

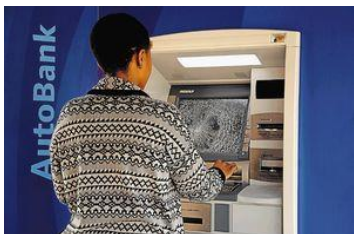
# The Big Read: The two faces of students

Nov 20, 2015 | Jonathan Jansen

There are two images of students in the ongoing protests around the country.



**INNER CIRCLE:** *Protesting students occupy Jameson Hall at UCT where exams were meant to take place. Less visible in the media are the queues of students who plead their financial case privately in the offices of vice-chancellors* Photograph by: **ADRIAN DE KOCK**



**ABOUT MONEY:** *A student withdraws cash from an ATM damaged by protesting students at Turfloop. The University of Limpopo claims the people who were involved in criminal activities during the #FeesMustFall protests were not students* Photograph by: **SANDILE NDLOVU/GALLO IMAGES**

**" I go back home to a small shack ... and watch life pass me by"**

There is the alleged rape of a woman student by a #Feesmustfall activist at a university house in Cape Town; one bright spark suggested a course in patriarchy. There are stories of failed petrol bombings of university buildings in Johannesburg. Rocks, fighting sticks and buckets of that smelly stuff arrive to disrupt yet another exam-in-progress on one campus, while the most violent students (are they actually students?) hide behind balaclavas on another campus.

And just in case you forget where we come from, the ubiquitous tyre shows up everywhere on roads leading onto university property and even around the stone neck of a statue of a hapless old man. More than one university has postponed examinations to next year and another has shut down for this year after waves of nonstop violence began to threaten the lives of staff and the majority of students, who wanted so desperately to complete their studies; many will never be able to come back again, instantly ending their hopes of escaping poverty. That is the one image of students.

The student sitting in front of me this week came with her academic record. She had passed all 14 modules for the year, a remarkable accomplishment, but owes more than R40000. When students load themselves with so many modules in one year it is often an attempt to shorten the study time and therefore the costs of getting a

degree. But to be able to qualify for a bursary or loan for studies next year she must pay off the 2015 debt; those are conditions set by the funder.

"So what will you do if you do not get this money?" I ask the young woman from rural Limpopo. "Then Prof I go back home to a small shack with an unemployed mother and absent father and watch life pass me by."

At this time of the year no university has that kind of money left, but we cannot send this student into a life of poverty. So we devise a plan and after an hour we put together the money from a small savings here and a staff fund there and some cash out of our own pockets. Sorted, she'll be back next year, and we rejoice with elated student.

The problem is there is a line of other students outside my door and the next one in owes more than R45000, also with an outstanding academic record. We beg, we borrow and we make calls as my amazing staff try to help every young soul. This, I can tell you, is heartbreaking stuff.

As I park my car on campus and start the early-morning walk to the office I see a student walking 50m ahead of me but in the same direction towards the main building. She must have sensed me coming because she drops her pace and I know this is to talk and, most probably, seek financial support for her studies. As I catch up with the short young woman she says nothing, just slips her arm into mine as we walk together, not saying a word. I feel slightly uncomfortable and then she speaks: "This has been a difficult year for you leaders," says the science student, "but I wanted to say 'thank you' to the university for everything done for us this year." And then she disappears to write her final exam. I struggled with tears in that moment.

Throughout the past two weeks I have had more students come to express gratitude for support than ever before; I suspect this happens because they sense a need to recognise the other side to what universities and communities actually do for them. This is the other image of students that the media does not see or capture. Violent upheavals and dangerous protests sell newspapers and light up the online media, drawing paid advertisements and new subscribers in the process.

But there is another image and, I would like to believe, a majority image of decent, committed, hard-working students who do receive government funding, private sector support as well as financial backing from poorly paid university secretaries and from the meagre pensions of loving grandmothers. It might not be enough funding but it keeps them studying as these amazing young people find ways to earn other money through a weekend job off-campus or as a tutor.

To those students I say thank you.