



In the words of the late Tata Nelson Mandela (Madiba) in his renowned publication, *The Long Road To Freedom*, whose moral standing is valued globally, *‘It is through education that a daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, a son of a mineworker can be a head of the mine and a son of a farmer can become a president’*. It is with consideration of what this profound utterance implies that I am penning my contemplative report regarding the 2017 registration at the University of Fort Hare, my first registration experience in the university.

Registration began on 18 January 2017 at the East London campus and ended on 10 February at the main campus in Alice (now at the late registration phase). Two important questions can be asked. One has to do with whether we have achieved what we set out to achieve and the other has to do with whether the 2017 registration was successful?. (*success* being the operative word here). I will respond to these weighty questions by laying out four points below.

First, statistically, to date, we have registered around 13 890 (still registering). This means that we have managed to open access to multitudes of students, which is a remarkable achievement. In 2016, around 30, 000 prospective first-year students applied for admission at UFH for 2017, but only 10% of these (around 2, 900) could be admitted. Can we then align the word *success* to the latter achievement? The answer is ‘Yes’ and ‘No’.

The ‘Yes’ part applies to the reality that the university has created access to higher education to around 3 000 new first year students, thus responding to Dr Nzimande’s stance on universities being ‘the gates of access for our students’ future, their families and future generations.’ The ‘No’ part applies to all those students who qualified for admission and whose applications were not considered because there was no space to accommodate them. These students, understandably, do not understand why it is that for 2 or 3 years consecutively, they cannot be accepted in degree programmes that they have set their hearts on since they were kids. The difficulty of having to explain to them when they cry that there is only so much that the university can do to accommodate the province’s matriculants makes the reality of limited access to higher education a big issue. The actuality is that the higher education sphere is, in spite of the Department of Higher Education’s goals, unable to absorb all matriculants from surrounding schools as these institutions are guided by limited financial and other resources. This is a debate we need to engage in as the university community and alumni.

Second, revisiting the question on whether the 2017 registration was successful or not, I am wary of treating the word ‘successful’ lightly as it has different corollaries. As mentioned earlier, statistically, registration has been and continues to be successful.

Examined from a systems point of view, it can be said that some aspects did not go as planned. Again, what is fundamental with this is that the sense of ownership from all stakeholders saw to it that students were being registered throughout the registration period. In his speech during the opening of the university, Prof. Buhlungu remarked that the university has a rich history, but we cannot forever quote this history as our success barometer. This just does not cut it after 100 years of existence. It is how we make this history work for our future that will ensure our credibility as an institution. Linking this with registration systems, stakeholders at UFH showed a sense of ownership in that without being even aware of it, they pushed on to reach our goal, *i.e.* opening access to education for all students.

Faculty staff worked tirelessly when the online system was problematic (affecting mostly international and out of campus students), registration staff put in more than the required effort, NSFAS took the next available flight to be on campus to respond to students' concerns when we called them, ICT staff assisted greatly with their support, student assistants from Student Support, SRC and Registration visibly gave guidance to new students whenever needed, ITEC and Xerox stepped in whenever printers had minds of their own and refused to print, the Buffalo City Municipality treated our power outage as a crisis and despatched technicians to assist and obviate a possible stampede, students gave continuous feedback on social networks and registration emails and the Institutional Advancement office assisted with communication issues. All that has been mentioned here points to a collective move that makes one quite optimistic about the future that we have in this university.

The third retrospective aspect is that in leadership terms, *success* is not measured on whether targets have been reached, but on how leaders ensure better outputs of a certain activity for the future. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, not all went according to plan, and the registration processes at UFH can be better. In terms of this observed shortfall, the office of the Registrar and internal stakeholders are (1) re-establishing networks with system owners (2) revisiting roles and responsibilities and (3) ensuring that a proactive risk process management of such events is resuscitated, including improved communication.

Last, as February 2017 marks the end of the centenary celebrations for this institution, I am of the opinion that Registration was more successful than not. This is in view of the challenges that other institutions were faced with during this period due to the Fees Must Fall movement and other institution-specific challenges. The university of Fort Hare was able to avert these challenges through thinking on our feet and through the engagement of alternative plans, but importantly, through working collaboratively, reviewing our gaps and continuing to learn from our mistakes. This is where Tata Madiba and other alumni of this university would have liked to see us.

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