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## Professionalisation the tonic for municipalities' dysfunction

**Violent service protests across the country reflect the disjuncture between the needs of civil society's poorest and local government's roll-out of resources and services. It's a topic close to Phindile Ntliziywana's heart. One of UCT's six New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) participants, Ntliziywana's PhD examines how the public service, specifically local government, can be improved.**

Lady Frere in the Eastern Cape, where Ntliziywana grew up, epitomises the plight of many traditional South African rural settlements. With low levels of economic development and high levels of unemployment, people rely on social grants. Services and resources are meagre. Taps are few and far between and in winter the wells ice up.

Caught in the cycle of neglect, Ntliziywana says the community is "defeated, disempowered and disinterested". As one resident said to him: "I live in a dump. Water and winter come into my house."

"Even local councillors leave them desperate," he says. "People there say democracy is a farce; that it protects white interests."

Poor levels of professionalism in the public service also play a large part, says Ntliziywana. His LLM thesis (University of the Western Cape, 2009) focused on how the professionalisation of local government's administrative arm could address capacity deficits. His PhD thesis proposes that professionalisation could go a long way to stemming the tide of incapacity and dysfunction in many municipalities. Professionalisation has three prongs, he says: competence (qualifications and experience); professional independence (insulating professional administrators from political meddling); and ethics (enforced by professional associations).

### Pipeline of PhDs

Ntliziywana spent a month at the Swiss University of Fribourg as a postgraduate student for a short course on federalism (he got his diploma cum laude). After returning to South Africa, he

joined UWC's Community Law Centre (now the Dullah Omar Institute) as a researcher. He spotted the nGAP advertisement in 2015 and, well, took the gap.

The nGAP programme is a partnership between government (specifically the Department of Higher Education and Training) and universities. Government carries the costs for the first three years and shares the costs with the host university for the next three-year phase.

The first three years are devoted to development: candidates are sheltered from onerous teaching commitments to allow them to complete their PhDs. For the next three years they're inducted as academics and then appointed to fulltime posts. Each candidate is assigned a mentor. Ntliziywana's mentor is Professor Hugh Corder in UCT's Department of Public Law.

"The programme ensures black academics find a presence in institutions of higher learning, which have been an 'only whites' bastion from time immemorial," says Ntliziywana. "Because of the institutional culture and other barriers, not all of us would make it here. This gives us a headstart. When it's done, we'll be established academics."

He is well on his way. His PhD is already well developed, and has now broadened into a multidisciplinary study incorporating public administration and political science. He hopes to finish by the end of the year.

### **Cost of scholarship**

While buoyed by the support the programme offers, pursuing a PhD initially left him feeling torn. Ntliziywana feels the poverty of his community – and his country - acutely. After matriculating from Freemantle Boys' High School at Lady Frere in 2000, he entered the Roman Catholic seminary to become a priest. Even with his parents' blessing, he felt it was an indulgent choice. They were losing a vital breadwinner.

"Not being able to pay back weighed heavily on me."

So he changed tack to study law, which he thought would be productive and provide family support.

"Law is practical; it deals with the day-to-day issues," he said. "Law is doing."

Part of that doing is publishing. His contribution thus far includes several scholarly articles and three book chapters as well as a case note in the South African Law Journal and an article in the Constitutional Court Review. (The latter is an accredited journal that reviews the decisions of the Constitutional Court thematically.) Ntliziywana also plans to turn his PhD into a book and a number of journal articles. And by publishing in lay publications, he's educating the public about the role and workings of local government.

"The aim also is to publish on the issues that affect the nation on a day-to-day basis and not only on abstract academic issues."

But working on a PhD can be a lonely exercise, he says.

“A community of scholars would help; a forum where we could assess each other’s progress, keep each other on our toes, encourage one another, share our frustrations. It helps to speak to people who know the pitfalls you face.”

**Story written by:** Helen Swingler

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