

25 Jan 2006 – Vuyo Mbuli show SAFM 9:00. Not verbatim. Only notes.

Rush transcribed by Richard Ballard, CCS.

Vuyo [welcome Malegapuru Makgoba]: Prof Makgoba, are you stifling debate?

Makgoba: No we are not, but academics must be accountable to clear transparent performance measures. So at the heart is the issue of whether we should run the university on the old style of leaving everything to everyone, or must the leadership follow up and enforce decisions, whether there must be reporting and accountability.

Vuyo: Did you exclude Ashwin Desai from taking up his position?

Makgoba: No I never did that. Vuyo, this is an interesting discussion. People are confusing corporate governance with academic freedom. The latter is the freedom to research or hire people etc. But academic freedom happens within the framework of the law. If an academic has charges against them as a rapist, you can't employ them on the basis of academic freedom.

Vuyo: What has made Desai an unsuitable candidate?

Makgoba: Its not that he is unsuitable. He is highly qualified. We have to distinguish between corporate governance and academic freedom. I may be the most qualified person to be Vice Chancellor at this university but there is still a vetting process I must go through. Let me try to put the Desai issue to rest. In 1998 and I am going to read from the minutes of council: prof Ramashala informed council that the university had reached a mutual settlement with Desai, mutual settlement, note. This resulted in Desai severing his relations with the university and there was a package. The details were confidential. The university's disciplinary hearing against him had been terminated. These were based on allegations that bordered on criminality. This was a council decision, although only a few members of the executive knew the contents of the agreement. At the time there was no issue of academic freedom. He agreed to this. It had nothing to do with academic freedom it had to do with good corporate governance. How did we get into the debate today? There was a post advertised at the university. The chair of the selection committee walked into his office and asked if the agreement had been rescinded and I said no it had not, the appointment could not go ahead.

Vuyo: Is it within your area of jurisdiction to rescind the agreement?

Makgoba: No – can't be taken away by vice chancellor unless delegated by council – this would have been minuted. That can only happen when Desai humbles himself and makes the application to council. *He* made the agreement with Ramashala, and council.

Vuyo: The article by Jane Duncan suggests that the motive to exclude Desai might be impending budget cuts, and he has a history of organising staff and students against this kind of thing.

Makgoba: Ashwin Desai and I are colleagues. I advised him in my office that he needs to put a letter to Council. It is my job to advise him. The charges are serious – I am not at liberty to discuss them – but they are serious enough to have been made at council and the only body that can reverse them is the council.

Vuyo: Is it true that Saths Cooper rescinded the agreement?

Makgoba: I have looked through all minutes – I cannot find that there was ever a discussion on that matter. The former chair can't remember either. The deputy chair of UDW said these were informal discussions that were never brought to council. I sit here in a position where I am supposed to regularise all the baggage of the past. Now I am confronted with an informal discussion, what am I supposed to do?

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Ad break. 9:19

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Take some calls:

Prof Pitika Ntuli: I just want to put to rest the issue of Academic Freedom. First my responsibility is institutional development. On Wednesdays we link up across all five campuses and have discuss all problems. Even senior staff from CCS participate. Second unions are able to organise on campus without a problem. Third when people write to papers – does anything happen to them? Ashwin Desai has destroyed three VCs. First he destroyed Markus Balintulo and then Ramashala. Desai should come out and say what he is charged with. He should not be maligning the remaining 5000 staff at the university.

Vuyo: Is this a reinstatement which is desirable?

Mturi: It's not a case of whether he should be reinstated. Ashwin took the package, pocketed the money and now he wants this all forgotten.

[mid question Vuyo asked how much money was in the package but this was never addressed]

Vuyo: The intention of this discussion is to talk about academic freedom in general. A further issue raised by Jane Duncan's article is budget cuts. Is the university going to be undertaking budget cuts of 27 million?

Makgoba: There are no budget cuts. There are challenges that the university faces which relates to the merger which has obviously unsettled many academics. There are no budget cuts. What we have said is that we must turn the university into a healthy financial position. Over the last 7 years the university has been run on a deficit – the academic have not been aware of that. We want to embark on a road to sorting this out so that we can do the exciting things we want to do. The whole issue of stifling debate is not the case – there is debate that is alive. The very fact that academics can bring this to the public is evidence of that.

Anthony (Cape Town): A hundred and fifty years ago, when free basic education was first produced, it was linked to an idea of payment by results for teachers. Obviously this is idealistic, but what does the VC think of this.

Anthon (Pietermaritzburg): Can a student and academic get romantically involved?

9:30 time for the news.

Makgoba: The question that Anthony raised is central to the corporatisation of university. I am glad that we are hearing that there is a history to performance and reward. When you bring this idea into universities there is a negative reaction, but the tax payer must get value for money. I think that people just want to be left and nobody knows who or what is being done with the university. [responds to other question]

Vuyo: I am trying to understand what is the problem at the university. In your new approach you are saying lets professionalise and people are resisting that?

Makgoba: It's wrong to say that people are resisting that. There are 5000 staff here. What we are talking about here is not more than 20 people, one of whom is not even an employee. He took this package in 1998 and didn't protest about academic freedom then. He accepted that being an adult. Why does it become academic freedom in 2006.

Vuyo: What is the problem then?

Makgoba: The problem is a culture of academics who want to be left alone in a new world which demands accountability. Let me give you another example. Students bring concerns of increased failure rates. Senate appoints a commission. They found that there is no failure rate increase but problems between students and staff themselves where staff tell students they are going to fail. We have a new country, a new value system. However, universities are by their nature conservative. However most of the staff and students are on board. It is a few non-productive academics who are threatened by the merger itself and the new value system.

Pitika: Just to lay to rest Ashwin Desai. Other colleagues of his were also suspended at the same time as he was. They are now back at the university because they followed the procedure. Desai refused. This merger has succeeded in bringing together black, Indian white. Some of those going on about academic freedom are not black they are white. For some reason we are side tracked.

Vuyo: Email from mike – Although everyone sounds logical, everyone's using their own language to describe this. Aswin is clearly an inconvenient person for the administration. Re-hashing old minutes is dealing with this on a formal rather than a constructive manner.

Makgoba: I understand where Mike is coming from. What we are requesting from Desai is that he waives the issue of confidentiality so that we can all look at the same document and know what is in it.

Vuyo: Also in the Duncan article there was mention of pressure on Khan and Pithouse

Makgoba: They are not under pressure from the university community. They are under pressure from Central Intelligence agency. I have been in touch with Richard about that via email yesterday and will keep me apprised of the situation.

Caller: Question about complaints students had raised...

Makgoba: Talks about Hugo Africa commission.

Caller: Financial accountability problems. Government must have more authority.

Makgoba: Academic autonomy must not be taken away. But how do we interpret that autonomy for today's values? As an example of SA uniqueness: We live in squalor. [Mentions Banana city.] Do we live with it or do we fit into a broader developmental framework.

Ibrahim (jhb): Relates this to autonomy of judiciary and intentions to make it more accountable to government.

Makgoba: This is a healthy debate as to where does government stop with regards to the judiciary and higher education. But lets not run away from fact that that autonomy of judiciary not at question just as academic freedom not at question. It is more a case of how we interpret this as a developmental state.

Pat in Vryberg: This debate is unfair. Jane Duncan has the right to reply and so does doctor Desai. I call on the other people to give an input.

Raj on email: Surprised that the vice chancellor is saying there are no budget cuts. If there aren't then he should give into union demands and save everyone a lot of time.

Makgoba: There are no budget cuts. But we can't spend money that we don't have because the money comes from the tax payer. We can't accede to excessive pay rises. We have agreed that we will go through a merger in which no member of staff will lose their job in the merger. Given this we can't have lots of pay rises.

Margaret Logan (wrong pronunciation): Desai is concerned about the problem of the rich getting richer and poor getting poorer. Why is Makgoba getting uncomfortable with this? I am a member of the public who as been coming to Wolpe lectures for a long time. Patrick Bond and his colleagues at CCS are doing great work. I am grateful for Desai.

Makgoba: That is her opinion. I respect Desai. But we are limited by the council minutes I have read out earlier. Goes to news. 10:00