

## Excerpt from the book

### Corrupted: a study of chronic dysfunction in South African universities (Wits U Press 2023)

At around 17h15 on 22 May 2018, Professor Gregory Kamwendo parked his car outside a flat in Durford Road, Empangeni, a beautifully situated town overlooking the Indian Ocean in the northeastern part of the KwaZulu Natal province. An accomplished scholar in the field of sociolinguistics, and dean of the faculty of arts at the University of Zululand, the curriculum vitae of the Malawian-born Kamwendo conveyed intellectual substance way beyond that of many of his colleagues at *Ngoye*.

The man who pumped bullets into Kamwendo's upper body as he sat in the parked car on that fateful Tuesday evening was *inkabi* (an assassin). He was acting on behalf of a taxi owner, Oscar Mthiyane, who had been called "out of the blue" to be hired for the kill. The caller was Zweli Nkune, a one-time lecturer at the University of Zululand. Oscar drove the getaway car because he was apparently too slow to run once the execution had been conducted. The 53-year-old professor died bleeding in his car as the two men sped away. On 29 November 2018, detectives arrested Oscar and Zweli, and in October 2020 the two killers were sentenced to life in prison.

Why would a university lecturer murder an academic dean? Quite simply, because the dean was disrupting a revenue stream that enriched the lecturer. Kamwendo had exposed a fraudulent PhD operation in which the university had allegedly been dishing out doctorates for cash on poorly printed certificates. It did not help that there was already bad blood between the two men because Kamwendo had testified against Nkune in a CCMA case where the latter was accused of physically assaulting a student. Nkune threatened to send Kamwendo "back to Malawi in a coffin." The murder took place in the context of institutional dysfunction, as one statement on the subject so poignantly captured:

In grieving the loss of a man of such principle and integrity, we call for justice, not just in prosecuting his murderers but in addressing the institutional and system-level dynamics that his murder draws attention to

The PhD scandal was matched by a more widespread case of certificate fraud at the University of Zululand. An investigation showed that more than 4000 people might have paid for their degrees over a period of 20 years. About 400-500 of those certificates appeared to involve teaching qualifications. Five staff made R260,000 selling 15 fake degrees. About 80 students

were deregistered after it was found they did not even have school leaving or matric certificates. A student tutor confessed that he had doctored the results of more than 1000 failing students. Probes, suspensions, and firings became a regular part of the administrative labour at this university for years.

By the time one in a line of government Administrators, Professor Chris de Beer, came to the University of Zululand in April 2011, there was continuing chaos and fraud around academic certification. A highly skilled university administrator, de Beer literally took things into his own hands. It is important to grasp the kind of rescue operation required under conditions of serious dysfunction and so de Beer's recollection of actions taken are revealing:

I will tell you what I did with regards to the certificates. I had a search and seizure operation done, with the forensic officers and the police, of all the offices. I found more than 750 blank degree certificates in the offices. I then destroyed all graduation certificates that they had anywhere, and I designed a new one that was delivered to me personally ... My way of doing things may have created some respect but it was a lot of danger for me as a person

The courageous attempts by de Beer to get a grip on academic fraud would deliver results during his tenure as administrator. But those who study institutions would know that where corruption of this kind is ingrained in the culture and operations of a university, the behavior is likely to recur when those tight controls are released. It is a fair question, therefore, as to whether the Administrator's intervention would outlast his term of appointment.

There is always great risk associated with the disruption of a corrupted revenue stream. At the University of Zululand, the vice-chancellor goes to the toilet with armed bodyguards. As in the case of Kamwendo, there is the threat of bodily harm. Chris de Beer was not allowed to drive his own car, and armed personnel accompanied him to and from his university office. The case of the University of Zululand underlines the difficulty of institutionalizing honest practices in contexts where there is no agreement in the university's value system about right and wrong when it comes to public resources. It is not only within institutions that the struggle for power and resources are constantly fought. Those outside the university also "want in."

Who are the rogue actors in- and outside universities that compose the chain of criminal actors targeting institutional resources? There are many, including rogue taxi operators.

The students at the University of Fort Hare's Alice Campus were excited as they prepared for a choir competition in Port Elizabeth (since renamed Gqeberha), about 230 km away. Buses were hired, an estimated two or three busloads. The taxi organizations were very upset when they learnt of the trip. Why hire buses when you have taxis available to do the job? A stalemate ensued and a compromise was reached. The buses would take the students to Port Elizabeth and, once there, the taxis would ferry the choir members to and from the local venue. It was a strange sight: full buses and empty taxis travelling from Alice to Port Elizabeth and back simply to ensure that that the taxi owners shared in the spoils. From the perspective of university management, a serious crisis was averted. From the taxi operators, the threat worked. For the bus company, all good as long as they were paid the contracted fee regardless of the additional transport arranged. In the end, a rural university with precarious balance sheets paid twice for what should have been a straightforward service to students.

Taxis form an integral if often corrupt part of a university's business arrangements. Threats comprise a key component of the strategy of taxi bosses to gain a monopoly on university resources. The Fort Hare vice-chancellor vividly recalls his boardroom packed with taxi owners one day. The men were from the Victoria East Taxi Association and the message they conveyed was crystal clear:

We have reached the end of our tolerance with the university. The university goes to Port Elizabeth (PE) to come and load students [in buses], and go to Cape Town, but in the meantime we are here. We are not going to allow that. The next time PE comes around here we are going to show them, and you'll see your students might be hurt.

And then, as if to make the logical link between external power and institutional resources as transparent as possible, a taxi boss stood up and offered this lesson in candor as recounted by the vice-chancellor:

VC, I want to tell you something. To us here in this region, Fort Hare is a goldmine. We don't have any other goldmine, like Gauteng. Fort Hare is our goldmine. You must understand that. So now, when you are bringing someone from outside in here, you are basically bringing a stranger to take the gold from our mouths.

There is obviously nothing wrong when a local entrepreneur seeks partnerships with the local university for purposes of mutual benefit; those kinds of transactions happen in any business

context anywhere in the world. What is different here is the insistence that the partner must have exclusive access to “the goldmine.” Nor does one need to read between the lines to detect the incipient threat (‘You must understand that’) or the potential enemy (‘a stranger’) as outsider to the local community.

In sum, universities in South Africa walk a tightrope in balancing the needs of students and the demands of the taxi industry. What on the face of it appears to be a legitimate expression of the need for recognition as a local business crosses that thin line that separates the quest for resources from outright criminality. “I have seen it with my own eyes,” says a chair of council of one of the country’s rural universities. “The taxis line up at the gates of the university and heaven help you if you offer a student a lift and they see you.”

It is not, however, only rural universities that suffer the sting of the competition for resources from taxi drivers. From time to time the University of Cape Town, for example, would come under threat from operators if their Jammie Shuttle used routes that taxis saw as their own. It was at the historically disadvantaged universities, however, that the most intense run on institutional resources was experienced---sometimes with the university leadership at the head of the criminal enterprise ...