

## Free higher education – why not!

I support the ideal of free higher education.

I also support the idea that health care should be available free of charge to all in need, just as I believe that our economic and social policies should prioritize full employment through which all can enjoy the dignity that is associated with leading economically and socially productive lives.

Of course these ideals are a great anathema to neo-liberal economic and social orthodoxies, which laud the 'free market' and minimal state, and advocate the privatization of all aspects of economic and social life. Their celebrated rational being is the egoistical individual motivated by profits and money. Recall that it is this thinking that recently plunged the world into an economic recession, at great cost to millions of people, from which we are only painfully recovering.

Neo-liberals scorn any notion of the public or social good or collective well-being. Yet, we should not be shy of asserting the aspiration to live in a South Africa that puts human development and well-being first and that prizes a highly educated, informed and critical citizenry. This is consistent with our Constitutional ideals.

Free higher education *is possible in South Africa*. It is a question of making reasoned public choices, and of understanding the consequences of public policies of both free and non-free higher education.

Of course, a policy of free higher education requires fundamental re-thinking of and changes in our social goals, priorities and policies. If there is, however, no significant change in these regards, I am unable, for reasons I set out below, to support the call for free higher education.

First, the public subsidies that our universities receive from government do not cover their full running costs. They must rely on tuition and residence fees from students, as well as income from donors, research and other activities to maintain themselves.

If free higher education was to be introduced immediately, the government would need to provide, apart from the current R 17.5 billion, an additional R 7.7 billion to universities. If funding for accommodation in university residences was included a further R 1.3 billion would have to be provided. If the government was to provide accommodation and subsistence for all students R 21 billion more would have to be made available. These funds could be at the expense of health, housing and other needy sectors.

Unless the government made up the shortfall that universities would experience as a result of free higher education for all, our universities would not simply battle to operate. They would collapse, cease to exist!

Currently, private higher education institutions in South Africa do not enjoy much prestige. As with other countries that introduced free higher education for all without

increasing public funding, a fertile environment would be created where the wealthy would send their children to private institutions, or to overseas universities. Higher education would thus become even more of a generator of class and other divisions and inequalities.

Second, we live in one of the most unequal societies on earth, in which there are huge income and other inequalities. Free higher education would be a great boon for wealthy and middle-class parents that can afford to pay university tuition/residence fees and associated costs. In effect, this would be a public subsidy to the very rich and well-off middle classes and a further entrenchment of inequalities.

Third, a university education has both public and private benefits. The graduates of universities contribute in various ways to the public good – as teachers, health professionals, engineers, public servants and the like.

However, they currently also derive, often handsome, private benefits in the forms of better prospects of decent employment, earning substantially higher incomes, enjoying higher standards of living, and having many more of life's pleasures available to them than those who do not have a university degree.

Given this, it is neither unreasonable nor unfair that graduates in employment should contribute towards the higher education of other students – whether through the repayment of state loans or through a graduate tax.

The problem to which the SASCO-led protests seek to draw attention is real as it is urgent. Thousands of working class and rural poor students with potential and talent find themselves without the means to access universities. At the same time many hundreds of outstanding potential postgraduate students, much needed by our society and economy, languish without financial support for Honours, Master's and Doctoral degrees, or toil with inadequate funding.

This is notwithstanding that thousands of professional jobs in the private sector and public service remain unfilled because of a shortage of high quality graduates. Much needed and welcome public investment in infrastructure is not matched by investments in humans.

We should strive to progressively realize free higher education, beginning with those most in financial need, and this should be part of a wider reformulation of our social goals, priorities and policies.

Outside of such an approach, the call for immediate free higher education, however, will reproduce inequalities. Instead, the immediate priorities should then be the following.

First, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is in urgent need of large capital injections so that indigent students can be fully supported to access universities, can succeed, and make their contribution to economic and social development. The NSFAS

would need to also be effectively and efficiently administered at both national and institutional levels.

Second, a NSFAS-like scheme needs to be urgently established for postgraduate students in financial need. We cannot afford to deny opportunities for postgraduate study to students that have the ability to be the next generation of academics, scientists, writers, artists and critical intellectuals. This is also necessary to redress our historical legacy and transform who produces knowledge and how knowledge is generated in the future.

Third, there must be increased support for effective academic development programmes that provide *meaningful* opportunities for students who have been under-prepared by our nation's schools for the rigours of a university education.

Access without real opportunities and good prospects for success and graduating as high quality professional is a waste of scarce resources and a terrible injustice to the under-prepared. The academic capabilities of our universities to mount effective academic development programmes would need to be built or further enhanced.

Fourth, given the legacy of apartheid, some of our universities still remain to be adequately supported to develop their academic infrastructure, facilities and capacities. Such support is vital if they are to play their role in producing high quality graduates.

Finally, given the private benefits that accrue to graduates, those who earn above a certain level should be expected to contribute to NSFAS so that future generations of students can be supported. Perhaps all graduates should be subject to a graduate tax payable to NSFAS.

Free higher education exists in a number of countries. It is not an impossible dream. It must continue to remain an ideal that we aspire to achieve, one of the markers of the good society that we should be committed to developing and to leaving as a legacy for future generations.

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