

# Views not represented accurately

ON Monday July 11, the first day of the third university term, NMMU faced a student and worker protest which spilt into half of the following day. It is unlikely to be the last protest the higher education sector will see this year, since the base causes around which students and workers are mobilising remain stubbornly with us.

The issues that revolve around access, the funding and transformation of universities are structural and systemic, and have been coming for some time.

Social movements and political protests, as sociologists and political scientists will tell us, come in waves and cycles. The very June 16 1976 Soweto uprising, whose 40-year anniversary we celebrate this year, was preceded by student struggle going back to 1968, the year Saso (South African Student Organisation) was born.

Saso in turn inspired the growth of the black consciousness movement.

The establishment of Saso took place after a 10-year political hiatus following the banning of the ANC, the PAC and the SACP, among others, and the condemning of its leadership ranks to exile and Robben Island prison terms.

The year 1972 saw the revival of the black trade unions which, after years of gestation, was to culminate in the establishment of Cosatu.

In 1974, the black consciousness adherents and university students held mass rallies that celebrated the Frelimo-led liberation of neighbouring Mozambique. Then there was 1976 itself, followed by nation-wide university protests in 1980, repeat-

## In my View



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ed in 1986.

The birth of the “new” democratic South Africa in 1994 interrupted this steady “march to freedom”, a march which has been impolitely disrupted by the class of 2015. The political struggles that accompanied the youth struggles from the ‘60s onwards, spawned yet another struggle, this time around and within journalism and newsrooms of the newspapers of the day.

With the SABC under the tutelage of the apartheid regime, the print media became the only platform through which the story of the struggles of students and workers being waged on campuses, in factories,

mines and communities could be told. Unfortunately this was not to be.

With the exception of the Rand Daily Mail and Drum magazine, the white press, as it was known at the time, ignored these struggles. This in part is why the struggle for a free press, particularly gallantly fought by black journalists, grew and became a central part of the student, worker and community struggles in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

Today the fight for a “free press” seems in the main too focused on Hludi Motsoeneng’s stranglehold of the SABC and the “capture” of the public broadcaster by narrow and sectional political, and perhaps economic, interests.

This trend has seen Aubrey Matshiqi, the astute Business Day columnist, writing recently about the need to “commit to freedom in the media”. He correctly argues: “There is a difference between

media freedom and freedom in the media. We spend too much time bemoaning attacks on the former, and very little of our attention focuses on the latter.”

Confronted with screaming print, broadcast and social media headlines on July 11 and 12, glibly declaring “violent blockade shut down NMMU” and “NMMU caves in”, you might have missed another declaration and counter-narrative by protest leaders against a local newspaper in particular, and print media in general, and a national television station. The student leaders were complaining about the way their struggles had been misrepresented and misreported at best, and ignored at worst.

This sentiment has found resonance nationally, which probably explains why the advent of #FeesMustFall movement was accompanied by one of the highest social media spikes in the country as the South African student “revolution got tweeted”.

It is not just the students who find the media wanting. It applies also to university staff who are often bemused by the disjuncture between what they experience during the actual protests and what they subsequently read or hear from the media.

While the tactics of student protest leaders often leave much to be desired, the issues of access, affordability and transformation of the South African university system that they raise are important and fundamental.

The student struggles and protests around these issues need to be actively recorded, and vigorously reported, analysed and debated. We rely on the media to do justice to such coverage, as our knowing, knowledge and understanding depends on it.

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