

# Disruptions teach lessons

**T**HIS year has been a momentous year in the history of our country and of NMMU. As we move towards the end of the year, we need to reflect on events, especially the crisis occasioned by the student protests of the last few months.

Stressful as it has been, the crisis has also provided opportunities to grow and develop. It has been a privilege to serve as the acting vice-chancellor of NMMU since May.

It has been an incredibly difficult time for everyone involved – students, parents, staff, business and the broader community. Although protests played out on NMMU campuses, the dominant demand is a national issue over which universities have limited influence.

The protests brought out the best and the worst in people. While some student protesters threw literal stones, other people, through the mainstream and social media, threw figurative ones.

Some of the comments reflected the fears, biases and perceptions of the originator more than objective facts. There are, however, a number of positive things that emerged from the crisis.

First, the support shown by the university community and the broader public has been overwhelming. We remained encouraged by the positive responses in words and deeds to the crisis by many ordinary men and women, the business community, alumni, staff members, students and local government.

Offers of venues for lectures and examinations, donations in cash and kind for needy students and other practical support to complete the academic year are but a few examples of gestures of goodwill that were extended to us. This constructive outpouring of support for NMMU lifted our spirits and motivated us to find solutions to the impasse.

Second, the university was challenged to find alternative ways of thinking about its delivery platforms and assessment processes. Previously we were tentative in our deployment of multi-modal teaching and learning methods because some of us found these complicated and difficult.

In recent weeks, however, academics have risen to the challenge of finding innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Indeed, all staff responded very positively and invested in infrastructure successfully to complete the academic programme.

We aim to build on these initiatives to further strengthen our delivery platforms at NMMU.

Third, the #FeesMustFall students raised critical issues in our society with which we all need to engage. The call for affordable, quality higher education for the poor, in particular, is a noble cause.

It has drawn attention to fundamental issues of inequality and poverty in our society. Starting with a focus on symbols such as statues and problematising matters of identity, the questions related to the epistemology of knowledge and transformation remain ineluctable.

Notwithstanding the fact that the leadership of the student coalition foremost in the protests failed to sign the mediation agreement they had negotiated, NMMU is honouring its commitment to undertake a collective consultative process next year involving students, staff and stakeholders. This will explore the meanings and modalities of quality, accessible higher education and lobby the state to address substantively the challenges facing the sector.

We remain committed to constructive engagement, even as we recognise that many of the students' demands cannot be addressed by the universities on their own, let alone by individual institutions.

Fourth, we have all been challenged to reconsider notions of leadership. Managing complexity requires alternative approaches to tried and tested styles of management in organisations, including our own.

Some of the negative public comments made about the "need for strong leadership" were

## In my View



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made in utter ignorance of what was happening behind the scenes. The ignorant fail to appreciate the nuances of managing the fluid and delicate situation in which the university found itself in the past few months.

Student protests of this scale were unprecedented and we had no template on how to respond as a sector.

Throughout the protests NMMU operated with a broad management collective, which was advised by an even broader group of managers and professionals.

During the crisis, the management collective met daily.

The position of vice-chancellor carries ultimate responsibility and accountability for management decisions at the university. This mandate was, as it were, exercised in a consultative and collective manner.

One of the positive spin-offs was to create a more cohesive team where diverse voices were heard and solutions co-created. In all this, the sense of camaraderie and teamwork that emerged is a positive we need to hold on to as we look forward to next year.

Once the university had exhausted all possible avenues for the resumption and completion of this year's academic project through consensus and once it became clear that the negotiated end to protests had been undermined by duplicitous behaviour, NMMU began implementing its academic completion plan (ACP). It included the use of alternative venues for teaching and examinations, use of digital platforms as part of blended learning and a host of other innovations.

Implementing the ACP required the university to address complicated logistical challenges in aspects such as transport, security and digital connectivity.

Our humanising approach to teaching and learning is embedded in the plan. Each step of the way NMMU has offered students choices (like the opportunity of writing examinations in November-December this year or January next year), providing logistical and other support for accommodation and transport, and generally going the extra mile to minimise the impact of the disruption on the completion of studies for this year.

The ACP also encompassed providing on-going counselling services for students and staff traumatised by events. There has been resounding support from students, staff and the general public for implementation of the ACP. We are on track to complete the academic year.

We now need to embark on a process of rebuilding and healing. Without condoning criminal behaviour, we should avoid polarising triumphalism.

We need to rebuild fractured relationships, rediscover a sense of common purpose and focus on our core business. One hopes that protesting students who disrupted activities will

also do some introspection and recommit to robust, yet peaceful engagement as they return to complete their studies at the university.

As we move forward, we need to ensure that we extract all the positive lessons from the student protests and our institutional responses to these developments. As we approach the end of the year, and in this season of goodwill, it is fitting that we thank all the university publics and private citizens who have stood with us in these trying times.

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