

Nelson Mandela said that 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'. Southern Africa suffers greatly from a shortage of well-educated people. However, it is a massive challenge to increase literacy, let alone to provide education for all people in the region, starting with early childhood education, through primary and secondary schooling, and culminating with university studies. But this is a challenge to which we must rise, as educated people are employable and have the capacity to build a better society, to create employment, and to reduce poverty.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) says, in Article 26, 'Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.' Some countries seem to have got this right, with examples of free education (even at university level) seen in countries including Cuba in the developing world (which spends 10 to 11% of its GDP on education), and Norway in the developed world. Annual spending on education around the world exceeds five trillion US dollars, yet there are still around 800 million people who are unable to read or write. There is clearly a pressing need for more professional, dedicated, well-trained teachers, and for society at large to confer a high social status on these important people (as is the case in the Nordic countries).

In South Africa, the Freedom Charter of 1955 declared that 'Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children. Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit.' More recently, Section 29 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of South Africa says that 'Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education; and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible'.

A report commissioned by the Department of Higher Education last year found that South Africa spends only 0.75% of its GDP on tertiary education, which is less than the average in Africa, let alone the world average. Universities say that government funding has not kept up with inflation and the huge increase in student numbers in recent years. Rising fees at universities have made studying unaffordable for many potential students. There is no doubt that many students are effectively excluded from a university education because of poverty.

Students at the University of the Witwatersrand started protesting around 14 October 2015, in response to an announcement by the university that fees would be raised by 10.5% in the New Year. The 'Fees Must Fall' student protests quickly spread to other universities across South Africa. University activities were significantly disrupted and access to campuses was effectively blocked. By 17 October, Wits University agreed to suspend the fee increase, and declined to take disciplinary action against participating students or staff members. Exams were postponed by a week. After a week of nationwide protests, a mass rally of many thousands of protesting students was held outside the Union Buildings in Pretoria. This resulted in the President of South Africa declaring that there will be a zero increase of university fees in 2016. A small group of demonstrators turned violent, setting fire to a portable toilet, and breaking down fences. The police responded with tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets. The students themselves called for discipline, stressing that it was a peaceful protest.

There seems to be a general consensus view that the protesting students managed to achieve a great deal in a relatively short space of time. Overall, the protests were disruptive but relatively peaceful (with a few exceptions). Many commentators hold the view that these protests are historically significant for our country. Of course, it remains to be seen whether the zero increase in fees is altogether a good thing -- presumably good for students' finances, but not necessarily so for providing the funds needed for quality education (unless the funds can be made up from somewhere else). The universities have argued that they need a greater income to keep up their standards.

The SAIMM's Young Professionals Council responded promptly to the protests by presenting a very constructive option (by means of contributions to the SAIMM Scholarship Trust Fund) for people to contribute towards solving some of the very real problems faced by many students in South Africa. This fund makes a big difference to the lives of many students, and enables them to stay at university when they would otherwise have to drop out because of insufficient money for books or even food. This is a very good example of the way in which the SAIMM shows that it cares.

There is a further dimension to the story of the mining and metallurgy students of 2015. Perhaps half of the students who have recently graduated will not find employment in the year ahead. The universities have done a great job in response to the call to double the number of graduates in the past few years. However, in the current downturn, there are very few jobs available. This is a tragedy for the individual student who might have come from a rural village where the community has raised funds for him or her to get an education, with the expectation of a well-paying job, and the student has to return home dejected and empty-handed. Has a proper survey been carried out to determine how many engineers the mining industry actually needs in good times and in bad times?

As we approach the end of 2015, the mining industry is feeling rather battered and bruised after an exceptionally tough year. Many observers have indicated that 2016 is likely to be tough too, but we know that the commodity business is a cyclical one and the world we live in requires a variety of metals in order to function, so there is some optimism for the medium term. Best wishes to all for a good rest during the coming holiday season.

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