

HOT TOPIC: Student protests at NMMU

Only firmness will save 2017

IT occurred to me while taking refuse to the municipal dump site and observing desperate people picking over other people's trash, that students have – violently – managed to place themselves at the top of the national agenda, at the expense of other far more desperate members of society – persons who are ill, starving, homeless, unemployed, all those who are unable to make their point on Twitter via their smartphones, or have failed to burn something expensive to make their point.

I was struck by the following statement in a letter to Alumni by Dr Sibongile Muthwa, the Acting Vice-Chancellor of NMMU: “We would hope that all stakeholders would understand the need for

the university management to strike a balance between those students who wish to protest, and those who wish to resume academic activities, while ensuring the safety of all involved.”

The proper point of departure is this: those persons who wish to pursue academic activities do not deserve to be subjected to any balancing act. They are entitled to pursue their studies and their work, free of interference.

Before anything else, NMMU management must decide whether they want to beat the protesters, or join them. If management lacks the resolve to beat them, then say so now. 2016 has been squandered. At best 2017 and beyond may be saved.

The latest development is that hopes of a return to lectures have been dashed by the protesters' objections. The student leadership have dictated terms. That is not surprising, given the university's approach thus far. You get what you reward. So far it is disruption and intimidation that have been rewarded. Expect more of the same.

I was bemused by the sentiments expressed by Drs Zinn and Webster (“NMMU backs free education call”, The Herald, October 7). It's an easy thing to back. The more useful question is how demands for free tertiary education should be balanced with the needs of many desperate members of society. Who will get less because students get more?

Prof Zinn and Dr Webb, who applauded the “quality and maturity of student leadership” and the absence of violence and damage to property at NMMU, left me wondering – so why did the university shut down for three weeks? According to Muthwa's letter (quoted above) it was because the university could not guarantee the safety of the university community. Decoded, it means this – students' conduct caused management to conclude that unless it shut down the university there was a material risk to the safety of persons and property. So much for the quality and maturity of student leadership.

Nobody who is serious about resolving these problems will ad-

vocate a simplistic display of brutality in response to protests, and I do not do so now. There are other ways of making sure that actions have consequences. Simply put: if you are unable to function within an academic community without violating the rights of others to undisturbed academic activity, then you have no right to be part of that community.

Let us confront the issue of the use of force nonetheless – if indeed anyone is lawfully removed from a place where he or she interferes with the rights of others (such as the university access road where the tyres are being burnt), that removal is not an act of “apartheid kragdadigheid”. It is an act by the police force of a democratic state,

aimed at upholding the values of its excellent constitution and the rights of its citizens.

Making study material and lectures available online appears to be a bridge that the management is unwilling to cross, given unequal access to the internet. This is unacceptable, and sends the message to protesters that management lacks the resolve to contain the disruption that they cause.

The university needs to demonstrate that it will do all it can to explore a resolution to the financial needs of students, while being uncompromising in its insistence that at the same time academic activity must remain undisturbed.

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