

UKZN: a call for perspective on our issues and a request for creative engagement on the way forward

I WAS startled to read Professor Jonathan Jansen's piece titled '*UKZN: It's terrible seeing a varsity die, especially as it was preventable*' in his column published in the Times Live on February 6, 2020. As a former Vice-Chancellor, I think his piece should have been better informed, less sensationalist and considerably more constructive. What follows below is not an engagement with Professor Jansen or his piece, though I have issues with it; rather, it is a statement of the position of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).

The recent outbreaks of violent protests on our campuses might easily suggest that the impasse in negotiations between student representatives (SRC) and University management is essentially a matter of inflexibility or narrow-mindedness on one or both sides and that the disruption could have been avoided had the parties come to an early, sensible compromise on their positions. The reality is less simple and more impacted. Both the SRC and University management are in a difficult bind. We must not only find a way through the current deadlock, but also create a means of reconciling the University's financial obligations and the serious needs of our students on a longer-term basis.

What needs to be said first, however, is the obvious: violence and intimidation are entirely opposing to the idea and ideal of University life. Those who engage in such conduct do not represent anyone. Threatening behaviour and the destruction of property are not a form of politics – they are the negation of politics and reason. Nor are they in any sense a legitimate form of protest: they are criminal acts and the University will seek to bring those responsible to justice. Let's also dispel the rhetorical recourse of Franz Fanon. Across the continent Fanon's eulogisation of violence has become nothing more than an ultimate betrayal: violence has begotten more violence and the legacy is what we see today.

The dedicated staff members of UKZN have worked tirelessly to secure the best possible conditions for all our students, so it is distressing for all of us to suffer these recent reversals. The recourse to violence which has shaped the political landscape and scarred the lived experience of the majority of South Africans is a national issue and not just specific to UKZN, though I concede that we suffer from it more than most. But it must cease: it undermines everything that generations before us risked their lives to secure; it is morally indefensible; and self-harming both immediately and long-term.

Our public Universities have a vital role to play in redressing the structural injustices of our past. By extending the opportunity of a University education ever more widely to previously disadvantaged communities, we fulfil our social commitment and lay the foundations for a more equitable and prosperous society. But no University stands above or outside the prevailing conditions in which it operates. That includes everything from the state of the nation's economy and the priorities of the government to the local conditions in which individuals and families must make their way.

The Province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) has one of the highest rates of poverty in the country, with the adult rate above 60%. The spectre of unemployment, which is alarmingly high even for graduates, tempts many students to remain in the system without momentum and purpose; and subsequent academic exclusion, either through indebtedness or lack of progression, triggers political agitation and sometimes, violence. And the cycle repeats.

The SRC's key demand is that the University allows all students whose annual family income is below R350 000 to register without being required to make any payments for registration fees and towards their debt. The problem we face is that this is approximately 78% of the student population at UKZN. Moreover, it would amount to free education at UKZN for all students whose annual family income is below R350 000; a demand which, should UKZN accede to, would extend beyond current government policy and leave the institution in financial ruin.

UKZN's student debt at the end of December 2019 stood at R1.7 billion. In spite of this, we have continued to implement processes (through financial clearance concessions) that effectively ensure that no single student of the University is required to pay 100% of their debt prior to registration. In fact, the maximum amount payable towards debt has been capped at R45 000 per student with 67% of the student population being required to pay a maximum of R10 000 per student towards their debt.



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The University's position on this matter has been guided by the principle of enabling access for students whilst ensuring that the University remains financially viable and sustainable for the foreseeable future; manages cash flows at a level that maintains daily service provision; maintains its ability to meet its financial obligations to staff, students, suppliers and service providers; and manages its already high level of student debt – the highest of all the public Universities in South Africa.

Clearly, any additional financial concessions that would risk imperiling the University's sustainability would be self-defeating for all concerned. At the same time, we recognise that financial hardship on our campuses is widespread; and indebted students can easily begin to fail academically, leaving them trapped, without secure tenure either inside or outside the University. On this point, the second key demand from student leadership has been that academic exclusions be suspended. But again, University management has an obligation to maintain academic standards and the integrity of the UKZN qualifications.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal not only accepts but also embraces its responsibilities towards the communities within which it is sited. We have an outstanding record of broadening access and very generous levels of fee remission: The financial clearance concessions are the most substantial, at a cash flow cost to UKZN in excess of R1 billion. But neither our own budget nor the government's is endlessly elastic. In fact, there is almost no 'give' in either.

How can we honour our mission as a public University in KwaZulu-Natal – maintaining institutional viability while trying to ensure that the largest number of our students are not left vulnerable, financially and academically? Since I commenced my tenure as Vice-Chancellor, I have worked persistently and in good faith with my management team and the student leadership, trying to square their obvious needs with the necessity of ensuring that the University remains financially sound.

Our stance is not a negotiating bluff – it is an honest depiction of hard circumstances which we cannot evade. Even as all South Africans of goodwill aspire to a nation transformed and rightly look to Universities for leadership, we cannot conjure a better world into existence, any more than can government or private enterprise.

So what is the way forward?

First, we need better politics. The violence must stop – immediately and permanently. Similarly, the decade-long cycles of demands and concessions must come to an end. Of course, all parties come to a negotiation with goals, but our shared goal of maintaining the viability and standing of the University is no longer a background that we can take for granted.

It needs to be a primary consideration for all of us – and that will require new forms of shared responsibility and truly creative leadership – and that applies to University management as much as to the student leadership.

Second, to break the current impasse we need to be realistic about what is achievable by the University and what is not.

The university cannot enrol every student who is financially eligible for NSFAS funding when even NSFAS itself has other qualifying criteria for accessing and allocating funding to financially eligible students. The University is, and has always



been ready to assist 2020 NSFAS qualifying students with debt. There is a greater legitimacy for finding solutions to the challenges facing this cohort because they are less likely to incur future debt if supported appropriately and are also more likely to complete on time if additional support by the University is offered.

The University is committed to working with the Student Leadership on this group for solutions.

Thirdly, the University is committed to working with all our students who are left with one or two modules to complete their qualifications. Senate will apply its mind to find academically acceptable solutions to enabling this cohort of students to complete their qualifications using – if necessary – alternative modes of assessment where formal examinations have proved to be unsuitable or deleterious to the needs of the students. Our DVC and Deans of Teaching and Learning are tasked with generating a list of these students for consideration by relevant bodies of the University.

As Vice-Chancellor of UKZN, I can assure all members of the University community and the population at large that senior management and I will continue to act in good faith, with both principle and strategic vision to the fore.

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UKZN Vice-Chancellor and Principal



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