

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Fellowships from the Yale University (1988 – 1989) and Fulbright Fellowship from the University of the Witwatersrand (1992)
- Editing *Pedagogy of Domination* (1990), a volume that brought together some of the most progressive educationists in South Africa
- Doctorate from the University of Massachusetts (1983)

DEFINING MOMENT

Nkomo identifies his departure from South Africa for the United States in 1966 as the defining moment in his life as it afforded him the opportunity to escape the clutches and debilitating effects of apartheid hegemony.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

Nkomo is a tanked fish enthusiast. He first grew to love fish when he bought a house with a koi pond; he found it very therapeutic to spend hours watching the magnificent creatures at the end of a long day.

CHAMPION OF EDUCATION

Mokubung Nkomo's hunger for world-class education drove him to leave South Africa in his early twenties; that same passion would eventually draw him back home on a quest to help address past academic injustices. In South Africa and abroad, Nkomo dedicated his academic career to fostering learning, diversity and social cohesion. He held a number of research positions, won several research awards and was active in administration and management at all the campuses he worked on.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Nkomo was born in the mining town of Mashishing in Mpumalanga. In 1952, his family moved to Uitkyk, a small mining outpost on the outskirts of Middelburg before settling in the neighbouring township of Mhluzi. His self-educated father worked as a mine store clerk while his mother brewed traditional beer and ran a tavern from their home. Such establishments were illegal at the time so as a boy Nkomo operated as a lookout, perching on top of a mine dump with a whistle to warn his mother of approaching police raids. He attended

school in Mhluzi under the shadow of the Bantu Education Act and recalls being acutely aware that "the education black people were offered was sub-standard and grossly inadequate".

In 1963, Nkomo was admitted to St. Christopher's High, a boarding school in Swaziland, where he matriculated. His decision to continue his education in Swaziland prompted questions from the apartheid police's notorious Special Branch, who visited his home a number of times. Ignoring a warning from his father, Nkomo returned home during a mid-term break the following year. He was interrogated, his travel document was confiscated and he was instructed not to leave the country. With his academic future on the line, Nkomo defied the authorities and headed back to Swaziland. He could not legally re-enter, so he crawled under a barbed-wire border fence in the dead of night: "I was determined not to go back to a situation where my dreams would be frustrated, where I would never see the fruition of my desires," he says.

The keen student was offered a scholarship to the United States by the African American Institute but in order to travel, he needed a passport. Help came from an unexpected source: an elderly Swazi woman offered to pass Nkomo off as her son, having lost her own son years before.

Nkomo arrived in the United States in 1966 on a Swazi passport, excited to study towards a degree in economics at Pennsylvania State University but unaware that he would be unable to return to South Africa for three decades. Months after his arrival in the United States, the Swazi authorities discovered what had happened and annulled his passport. Suddenly, he was stateless. Undaunted, Nkomo completed his economics degree and landed a job at the African American Institute. A year later, he decided to switch courses and pursue his master's and doctoral studies in education at the University of Massachusetts.

Despite his ongoing citizenship complications, Nkomo kept in contact with his family, arranging to meet his parents in countries he could travel to like Zimbabwe and Malawi. In 1983, having been granted his doctorate from the University of Massachusetts, Nkomo was appointed an assistant professor of education at the University of North Carolina's Charlotte campus where he



MOKUBUNG NKOMO

earned his tenure. In 1988, he spent a year at Yale University as a Visiting Fellow. In the early 1990s, as the political environment began to change in South Africa, he returned for a year as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

In 1995, Nkomo took on a fresh challenge as Director of the South Africa Partnership Programme at the New School for Social Research, a private university in New York City. Three years later, change beckoned.

He was recruited to take up a position at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 1998. Propelled by a deep sense of the injustices of apartheid and a desire to reconnect with his past, he accepted the post of Executive Director of the HSRC Education and Training Programme. "I couldn't get away from this feeling of discomfort while in the United States," he says. "I left because the education back home was bad and I knew that many others still languished in those circumstances. My discomfort could only be eased by involvement in the restoration project."

The late nineties were a time of high flux in state institutions and structures. Having spent more of his life in the United States than in South Africa, Nkomo initially felt lonely and disconnected. However, within a year he was leading the HSRC: "I was appointed as interim President, perhaps by accident, as the institution was fraught with intrigue that only a seasoned operator could manage," Nkomo chuckles.

Nkomo's wife Stella, a New York City native who is herself an accomplished academic, moved to South Africa. In 2002, he joined the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria (UP) as an Extraordinary Professor, with a particular focus on social cohesion within the context of education and school integration. He also started the Centre for Diversity and Social Cohesion, hoping to facilitate dialogue: "Serious social cohesion is critical, especially in a country burdened by a divided past; if you don't instill a sense of belonging and common purpose in everyone, you're not going to succeed to the fullest." Only a small grant was made available for the project and Nkomo became disillusioned by its limitations and what he perceived as lacklustre support.

In early 2012, almost a decade after he'd expected to retire, the academic was seconded to join the 'rescue team' at the troubled Tshwane University of

Technology (TUT) as a Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. The institution was beset by near-constant disruptions that seemed to be endemic and it had been placed under administration. Nkomo is blunt about his role in the daunting task: "Had I known better, I would have stayed away." After two years at TUT, Nkomo left to take on the role of ombudsman at the University of South Africa (Unisa). He retired in 2016, having published and contributed to numerous academic texts and edited several publications, as well as serving on a host of advisory boards and supervising postgraduate students.

Nkomo still believes passionately in the power of education in an increasingly complex world: "Everything is founded on education. If you can get that right, you can be assured your society can stand its ground."

