

Working for transformation

THE article, “Varsity personnel taking extra strain” (June 3), held much promise as it boldly pronounced “anxiety, stress, safety concerns and extra workloads are putting university staff under strain” and cited #FeesMustFall-related events at Wits, Rhodes and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan universities.

I thought, as I read references to statements by Wits University vice-chancellor Adam Habib and his counterpart at Free State University, Prof Jonathan Jansen, bemoaning the human toll occasioned by the #FMF movement, that finally the media was casting a long overdue spotlight on staff and students’ personal #FMF experiences.

The need and importance of such a focus is underscored by the cited case of one NMMU staff member who, due to high stress levels, has had to go on stress leave and take prescribed medication.

Up till now, the coverage of the #FMF movements has disproportionately focused on the “violence” and damage to property, the securitisation of the management of student protests and the financial toll suffered by universities.

We have seen little coverage and analysis of the meaning and significance of the resurgence of the South African student movement more than

20 years into democracy. We have heard little from the student voices, particularly those of the broad-based leadership of the student movement.

Similarly, there has been little focus on the human impact and relations that have played themselves out on different South African campuses. This very point was the reason for my initial excitement on reading the headline of the news article.

While the article suggests that leaders in the sector and at NMMU are somewhat oblivious and uncaring of university staff’s negative experiences, worries and anxieties, this is not entirely correct, nor entirely true. While the depth of the problem may not be fully understood and appreciated, none in the sector can claim to be unaware of the shifting ground and that “a new normal” is upon us.

What we can say is that while NMMU does not have all the answers to a vast range of challenges, we are actively grappling for solutions. We are aware that not all staff and students are equally informed or involved, but we are nonetheless

In my View



Lebogang Hashatse

encouraged by the responses to the “case for change” engagements to date.

That journey started in November last year when the NMMU council passed two historic resolutions – to offer debt relief to hundreds of academically-deserving students from families suffering dire financial distress and to end outsourcing of service functions. These were but two of the many #FMF-related demands facing universities late

last year.

These courageous resolutions enabled NMMU to begin the difficult process of constructively engaging the broad-based (#FMF) student leadership, unions and worker representatives. It was a rocky and treacherous, but necessary, process that consumed our university leadership for almost five months.

While we are by no means out of the woods, we can say that this intense engagement with respective stakeholders has helped to contain mounting risks. It has further enabled relations, particularly with student leaders, to reach a notable level of maturity and restore some working levels of stability.

This, in turn, has given us space to contemplate and explore a “new” future forced on the sector by the spectre of no fee increases and sharply rising costs.

This creative and innovative exploration saw the university’s extended management committee agree to commence work on five critical institutional sustainability streams – academic programme viability reviews, curriculum renewal and decolonisation, reimagining resource mobilisation, student funding, and reintegration of outsourced services and functions.

It also saw vice-chancellor Prof Derrick Swartz being tasked by council to work full-time on leading three strategic macro-projects –

- Re-engineering and re-gearing NMMU’s underlying macro-financial and business model, including its core revenue streams and cost structures to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the university;
- Securing final approval for, and financial development in support of, NMMU’s medical school project; and
- Establishing a sustainable busi-

ness model for NMMU’s new ocean sciences.

Having recognised the critical role of staff (and students) in maintaining and enhancing the academic project and other university projects, NMMU embarked on a series of “case for change” engagement sessions to co-create a more sustainable future.

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These sessions, which are intended to bring issues to the surface, will enable staff and students jointly to craft solutions and co-create the future. They started on May 16 at NMMU’s George campus and on May 27 in Port Elizabeth.

These sessions will cascade to faculties, departments and divisions. Inputs from these engagements will culminate in richer, co-owned strategies and plans, which will then be implemented towards a better and more sustainable future.

While we are under no illusion as to challenges ahead, we are sure of one thing – that by co-creating a future together, we have a better chance of success.

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