

How #FeesMustFall presented opportunities for greater student accessibility

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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During a plenary roundtable on education for sustainable development at the recently concluded World Sustainability Forum 2017, [Professor Norman Duncan](#), vice principal of the University of Pretoria, noted how the #FeesMustFall protests highlighted two sustainability issues within the higher education sector.



Professor Norman Duncan, vice principal of the University of Pretoria, presenting at the UN Global Colloquium of University Presidents at Yale University in 2016.

The first issue sparked the protests - the fact that fees are increasing annually at a rate at which many South African students can no longer keep pace with in terms of affordability. The second issue of sustainability was triggered by the first - the need for universities to complete the academic year.

Hybrid learning

Reiterating the point of a previous speaker at the forum, Prof Duncan emphasised that, quite frequently, a crisis may present an opportunity. "When we went through weeks without the capacity to offer students formal lectures - chalk-and-board lectures - universities had to be innovative because we have lots of students who pay lots of money. At our university, what we did was we decided to fast-track our hybrid mode of teaching," explained Prof Duncan.

At the University of Pretoria, the hybrid mode of teaching entails 70% traditional, chalk-and-board lectures, and 30% online learning so that students are provided with technology-based skills. Fast-tracking the e-learning programme allowed the university to complete the year, but also presented an opportunity.

"The crisis really showed us what may be possible in the future... It has given us the opportunity to see how we can drive a diversity of modes of engagement with students that will make education much more accessible to larger groups of students," said Prof Duncan.

Community of practice

What was lacking, he pointed out, was collaboration among South Africa's universities as many had to move to a hybrid teaching programme during the crisis, each going through the pains of acquiring new sets of skills on their own. It would

have been more efficient and useful for universities to form a "community of practice", said Prof Duncan.

"That is one of the things I think should be quite high on the agenda for higher education in South Africa - to form communities of practice that go way beyond individual universities. As in other countries, universities in South Africa are relatively competitive, and it's something that I think is to our detriment and to the detriment of our students ...our commitment should be to all South African students, not just to the students at individual universities," he said.

The sixth World Sustainability Forum took place 27-28 January 2017 at the Southern Sun Cape Sun in Cape Town. For more info, [click here](#).

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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