

Students must respect taxpayers' money

IN a television interview on Thursday, a leader of student protests stated that they are only claiming what they were promised, namely free education. Let us leave the question of who made the promise . . .

We all know that free education is a misnomer. What the students are asking for is education fully funded by the taxpayer. At the risk of being told that I am commodifying education, I must practise what I preach.

The student who qualifies at a tertiary institution receives lifelong private, call it personal, benefits from the qualification obtained. At the same time, the community reaps the social benefits. Therefore, from the economic point of view, both parties have to pay.

The students cannot expect to reap private benefits from an investment

which they did not partly fund. The community cannot expect to reap social benefits from an investment which they did not partly fund. The student's investment is by means of fees, the community's investment by means of the tax money that subsidises the educational institutions.

There are cases where our political economy provides private benefits which the recipients do not pay for. Healthcare and income maintenance programmes for people with personal circumstances that warrant tax-funded support are such private benefits which those people do not pay for.

When tertiary education is reclassified into a category of public services for which the taxpayer must foot the full bill, the recipients of the private benefits of education will have to

accept a liability towards the taxpayer who so generously made the full investment in their education.

Full tax funding of tertiary education will have to come with stringent conditions attached. The students must complete the qualification of their choice within the minimum prescribed period of study. Any extension beyond the minimum period will be loan funded. This loan will be repaid within the same number of years of employment as the duration of the study.

A second condition will be a pay-back period, but not in cash. Nothing more than taking up any occupation of choice, but staying in that occupation in South Africa for a period equal to the length of study. In that period, the former student will become familiar with the duties of a taxpayer.

Given the problems within the South African school education system, universities can restructure their degree programmes by adding another year, but at the same time making it possible for students to complete the qualification in the original shorter period.

The moral of the story is that the recipients of tax-funded tertiary education must show the same respect for the taxpayer's money which they would like to see future generations show their tax money.

It can do no harm when the beneficiaries acknowledge that the poor count among the taxpayers from whom they want to receive what they mistakenly call "free" education.

Charles Wait, professor emeritus, NMMU