This article focuses on cordial relationships that existed between the leadership of institutions of higher education and the Apartheid regime. An example proving that this leadership was guilty in aiding the Apartheid regime to achieve its hideous goals is reflected in a 5 May 1969 letter on the pending release of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) leader. This letter, to be discussed later, was authored by GR Bozzoli, then Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). It was addressed to then Minister of Justice, Petrus Cornelius Pelser, who had publicly announced the release of Sobukwe. The letter also serves as an important historical document that provides primary evidence concerning the cosy relationship that existed between universities and the Apartheid regime.

Robert Sobukwe was born on 5 December 1924 in Graaff-Reinet, Northern Cape Province. He attended mission school at Healdtown and the University of Fort Hare where he became President of the Students’ Representative Council, Editor of the students’ magazine *Inkundla Ya Bantu* and Chairperson of the Fort Hare’s branch of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). He was one of the ANCYL members who piloted the Youth League’s Programme of Action in 1949. He also led a series of students’ strikes and demonstrations, thereby incurring the wrath of authorities. His student grants were withdrawn, but with some financial assistance from friends, Sobukwe completed his BA degree, as well as a teacher’s diploma. He became a teacher at Standerton, in the Transvaal, but was dismissed in 1952 for participating in the Defiance Campaign. He was reinstated, but soon left to take a post as a Language Assistant at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. There he enrolled for a BA in African Studies, graduating with Honours in Languages. He continued in that post until he resigned in 1960 to devote all his energies to the PAC, which had split from the African Nationalist Congress in 1959. In the same year, he became President of the PAC and Editor of their organ, the *Africanist*.

History shows that a cosy relationship between the leadership of universities and the Apartheid regime not only existed, but directly impacted the lives and academic careers of freedom fighters, like Robert Sobukwe.

By Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu
He delivered the principal address at the PAC’s inaugural conference held in Orlando East, Soweto in April 1959. At its first and only annual conference held in December 1959, the PAC decided to launch a Positive Action Campaign “to overthrow white domination and to attain freedom and independence.” It was to take the form of “decisive and final positive action against the pass laws.” On 18 March 1960, Sobukwe announced that the “anti-pass” campaign would be launched three days later. In instructions sent to all PAC branches, Sobukwe warned, “our people must be taught now and continuously to observe absolute non-violence.”

On 21 March 1960, Sobukwe, accompanied by about 50 of his supporters, left his home in Mofolo Village, Soweto, marched to the Orlando Police Station and presented himself for arrest. In many parts of South Africa, thousands of Africans demonstrated peacefully and surrendered themselves at police stations, asking to be arrested. The police, however, opened fire against unarmed peaceful demonstrators at Sharpeville, 68 people were shot and killed (most of them in the back as they fled) and 184 were wounded. The police also resorted to ruthlessness in the African townships of Cape Town. Sobukwe and some of his lieutenants were charged, on 23 March 1960 with political offences. Sobukwe was the only person to be detained under this provision, which came to be known as the “Sobukwe clause.” The Apartheid regime was so afraid of his influence that they separated him from other political prisoners and kept him at a secluded small house on Robben Island.

For six years Sobukwe had to endure imprisonment in total isolation from other prisoners. His only “human” contact was with vicious, racist warders. This was an intolerable form of psychological torture. During his incarceration Sobukwe frequently complained about persistent harassment but on 16 April 1969 in a letter addressed to Pelser, Sobukwe noted that the complaints he had made in 1967 were, to a large extent, settled. However, new forms of harassment and systematic torture had arisen. These included: being served decomposed food deliberately and at times served crushed bones soup; constant interference with electric power supply; inordinate delays with mail, which affected his UNISA lectures as well as interfering with his Nederlands studies and interference with a fruit parcel from Stuttafords. Most egregious, however, was that starting on 21 March 1969, Sobukwe was subjected to what he termed systematic torture as concentrated, compressed hot air was introduced into his room, stifling him with unbearable heat. On 3 April 1969, compressed cold air was now introduced, simultaneously or switched alternately with hot air. Sobukwe complained about this form of torture but the Commanding Officer showed no interest and two psychiatrists were called in as a result of his persistent protest to authorities. Again there was no solution to this problem as their report was not submitted. Sobukwe wrote the following to Pelser: “In light of present experience, I realise that this treatment of hot and cold compressed air has been going on for years. It didn’t start on 21 March. Only, on that day, it came into the open…I am, therefore, in accordance with the provisions of the order served on me, appealing to you for protection against some of your men who are supposed to provide me with protection.”

Sobukwe was subsequently released on 13 May 1969 and confined under house arrest to Kimberley where he had no kith or kin. Prior to his release, Pelser informed the press that Sobukwe should not “live where he can, with reasonable ease, resume subversive activities.” The day before his release, on 12 May 1969, Sobukwe was served with a five-year banning order under the Suppression of Communism Act. He was prohibited from leaving the municipality of Kimberley; attending any gathering; leaving his residence between 6:00pm and 6:00am; communicating with any other banned persons; giving educational instruction at an educational institution; and, lastly, participating in any publication. No statement by him could be quoted.

A year after his release, Sobukwe applied for a passport to take up a research and lecturing fellowship in African Linguistics at the University of Wisconsin in the United States where he was also admitted as a PhD student. At the same time, he was offered two part-time lecturing posts at Roosevelt University and the Adlai Stevenson Institute in Chicago. Sobukwe ultimately accepted the University of Wisconsin offer together with a revised offer from Roosevelt University. But the Apartheid regime denied him permission to leave, so on 23 May 1970, he applied for an exit permit. After a threat of court action, the Minister of Interior granted him the permit. But he could not leave South Africa as the banning orders confined him to Kimberley and Pelser refused to relax the order. The defiant Sobukwe applied to the Pretoria Supreme Court for an order to permit him to travel to the Jan Smuts Airport to leave South Africa, but on 22 June 1971, the Court ruled that the restrictions under the
Notes:

2 Ibid.
3 National Archives Depot (NAD), Sobukwe File 2/3/1503 Vol 1V.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid, File 2/3/21503 Vol 1V.
7 Ibid, File 2/3/21503 Vol 1V.