



## **“Free Education”**

### **POSITION PAPER**

A poet once wrote: *“Africa is a land of deferred dreams. A land where problems are ignored and left to fester. What happens to these dreams deferred?”*- Langston Hughes, the African American poet.

#### **1. Introduction**

South Africa is currently facing unprecedented scenes of protests within the higher education division. There has been a series of protests among students who cannot afford tertiary fees, nothing like the protests that brought institutions to a standstill in the late 2015 and early 2016 (Essop 2016). Where thousands of students took to the streets calling for free education, arguing that increased fees would thwart poor black youths from accessing education.

The unique feature of recent protests is that it involved students from both historically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, students from private institutions also protested last year when the protests emerged. However, the protest did not last longer than that of the public universities. Hundreds of people have since also taken to social media to voice their dissent under the hashtags; *#FeesMustFall* as well as *#NationalShutDown*. The Media’s extensive exposure ignited solidarity protests in countries like the United Kingdom and United States of America.

Although the students demands were met with a positive result like a freeze on tuition fee increases; their demand for free university education has not yet been achieved (Essop 2016). According to recent updates, there were sudden clashes at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Rhodes University causing unrest at both campuses on Monday 7 November 2016. The University of Wits was preparing for a mass assembly of protesting students in support of the shutdowns, while on the other side of the protests a group representing ‘Take Back Wits’ was gathering. According to Ms Lerato Sejake; The ‘Take back Wits’ leader Young Stuart said the group did not want to destabilize the *#FeesMustFall* movement, instead the group hoped for informative action to recommence at the university.

#### **2. Background**

The Protest demonstrations began earlier in October 2015 after the government proposed to increase university fees by about 12 percent at tertiary institutions. The abrupt trigger towards the protest appeared to be the announcement that was made by Wit University of a 10.5 percent fee hike for 2016, which then evoked the



response of the hashtag *#FeesMustFall* campaign. Rallies swiftly spread to numerous cities across the nation, where students clashed with the police as they tried to enter the Parliament building to interrupt a budget speech conveyed by the then finance minister Mr Nhlanhla Nene. The Protesters also tried to infringe the headquarters of the ruling party the African National Congress (ANC).

The dilemma for the *#FeesMustFall* protest extended further as a racial concern because of the notion that most white people were more privileged than the black people. For instance, the education system it was argued, despite progress since 1994, options were still stacked-up against black students, starting from primary school. The unemployment for black South Africans is far higher than their white counterparts, coupled with fewer executive positions being held by the previously disadvantaged population, it is a true reflection of what South Africa has now come to be known for, the most unequal societies in terms of the Gini-coefficient.

The protesting university students have continually linked their cause to race. Speaking at the Wits University, former SRC president Mr Mcebo Dlamini spoke more about reports of racism at the institution than fees. “Decolonization” was recurring at the protests. Essentially, demonstrating students say universities do not reflect the demographics or cultures of the black majority. “We can’t breathe” is a phrase often cited by students”. Black students must struggle or be extremely lucky to get into university and face family financial pressures or be lumped with future debt. By their nature, universities reproduce past knowledge systems before they create new thoughts, meaning black students are not only usually taught by whites but taught White.

This is the country’s DNA says Nicolson (2016), where dignity is a luxury, but how many generations will be able to accept the virus? Protesting students have talked about historical debt, registration fees, issues of accommodation, campus security, racism and fees, which for the average student remain extremely high in relation to household income, and have risen, with lower government subsidies. A revolution is the underlying message according to the students.

### **3. Statement of the Position:**

More than 20 years into democracy, young people are still languishing in poverty and are plagued by crime, violence, unemployment and lack of education. About 70% of South Africa’s 20 million young people were more likely to be victims and perpetrators of assault, robbery and property theft than adults (35 years and above)

The SAAYC as an organization advocates for the youth in their quest for a better education such as the free education, however one must be alive to the competing priorities on treasury and take into consideration the existing tiered allocation of funds to students coming from poor households. The National Student Financial



Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has had its share of problems ranging from the more than R650 million that was not utilised as reported in parliament, worse still in the previous financial year, R750 million was not used; the Minister of higher education indicated that this could be partly because universities have not spent their allocation and only notify NSFAS at the end of a financial year, at which stage it may not be possible to fund other students as the academic year has ended.

Some amongst Young people felt that the African National Congress (ANC) as an organisation has over the years since 1994 been incapacitated to deal with the issues surrounding higher education.

It is with sadness that one must see how the youth of today from child-headed households and poor backgrounds are living their lives with fewer opportunities. These could be fertile ground for young people resorting to crime, stealing, drugs, trafficking and child labour just to make a living.

Helping the poor, the needy, the destitute, and the underprivileged is everyone's responsibility and as a non-profit youth organisation, it would be in society's interest that the matter is resolved. The SAAYC has been involved with transforming young people in South Africa. It has fundamentally evolved into a bigger and more inclusive organisation over the years, which has gone through a number of transformations that are aligned to the government youth policies; from apartheid to the currently democratic government. The institution is aimed at "empowering all Southern African young people, realize their self-worth, develop a positive image about themselves and restore their dignity". Like any other organization, SAAYC continues to transform and challenge itself to meeting the needs of the growing youth population and supports amicable and inclusive solutions on education.

#### **4. Main Body**

Many countries once offered free higher education such as China, Australia, Mozambique, Kenya and England. These countries have since implemented cost-sharing policies and models of one form or another. In South Africa, students are demanding free higher education. While some students are demanding free education for the poor, the majority seems to want free higher education for all.

In European countries such as Norway, Sweden and Germany there is still free education provided for its citizens. Most of these countries have higher taxes to cater for the financing of education. However, the downside to high tax countries turns out to be that the living expenses can be high with NOK 8,900 (approx. 1,200 GBP) needed just for subsistence per month in Norway. Until 2010, Sweden had been one of the few European nations' countries that had no tuition fees. It did not matter what your nationality was in Sweden as



the bill was footed by the Swedish taxpayers. In 2010, the Swedish parliament passed a law to charge tuition and application fees for non- EU/EEA students. At the moment there are no longer tuition free universities in Sweden as it proved to be unsustainable.

According to research (Badat 2016:3) it was clear enough that the crisis of higher education has a number of dimensions; such as the ‘economic dimension’. One way of measuring the state’s contribution is to consider the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that is allocated to higher education (Badat 2016:3). The percentage increased between 2004/2005 and 2015/2016, from 0.68% to 0.72%, from some R9.8 billion to R30.3 billion. However, this level of funding is low in comparison with a number of other countries. For instance in 2012, Brazil allocated 0.95% of its GDP to higher education, “Senegal and Ghana 1.4%, Norway and Finland over 2% and Cuba 4.5%. Therefore, if the state was to spend at least 1% of GDP on higher education, this would amount to R41 billion – an additional R11 billion” (Cloete 2015).

#### **4.1. South Africa’s Actions in Respect to the Problem**

South-Africa’s stand-point as far as the #FeesMustFall campaign/ rally has brought an abrupt shift and silence when the government forfeited the increment and let the fees remain as is. Although, everyone might have opinions on free education, where some support the notion and other parties are against it. The government remains at a point whereby they say that they are unable to fund for all students. However, as per Blade Nzimande’s report, he mentions that, as government they do understand the concerns and frustrations raised by students on free education, but it stands to reason that those students that can pay must pay. Bearing in mind the responsibility and commitment to subsidise for poor students in higher education in the context of an unnatural economic climate.

The PWC (2016) rather suggested that the government should increase the level of spending on higher education. For instance, increasing government’s spending from 0.75% of GDP to 2% of GDP. Thus, relieving the burden on students to fund for their own education. Building more institutions such as colleges, to facilitate and provide educational alternatives for the 18 million South African’s who are unable to study at universities is considered (Nzimande 2016).

More than R4.5 billion in the 2016/17 financial year has been reprioritised to the NSFAS; which is still not considered enough to support all students from poor socio-economic backgrounds and academically deserving



students. It was developed that there were students who came from wealthy families that got a NSFAS loan or bursary which is not supposed to be the case as the facility was supposed to cater for the poor and working class families. In this regard, procedures for bettering the expenditure of funds, and rigorous efforts to source out fraudulent acts are currently considered and are underway.

Furthermore, the department places an attention to all stakeholders, private segments and university management to help and participate on the issues at hand; discovering harmonious negotiations and resolutions.

## **5. Conclusion**

The *#FeesMustFall* campaign was about free tertiary education for all and how youth express themselves in a democracy on matters of access to education. Young people view that as about healing broken promises, about a generation's phantom limbs and its children refusing amputation. Free education is cheap. It is more expensive to have a mass pool of uneducated youth than to have an educated nation. A policy of free higher education requires fundamental re-thinking of and changes in social goals, priorities and policies. In addition, the state would have to provide universities their full running costs, part of which they currently derive from tuition and residence fees from students. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, in which there are huge inequalities based on wealth and income. Free higher education would be a great boast for the poor and working-class families. An alternative approach could be to strive to progressively realize free higher education, beginning with those most in financial need, alongside a parallel process of a wider reformulation of social goals, priorities, and policies. Outside of such an approach, the call for immediate free higher education will reproduce inequalities.

## **6. References:**

Avantika Seeth and Zinhle Mapumalo 2016, Shocking stats for SA youth: <http://city-press.news24.com/News/shocking-stats-for-sa-youth-20160427> City Press 27 April 2016.



Badat, S 2016, Deciphering the Meanings, and Explaining the South African Higher Education Student Protests of 2015-16, Available from <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/documents/Saleem%20Badat%20-%20Deciphering%20the%20Meanings,%20and%20Explaining%20the%20South%20African%20Higher%20Education%20Student%20Protests.pdf>

Cloete, N 2015, 'The flawed ideology of "free higher education"', University World News, 389, Available from <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20151104111825416>

Davids, N & Waghid, Y 2016, #FeesMustFall: History of South African student protests reflects inequality's grip, *Education*, Accessed on 15 November 2016, Available from <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-10-10-feesmustfall-history-of-south-african-student-protests-reflects-inequalitys-grip>, Mail and Guardian, Johannesburg.

Essop, A 2016, Fees must fall but not at the expense of quality higher education, *Education*, Accessed on 15 November 2016, Available from <https://theconversation.com/fees-must-fall-but-not-at-the-expense-of-quality-higher-education-62520>, The Conversation, Johannesburg.

Langa, P, Wangenge-Ouma, G, Jungblut & Cloete, N 2016, South Africa and the illusion of free higher education, Available from: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160223145336908>, University World News.

Nzimande, B 2016, Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande on 2017 university fees, Available from <http://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2016/09/19/IN-FULL-Higher-Education-Minister-Blade-Nzimande-on-2017-university-fees>, City Press, Johannesburg.

PWC 2016, Funding of public higher education institutions in South Africa, Available from <http://www.pwc.co.za/en/higher-education/Funding-public-higher-education-institutions-SA.html>

Pilane, P 2016, Three reasons why #FeesMustFall protests will continue, Available from: <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-01-13-three-reasons-why-feesmustfall-protests-will-continue>, Mail and Guardian, Johannesburg.