mthembu points out, of private enterprise gone wrong.

Mthembu says, according to the department’s regulation, universities are meant to accommodate about 50% of students but, for example, Durban University of Technology, where he is Vice-Chancellor, only offers housing for about 25%, about 7000 beds. The demand, he explains, is due not only to universities opening up to students from rural and outlying areas but also “with the peri-urban sprawl, you might have someone two to three km from the university who lives in a shack and needs accommodation more conducive to study.

“We are bursting at the seams at our institutions. As a result of limited infrastructure and growth in numbers, quality gets challenged.

“Infrastructure has not kept up. There has been a lot of investment by government over the last 10 years or so but unfortunately it came too late, after decades of no development of infrastructure at all. The Department of Higher Education and Training has made it a priority but if you are given money to build a residence, 500 beds, 1000 beds -- that would not help much when at DUT we need to double our bed capacity to about 14000.

“We have not found a mechanism with government to exploit public-private partnerships. My view is that government has been reluctant. Some universities may have burnt their fingers in the public-private partnerships. They entered into deals that were not advantageous to them. I won’t be able to go further into this but the challenge is how we learn from those problems and how we devise a system on public-private partnerships that will work across the sector.”

The threat – or is it a challenge? – lies outside

Mthembu sees a big challenge to South African universities coming from outside the system, namely, private higher education institutions. And interestingly, he welcomes what others in his position could regard as a threat.

“They have publicly said they are going aggressively into the higher education market. When some qualifying ones get granted university status and market themselves competitively it will be a whole change; but for the better.” He is referring to Section 33 of the HE Amendment Act of 2016 which would allow private institutions to be termed universities or university colleges. Section 33 remains on hold until the Council on Higher Education (CHE) develops the appropriate criteria.

Mthembu knows it’s all about perceptions. Until now there might have been a view that private institutions offered inferior qualifications. However, many offer degrees accredited by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in the same way as public institutions. But the status quo could change. Plus, if top students start moving to the private sector that could impact severely on public universities. “We would like to keep the best students; they are our hope for maintaining the higher education system into the future. If all you are good for is a student who is average, then you are not going to be a leading university in the country or in the world.

“Look at examples in the US. Which are the best in the world? Private universities – Harvard, Princeton. This is not the US but the idea of quality and excellence cannot be seen to be the preserve of public universities. There are examples of private education providers that have competed very favourably against public universities. There are people in this country who can afford to pay, who take their children overseas for university education. I am not saying there is a multitude but....”.

From Nkandla without a high school, to a higher education leader

Mthembu was born in Hlajakazi in Nquthu, KZN but grew up in Nkandla in the same province. And no, he didn’t know Zuma – Mthembu’s home was 50km away from *THE* Nkandla – but his older brothers did.

The child of two teachers, he had a solid background in mathematics which his father taught him at primary school and his father’s ex-pupil, Mr Adolphus Sikhakhane, taught him at secondary school. With no high school in Nkandla, he went to the Anglican boarding school of St Chad’s in Ladysmith for his last two years of school.

“Educationally you could have said my family was middle class. But not the life we lived, having to fetch slurry from a river and suffer total lack of infrastructure, then you are like everyone else. I was lucky to have parents like mine, teachers. But, with the slurry you drink, sometimes producing sores all over your body, you are just one of the poor kids in the village.”

After Fort Hare and honours in maths, and then a PhD at Wits at the age of 28, he went to the Ohio State University in the US for post-doctoral studies and was teaching there when South Africa changed governments.

“I was thinking seriously about not coming back but ‘94 happened and it was so appealing: a sense of going back home and making a contribution.

“Even the choice of institution for me ... I had offers at Wits and many other places but I went to Qwaqwa, (the former campus of the University of the North, now part of the University of the Free State), a kind of forgotten place. My argument was Wits doesn’t need me; there are many people who can go to Wits and make a contribution but how many would want to go to Qwaqwa?

“It was very idealistic, I must say. When I got there my daughter, Seneme, who had spent her early days in the US, could not even find a school and eventually had to go 50km away in Harrismith.

“I can’t say I achieved a lot because when I got there I got embroiled in the institutional politics and that’s how I ended up leaving being an activist mathematician and moving into where I am today.

“Those were the days in the early-mid 90s when there were transformation forums mushrooming everywhere, and there were calls for councils of universities, senates of universities to be more inclusive and so on. I got embroiled in that politics, getting academics together to fight wrong systems and practices, where a number of staff at the campus who look at a relatively young person who has a PhD while they were still doing their masters and PhDs thought we had nothing to lose. So my friend, Prof Mashupye Kgaphola, who joined the campus at the same time and also had a PhD, in Chemistry and I had to carry their academic and administrative battles and fight. We didn’t even choose that role; it just chose us.

“I moved into management from being a transformation activist. I thought: ‘I keep on criticising management and I think I have better ideas than they have but they have never been tested. For how much longer am I going to continue living in this maybe delusional space -- thinking things can be done differently?’ So I decided, when an opportunity arises I must test all these crazy ideas.

“Because of being too active, I wasn’t at Qwaqwa for long. Management did not like that and so we had to run away,” he says with a slight laugh. “So I went to Vista University”. He became Campus Principal there, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the former University of Durban-Westville and later at the University of the Witwatersrand before becoming Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Technology in the Free State in 2007 at the age of 44.

Now Vice-Chancellor of the Durban University of Technology (DUT), he is loving living in Durban, close to the sea and mountains, as he is a keen hiker who enjoys the Drakensberg peaks.

He believes his additional position as Regional Chair for central-eastern-southern Africa of the International Association of University Presidents will help with USAf’s priority of internationalisation.

Mopping up

Mthembu has two years in his role as USAf Chair but doubts “one will be able to do much more than trying to help to contribute to stabilising the system after the free education announcement.

“Not by ourselves; we don’t have the authority as USAf to take leadership on the free education saga, but in partnership with the Department of Higher Education and Training, Treasury, the government, the Presidency, whoever. There is a need for us to go back and sort this out because if we are not going to have enough and sustainable funds beyond the next three years, that will be a big challenge for the country so we need to develop something we know will work into the future.”

Written by Gillian Anstey, an independent writer commissioned by USAf.