Time to listen and adapt

As bad as the campus violence has been, we haven’t yet reached the point of no return and still have a chance to save our universities. An Afrikaans editor and a government minister identify the big issues.

Adriaan Basson

 Beware the tyranny of the minority. Beware of people who hug the spotlight for selfish political or business reasons, and who get everybody’s nerves with inflammatory slogans and clenched fists. They are not the majority. Beware of “leaders” who want to convince you, with a rugby tackle here or a human chain there, that you should protect Afrikaans or campus property. You are a student, not a security guard.

Take a deep breath. Count to 10. Last week, we were close to the precipice. One photo of the violent protests on university campuses remains with me. The photo was taken when a group of black protesters disrupted a Varsity Cup match between the University of the Free State (UFS) and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Bloemfontein.

In the photo, three white UFS students are carrying a young black student from the rugby field. He could have been dead; his arms were hanging limply at his sides and his head was thrown back. The three white students look worried and unsure about their condition.

What if he was dead? What if his neck had been broken after the tackle by a white former student or UFS lecturer?

“It would have been a second Chris Hart,” says a colleague who covered the violence in Johannesburg in the early 1980s. Where would we be today if a student had died during last week’s campus violence? It could have been the Free State student whose arms were hanging at his sides, or Jó-Mari Pretorius, who was struck on the head with a megaphone; or a Tukulus student in the middle of the EFF and AfriForum Youth’s stone-throwing at the Witwatersrand campus.

Thank goodness no one was fatally injured. But we must talk this thing out before it is indeed too late.

Young black people are angry and it is important that white people understand their anger. Not approve of or defend it, but understand. Many commentators argue all started with the #RhodesMustFall protests at the University of Cape Town (UCT) last year. They argue university authorities should have been firmer at UCT and Wits when students started protesting against colonial symbols on campus.

I do not agree. To treat all the student unrest of the past 12 months in the same way is simplistic and wrong. Every campus has its own dynamics and issues. Unfortunately, it is in some people’s interests to try to make every campus protest a conflict between white and black.

Last year’s protests, which started at UCT and eventually led to the # FeesMustFall movement, were largely about two things: colonial legacies and symbols at universities (physically and in syllabuses), and high fees. The latter issue was widely supported and eventually led to President Jacob Zuma agreeing there would be no increase in fees this year. The EFF and the DA tried at various stages to hijack the # FeesMustFall campaign, but the leaders of both parties were chased away by the students. Even ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe was not allowed to speak when students handed over a memorandum at Luthuli House.

The question was always whether a solid # FeesMustFall leadership structure was in place to continue with the pursuit of free university education in 2016. The short answer is not: on many campuses new students’ councils took over. With their mantra of “economic freedom in our lifetime”, the EFF’s message resonated on campuses where students simply do not have the financial means to pay for their studies and accommodation.

Yes, the state provides bursaries for the poorest students, but the phenomenon and impact of the “missing middle” became increasingly clear last year. The missing middle refers to the plight of students from working to lower-middle class homes who do not qualify for state support. Many of these students are angry when they see their fellow white students arriving in their own cars in their first year and leaving without any study debt.

Of course, every uprising has its things and it is not surprising that things are stolen or destroyed in the process - even paintings. Does that mean all students who support # FeesMustFall are thugs who should have been arrested last year? No.

Afrikaans is an easy target for opportunistic groups such as the EFF, which is trying to hijack the # FeesMustFall campaign. Its twisted logic goes something like this: if Afrikaans and Afrikaans symbols at the UFS and Pretoria are removed, black students will feel more welcome and will compete more equally on an academic level.

Nonsense.

There is currently not a single university in the country that does not offer all its degree courses in English, particularly Tukis, where Afrikaans is used only by exception in undergraduate classes.

Point: this is not a time for fighting, but a time for listening.

Basson is editor in chief of Netwerk24 where this article originally appeared.

Naledi Pandor

The past few months have posed significant challenges for higher education. The issues raised refer to genuine concerns and are a justified expression of the ongoing struggle of transformation. However, the chaos, violence and criminal behaviour that have been seen on some campuses are an aberration all of us must reject; they pose a real danger of distracting from genuine issues of transformation.

It would appear students at the University of Stellenbosch have decided to address their concerns through dialogue and engagement. This must be praised, but it should not lead to a false sense of security in executive leadership. Students across faculties, race and gender have created room for the executive to show leadership and commitment, and we look forward to hearing the steps they will introduce to confirm their genuine commitment to transformation.

Any reflection on higher education must begin with acknowledging that in 1994 we began the process of transforming our universities, and in 20 years we have made remarkable progress in black participation and enrolment, and gender equity. Transformation, too, is much more.

Recent debates have once more highlighted the salient issue of transformation confronting us all. First, there has been inadequate transformation at leadership level in our institutions, with women seemingly considered unable to lead institutions. Second, the transformation of the academic core is proceeding too slowly. There are too few senior black academics in our universities and few developmental programmes targeted at reversing this statistic.

Last year, the department of higher education introduced a “next-generation” scheme, beginning with 150 new academics taking up permanent posts in our universities, 80% of whom are African women. Four years ago, I launched the African Doctoral Academy at Stellenbosch University to support and advance doctoral training and scholarship on the continent. About 30% of doctoral students in South Africa are from abroad, most of them from Africa.

Third, the increased access of black students has not completely resulted in advances. The majority are registered in fields that do not address the significant gap South Africa has in critical skills fields.

Fourth, higher education is bedevilled by a revolving door syndrome. Learners successfully complete the senior certificate and enter university, only to exit without a degree, wasting our resources in the process.

Fifth, despite legislative commitment to transformation in various higher education acts, the state has been unable to hold institutions accountable for not pursuing the change agenda of higher education.

Sixth, the cultural authority of superiority that characterises many of our institutions continues to be a barrier to success and inclusion for many black students and women. Thousands of young people find our universities alien and forbidding, reluctant to embrace change and, at some campuses, determined that the past will continue to live.

Seventh, where there have been laudable attempts to shape a new trajectory - such as the Hope Project, conceived under the sterling leadership of the late professor Rusel Botman - it has not proven easy to secure “unity of purpose” in our institutions. Such a unity is vital because the national agenda of transcending apartheid will only advance when it is agreed that all constituencies and must work together.

There are early signs of an emerging unity at Stellenbosch that must be supported.

Eighth, our universities suffer from the pull of globalisation in higher education, which imposes a range of administrative, financial and structural constraints on our institutions. Appropriation of these so-called global practices detracts from concerted attention being given to our national aspirations. The desire to mirror the North distracts from the context of Africa and its complex development challenges. Our students become more familiar with academic works from abroad and are educated to appropriate cultural capital that has little relevance to Africa.

These are the core problems that must be responded to, but how?

Recently, government has acted in response to student calls for increased funding to assist students who do not have the means to fund their studies. The extra funding that will be provided by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme in this financial year is welcome.

However, to indicate the unity of purpose that’s urgently necessary, university leadership must use this positive response from government to provide improved support to students. Institutions need to examine their own cost structures and assess if it is possible to assist government in providing affordable higher education. Ensuring financial access is not solely a government matter, but a challenge for South Africa as a whole.

Racism, gender inequality and the exclusion of indigenous knowledge paradigms in higher education in South Africa must be acknowledged. The manner in which we achieved freedom suggests that our universities have the potential to reimage higher education. Our public discourse is in need of rational thought, evidence-based reflections and propositions that advance our national agenda of radical social change.

South Africa must not repeat the history of other systems that have taken decades to overcome discrimination and disadvantage.

Pandor is minister of science and technology, and was minister of education between 2004 and 2009. This is an edited extract of an address given to a Sasco gathering at Stellenbosch University this week.