

Malibongwe

Series

CELEBRATING WOMEN LEADERS



ACADEMIC WITH A NEW VISION

Bongekile Macupe

WHEN Professor Thoko Mayekiso joined the University of the Witwatersrand in 2001 as head of the

Human and Community Development School, she was struck by what she terms "an alienating culture".

But being a black woman meant that she was well placed to be one of the agents for change.

"People wanted to continue to do things the way they used to. If you come and suggest some changes you were asked, 'who are you?'" she says.

More than a decade later, the issue of transformation is still high on the agenda of universities. "I think many institutions are working on their culture to make themselves more welcoming."

Varsity's fate in professor's hands

I meet the vice-chancellor of the newly established University of Mpumalanga shortly after she attended a meeting of the oddly named Universities South Africa (Usa), an association of vice-chancellors whose goal is to advance the interests of universities and lead transformation.

Mayekiso believes many universities have made strides in tackling transformation, but concedes that "there is still a long way to go".

Well, at the University of Mpumalanga, she has been given an opportunity to demonstrate her ability to establish a transformed university from scratch.

She is a member of Usa, previously called Higher Education SA. The renaming was apparently motivated by the desire for leaders of universities to distinguish themselves from colleges.

Mayekiso is one of three women in the organisation. The others are Professor Cheryl de la Rey, the vice-chancellor of the University of Pretoria, and Vaal University of Technology vice-chancellor Professor Irene Moutlana.

Mayekiso began her academic career at the then University of Transkei, now known as Walter Sisulu University, as a lecturer. Since then she has served as associate professor, professor and head of the department

of psychology.

At Wits, the psychologist worked her way up to deputy dean and acting dean in the faculty of humanities. Before joining the University of Mpumalanga, she was deputy vice-chancellor at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), a position she held for over four years since joining the institution in 2007 as a dean.

She believes all these roles prepared her for her current task as vice-chancellor.

She also believes her role at UMP will serve as motivation for other women in academia.

But she doesn't think there are short-cuts to the top.

Women academics still need to go through all the ranks before getting to the top seat.

Mayekiso, who was born in Lusikisiki in Eastern Cape, is aware of the responsibilities that come with the job.

She knows establishing a university won't be smooth-sailing. It will take a long time before the university can be at the same level as some of the country's oldest institutions.

"Very few people have the opportunity to start something from scratch. So if you are given that responsibility, you want to embrace it and you want to make sure that you succeed."

For the 59-year-old, laying a good foundation includes coming up with a good vision for the institution, having proper systems in place and developing qualifications that are relevant to the country's needs.

"The main challenge with setting up an institution is that one has to deal with strategic and operational issues at the same time while the process of developing a strategic plan for the institution is ongoing," she says.

chapters in no less than seven books.

Mayekiso's influences

She credits her late parents for having laid a firm foundation in her by instilling the importance of education.

"They imbued me with the love for reading and piqued my own interest in sport. They encouraged me to focus on tasks at hand and [to] stay disciplined in all that I do ..." says Mayekiso. — Bongekile Macupe

“Very few people have the opportunity to start something from scratch

relationship with the students representative council, when there are challenges they will not burn things, they will come to

you [to talk] because they have already established that relationship."

She believes that listening to even the most "trivial" issues students raise and looking at things from their perspective results in trust being developed.

Trust can't be built over night. But trust between students and university managers cannot replace the need for funding.

Mayekiso says money needs to be made available to ensure more people access higher education. Funding needs to come from different sources, including the private sector.

New funding models should also be developed.

Her former colleague at NMMU, Professor Simphiwe Sesanti, says when he met Mayekiso a few years ago he assumed she was a soft person but later realised that was not the case.

"Many people mistake softness for weakness, but I realised that behind the smile and soft eyes is a person who analyses, questions and finally when she gives her views, she comes with very strong views."

UP TO THE TASK:
Professor Thoko Mayekiso, the vice-chancellor of the University of Mpumalanga, has a great task of ensuring the university prospers

PHOTO: VELI NHLAPO

