

Positioning the #FeesMustFall Movement within the Transformative Agenda: Reflections on Student Protests in South Africa

Luvuyo Ntombana

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6376-6068>
Nelson Mandela University,
South Africa
luvuyo.ntombana@mandela.ac.za

Asemahle Gwala

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3163-1000>
Nelson Mandela University,
South Africa
Asemahle.gwala@mandela.ac.za

Francis Sibanda

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9746-0772>
Nelson Mandela University,
South Africa
francis.sibanda@mandela.ac.za

Abstract

This article reflects on the successes and failures of student protests in transforming higher education in South Africa through a Marxist lens. The slow pace of change by the government in addressing structural and systemic inequalities has led to disgruntlement within the student body. In their quest to hasten the process, students engaged in protests across the country, inspired by the #RhodesMustFall movement. This article outlines the problematic areas that have led to the unrest and reflects on the #FeesMustFall movement: the lessons learnt and its impact on contemporary higher education. The reflection further unpacks what it means to be a student in South Africa and how the learning process shapes and is shaped by the student movements within universities. The study reviewed existing literature on the #FeesMustFall movement to better understand the influence of student protests on government policy and to evaluate whether any protest-based changes have occurred in higher education in South Africa.

Keywords: FeesMustFall; student activism; student protests; higher education



Education as Change
<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>
Volume 27 | 2023 | #10870 | 18 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/10870>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
© The Author(s) 2023



Published by the University of Johannesburg and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Introduction

Six years after the nationwide #FeesMustFall (FMF) student protests in South African universities, the education landscape remains much the same. Students continue to protest, raising both historical and new demands. Even lockdowns necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic failed to stop students from organising and demonstrating for their demands. As recent as the beginning of 2022, students from across the country disrupted classes over registration difficulties, financial exclusions and vaccine mandates (O'Regan 2022). In 2021, protesting students at the University of the Witwatersrand demanded that the university allow those with historical debts to register, and that the government increase national funding. They used the hashtag #WitsAsinamali (We have no money) to trend on social media, indicating that they did not have money to register. In 2019, students at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and Durban University of Technology (DUT) held demonstrations calling for free accommodation for those affected by historical debt (Mlaba 2021).

One may then wonder whether these cycles and waves of protestation will go on *ad infinitum* without resolutions. In short, the #FeesMustFall campaign began over a proposed fees increase, which took place in October 2015 for the 2016 academic year at the University of the Witwatersrand and later spread to all government-funded universities (Mavunga 2019, 81). Soon after the Wits incidents, it became obvious that students struggled with other issues that had been boiling under the surface for a long time. For example, early in 2016, the country witnessed the #RhodesMustFall protests, which were triggered by students' unhappiness over the continued presence of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes and other symbols of colonialism at the University of Cape Town. The use of hashtags comes from the fact that in order to maintain its national momentum and to mobilise across the board, students utilised mainstream media and social networks such as Facebook. At some universities, the protests were very violent and led to the suspension of lectures and examinations, damage to property, as well as injury and arrest of some students (Phaladi and Salavu 2016).

There are three key players in the education sector, namely, the university, the government and the students. The society, in general, can also be included in this matrix. For optimum efficiency and functioning of the education system, all stakeholders must share an understanding of needs, resources, challenges and visions (Wangenge-Ouma 2021). Attaining an inclusive and accessible education has been a struggle for the post-apartheid government. Unlike its predecessors, who drove a segregationist approach, the post-1994 government had to fulfil the wishes of the country's majority. That entailed removing barriers and establishing equitable institutions and systems. Despite opening opportunities and access, the affordability of higher education has always remained the biggest challenge. This aspect has been a cause of most protests by the South African tertiary students (Mzileni 2020, 16).

South African students' protests for fee-free education did not begin with the #FeesMustFall campaign, as generations of students have fought for the same cause (Mzileni 2020). The 2015 FMF protests reignited the national dialogue about progressive change within the South African higher education sector; they drew attention to the capitalist superstructure that South African universities had become and highlighted that the higher education curricula still reflected colonial, apartheid-era objectives that did not fully equip black African youth. It can be argued that the nature and character of South African universities have not changed much since the advent of democracy in 1994. Content from the colonial era can still be seen in the curricula and other vital aspects of university life. The landscape of higher education in South Africa has notable changes, but it is also riddled with continuities from apartheid. We argue that the #FeesMustFall movement has not achieved its purpose given that a number of South African students are still excluded due to lack of fees payment, and even those who have graduated are still unemployed. What makes matters worse is that even after graduation, they are often required to produce experience while their predecessors who are at various companies were never demanded such.

Class Struggle and Social Justice

At the heart of the #FeesMustFall campaign were two main issues: the class struggle as argued within Marxism and a quest for social justice. Karl Marx's greatest contribution was the revolutionary dimension to change. He believed that the dialectical nature of history is expressed in class struggle and that the class system is responsible for the oppression of the masses. He further states that when people become aware of their loss, of their alienation, as a universal nonhuman situation, it will be possible for them to proceed to a radical transformation of their situation by a revolution (McLellan and Chambre 2022). The students' struggle embodies the decolonisation of systems and structures that perpetuate the status quo. Borrowing these concepts and applying them to their situation, students find themselves confronting the education system they deem unjust, colonial and oppressive. Their main objective centres on having a "liberated" education system that is fully transformed.

This article seeks to evaluate the transformative power of these protests and their contribution to the higher education discourse in South Africa. Marx's dialectical interpretation of society and decolonisation theory are used to better understand and reflect on the transformative agenda of the student protests. Various South African academics have built on Marxist scholarship by advancing social justice theory as the key instrument in the utilisation of the post-apartheid university for purposes of addressing poverty and the underdeveloped sociocultural make-up of universities (Kele and Mzileni 2021, 2). For scholars such as Badat (2007, 459), Pityana (2010, 39), Swartz (2015, 2), Jansen (2017, 1) and Habib (2019, x), the social justice worldview is critical in the postcolonial South African university in which, among other things, students seek solidarity with fellow students and workers as well.

In essence, the #FeesMustFall campaign began as a revolt against the unaffordability of higher education and patterns of coloniality that still define the epistemic and sociocultural make-up of the university space (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, cited in Godsell and Chikane 2016, 59). At the centre of this movement was the majority of poor students who were unable to pay their school fees, with some facing academic exclusion and a bleak future due to the crumbling South African economy (Kele and Mzileni 2021, 4). The FeesMustFall campaign cannot be separated from the South African economic and political landscape in the sense that the students themselves are part of the broader society. Furthermore, the movement was a matter of prioritising the needs of the poor and the working class, such as public investment in free education and training to create a skilled workforce with better opportunities to make livelihoods (Bond 2016, 196–98).

The Landscape of Higher Education in South Africa: Continuities after Apartheid

The higher education system in South Africa, like other sectors of society, was shaped by social, political and economic discrimination and inequalities of a class, “race”, gender, institutional and spatial nature (Badat 2010). To understand the South African university landscape that sparked nationwide protests during the #FeesMustFall movement, one must understand the “race” and class dynamics that characterise post-apartheid South Africa (Southall 2016, 15). In an article titled “Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, Andrew Nash (2006) outlines the framework that was introduced by the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, on the 2nd of February 2002 on the restructuring of higher education in South Africa.

The standout recommendation that changed the course of history for many institutions around the country was the reduction of the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21, mainly through mergers of former white universities and technikons with former black universities (Nash 2006, 3). Nash argues that the move was part of a concerted effort to solidify higher education with a more pointed orientation mirroring the neoliberal shift inspired by the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) policy positioning of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) government. The government used the rhetoric of non-racialism and democracy as a façade to mask the class project that would define the form and content of higher education in South Africa until the #FeesMustFall protests ruptured the status quo (Ngcaweni and Ngcaweni 2018, 73). The new model contained racial and class frailties that could be seen in fundamental aspects such as the funding model and language policies. The restructuring took place around the time when the American university system was asserting its dominance in the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Barchiesi 1997, 36). Nash (2006, 9) argues that even before the advent of democracy in the country, South African universities embraced other countries’ systems of higher education and their norms and values, even though they were unachievable in South Africa. The systems had been created to cater to the needs of exploitative capitalism and its distinctive features that include a highly differentiated hierarchy of institutions, academic specialisation defined

in such a way as to establish precise norms of achievement and research “output”, the concentration of extensive resources behind the highest-achieving individuals and institutions, an ethos of individual self-advancement and undisguised careerism, and a strong orientation to the marketplace (Nash 2006, 5).

The model, despite being structured in line with the South African economy’s requirements, continued to reflect old colonial patterns embodied in the continuous use of global ranking methods that do not take into account the disadvantaged history of historically black institutions. The latter have to compete for funding in the global market with former white universities that have been disproportionately empowered compared to so-called “bush” or “Bantu” universities. This deepens the dichotomy between the “classes” of universities. South African universities also have to stretch their meagre resources to alleviate the pressure of publishing in international journals that are predominantly based in the Western world and that are predominantly interested in research topics that appeal to the countries in which they are published (Naicker 2015).

A consequence of this, particularly pertinent to institutions such as Fort Hare that are located in rural areas, is not being able to access the required financial assistance offered by international research institutions to study the lives of those who live in the same geographical location as the rural university. Universities located in urban areas whose research aligns to the Global North are thus more likely to gain financial assistance from international research institutions. Students with a working-class and/or rural background who beat the odds to gain university admission are exposed to a culture that does not resonate with the culture in which they were socialised. Once they have assimilated into the system, the content of the curriculum promotes capitalism rather than community upliftment and they tend to perceive the indigenous communities in which they were raised as research subjects rather than reservoirs of knowledge (Bunting 2004). Universities should be relevant to the places where they are based and collaborate with local communities even though their mission may be global (Bank and Sibanda 2018).

The Political Economy of Higher Education in South Africa

In pursuit of equity and quality, the South African education system experiences turbulence and paradoxes. For instance, how do universities achieve quality when they have to enrol under-prepared students? On the other hand, how do they claim to be inclusive if they exclude those who are disadvantaged? In making trade-offs, the education system is generally seen as disadvantaging the poor and promoting inequality in the country. Keet (2020) contends:

We need to reject the popular arguments that appear to steer the thinking and programmatic work of our public agencies around trade-offs between excellence and quality on the one hand, and social justice on the other; and between equity and

development. Or, as some would have it, the trade-offs between social equity and knowledge production.

Throughout the twentieth century, the education system maintained colonial ideals through curricula that either empowered or disempowered individuals according to their “race”. The South African schooling system has historically disadvantaged black people. However, it has also served as a platform where transformative ideas are conceived for the betterment of those at the lowest levels of society (Bond 2016, 192–95). When the ANC ascended to power after the 1994 general elections, people anticipated significant changes to the education policy in the country and that the system would become more people-centred and advocate for equity and redress, but the globalisation of the 1990s maintained the status quo, as the government had to find its place in the global economy (Badat 2007, 465). Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, there has been an increased demand for access to basic and higher education. Millions of black people previously denied access to high-quality education were thus only able to provide cheap labour due to their lack of skills.

The economic forces that shape society also affect the higher education sector. Since the end of apartheid, a sizeable black middle class has grown rapidly alongside a large and relatively impoverished black working class (Southall 2016, 19). During the FMF protests, students criticised the University of Cape Town for owning shares in Lonmin Platinum Mine. This was an indication that the students saw themselves as part of a larger transformative struggle within the South African political structure (Naicker 2015; Valela 2015). The Marikana Massacre of 2012, where the South African police gunned down 34 mineworkers at Lonmin Platinum Mine, was the first post-apartheid massacre that laid bare the failures of a young democracy. In the critically acclaimed documentary titled *Miners Shot Down* (Desai, dir., 2014), one of the miners explained that they had picketed for their children to go to school to achieve social mobility.

The developing world views tertiary education as one of the few ways to escape from poverty. For many years families have sold their livestock to send their children to higher education institutions, and these graduates have subsequently joined the ranks of the South African middle class (Wolff and Gittleman 1993). There is a correlation between university enrolment rates and the productivity of labour and therefore higher wages for those who are involved in the labour market. One of the prime examples is the growth of the middle class in Asia that ultimately led to accelerated economic growth on the continent (Banerjee and Duflo 2008; Bussolo et al. 2007; Kharas 2010; Ravallion 2010). By 2008, Asian countries had substantially reduced the number of people living on less than \$2 per day and the middle-class people earning \$2 per day or more accounted for 57% of the entire population, according to data obtained from a household survey (Ravallion 2010).

One of the challenges in transforming the education system has been the African universities’ approach to development, which is aligned to global economic trends. The

global dominance of neoliberalism has affected South African institutions and their ability to maintain a developmental approach to education. The political ideology of neoliberalism that holistically advocates for market liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation and decreasing the role of the public sector in society has led to governments reducing investment in the higher education sector around the world. For example, in the United States of America (USA), over the past 40 years the government's contribution to the operating expenses of universities decreased from 80% to 10% (Saunders 2010). This trend has not only fundamentally altered the political economy of the USA but has also had a direct impact on the Washington Consensus, the set of market-oriented, macro-economic policies that guide international financial institutions' influence on domestic policies in the Global South. The reduced government subsidisation of the higher education sector in South Africa has led to universities increasing their fees to a point where, although everyone has access to learning, not everyone can afford the education. This is one of the factors that led to the FMF movement.

#FeesMustFall in Context

In 2015, South Africa was engulfed by a wave of student protests and activism. The #RhodesMustFall (RMR) and the #FMF movements highlighted the importance of transforming and decolonising South African universities. The contradictions within the higher education sector reflect those that are prevalent in the broader society. Educational institutions are superstructures of an exploitative capitalist system and cannot be fundamentally transformed without altering their economic base. Capitalism fuels the commodification of education and leads to the exploitation and alienation of students with working-class backgrounds in the corridors of our universities. South African students challenged some of the draconian issues within universities remnant of the legacy of apartheid on the premise of “race”, class and gender. The South African education experience, particularly black students' experience, is a true reflection of Karl Marx's argument in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, where he talks about “the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges” (Marx cited in Nielson 1986, 28). Likewise, the students believed that the elements of the old society were finding expression in the “new” norms in society, that the challenges they faced would not end without a revolutionary programme. For thousands of students across the country that revolutionary programme became the #FeesMustFall protests. According to Keet, Nel, and Sattarzadeh (2021, 102), what students demanded was not different from the understanding of transformation articulated in higher education policy. Their demands centred on issues such as the “Africanisation” of universities, the “decolonisation” of knowledge and curricula reform, equality of access and success, democratic and inclusive institutional cultures, and the insourcing of contract workers.

Due to South Africa's past of racial discrimination and the inherent inequalities of the capitalist system, South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Mbeki and Mbeki (2016) argue that post-1994, as a result of policies such as Black Economic

Empowerment, the inequality in South Africa is not as racialised as it was before democracy, although it is still shaped by the legacy of the past colonial system and apartheid. They also highlight that the differences between classes grew exponentially in the same period, with the lower class becoming poorer and the elites becoming wealthier.

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2015), in 2013 black Africans accounted for more than 65% of all the students registered in South African contact universities, but it did not elaborate on the socioeconomic status of those students. This means that the racial demographics of students are known but their socioeconomic status is not. Being black is often associated with being poor, which can be misleading and can lead to the assumption that a much greater number of people at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum are gaining access to the higher education system, particularly university education, than may be the case.

Numerous studies have explored the factors that contribute to black students' success at historically white universities. These factors include "race", class, gender, type of high school, social capital, locus of control, wellbeing, international status, language and frequency of lecture attendance. Several of these studies have noted an interesting trend between "race" and class, as demonstrated in Dlamini's (2016) study. The research upon which Dlamini's (2016) article is based did not intend to highlight participation with regard to "race" and class, but many of the participants indicated that they were raised in the middle to upper class of South African society. Regarding family income and the type of high school attended, most cited former Model C and private schools (Dlamini 2016). Considering statistics reported by the DHET (2015) and the results of the study conducted by Letseka, Breier and Visser (2010), middle-class black Africans form the largest proportion of the students enrolled in the university system (66.4%), although working-class black Africans constitute more than 80% of the South African population (DHET 2013, 16). There thus appears to be a disproportionate participation rate with regard to economic class within the sector.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (NSFAS Act No. 56 of 1999) is a government initiative implemented to fund impoverished students. A set of criteria is applied to select students who qualify for a loan, the most fundamental being that the family should earn a combined income of not more than R600 000 per annum. This was not always the threshold set by the NSFAS, as just before the 2015 and 2016 student protests the combined family income was R122 000. This was problematic as many potential students were not poor enough to qualify for the scheme but were not sufficiently wealthy to afford the exorbitant university fees. One of the measures employed to eradicate student debt was the final year of the loan being converted into a bursary when a student completed his/her qualification in the minimum possible time and the remainder of the loan being repaid to assist the government to fund the next group of students (DHET 2015). The rapid increase in university enrolment after 1994 continued into the new millennium and the NSFAS was under severe budgetary

pressure, as numerous loans to students were not repaid. Between 1999 and 2015, the year of the first #FeesMustFall protests, the NSFAS budget increased from R4.44 billion to R9 billion (NSFAS 2017). In the 2014/15 financial year, the NSFAS provided funding for more than 40% of the students in the higher education system, including students in the Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) colleges. The NSFAS funds a significantly higher number of students in historically black universities than in historically white universities. Furthermore, according to the Centre of Higher Education (CHE 2016), the NSFAS funds 31% of the students enrolled in universities.

In 2017 the former President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, announced the restructuring of the NSFAS. He stated that all students who were currently enrolled in a university and whose fees were paid by the NSFAS would be provided with a grant rather than a loan, which in effect amounted to free education but only for those who were deemed to be “needy” by the NSFAS (News24 2017). The principles that were applied in universities were also used in TVET colleges, meaning that for the first time since 1994 those who were classified as working class would not have to pay tuition fees. The implication was that there would be a change in the class inequalities prevalent in the higher education sector. The first cohort of students to benefit from the restructured system of funding enrolled in 2018. There is a dearth of research on whether or not this has had an effect on class inequality within our universities. The protests that occurred in our universities during which students burnt tyres and ducked rubber bullets fired by the police were a direct indication that the students were dissatisfied with the structure of funding within our universities, among other issues (Hodes 2016; Naicker 2015; Nathane-Taulela and Smith 2017).

Students indicated through the 2015 and 2016 protests that although the NSFAS had opened doors for those who would otherwise not have had access to the university system, the loan system meant that they entered the job market disadvantaged and were unable to change their class position in the broader economy of the country. Therefore, the transformation agenda embarked upon by the government aims to reverse and address the imbalances caused by over 350 years of colonial subjugation, which has had an adverse effect on the participation of black people in the formal economy. To this end, the higher education sector is one of the sectors that has historically performed a significant role in the class formation in South Africa. For many years, black people had limited access to universities and could only access “Bantustan” universities, which were not of the same standard as the traditionally white universities. The limited opportunities that were provided to black people had a bearing on their participation in the economy, as they were unable to acquire the necessary skills to meaningfully participate in the economy besides providing an inexhaustible supply of unskilled labour (Mbeki and Mbeki 2016; Seedat 1998). As stated above, one of the tools used to address the injustices of the past is the participation of black students in higher education to transform the South African economy.

Funding Models in the Global South

Access to higher education for the poor in the postcolonial world is a contentious issue. There is a clear line between the economic development of a country and a well-functioning education system. The correlation between the two variables contributes to a country's prospects for growth. Institutions of higher education train the next generation of leaders, shape the minds of teachers, and prepare graduates to contribute to society. During the colonial era, numerous colonised countries did not train sufficient skilled labourers to run a country efficiently, which had disastrous results after decolonisation during the 1960s (Mamdani 2008; Teferra and Altbach 2004). This lack of skills meant that the subjugation of the black majority could not easily be undone. There were also instances when these countries approached their former colonisers for assistance, which in most cases resulted in their re-colonisation through accepting foreign capital.

Cloete (2015) posits that although free education might sound “revolutionary”, in the South African context of significant inequalities, the provision of free education for all is financially and morally wrong. This argument is informed by the notion that a postcolonial country such as South Africa is a mosaic of various classes and despite the citizens paying allegiance to the same flag and the same national anthem, they have different standards of living. The aforementioned author suggests that those who are rich should pay for their education and thereby subsidise those who are poor.

Similar protests to the FMF in South Africa occurred in countries such as Kenya, Uganda and Zambia in the 1990s. Those protests were driven by the notion that tuition fees are a barrier to entry to those on the periphery of the economy irrespective of their capacity to succeed in the system (Moosa 2016). The provision of free higher education does not always achieve the desired results in countries such as South Africa. Brazil offers free education (Brotman and Pollack 2017; Johnstone 2004), but has not realised a significant rise in the participation of students from working-class backgrounds in the country's universities. More than 65% of all students admitted to the country's universities attended basic private education and more than 66% of all students in Brazil's universities come from the top 20% of the income earners in the country (Kapur and Crowley 2008). The lack of coordination between basic and higher education appears to serve as an obstacle to underprivileged people entering institutions of higher learning because by the time the students attain the level of progressing to a university, inequalities are already entrenched. Only those who attend private fee-paying schools can meet the minimum entry requirements to a university because public schools are generally under-resourced compared to schools that require the payment of fees.

Various funding models have been put in place by countries in the Global South to solve the funding problem in universities. According to Johnstone (2004), a model that is commonly used is that of “cost-sharing”, which he describes as “a shift of the higher educational cost burden from exclusive or near-exclusive reliance on government, or taxpayers, to some financial reliance upon parents and/or students” (2004, 7). The first

institution to advocate for cost-sharing in the Global South, particularly in Africa, was the World Bank. This was informed by the belief that basic education was a public good and higher education was a private good that should be partially subsidised by the government. The debate surrounding public vs private created binaries in education and was devoid of any scientific evidence, because higher education is also a public good. Those who enter universities stand a better chance of being employed in higher-paying jobs and the government then gains from taxes, which contribute to the country's overall wellbeing (Mamdani 2008).

In postcolonial countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, the cost-sharing model has been utilised in conjunction with a private system and there are therefore two distinct tiers of institutions in those countries (Ishengoma 2004; Marcucci, Johnstone, and Ngolovoi 2008). Marcucci, Johnstone and Ngolovoi (2008) argue that this system further entrenches inequalities because, even though everyone has access to higher education, the quality differs fundamentally and there are obstacles to the level of access because of the stringent minimum requirements one has to meet to gain entry. As in Brazil, students with a private school background have a better chance than public school applicants when competing for the limited places that are available in universities. In the South African context, although there is provision for a free basic education through a system administered by the Department of Basic Education, there are dichotomies in the country's schools. There are those schools that were privileged before 1994, the Model C schools for white learners, and schools that were subjected to the system of Bantu Education for black learners. The funding invested in the two systems differed in favour of the Model C schools.

Nelson Mandela University is one of the few universities in the country that considers a learner's school background to level the playing field in terms of access and success in the student's academic career. Where this principle is not applied, universities are only accessible to those who attended the best schools in the country and/or can afford the tuition. Students from disadvantaged schools struggle to attain the level and points required for university entry. These schools are likely based in the most impoverished parts of the country where the socialisation of the community adversely influences learners' performance in the classroom (Kapur and Crowley 2008; Marcucci, Johnstone, and Ngolovoi 2008).

In Asian countries such as China and India where there is maximum state funding, legislation limits the investment made in universities (Mzileni 2020). The regulations put in place by the governments have also influenced the quality of education and the degree of academic freedom afforded to academics. In South Africa, institutions enjoy autonomy and can choose their curricula as long as they are in line with governing and professional bodies' requirements. This autonomy extends to the setting of fees and numerous other facets of institutional life (CHE 2016). One of the most significant challenges for many universities in the Global South is remaining financially sustainable without diminishing the quality of the education offered. Universities constantly

struggle to maintain a high standard of education and research with limited financial resources (Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2006; Mamdani 2008). Research output in the Global South has declined steadily over the years, except in South Africa where research output has grown consistently (Mzileni 2020).

Most decolonised countries in the world are challenged by their inability to attain equality while employing the cost-sharing method of funding universities (Mamdani 2008). South Africa experienced similar difficulty in that the demographics of universities by 2018 still did not reflect the citizenry's demographics (Stats SA 2017). Although the cost-sharing method acknowledges that education is both a private and public good, in reality, those who do not have the means to afford the percentage that requires private funding are often sidelined. The NSFAS has achieved limited success in levelling the playing field, but challenges such as transportation, food and accommodation still hinder access for the poor. Although the NSFAS has helped, as the numbers of students in our institutions steadily increase, the quality of the universities' services decrease as these universities take in more students than they can accommodate and outside service providers with capitalist motives exploit the students. The free education demanded by students in the picket lines and partially supplied by the government differs from the cost-sharing model that the majority of countries have adopted as a way to achieve a higher education system suitable for the future. Following the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests, the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, stated that the government was "committed to progressively realise free post-school education for the poor and the working class ... and to assist middle-class families who are unable to pay" (DHET 2015). This was an indication that the government was working towards achieving a system biased towards the poor and the working class. The President of South Africa reiterated this statement in December 2017.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated some of the transformational challenges faced by South African higher education. Despite government efforts at addressing some of the underlying issues, students have remained unconvinced by the slow pace and unwillingness to implement their demands. The failure to reach a consensus has historically led to student protests at universities across the country. The FMF movement was a remarkable series of events for higher education. However, very little has changed in South African universities since the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015. The authorities have made limited interventions in the education sector. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the economic situation, constraining whatever interventions the government had planned. Notwithstanding, there are deeper problems bedevilling both the education sector and the country, and this may mean that successful solutions cannot be confined within the universities' gates.

The student protests also brought into question the government's claims of transforming the education sector to ensure that higher education is accessible to all. The students exposed the limitations of the rhetoric surrounding decolonisation and the racial and

socioeconomic equality espoused by successive government administrations since 1994. They depicted South Africa as “an untransformed colonial society that has been unable to shed the impediments of the past” (Bank and Kruss 2019, 294). The challenges confronting South Africa are both systemic and structural, embedded in the ethos of a postcolonial society. In addition, as stated in the beginning of this article, unless students, the state and universities understand one another’s side, transformation will remain a dream, with protests becoming the norm rather than an exception.

Access to higher education has the power to raise individuals from poverty to enjoy opportunities to improve their lives and those of the communities in which they were raised. It is imperative, therefore, that mass access to institutions of higher learning be promoted as a strategy to achieve emancipation and transformation. In this way, the higher education sector may be able to tackle the socioeconomic inequalities and all forms of historical injustice. Universities should focus on inclusive ways to grant access to all, particularly those who were historically disadvantaged.

References

- Badat, S. 2007. *Higher Education Transformation in South Africa Post 1994: Towards a Critical Assessment*. Pretoria: Centre for Education Policy Development.
- Badat, S. 2010. “The Challenges of Transformation in Higher Education and Training Institutions in South Africa”. Paper Commissioned by the Development Bank of South Africa. Accessed January 24, 2023.
https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/vc/documents/The_Challenges_of_Transformation_in_Higher_Education_and_Training_Institutions_in_South_Africa.pdf.
- Banerjee, A. V., and E. Duflo. 2008. “What Is Middle Class about the Middle Classes around the World?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 22 (2): 3–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.22.2.3>.
- Bank, L., and G. Kruss. 2019. “Beyond the Campus Gate: Higher Education and Place-Based Development in South Africa”. In *State of the Nation: Poverty and Inequality; Diagnosis, Prognosis and Response*, edited by C. Soudien, V. Reddy and I. Woolard, 294–312. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Bank, L., and F. Sibanda 2018. “Universities as City-Builders: The City-Campus Development Opportunity in East London–Buffalo City, South Africa”. In “Putting Universities in Their Place”, edited by L. J. Bank, special issue, *Development Southern Africa* 35 (5): 701–715.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2018.1502076>.
- Barchiesi, F. 1997. “South Africa: Between Repression and ‘Home-Grown Structural Adjustment’”. Newsletter No. 13. Johannesburg: CAFA.
- Bloom, D. E., D. Canning, and K. Chan. 2006. *Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. Accessed January 24, 2023.
<http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01447/WEB/IMAGES/HIGHER-2.PDF>.

- Bond, P. 2016. "To Win Free Education, Fossilised Neoliberalism Must Fall". In *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, edited by S. Booyesen, 192–213. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18772/22016109858.14>.
- Brotman, D., and N. Pollack. 2017. "Case Study: Brazil's Free Education". *Mail & Guardian*, March 31, 2017. Accessed January 24, 2023. <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-03-31-00-case-study-brazils-free-education/>.
- Bunting, I. 2004. "The Higher Education Landscape under Apartheid". In *Transformation in Higher Education: Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa*, Higher Education Dynamics, Vol. 10, edited by N. Cloete, P. Maassen, R. Fehnel, T. Moja, T. Gibbon and H. Perold, 35–52. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4006-7_3.
- Bussolo, M., R. E. De Hoyos, D. Medvedev, and D. van der Mensbrugge. 2007. "Global Growth and Distribution: Are China and India Reshaping the World?" World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4392. Washington, DC: World Bank. Accessed January 25, 2023. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/ru/379281468043457099/pdf/wps4392.pdf>.
- CHE (Council on Higher Education). 2016. *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy*. Pretoria: CHE.
- Cloete, N. 2015. "The Flawed Ideology of 'Free Higher Education'". *University World News*, 389. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Documents/CommOct2015/University%20World%20News%20Cloete%20article.pdf>.
- Desai, R., dir. 2014. *Miners Shot Down*. Produced by R. Desai, A. Khanna and B. Tilley. Uhuru Productions.
- DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). 2013. *Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa: 2011*. Pretoria: DHET. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://www.dhet.gov.za/DHET%20Statistics%20Publication/Statistics%20on%20post-school%20education%20and%20training%20in%20South%20Africa%20202011.pdf>.
- DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). 2015. *Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa: 2013*. Pretoria: DHET. Accessed January 23, 2023. <https://www.dhet.gov.za/DHET%20Statistics%20Publication/Statistics%20on%20Post-School%20Education%20and%20Training%20in%20South%20Africa%202015.pdf>.
- Dlamini, R. 2016. "The Global Ranking Tournament: A Dialectic Analysis of Higher Education in South Africa". *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30 (2): 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.20853/30-2-567>.

- Godsell, G., and R. Chikane. 2016. "The Roots of the Revolution". In *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, edited by S. Booyesen, 54–73. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18772/22016109858.7>.
- Habib, A. 2019. *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall*. Cape Town: Jonathan Ball.
- Hodes, R. 2016. "Questioning 'Fees Must Fall'". *African Affairs* 116 (462): 140–50. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adw072>.
- Ishengoma, M. J. 2004. "Cost-Sharing in Higher Education in Tanzania: Fact or Fiction?" *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 2 (2): 101–3. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000148929>.
- Jansen, J. 2017. *As By Fire: The End of the South African University*. Pretoria: Tafelberg.
- Johnstone, D. B. 2004. "The Economics and Politics of Cost Sharing in Higher Education: Comparative Perspectives". *Economics of Education Review* 23 (4): 403–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2003.09.004>.
- Kapur, D., and M. Crowley. 2008. "Beyond the ABC's: Higher Education and Developing Countries". Centre for Global Development Working Paper No. 139. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1099934>.
- Keet, A. 2020. "University Transformation at the Crossroads". *University World News*, February 27, 2020. Accessed January 24, 2023. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200225094803518>.
- Keet, A., W. Nel, and S. D. Sattarzadeh. 2021. "#MustFall—The Event: Rights, Student Activism and the Transformation of South African Universities". In *University on the Border: Crisis of Authority and Precarity*, edited by L. Lange, V. Reddy and S. H. Kumalo, 97–124. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media. <https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991201355/03>.
- Kele, K., and P. Mzileni. 2021. "Higher Education Leadership Responses Applied in Two South African Comprehensive Universities during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Discourse Analysis". *Transformation in Higher Education* 6: a114.
- Kharas, H. 2010. "The Emerging Middle Class in Developing Countries". OECD Development Centre Working Papers, No. 285. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5kmmp8lncrns-en>.
- Letseka, M., M. Breier, and M. Visser. 2010. "Poverty, Race and Student Achievement in Seven Higher Education Institutions". In *Student Retention and Graduate Destination: Higher Education and Labour Market Access and Success*, edited by M. Letseka, M. Cosser, M. Breier and M. Visser, 25–40. Cape Town: HSRC Press. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11910/4385>.

- Mamdani, M. 2008. "Higher Education, the State and the Marketplace". *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 6 (1): 1–10.
- Marcucci, P., D. B. Johnstone, and M. Ngolovoi. 2008. "Higher Educational Cost-Sharing, Dual-Tracking Tuition Fees, and Higher Educational Access: The East African Experience". *Peabody Journal of Education* 83 (1): 101–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01619560701649232>.
- Mavunga, G. 2019. "#FeesMustFall Protests in South Africa: A Critical Realist Analysis of Selected Newspaper Articles". *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 7 (1): 81–99. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v7i1.3694>.
- Mbeki, M., and N. Mbeki. 2016. *A Manifesto for Social Change: How to Save South Africa*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa.
- McLellan, D. T., and H. Chambre. 2022. "Marxism". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 17, 2022. Accessed December 5, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marxism>.
- Mlaba, K. 2021. "South Africa's Student Protests: Everything to Know about a Movement That Goes Back Decades". Global Citizen, April 8, 2021. Accessed January 24, 2023. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/south-africa-student-protests-explained/>.
- Moosa, F. 2016. "What Are Students Demanding from #FeesMustFall?" The Daily Vox, October 13, 2016. Accessed January 24, 2023. www.thedailyvox.co.za/students-demanding-feesmustfall.
- Mzileni, P 2020. "Informal Education and Collective Conscientisation in the #FeesMustFall Movement at Nelson Mandela University". *Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)* 9 (1): 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2020/v9i0a2>.
- Naicker, C. 2015. "Post Marikana SA: Birthing the New Student Politics". *Daily Maverick*, April 7, 2015. Accessed January 24, 2023. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-04-07-post-marikana-sa-birthing-the-new-student-politics/>.
- Nash, A. 2006. "Restructuring South African Universities". In *Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, edited by R. Pithouse, 1–10. Eritrea: Africa World Press.
- Nathane-Taulela, M., and L. Smith. 2017. "Voices from the Frontline: #Feesmustfall #Decolonised Education". *Critical and Radical Social Work* 5 (1): 115–18.
- News24. 2017. "Zuma Announces Free Higher Education for Poor and Working Class Students". News24, December 16, 2017. <https://www.news24.com/news24/zuma-announces-free-higher-education-for-poor-and-working-class-students-20171216>.
- Ngcaweni, W., and B. Ngcaweni, eds. 2018. *The Struggle for #FeesMustFall: We Are No Longer at Ease*. Johannesburg: Jacana.

- Nielson, K. 1986. "Marx, Engels and Lenin on Justice: The Critique of the Gotha Programme". *Studies in Soviet Thought* 32 (1): 23–63.
- NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme). 2017. *2016/2017 Annual Report*. Cape Town: NSFAS. Accessed January 24, 2023. <https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/reports/NSFAS%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.
- O'Regan, V. 2022. "Varsity Year Opens with Online and Face-to-Face Class Disruptions over Registration, Financial Exclusions and Vaccine Mandates". *Daily Maverick*, February 21, 2022. Accessed January 24, 2023. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-02-21-new-varsity-year-opens-with-online-and-face-to-face-disruptions-over-registration-financial-exclusions-and-vaccine-mandates/>.
- Phaladi, B., and A. Salavu. 2016. "SA Universities Face Massive Bill". *The Citizen*, March 17, 2016, p. 4.
- Pityana, B. N. 2010. "Higher Education, Transformation and Africanisation—A Paradigm Shift?" In *Study South Africa: The Guide to South African Higher Education*, 9th ed., 39–41. International Education Association of South Africa. Accessed April 7, 2021. <http://studysa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Study-SA-9th-edition.pdf>.
- Ravallion, M. 2010. "The Developing World's Bulging (But Vulnerable) Middle Class". *World Development* 38 (4): 445–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.11.007>.
- RSA (Republic of South Africa). 1999. *National Student Financial Aid Scheme Act, 1999*. Government Gazette, Vol. 413, No. 20652. Cape Town: Government Printers. Accessed January 24, 2023. <https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/downloads/NSFAS%20Act.%20No%2056%20of%201999.pdf>.
- Saunders, D. B. 2010. "Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States". *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 8 (1): 41–77. <http://www.jceps.com/archives/626>.
- Seedat, M. 1998. "A Characterisation of South African Psychology (1948–1988): The Impact of Exclusionary Ideology". *South African Journal of Psychology* 28 (2): 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124639802800204>.
- Southall, R. 2016. *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Swartz, D. 2015. *Vice-chancellor's Report to Council: Fourth Quarter*. Port Elizabeth: Nelson Mandela University.
- Teferra, D., and P. G. Altbach. 2004. "African Higher Education: Challenges for the 21st Century". *Higher Education* 47 (1): 21–50. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:HIGH.0000009822.49980.30>.

- Valela, N. 2015. "The Rhodes to Perdition: Why Rhodes Was Never Ready for the BSM". *Daily Maverick*, March 26, 2015. Accessed January 23, 2023. [https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-03-26-the-rhodes-to-perdition-why-rhodes-was-never-ready-for-the-bsm//](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-03-26-the-rhodes-to-perdition-why-rhodes-was-never-ready-for-the-bsm/)
- Wangenge-Ouma, G. 2021. "South Africa's Higher Education Funding System Can Be More Realistic without Betraying Ideals". *The Conversation*, April 6, 2021. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-higher-education-funding-system-can-be-more-realistic-without-betraying-ideals-157478>.
- Wolff, E. N., and M. Gittleman. 1993. "The Role of Education in Productivity Convergence: Does Higher Education Matter?" In *Explaining Economic Growth*, edited by A. Szirmai, B. van Ark and D. Pilat, 147–66. Amsterdam: North-Holland.