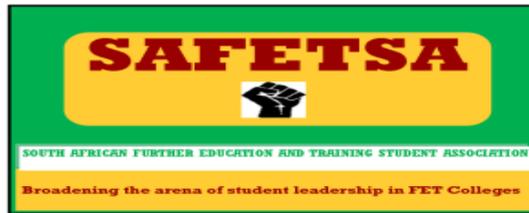


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SAFETSA NATIONAL OFFICE

Submission on the fees must fall

SAFETSA

South African Further Education and Training Student Association

Background

South Africa (SA) has had a long history of political upsurge championed by youth and students. At different epochs labeled differently as ‘riots’, ‘revolt’, ‘uprising’, ‘protest’ or ‘resistance’ but somewhat linked to the broad struggle against apartheid. Most of these took place at the time when social media was not in wide usage, and so political mobilization would have taken longer. But the commitment to topple the visible apartheid enemy made it easier to lobby for a united front of the “young lions” (Sisulu, 1986). Two decades after apartheid, sounds of the struggle song ‘siyaya epitoli’ foretelling of the downfall of apartheid administration continue to be echoed. As it appears that, younger members constituting the majority of SA’s population have not yet arrived to the proverbial Union Buildings in any meaningful way.

It seems that their struggles for social justice, equality and economic emancipation are far from being over. This context of their lived world foist a responsibility upon their shoulders to soldier on without relent. The circumstances they find themselves in pose a mood of ‘aluta continua’. Often it is asserted that their struggle is a different one, at least perceptually, nevertheless it is not dissimilar materially. The economic landscape has not shifted in any drastic way to accommodate those young people that grow up in poor communities and households. This broad context help both to shape and influence young people’s position and dispositions. “Since no human action takes place outside of established objective reality, and since we want to achieve our objectives, necessarily we must strive to understand the social conditions that would help to determine whether we succeed or fail” (Mbeki, 2006¹).

Perhaps, we should also mention at onset that there has been a temporal interval of lull in terms of widespread youth protest in the democratic epoch. But this has now ceased protest

¹ A Nelson Mandela memorial lecture offered at the University of the Witwatersrand on July 29, 2006.

seem to be on the rise. Historical annals will record 2015 as a moment when students' remonstrations remerged in SA. Indeed, it was in 2015 when SA witnessed a wave of university student protest throughout the country. One started early in the year as 'Rhodes Must Fall' (RMF) and the other erupted towards the end (in October) of the same year resembling the former in mode, but different in logic. The latter came to be widely known as 'Fees Must Fall' (FMF).

It would appear that in practice both calls undergone a process of rapture which would shift their foundational logic. One began as organised displeasure regarding the colonial symbols, in a single space but would inspire others in different spatial context throughout the country. What began as a battle against symbols, ignited black consciousness and forged solidarity with the struggle against decoloniality. It can be said that, the rise of current debates on decolonialisation of the curriculum are owed to RMF. Similarly, it can be said that what started as general concern for a 'no fees increment' in a specified year has become a class struggle. For instance, current debates seem to be dominated by the emergent notion of 'the missing middle'. While care is needed to search for ways of finding those that are deemed to be missing. It should not be the case that their discovery occurs by hiding those in lower social stratum.

What is common with these two calls is the strong demand for a 'fall' and most admirable about them is bringing together of urgency and agency. They serve to remind us that identifying a list of ingredients for change may well be necessary but not always sufficient to bring about desirable change. These calls further conscientise us about importance of incorporating agency to timeframes when pursuing societal ideals. In a refreshing way, the two calls demonstrate that the youth, in this case university students are a significant pressure group and indeed a force to be reckoned with in this society. Contrary to the view of sociological imagination which has often been seen as a reserve for progressive sociologist (Mills, 1959), this social group is said to wield political 'imagination(s)', thought and power to influence changes in the running of societal affairs (Naidoo, 2009). Without students there might have been no conversation or commission on fees.

Notwithstanding, youth actions are often disparaged and applauded at same time. Often tactics young people use appears to be fixated in terms of imagination and method to the style used by the 1976 youth. This is not surprising. In popular parlance June 16 is often made to appear as a pinnacle for 'all' youth acts of resistance. This is trumpeted every year in the month of June. And so, this leaves an impression that any demonstration worth its name 'must' be approximating style, tactic and outlook of June 16. The throwing of stones and

shooting of rubber bullets, the torching of property and teargassing, violence and intimidation through colloquial ‘bouncers’ have all become common features. While rage may help as a tactic, it should not be construed as viable strategy for sorting students’ fees problems. A mention of policy context is needed.

Policy context

Democratic SA is founded on values that were expressed in the Freedom charter and the constitution. The charter projected that the ‘doors of learning’ shall be opened for all. Similarly the country’s constitution recognizes the importance of human dignity and access to basic education and further education. The founding principle is that the state *has to* find reasonable measures to make education progressively available and accessible (RSA, 1996). Similarly, the Continuing Education and Training Act of 2006 (41c) further state that “every person has a right to receive further education and training and to have training and equal access to public colleges”. In one accord these policy documents esteem education as a pivotal dimension of human life. And means should be explored on how to make it accessible to that value it and have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Policy context provides the backdrop against which FMF can be best understood. Participation in education, can also be seen as longterm strategy to reduce the number joining the ranks of those that have come to be called ‘NEETs’ (not in education, training and employment). Fees have implication for meaningful participation in post-school education.

#Fees Must Fall

‘FMF’ is both simple and complex phenomenon. While there are some disagreements, the general view has been that FMF campaign helped to bring to the fore ‘student fees’ and their general financial burdens (Bond, 2016). The original context of FMF is aligned to higher education component of the post-school, but decision taken and policies drawn may have implications for the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sub-sector. As result SAFETSA and its constituents have direct interest in influencing the commission to protect the interests of students in the TVET sector. As a structure SAFETSA was established in 2013 through consensus with already organised Student Representative Councils (SRCs) in the further education and training sector. Its mandate is to build a unified, democratic and well governed education system that is responsive to needs of South Africans. Among other things, it seeks to encourage academic excellence and to promote equality of opportunity.

As SAFETSA we acknowledge that there are competing views on what has come to be dubbed as ‘FMF’. We note that there are critics who have raised concerns about monetary

value. This brings to the fore related factors which aspects such as inflation rate, GDP and the general direction of the economy. It is asserted in this area that the 'falling fees' would be impossible without wider base of the private sector. On the main this view is about the system first then the people within it. However, there is now a considerable number of sympathisers who make people to take centre place then end with structure that could best serve them. In the end this debate takes the form of chicken and egg with both competing for first place. The reality students face soaring fees can temper with access and by extension with the country's foundational value. In that they pose a threat to block students from poor households from full participation in post-school education.

In media Phungo (2015) demonstrate how first levels could be organised to fund free post-school education. Basically, this research advances that current fiscal pressures should not deter the government from funding fee free undergraduate education. In the study done by South African Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR) it was found that only 5% of the households could actually afford paying for university education fees. If this is true, then it would be difficult to offer education services to deserving students without giving much thought to fees. As such, as a country we can make the choice of either educating the top 5% who can afford fees or think hard for ways of funding the education that is free to clients. There are few countries that have shown political will which have explored free fees models.

Countries implementing fee free education

As already alluded, fee free has been tried in few other countries in developing world context. This in itself shows that 'free fee' is a difficult option, but this doesn't mean that it cannot be achieved in the developing world context. Within the African context university of Makerere is a case in point where fee free education has been tried, nonetheless this could not be sustained. Observers argued that it failed because their economic climate was not yet ready for this drastic change. With imagination and commitment we have compelling grounds in this country to explore means test for fee free education. We know from research that there are countries which tried to champion free fees successfully. These countries include Germany (49.9%), Finland (42.9%) and Denmark (38.1%) have implemented fee free.

In the few lines above, we have sketch out hastily what may be potential problems besetting the TVET sub-sector broadly, and made a point or two about insights vying both for and

against fee free education in SA post-school education landscape. We hereby make this submission for a consideration by the commission of inquiry into higher education and training to which SAFETSA is part.

Fee free is a difficult option but worth being explored. There is a need for the government to be seen as playing a leading role in prioritising student affairs in particular the issue of free fees.

- We herein therefore recommend that South Africa makes undergraduate and all college studies to be free for all those who cannot afford to pay.
- Government and willing business should commit to mechanism that would raise necessary revenue, regulate economic landscape to make free fees possible in SA.
- Ways should be explored in which those that have been helped to continue contributing to their alma mater, but that these contribution be regulated and distributed throughout the sector so that richer universities and colleges do not overshadow poorer ones.

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