

# NMMU student protests yield unexpected positive results

WITH every crisis, come opportunities – and even happy endings. This, perhaps, is how we should aspire to reflect upon the impact of the #FeesMustFall movement on the higher education sector and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in particular.

Many are likely to equate 2016 as the year when students destroyed infrastructure valued at more than R650-million across most of the country's 26 universities and dramatically brought tuition to a standstill in a bid for “free quality, decolonised education for all now”. But it was never this simple.

Had it been, NMMU would certainly not have remained shut for four weeks, endured two weeks of on-campus disruptions nor faced various court actions.

Regardless of your take on the events of the past nine weeks, there are many positives. Lessons have been learnt, innovative and creative solutions found, opportunities seized, new leaders identified and relationships cemented.

The crisis also identified the workers from the shirkers, along with the can-do champions and naysayers. So while not distracting from the angst caused by the uncertainty and even violence of the past term, NMMU staff have also developed “bouncebackability” in the face of adversity, to use one of the NMMU union's phrases.

They've also learnt new skills and made new friends.

Our students too are surely wiser and tougher for the experience. Though to be honest, I do not think there are many who would ever want a repeat of this term.

I am certainly one of them. But I am also one who chooses to recognise the positive in the midst of the mayhem.

Prior to September 19 when Higher Education and Training Minister Dr Blade Nzimande's 2017 fee announcement triggered the #FeesMustFall students to mobilise nationally, most NMMU staff worked alone in offices across the university's six different campuses. With a number of campuses under lockdown and work still to be done, staff were forced to relocate.

Very soon staff who had not so much as clapped eyes on each other before were sharing facilities and forming new relationships. New temporary open plan offices, energised by the shared goal of ensuring that our students complete their 2016 academic year, became the norm.

Suddenly, finance was working alongside communication, which was working alongside procurement. Similarly, admissions found itself on another campus alongside the university's international office, another nomad.

With it came new ways of thinking and doing.

## In my View



Debbie Derry

And supporting it all, was the university's information and communications technology (ICT) services.

The ICT services played a key role in not only enabling NMMU staff to work remotely, but by providing the means for the university's students to access the internet and Wi-Fi at 11 municipal libraries across the metro. And then there was the equally busy Centre for Teaching, Learning and Media, which trains staff in new technologies.

The multi-layered academic completion plan (ACP) introduced when all avenues towards resuming normal teaching and learning university activities had been exhausted, has

simply fast-tracked NMMU's own education strategy of teaching being available “anytime, anywhere”. It has also given those lecturers who lacked technological know-how, a significant nudge towards teaching the “screenager generation”.

But while the shift was and is towards blended and digital platform-based teaching and learning, many face-to-face sessions were still necessary given the extended shutdown. Enter the resourceful faculty deans and their lecturers, who used personal networks or the kind offers of strangers creatively and courageously to offer face-to-face class-

es in church halls, sports clubs, car dealerships and their own homes.

So many have gone above and beyond the call of duty, like the publications practitioner who ran the unmanned information kiosk and emergency number during the height of the disruptions and the secretary who is now running a team of volunteer staff marshals at Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium where most of the official NMMU examinations are now taking place.

It is in this, the general goodwill of others, that perhaps offered the greatest satisfaction and encouragement throughout the #FeesMustFall protests. For, in spite of all the anger, angst and uncertainty that has come with this unprecedented movement, there is still a genuine desire by so many individuals to look beyond themselves towards the greater good.

In this case, towards 27 000 students in completing their studies and exams for this year.

That goodwill has stretched beyond the university to the wider NMMU community as the business chamber, the metro council and individual citizens responded to the #Support4NMMU cam-

paign with offers of everything from toiletries to accommodation.

And internally, that generosity of spirit has not forgotten those students whose initial noble call of free education for all may have been waylaid.

NMMU has graciously agreed to host multi-stakeholder discussions towards arriving at a national solution.

Engagement has to be the answer in seeking such national, long-term solutions.

We have to think differently and innovatively in transforming our universities in response to the needs of Africa.

The crisis has helped us recognise the urgency of this.

Term four, 2016 has been tough, possibly the toughest in the sector to date, but the positives – the can-do attitude of staff and students, the support of the city, the cooperation between universities and the many lessons learnt going

forward – means our students will complete their academic year as promised. And in this alone, we have our first happy ending.

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