

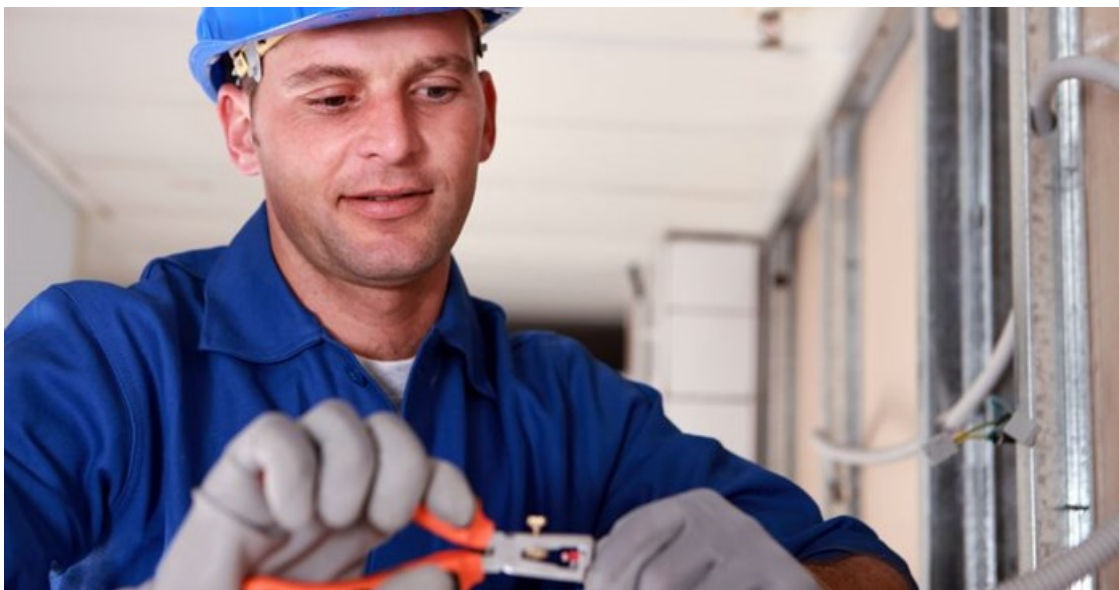
Business calls for a good, hard look at the skills the country really needs

 By [Ryan Ravens](#)

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The flames of discontent currently engulfing our universities and mindless rhetoric from student leadership are causes for grave concern. Our universities have long been a source of pride and hope in an environment where poor political leadership has resulted in minimal economic growth and mass unemployment.

Our tertiary institutions have stood firm as bastions of academic excellence and enjoy a significantly favourable reputation amongst international students and academics. However, scenes currently playing out across campuses around the country and utterances from student leaders have become absolutely embarrassing.



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An alarming political agenda

There can be no doubt that the struggle has moved beyond the needs of students, and an alarming political agenda seems to be at the root of the ongoing violence as opportunistic politicians seek to exploit this youth uprising in pursuit of their own objectives.

The system of tertiary education in our country is under threat and while our institutions are fairly robust and resilient, the system needs protection as we engage between government, business and academia to review the required changes and new models to achieve sustainable university education.

We cannot allow the current high standards amongst our universities to be eroded and the loss of an entire academic year would be catastrophic. Of further concern is the reputational damage being suffered abroad as international students and academics are deterred from enrolling at South African universities.

Uncomfortably ignorant

The general consensus amongst the majority of students was to return to classes and complete the academic year, but this intention has seemingly been derailed by a minority faction intent on violent disruption. The demands initially were for zero fee increases.

Once conceded, the demands very quickly escalated to free education and have now extended to the notion of a “decolonised curriculum”. What the latter actually means is anyone’s guess as the most recent attack on science (#ScienceMustFall) was uncomfortably ignorant and nothing short of a national embarrassment.

Without fear of intimidation

It is becoming increasingly difficult to understand why the rule of law is not being enforced. As much as disgruntled students have the right to protest, those wanting to complete their academic year also have the right to do just that – without fear of intimidation and violent disruption. Those intent on violence and damage to property should be dealt with decisively to the full extent of the law.

No meaningful government support

South African universities have traditionally been under-funded by government, resulting in a dependence on private revenue streams and student fees in order to maintain high academic standards. In a constrained economic climate, revenue derived from private sector contracts is diminished as corporates seek to tighten their belts and reduce R&D activity. As government coffers also start to run dry, universities become increasingly dependent on fees from students.

Our tertiary institutions need to generate income from fees and there would be dire consequences if this revenue is lost. The pressure on VCs is telling however and there are signs that some may be softening their stance and sentiment toward free education as they flounder without any form of meaningful political leadership or support.

University attendance is a privilege

University attendance is a privilege and rightfully so. It should remain valued and aspirational for school learners, and it should always be reserved for the brightest, most promising young minds. The privilege of attending one of South Africa’s top universities should rightfully also come with a cost, as this privilege affords significant advantage and benefits to graduates who will have far higher earning potential, especially in a developing nation. Nobody should be excluded from university purely due to lack of financial resources, but there are also vast numbers of students whose parents can afford it and who should pay for that privilege.

Should a free ride outweigh other social challenges?

How do we justify the call for free tertiary education in a country that has not afforded its citizens free and fair access to basic education? What about the need to maintain a robust system of social security - can we really argue that the needs of an impoverished student outweigh those of a disabled single mother with HIV?

Given that only 4% of our population will ever graduate from tertiary institutions, are these funding demands really more important to our nation than the health, safety and security of the entire country. We simply cannot expect precious state resources to be diverted from other aspects of society in order to afford all students a free ride through university.

Given that government cannot fund the demands, the focus has now shifted to the private sector and the role for corporates in resolving this crisis. While corporates already contribute significantly through numerous bursary programmes for students and contracted services to universities, there may also be an opportunity to provide additional support through student loans and grants to the poor and “missing middle”, i.e. those who cannot afford tuition but live in households that earn above the minimum thresholds required for state funding.

We need artisans, not more poets or politicians

The challenge however is the return on investment to our country and its regional economy. The stark reality is that we simply don't need too many more arts and social sciences graduates, as they are not immensely employable. What this country desperately needs are artisans, not poets and politicians.

Recent research and analysis for a course of action to re-ignite the South African economy demonstrated that we need 40-60% of school leavers pursuing artisanal training. Currently we are only affording that opportunity to 8% of school leavers and the country is consequently experiencing a significant skills shortage in that respect – which is a massive constraint to building and maintaining the infrastructure required to grow our economy.

The local business community is sympathetic to the needs of poor students, but we cannot in good conscience support the demands for universally free university education, and a revised curriculum that excludes “western science”. We certainly will not support the wanton destruction of much-needed infrastructure and the escalation of violence that could lead to the loss of life. This country urgently needs student leadership that is committed to driving an agenda that has national interest at heart and which seeks to strengthen our tertiary sector rather than destroy it.

ABOUT RYAN RAVENS

Ryan Ravens has extensive experience in leadership positions in the public and private sectors having joined Accelerate Cape Town from his role as CEO of consulting company, TetraFlex. Prior to that he was the group executive: strategic partnerships at Blue IQ Investment Holdings. He was also the lead project manager for FIFA for the 2010 World Cup.

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