

An Open Letter to Mr. Mzoleli Mrara

Dear Honourable Mr. Mzoleli Mrara, ANC member of the Eastern Cape legislature and chairperson of the Education Portfolio Committee

I respond to the comments attributed to you in the *Burger* of 19 January 2010. I was extremely puzzled, astonished and saddened by your comments.

It is clear that you are very angry at my comments at the Student Sponsorship programme function in East London last Saturday, which were reported in the *Daily Dispatch* on Monday, 17 January.

In a nutshell, my argument was as follows.

In so far as schooling in South Africa is concerned, we continue to be plagued by conditions and realities that thwart the achievement of constitutionally and legally enshrined educational imperatives and goals.

We need to honestly and openly acknowledge the failings and shortcomings of our schools and what accounts for these, and creatively and courageously confront them.

Unless and until we do this we will continue to deny millions of South Africans an education that develops their capabilities and affirms and advances their human and social rights.

We will also block a key avenue to social transformation and development. 'Although education cannot transform the world, the world cannot be transformed without education.'

Indisputably, the key challenge is to improve the quality of education in schools. Finances for equitable access for poor students, targeted nutrition programmes, facilities, toilets and the adequate remuneration of educators are all important.

However, all these are not enough for effective schooling and education. We also need to restore in many of our schools a culture of effective learning and teaching. We require effective educational leadership and management on the part of the national Department of Education, provincial ministries, district offices and especially school heads.

Motivated and committed teachers who are supported with high quality learning material and textbooks, effective assessment and monitoring of student performance, and holding schools accountable are all also vitally important.

In the face of incontrovertible evidence on the tragic shortcomings of our schooling system, I am most puzzled by your angry response. What is it that you dispute about my description of the realities of our schooling?

By all means respond vigorously if you wish to paint a different picture of our schooling system. Yet, 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.

It is dangerous because you say that that for certain reasons, which I address below, I 'have no right to criticize the current education system.'

Why? Because in your view I must satisfy certain conditions before I can express my views. You are wrong. To critique is my constitutional right as a citizen. Indeed, it is my *obligation* to speak truth to power.

In any event you seek to deny my right to criticism on grounds that are extremely dubious.

I cannot criticise because, according to you, 'Rhodes university is largely a university for foreigners.' Moreover, you assert that "most Rhodes students are not even South African citizens, they come from other countries.'

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%.

The percentage of international students has been deliberately reduced in order to make space for more South African students, and especially Black students from the Eastern Cape.

It should be noted that 15% of the students at Fort Hare are international students and at 18% UCT has a much larger *number* of international students than Rhodes.

There are many good reasons why we must have international students at our universities. South Africa also has international agreements on this – for example the *SADC Protocol*.

According to you a second reason I cannot criticise the schooling system is because 'most South Africans are not even given admission to (Rhodes) university.'

This is simply untrue. 80% of Rhodes' students are South African. Pertinent to equity, in 2006 51% were Black students and now 57% are Black.

In 2006 62% of the Black students were South African; today it is 70%. In 2007, for the first time in the history of Rhodes, black students predominated in the first-year intake. Now almost 65% of the new intake is black students.

It is all too easy to play the person rather than engage with argument. Thus, you state that 'I don't think Badat can pretend to know he was here when the rest of the South Africans took part in the struggle.'

Once again you make a claim that is groundless. For your information, during the apartheid period I occupied leadership positions in local and national student political organisations. I was active in national educational and political formations and was editor of a community newspaper and involved in the anti-apartheid alternative press.

I spent various periods in political detention and was thereafter restricted and prohibited from entering any educational or media institution. As a result of torture while in detention, I was deemed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to have had my human rights violated under apartheid and to qualify for reparations.

But I really should not have to set out my 'struggle credentials' to criticise our schooling system or any other unacceptable aspect of our social reality.

The right to freely express one's views and to criticise is a constitutional right. To seek to restrict criticism to only those who participated in the struggle for national liberation and democracy is dangerous and untenable. You effectively, then, deny millions of citizens, including all those born after 1994, any right to criticism. This makes a mockery of our noble Constitution.

Honourable Mrara, it is neither just nor helpful to throw insults at critics or to try and silence critics using dubious means and ill-informed claims.

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.

Yours in the struggle for a quality schooling system that effectively educates *all* our people

Saleem Badat
Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University