

Badat hits back after brickbats from Bhissho MPL

■ Rhodes head taken aback by SACP man's attack

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A WAR of words has erupted between Rhodes University vice-chancellor Dr Saleem Badat and Bhissho MPL Mzoleli Mrara over the state of education in the country.

This comes after Badat wrote an open letter to education portfolio committee chairman Mrara expressing dismay at comments made about him.

Badat last week labelled the country's education system as "a tragedy" and having failed the youth.

Mrara, who is also SACP provincial chairman, then hit back at Badat.

Apart from questioning Badat's struggle credentials and his right to criticise the education system, Mrara claimed that most South Africans were not given admission to Rhodes University.

In the open letter, Badat said he was "most puzzled" by Mrara's "angry response".

"To my astonishment and great sadness, you don't contest my description of the tragedy, indeed, scandal, of much of our schooling.

"Instead you mount an attack on Rhodes University and me that is as intemperate and dangerous as it is misinformed," Badat said.

Badat labelled as a "myth" Mrara's claim that his institution was largely a university for foreigners: "This is a long-standing myth which you, regrettably, seem to wish to perpetuate.

"The reality is that when I became vice-chancellor in 2006, international students made up 24% of Rhodes University; today they make up 20%."

He also dismissed as "simply untrue" that most South Africans were not given admission at his university.

"Eighty per cent of Rhodes students are South African. Pertinent to equity, in 2006, 51% were black and now 75% are black."

Badat lambasted Mrara's choice "to play the person (rather) than engage with argument" in questioning his struggle credentials.

Under apartheid, he said, he had occupied leadership positions in student political organisations and was active in education and political formations. "I spent various periods in political detention and was thereafter restricted and prohibited from entering any educational or media institution," he said.

Badat insisted that the right to express views freely and to criticise was a constitutional right. "To seek to restrict criticism only to those who participated in the struggle for national liberation and democracy is dangerous and untenable."

"We have a schooling system to urgently remake. The quicker we grasp this fact and courageously and determinedly do so the better we will serve our youth and country," he said.

In response, Mrara said Badat's statements did not augur well for those involved in education.