

Constructive engagement the way forward

EMERITUS Professor Norman Kemp wrote an interesting letter, “Student protests set to re-start” (January 12), which appeared to contend that we are about to witness a replay of the #FeesMustFall protest and shutdown late last year.

This was interesting in that it suggested some inside knowledge of the undercurrents in the politics of students, and an analysis that connected the dots of the social and political movement and phenomena currently at play in South Africa. The interest heightens when you consider the fact that these points are made by a distinguished academic.

Academics are trained to question, go beyond the surface, research, seek deeper meaning and help us make sense of that which is confounding.

The Fees Must Fall movement and campaign, which is a social, political and perhaps economic phenomenon, has raised important practical and theoretical questions, all requiring serious consideration. And so when we scan the papers, both academic and popular, we tend to read hoping to find leads to answers, if not the answers themselves.

That the letter, which makes glib and sweeping generalisations, appears at this

moment is perhaps not entirely surprising. This after all is the era of “fake news”, in which misinformation and miscommunication has gained renewed currency.

There is no doubt that the South African higher education sector is going through difficult and challenging times. These difficulties and challenges must be confronted and dealt with not only so we have peace in a given year, but simultaneously to ensure long-term sustainable solutions.

Examples of similar historical moments abound – the ending of the apartheid regime and Codesa talks are cases in point. In all such, the choices have often been quite stark: talk or fight.

In the higher education sector even when different universities had initially adopted different strategies of dealing with the protesting students, the “warring parties” in the end have had to sit and talk.

That said, what are we to make of Kemp’s key point, that alleges “certain members of the leadership team at our universities who are engaging (negotiating) with the radicals are colluding with them as they share the

same political persuasions and agenda”?

When protesting NMMU students barricaded entrances, the acting vice-chancellor directed two management teams to meet, deliberate and propose the best possible cause of response action. The first team compromised the university’s most senior executives (the management committee – manco), led by the vice-chancellor, with three deputy vice-chancellors and two executive directors as additional members.

Executive deans and senior directors joined these manco members to make up a larger collective, the extended manco (comprising about 30 individuals).

The second team was the university emergency management team, consisting of senior managers and specialists charged with operational responsibilities as these related to various emergency scenarios. These teams met regularly, often daily, making decisions and implementing plans, following difficult and robust discussions.

The leadership team’s decisions and devised plans were also often canvassed with the university council through the acting vice-chancellor’s regular engagement with the council

chairperson. Even as events unfolded rapidly, which required quick decision-making, attempts were made to engage widely with faculties and support divisions and, at appropriate times, senate and other relevant university governance structures.

The leadership collective decided, as a matter of principle and strategy, to engage with the protesting students. This also extended to concerned staff, Captu (largely made up of white parents), black parents, community and national groupings and organised labour.

Some of these engagements with internal and external, local and national stakeholders are ongoing, which is not surprising since some of the vexing issues – funding and transformation challenges – still need to be worked on and resolved in lasting ways that will ultimately ensure sustainability of universities and the sector. The need and commitment to work the issues, address the challenges and engage key stakeholders so solutions can be found collectively, remains.

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