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To some a dictator, to others a visionary

There is a world trend towards universities being run on business lines. How would I benefit the country by running an old-style institution, asks Malegapuru Makgoba

January 25, 2006

By Malegapuru Makgoba

From my perch on the comfy leather sofa in the vice-chancellor's office, 53-year-old Malegapuru William Makgoba is a handsome and articulate fellow.

The head of the University of KwaZulu-Natal looks after the interests 45 000 students and 5 000 academics and staff on five campuses. He is a clear, erudite thinker. But he's also an intimidating, narrow-minded establishment stooge who is clamping down on academic freedom, if you believe his detractors.

Individually their pronouncements about him aren't that bad, but mix them together and you have a dark picture of a Renaissance court thick with Machiavellian plots. Makgoba has been at the university for three years, in which time he has succeeded where others have failed: in uniting a medical school, a teacher training college and two universities. The process has been riddled with dramas, many which began unfolding before the Oxford-educated immunologist arrived.

Problems associated with the merger persist. Fazel Khan, a spokesman for the Combined Staff Association which has 700 members at UKZN, says there is still no pay parity, a single pension fund or a common medical aid for staff.

"When Makgoba arrived here he was a visionary. Now he tends to be a dictator. He intimidates people who criticise him," said Khan. In Makgoba's Westville office is a picture of him with his father, 84-year-old retired school principal "GP" Morithi Makgoba.

"I have enormous pride in my dad. I followed his way and I knew, aged 11, that I would be a principal," he says. It came to pass - via a circuitous route, however. Makgoba studied medicine at Natal University before specialising in human immunogenetics at Oxford. There, according to his impressive CV, he was part of a team that pioneered research into "cellular adhesion molecules in lymphocyte activation and function".

He was 30 years old. Since then he has been heaped with international accolades. He headed the South African Medical Research Council with distinction and was nominated as one of the world's most caring physicians last year. One of his citations is for "insisting with conviction on the highest ethical standards in the conduct of medical research".

When Makgoba talks about science he's animated. His eyes widen, his hands move and he's obviously keen that you follow his train of thought. I ask him why he didn't stay in science, breaking new ground?

"It's part of my value system, of being an African. I didn't choose it, it's the way I was born . . . this is the job for me."

Makgoba's views on what is African have drawn some ire, with some accusing him of racism. He says: "Being African is part of your consciousness . . . having said that, I have seen people who, like me, are completely un-African, or Afrosaxon. I don't claim a majority on defining what is African."



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With Makgoba at the helm, UKZN allocates about 7% of its R1.3 billion-plus budget to research. He says this should be double, at least. As a scientist, research is close to Makgoba's heart, something that has won him friends at UKZN.

'Corporatised'

It's a double-edged sword, however. One of the key criticisms of Makgoba is that he has "corporatised" the university and where academics previously enjoyed freedom in a collegial, democratic environment, they now belong to a business. Makgoba points to a survey of tertiary education that appeared in the Economist magazine in September which reveals a world trend towards universities being managed along business lines. He insists that South African taxpayers get "bang for their buck" when it comes to university spending. One academic, who does not want to be named, said: "Makgoba is close to the World Bank. We are getting funding for research that corporates want."

Makgoba denies this, saying he co-edited a book funded by the World Bank.

"There is merit in what people are saying, but this has to be put into context. I have studied at the best universities in the world. These institutions have become corporatised. They demand greater accountability of academics. Universities of old were run by the church or the pope. What would I benefit the country by running an old-style institution?"

Makgoba says today's academics want money. To gain the leverage for that, he has to get the best out of them. Regarding accusations that he is undemocratic, he says: "I don't sit on any structure that could influence collegiality. I have seven deputy vice-chancellors. I don't control a budget other than the executive's. This is the most free institution in the country."

This, in the words of one academic, is "b" Summing up the sentiments of Khan, other unionists and some academics, one professor said: "People are scared. The university senate used to have lively, vibrant discussions. Now Makgoba speaks, then student leaders speak and it's over."

Richard Pithouse, a researcher with UKZN's Centre for Civil Society, has taken different positions against Makgoba's stance on various issues, including squatters living on university land. Pithouse believes that Makgoba does sometimes seek to intimidate academics.

"He told Fazel Khan that he would charge the two of us with incitement for supporting shack dwellers. But that threat didn't materialise and I don't feel that my personal academic freedom has been undermined in any way. In fact, I think that academics are often culpably timid," said Pithouse. Prof Paulos Zulu, who heads UKZN's Maurice Webb Institute of Race Relations, says accusing Makgoba of stifling academic freedom is not fair.

"I have never been stopped from saying or writing anything and I have never heard of anyone being muzzled," said Zulu. Much of the academic freedom debate revolves around Dr Ashwin Desai, a sociologist who courts controversy and who once agreed to stay off the campus of the erstwhile University of Durban-Westville. To summarise a complicated story, Desai and UKZN are at odds over whether the sociologist can work at the university. Desai's supporters have mounted a campaign in international academic circles championing his cause. The campaign has affected Makgoba, but he appears to be trying to stay aloof from it.

Devi Rajab, a psychologist and the former dean of student development at UKZN, describes Makgoba as an "enigmatic personality".

"At times he can be very engaging and at other times quite detached. At the core, however, he seems to be a reasonable and sensitive personality with a lively sense of humour. I think that his weakness may be that he is surrounding himself with some people who are very insular and divisive. He needs to widen his exposure to more balanced thinkers."

Rajab says Makgoba had to make the university a place where people were free to discuss diverse views.

"It can't be a place where people are too scared to discuss their feelings because they are labelled racist, or something else. It must be a place of healthy dialogue, without intimidation."

Criticised

Makgoba and some of his deputies are criticised for intolerance, academic and otherwise. Khan says unionists got a drubbing for commenting on Makgoba's R1.7 million salary, that he paid his deputies R750 000 and that the public affairs department of UKZN was lavishly funded. Makgoba says he was upset at the time that unionists suggested that he and his

managers paid themselves bonuses, which was incorrect. He insists that there is no evidence of his ever acting maliciously. Kesh Govinder, of the National Tertiary Educators' Staff Union, says he has seen two sides to Makgoba.

"He has come down on us hard sometimes. Other times we have found him to be engaging and even-handed."

Makgoba says he demands the best from people but won't shy away from tough choices. This year university entrance levels and fees might be raised to the detriment of poor students. He says limited resources in a transforming society have to be marshalled for maximum benefit.

"Our processes must be robust, but we must engage. Universities are places where knowledge is generated, preserved and disseminated. This institution has the biggest brainpower in South Africa.

"I want it to be a powerhouse of intellectual rigor."

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