

Deleting purple politics

From Rhodes University

A social movement approach to campaigning for student issues is more effective as it brings all together. This helps in assessing and addressing issues affecting the community as universities are not islands, argues **Lazola Kati**, chairperson of the South African Students Congress (Sasco) at Rhodes University as she shares her experiences as a political leader at a supposedly apolitical institution in an interview with **Dineo Sitole**.

Unlike most higher learning institutions in South Africa in recent weeks, Rhodes University has been amongst the least politically involved. We hardly hear of students being associated with various structures and the Student Representative Council (SRC) members are chosen as individuals and under banners of movements. The arguments for this are around representing more students, and giving them more say pertaining to liberal individual aspects. Referring to the university's purple brand colour Lazola Kati argues against this approach. This 'purplisation of the institution' represents the silencing of students, and the separating of the university from the Grahamstown community.

'At Rhodes University if you are part of a political organisation you are a minority, and being a minority and in the majority at the same time you don't have a voice. Rhodes students are silenced and that's what Sasco wants to change'.

In many instances there has been a clear removal of political

parties from the movements in higher learning institutions dealing with students' issues. Recently the University of the Witwatersrand Vice Chancellor, Adam Habib, welcomed the decentralisation from political parties of students fighting against fee increases that impoverish students as well as the rape culture protected by university policies countrywide.

However, when discussions were held with President Jacob Zuma, political organisations were invited in numbers. What then becomes the need for organisations such as Sasco, when students cannot ask the organisation to represent them? Is representative democracy sustainable when the masses afflicted by bureaucracy continue to be unheard even within existing avenues?

Sasco works with other organisations on common issues. These include Chapter 2.12 which was formed by the Gender Action Project (GAP). Although not part of it, Sasco supported the protests it led as young women wanted to be

represented by organisations not affiliated to any political dynamics outside of the university. Despite this Sasco released a statement supporting Chapter 2.12. Rhodes as an apolitical institution means that if political organisations 'participate under the banner of a political movement it breeds a lot of animosity' between management and students. 'However, Sasco met with the task team and the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League was there in numbers. Also respecting that the protest was not started by Sasco which is a political organisation'.

Sasco learnt that rape culture in higher learning institutions is dealt with under counselling. As there is no talk around the campus, Sasco was not aware of the problem. The fact that young people after being raped or sexually assaulted run and report to a different side of the campus, and then run to the counselling centre located on the opposite side is further victimisation. Their bodies having already been violated, are



Speaking with passion: Lazola Kati emphasises a point.

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further violated by the system. Sasco asserts that over and above shaming the perpetrators, the management rule books on rape must be changed, and spaces of reporting and counselling be in the same place. Furthermore, statistics on rape must be accessible to all students.

Not only has movement politics been challenged but bureaucracies of organisations as well. According to Kati movement politics are 'relevant to current modern struggles' and allow for more united formations. Movements remain critical to assessing and addressing community issues. However, as political movements it's important that the mandates are heard and listened to. The political

mandate provides for support from other avenues and addresses the expectations of movements.

Obviously 'Sasco is aligned to the ANC, and because of that we receive a certain level of privilege'. It had the support of the ANC Women's League in the community and united with the ANC Youth League to ask for help against the police brutality experienced by students. Sasco became a catalyst in uniting both the students and workers, as well as the community at large.

'The union of workers and students is the type of union that created May 1968 [in France]: the type of union that created a civil society in itself. The only way power can listen to civil society is

when civil society addresses the issues united.' Kati emphasises that the unity of society is fundamental in achieving expected ends and in addressing issues. But this needs 'to be tweaked' and intensified.

'There are plans to do more community work, to be active in community struggles and to engage further in community areas. Before Sasco members are students, they are community members.'

'Getting an education in our day is very difficult. In fact I would need to go to jail for [free] education'. The struggle for free and accessible education is still a critical programme for Sasco which stands and will continue to stand for students. The big question is will students stand with Sasco? ¹⁸