

Supporting students so to pass education to next generation

NO civilisation has ever been successfully built without present generations investing in the education of future generations. As South Africans we must find ways of augmenting our universities' pressurised resources.

These words, often repeated by NMMU vice-chancellor Professor Derrick Swartz, are a call for a new era of agency in higher education funding. The call is not only about finances, it is about a new culture of active giving for education where people in South Africa come together to change society, one student at a time.

This is our approach at NMMU where we put a face to each of our students and where each student's future matters. This is part of the humanising pedagogy we practice at NMMU.

In the current protest environment students are often portrayed as a mass of disaffected youth. One of the many positive consequences of the **#RhodesMustFall** and the **#FeesMustFall** campaigns is that they drew attention to the uneven transformation of South African society, and the need for us all to confront pressing social and economic challenges if we are to build the kind of society we would like to see.

While we recognise and respect the power of the collective, there is also another emerging narrative: students who are using their own agency to do things for themselves in large and small ways. While the government cannot be allowed to abrogate its responsibilities in respect of higher education, at the same time there is a growing realisation that individual agency matters.

Every qualifying student, no matter how disadvantaged her or his background might be, must be given the opportunity to achieve excellence. This is genuine empowerment in that each student becomes a skilled, socially conscious individual, who, in turn, can use his or her agency

to help support the education of the next generation of students.

So how does this happen? It starts with awakening the awareness in every single person that each donation, from one rand upwards, is extremely important.

Each one of us – students, staff, businesses and citizens – needs to take the education of every young person personally and contribute. Investing in higher education is a significant mechanism for breaking the cycle of inter-generational poverty, stimulating sustainable economic development and creating social justice.

As early as 2014, the NMMU council mandated the vice-chancellor to explore ways of re-imagining resource mobilisation at NMMU. This initiative gained added urgency after the funding crisis in South African universities emerged.

At a macro level NMMU is looking at various interventions that will help make the university more sustainable in the medium- to long-term. This includes restructuring the NMMU Trust (the university's fund-raising arm), ramping up commercialisation opportunities and improving efficiencies.

At the same time, various short-term campaigns aimed at helping qualifying but needy students have been launched. One of the remarkable features of these campaigns has been the innovative ways in which students, staff and members of the public have rallied to the cause.

Even students who are themselves needy have generously donated to a cause aimed at assisting those who are even more needy. That is individual agency in action.

In my View



Denver Webb

Such sacrifice is indicative of the re-establishment of a culture of caring and of people taking responsibility to help solve the challenges we face.

The vice-chancellor's fund-raising campaigns have put a human face to the funding challenges students experience. Last year, his Mount Fuji climb raised more than R1.1-million to help fund honours students in financial need at NMMU.

This year he led a group of trailblazers on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu to raise R4-million to assist 160 NMMU final year students to complete their studies and to graduate.

To date this campaign has raised R2.1-million and the fund-raising will continue until the end of this year.

The individuals in the trailblazing group also reflect the agency that NMMU embraces. Among them are three businesswomen, all self-starters and entrepreneurs: Santie Botha, one of South Africa's top businesswomen and the chancellor of NMMU; Dr Bridgette Gasa, architect and founding chief executive officer of The Elilox Group (an architectural, infrastructural development and construction group); and renewable energy entrepreneur Rojje Kisten.

Representing final year students, Nandipha Jack is a final year public management student. She joined the Inca Trail climb to Machu Picchu.

She explains: "I am from New Brighton in Port Elizabeth. Money is very scarce in my community and in my family.

"Many of the young women in my community get caught up in socialising, drinking, drugging

and falling pregnant at a young age. Getting into NMMU and playing netball for the A side has been my way of creating a better life and future for myself and my family.

"I was fortunate to be awarded a sports bursary in my first year and I am now on NSFAS funding."

When Nandipha graduates she intends starting a foundation called Black Girls Matter to help young girls from disadvantaged communities "to believe in themselves and achieve their goals in life through sport and education".

The NMMU SRC has also taken the initiative to assist our students in innovative ways, launching the **#enablingDREAMS** campaign to raise funds to support our students. They have further established a food bank and book collection programme.

In these fund-raising initiatives, they have adopted innovative approaches such as crowd-sourcing, mobilising of individuals in their personal and business networks, and using social media.

NMMU is the largest university in one of South Africa's poorest provinces. This year NMMU enrolled 26 911 students.

Finding innovative ways to ensure students are able to reach their full potential in the current financial climate requires on-going efforts to mobilise all possible resources at a strategic as well as tactical level. The fact that corporate donors, the general public and staff have rallied to support the university in these circumstances is really appreciated.

Equally importantly, the fact that students have come together to find innovative ways of mobilising funding for students in need bodes well for the future of our country.

Dr Denver Webb assists with special projects in the office of the NMMU vice-chancellor and is the acting chief executive of the NMMU Trust.



RAISING FUNDS: Those who walked the Inca Trail to raise funds for disadvantaged students included, from left, Dr Bridgette Gasa, NMMU chancellor Santie Botha, NMMU vice-chancellor Prof Derrick Swartz and NMMU student Nandipha Jack