



Check for updates

**BOOK TITLE:**  
Statues and storms: Leading through change



**AUTHOR:**  
Max Price

**ISBN:**  
9780624087762 (paperback, 320 pp)

**PUBLISHER:**  
Tafelberg Publishers, Cape Town; ZAR350

**PUBLISHED:**  
2023

**REVIEWER:**  
Michael I. Cherry<sup>1</sup>

**AFFILIATION:**  
<sup>1</sup>Department of Botany and Zoology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

**EMAIL:**  
mic@sun.ac.za

**HOW TO CITE:**  
Cherry MI. The storms facing higher education have not abated. *S Afr J Sci.* 2024;120(3/4), Art. #17274. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2024/17274>

**ARTICLE INCLUDES:**  
 Peer review  
 Supplementary material

**PUBLISHED:**  
27 March 2024

© 2024. The Author(s). Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

# The storms facing higher education have not abated

Spare a thought for Max Price, who had a successful first term as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 2008 to 2013. He knows his onions, visited departments regularly and was popular with academic staff: his contract was renewed for a second term. Until Chumani Maxwele threw poo on Rhodes' statue soon after the start of the second term in 2015, Price could not have foreseen that the time was out of joint.

*Statues and Storms* is the account of his torrid time over the next three years, during which Price was assaulted, had his laptop snatched and his office fire-bombed. The book is well written and well edited – editor Russell Martin excised a third of the original text, although Price “still thinks every word of it should have been retained.”

There is little to fault Price's handling of events during the first year of the crisis in 2015. Although he had ignored Rhodes' gaze for nearly eight years, he was not the first vice-chancellor to do so. But since its removal in April 2015 the statue has not been missed, and perhaps one day it will be displayed elsewhere, appropriately contextualised. A second demand, the in-sourcing of workers, redressed (at least to some extent) the shameful manner by which they had been outsourced in the late 1990s.

The third – and least tractable – demand was a national one for free higher education. Here government, having faced off national demonstrations both outside parliament and at the Union buildings, had set up yet another commission, this time under retired Judge Heher, to investigate it.

Then, at the beginning of 2016, things spun out of control. Price found himself unable to set clear boundaries with a tiny group of students that threatened to disrupt campus life in a violent manner (it was unclear how much support this group commanded as it did not comprise elected representatives, but very clear that it espoused a particularly toxic form of racial identity politics). In not doing so, as Nicoli Natrass perceptively remarks<sup>1</sup>, Price “was legitimising a politics of racialised offence”. Combined with his conspicuous lack of any successional planning, this has been his legacy to UCT.

Price's book is remarkable for its lack of humility. With the certainty of a colonial administrator, he justifies his every turn, claiming that his leadership blazed a trail for institutions both here and abroad. What is unclear is how his strategy is reconcilable with his articulated view (p. 280): “In a society where the laws are unjust, civil disobedience, i.e. unlawful behaviour, may be justified. Today, we live in a constitutional democracy in which the majority can exercise their voices without resorting to civil disobedience.”

For a seasoned campaigner he also reveals a curious naïveté, for example in appearing disappointed when the Heher Commission did not report in time, and more so when government discarded its recommendations altogether.

Really? Wishing away pragmatic solutions had become a favourite pastime of Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande (the real villain of the piece), who had ignored a report on the feasibility of free higher education chaired by former Nelson Mandela University Vice-Chancellor Derrick Swartz.<sup>2</sup> And Nzimande had also shelved two related reports: on the future of university funding (chaired by none other than Cyril Ramaphosa); and a review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), chaired by Marcus Balintulo, former Vice-Chancellor of Walter Sisulu University.

Price does not provide much scholarly examination of the deeper issues underlying the protests – for this readers can turn to David Benatar's *The Fall of UCT*, although Ronelle Carolissen has noted that it lacks context on the corporatisation of universities this century.<sup>3</sup>

It seems unclear to Price why he appeared as the embodiment of this corporatisation, but it is in this context that his account is instructive. This century South Africa has experienced a large expansion in student numbers, together with below-inflation subsidy increases, leading inevitably to fee increases well above inflation.

David Attwell, also reviewing Benatar's book, makes another crucial point about context<sup>4</sup>: “For local students, the venality of state capture and corruption, the very real prospect of state failure, has opened up a profound moral abyss. We have a democratically elected government that is failing.”

Both criticisms apply equally well to Price's book. In this context, a general decline in institutional loyalty is unsurprising. In particular, many black students attending historically advantaged institutions experience a feeling of alienation to the point that little respect for institutional culture or infrastructure exists. The challenge to our universities is to re-build that loyalty.

Beyond Price's legacy to UCT, that of #FeesMustFall has been of profound national significance. In December 2017, campaigning to be re-elected as ANC President, Zuma announced that government had rejected the Heher recommendations (an income-contingent loan scheme, loans being recovered by the South African Revenue Service once the graduate's income reaches a certain threshold). Instead it would provide fees and maintenance grants (as opposed to loans) to university students with a household income below ZAR350 000 per annum – almost doubling the previous threshold of ZAR180 000.

Ramaphosa chose to implement this, and the consequences have not been trivial. The NSFAS budget has risen more than threefold (from ZAR15 billion to ZAR50 billion) between 2017 and 2023.<sup>5</sup> NSFAS now receives 53% of the higher education budget, with the country's 26 public universities receiving the



remainder in subsidies. The original problem – above-inflation fee increases – has not been resolved.

Free university education might be affordable if student numbers were capped – no bad thing if this were to be matched by a significant expansion in the vocational training component of our higher education system. The principle that the state should set the number of subsidised university places nationally in each discipline was adopted in the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-six years on we are still awaiting the implementation of this policy. What remains of the NSFAS, once corruption has claimed its share, has instead become a social grant for young people, the majority of whom sadly never graduate.<sup>2</sup>

## References

1. Natrass NJ. The man who saw the abyss...only to fall into the gutter of race. *Business Day*. 2023 September 26. Available from: <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/life/books/2023-09-26-big-read-the-man-who-saw-the-abyss--only-to-fall-into-the-gutter-of-race/>
2. Cherry MI. Four years later and Nzimande has still not acted on higher education reports. *Business Day*. 2016 October 24. Available from: <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2016-10-24-four-years-later-and-nzimande-has-still-not-acted-on-higher-education-reports/>
3. Carolissen R. Ivory towers as contested spaces: A review of *The Fall of the University of Cape Town*. *S Afr J Sci*. 2022;118(9/10), Art. #13916. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2022/13916>
4. Attwell D. On *The Fall of the University of Cape Town* by David Benatar: A discussion. *LitNet*. 2022 January 11. Available from: <https://www.litnet.co.za/on-the-fall-of-the-university-of-cape-town-by-david-benatar-a-discussion/>
5. Du Plessis S. NSFAS has failed our students, universities and country. *Business Day*. 2023 October 25. Available from: [https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2023-10-25-stan-du-plessis-nsfas-has-failed-our-students-universities-and-country/#google\\_vignette](https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2023-10-25-stan-du-plessis-nsfas-has-failed-our-students-universities-and-country/#google_vignette)
6. Cherry MI. South Africa reforms university funding. *Nature*. 1997;387:327. <https://doi.org/10.1038/387327a0>