Where there’s smoke, there’s a university

One of my earliest memories, on my grandmother’s farm, was sitting next to an anthill with a little packet of sugar, tempting the ants from the safety of their anthill and then sending them to happy hunting grounds.

When the toll was in the early single digits, my grandfather abruptly intervened.

He did not ask what I was doing, but rather why I was doing what I was doing. What was it that I was intent on achieving? What positive contribution was I intent on making? For any human being can kill an ant – doing so is not challenging at all. So, what did I want to prove?

As humans beings, we are all capable, in almost all our daily interactions, of inflicting destruction and pain, but just because we are capable of doing so does not mean that we should do so. What gain can accrue from destructive actions?

In recent months, destruction of the property of institutions of both basic and higher learning has continued unabated.

But these actions tend not to attract immediate condemnation, not even from the Education Ministers. Maybe the destruction has become so regular in occurrence.

There is a saying that means that, when something looks wrong, then it probably is wrong – where there’s smoke, there’s fire. In the instance of the young South Africa (it can certainly no longer be considered new or even adolescent), where there’s smoke, there’s a university’s seeming apt.

(Though just as concerning, this article does not deal with the issue of the costly destruction of schools — institutions of basic education, which warrants an article of its own.)

As am typing away, news of the destruction of the auditorium of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) continues to grab the headlines.

(This is one of the challenges of writing a column that is published a few weeks later.) But UJ is not the only educational destruction – there has been destruction at other universities too, but, in monetary terms, the extent, in most cases, is much smaller.

By all media accounts, the UJ destruction is estimated to be in the order of R100-million, adding to the R350-million worth of collective damage caused to universities between October last year and January this year.

At the time of writing, I had seen no statement from the government department concerned condemning the destruction.

A news article published on March 29, citing figures released by the Department of Higher Education and Training, reported that the damage to property at 14 universities caused during student protests in the 2015/16 financial year was calculated to be R300,302,849,58.

The breakdown was as follows: University of Stellenbosch (R352,000), North-West University (R151,000,000), the University of Limpopo (R78,294,52), UJ (R345,000 – this, of course, was before the R100-million destruction), the University of the Western Cape (R165,444,446), Walter Sisulu University (R351,247,19), Tshwane University of Technology (R3,473,747.79), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (R82,000,000), the University of Cape Town (R3,300,000), the University of Zululand (R4,300,000), Rhodes University (R250,000), the University of the Witwatersrand (R1,410,223), the University of the Free State (R2,800,000) and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (R65,850,14).

The University of South Africa, the Central University of Technology, the Durban University of Technology and the University of Fort Hare had also had their property damaged, but had not yet quantified the cost of the damage. At the Vaal University of Technology, the Mangosuthu University of Technology, the University of Venda, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and the University of Pretoria, either no property had been destroyed or the destruction was too minor to quantify.

To put the damage caused to university property into perspective, a May 17 report by free-to-air TV channel eNCA calculated that the R100-million required to repair the damaged property at UJ would have funded the tuition fees of 2,600 students at the university (or 5% of its current students) in one year. If you take the R350-million damage to date into account, you can add another 6,500 students.

The eNCA report stated: “Seventeen-million rand would have been shared among 500 law students, with law degree fees for one year estimated at R34,000.

“A similar figure would have funded 500 education students. Fees for engineering and the built environment are relatively high, at R43,000 a year, so 400 students could have split R17.2 million.

“At least 600 economic and financial sciences students could have shared R22.2 million.

“The health sciences faculty could fund 400 students with an R18.8-million budget. In addition, just over R8-million would have catered for 200 art, design and architecture students, whose fees cost R42,000 per year.”

The destruction is indicative of the economic illiteracy of a country whose economy is expected to grow by only 0.6% this year (if this could be considered ‘growth’) – and this figure will only be attained if the ratings agencies do not reduce South Africa’s status to ‘junk’.

Alien too is the concept of ‘opportunity cost’. Property destruction is one thing, but what about the cost of destruction of, for instance, private property? Here refer to, among others, fellow students’ property.

Who is compensating them for the damage caused to their property? And then there is the cost of depriving others of access to education, for which they have paid. What about the emotional cost to students who are traumatised by this unpleasant experience?

These are the real costs — the true costs — but, as usual, since these costs are not highly visible or quantifiable, they are easily ignored or even discounted.

But who is to pay the costs? One could argue that the cost of the actual property destruction is significantly lower than the associated costs.

What gain do the perpetrators expect from this destruction? Does destruction indicate ability? Does it indicate commitment? Is it intended to instil fear in others and scarifying them emotionally, while, simultaneously, enhancing the sense of superiority of the transgressors? Or is it simply a case of ‘yes, we can’?

As Isaac Asimov famously said: “Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.”

This economic and trade-focused column is prepared by Riaan de Lange. The views expressed in this column are the author’s personal views.