



PROTEST FOR FREE EDUCATION: Students from #FeesMustFall marching to Parliament to demand a decrease in fees. PICTURE: CINDY WAXA

# ‘Born frees’ yearning for change cannot be ignored

Critical conversations on the impact of colonisation are gaining ground

**T**HE current generation of young people are the next group of leaders that can take South Africa forward.

For the last 23 years we have celebrated Youth Day with a reflection on the Soweto uprisings of 1976, while reiterating the importance of youth in the present South Africa.

This conversation has, however, changed in the last couple of years since we labelled the youth once again – this time as “born frees”.

We have seen youth apathy and distrust towards our democratic processes: the rise of the #hashtag protests and gate sagas, where everything must fall and everything matters.

We have seen young university graduates at the robots with placards begging for jobs, first as a joke and a social media share for a like, then just as a normal part of our daily commute. Inequality is silently accepted through ignorance.

We are rather quick to judge and criticise when thousands of students protest for the basic right of access to education; we dehumanise them and make statements like “they must just be glad to have the opportunity to study at a higher education institution”.

Instead, we could be asking how we got to this

Folkers Williams

point where access to education as a human right has been neglected.

Our youth unemployment rate is sitting at above 50% and university graduates are earning four times more than their matric certificate counterpart. The recurring calls for access cannot be ignored.

Conversations around fees might have dominated media since 2015, but other critical conversations are also taking place that might not just have an impact on higher education but will hopefully flow over to other spheres of society.

This year we will continue to engage around decolonisation of our spaces and ourselves. What was the real impact of colonisation? We do not really know and the “born frees” can help us understand it.

Rape culture and intersectionality are other conversations that are just as important as that of women having the right to vote.

Women have been objectified and discriminated against. A worrying example is the abuse and violence against women and girls on a daily basis. It’s a sign of a deep cultural and structural grievance that needs more attention in public.

Perhaps we will also hear young people speak more seriously about climate change that will have the biggest impact on their future.

A big difference between young people of today and the previous generation is their connectedness to a global context.

Technology does not just link young people but broadens their own identity to a virtual reality where they have the power to have a say. Of course, we know that this is not always positive as many are still trying to make sense of this newly formed identity.

We have seen young people use their access to information and instant communication to bring about change. The Arab Spring has been used as an example of this over the last few years, yet the youth have still not been given the access to

democratic processes in the political sphere.

Critical and courageous conversations are taking place on social media and other platforms but are not being acknowledged back into the previous generation’s reality.

What is the use of having a voice if no one listens to you? It does not come as a surprise that the oppressed voices find other ways to express themselves when they have not been heard.

The world is ready to have critical conversations about societal realities, both its past and future. In a world that is open and transparent, leaders cannot hide behind bureaucracy and they should be held accountable.

We should thus not judge too quickly when young people voice their concerns and needs, regardless of the platform or method. What you are seeing might be the tip of the iceberg. We should join in on the conversations and see how we can best be part of the intergenerational dialogue where the youth is not listened to as the leaders of tomorrow, but as the leaders of today.

● Folkers Williams is the Programme Co-ordinator for External Offers at the Frederik van Zyl Slabbert Institute for Student Leadership Development at Stellenbosch University.

“

WE HAVE SEEN YOUTH APATHY AND DISTRUST TOWARDS OUR DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES: THE RISE OF #HASHTAG PROTESTS, GATE SAGAS

“

A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY AND THE PREVIOUS GENERATION IS THEIR CONNECTEDNESS TO A GLOBAL CONTEXT