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OPINION PIECE

Why the 1976 students' uprising still resonates today

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In the wake of the global #BlackLivesMatter movement that started in the United States after the death of George Floyd, past and present pupils from 20 Model A (private and self-funded) and Model C (semi-private) schools in Cape Town have taken to social media to [protest the blatant racism](#) at their schools. Within a matter of days, an Instagram account posting mainly testimonies of racist and homophobic experiences, had garnered a following of more than 10 000. This comes as South Africa observes Youth Month and on 16 June, the 44th anniversary of the [Soweto uprising](#).

The [1976 uprising](#) started with students at the Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto rejecting the move by the Bantu Administration to enforce the ruling that Mathematics and Science be taught in Afrikaans in black schools. This, despite the fact that teachers and children were not conversant in the language. This was the final straw in a long line of oppressive measures that had started with the inferior Bantu Education Act passed in 1953, pass laws restricting the movement of black people, forced removals, no land ownership and migrant labour.

The youth leaders were inspired by [Steve Biko](#) and his Black Consciousness Movement and their protests set South Africa ablaze for the first time since [Sharpeville](#), sixteen years earlier. Then, the passive resistance campaign against pass laws had culminated in the massacre of 69 protesters, leading to the banning of the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress, a decision to resort to guerrilla warfare, and to Mandela's arrest and imprisonment.

By the end of 1977, the Soweto uprising, which was quelled in a wave of [repressive action](#), the government had banned 22 Black Consciousness organisations, had killed 600 people, including [Biko while in police detention](#), and imprisoned thousands of activists and driven many into exile. Seventeen months of worker stayaways and consumer boycotts of white-owned businesses crippled the economy, and led to states of emergency and international sanctions being imposed against the apartheid regime. The uprising effectively started the end of apartheid and drew attention to the realities of black lives.

POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Forty years later, students espousing black consciousness ideologies on university campuses around the country were once again at the forefront of political protests, in what became known as the [Fallist Movements](#) of #RhodesMustFall followed by the #FeesMustFall movements. Assistant Professor in History of Southern Africa at Durham University, Anne Heffernan, observes that though these students may have changed the topic of [conversation around education](#) more effectively than any since 1994 when South Africa had its first

democratic elections, and gains such as the outsourcing of jobs on campuses have been made, the movement to decolonise university curricula and faculty has not moved off-campus.

University of Pretoria Professor, Siona O'Connell, proposes that the student-led campaign served to draw attention to the fact that the power structure at the university bore little resemblance to the demographics of a post-apartheid South Africa and that our colonial and apartheid histories, pasts, and memories continued to be disavowed while [our value](#) as human beings continued to be denied. The generation of South Africans born after 1994 continue to grapple with [what it means to be free](#) in a post-apartheid society, wherein blackness continues to be mocked and marginalised.

WHY DOES 16 JUNE STILL MATTER?

Restructuring post-apartheid South Africa in order to address poverty and gross inequality, was always going to be complicated. The negotiated settlement that ended apartheid involved significant compromises, such as the [granting of amnesty](#) to those who had perpetrated human rights abuses. Two strategies were adopted: the establishment of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) to engage with the human rights' abuses that had been committed, and [reconstruction](#) to move the country forward socially, politically and economically along with the removal of barriers of class, race, ethnicity, gender and language. Professor and Head of the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute at University of South Africa, Vusi Gumede, argues that the economic inequality in South Africa post-democracy remains high and is still a race issue, requiring a complete reconfiguration of society.

Nearly 50 years ago, while speaking about [white racism and black consciousness](#) at a conference in Cape Town, Biko stressed the same need to overhaul the whole system in South Africa before hoping to get black and white (who needed to address the inferiority and superiority complexes deliberately cultivated by the system) "walking hand in hand to oppose a common enemy".

As South Africans we have yet to address the colonial and apartheid history of our country and to truly bring about restitution, thereby contributing to the healing of intergenerational trauma and substantiating the possibility of a re-imagined post-apartheid South Africa. As South Africans we need to think about the kind of country we want to build, to think about what transformation means, by examining the narratives of those who were oppressed and how we may be free. Unless we take this opportunity to candidly learn from our mistakes and to consider what it means to be human, the hurts will not be healed.

A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Today South Africa is fighting the [COVID-19](#) pandemic with a total number of 70 038 confirmed cases and 1 480 deaths. The [pandemic has exposed the deep inequalities](#) in healthcare, education and economics in a society where black people continue to live in apartheid-era townships that make [social distancing](#) impossible. Is COVID-19 Biko's common enemy, the rupture that demands that South Africa finally address its shortcomings and lost opportunities, or do we still carry the seeds of instruction within us? Today, on the 44th anniversary of the Soweto uprisings, South Africa is presented with an opportunity for introspection. Will South Africa seize this moment to finally address its past and create a new society, or will another generation of children have to fight the pervasive pandemic of racism that continues to inform our present?

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za