

Submission to the commission of inquiry into higher education and training (the fees commission)

Date: 2 July 2016

It is with great delight to make this submission pertaining to the support for a free education agenda in South Africa. We feel obliged to contribute towards this debate even though our TVAT sector is already receiving substantial tuition funding especially for the previously disadvantaged learners. We believe that solving problems in our education system will mean focusing to the whole rather than on piecemeal bases given that the basic and higher education, technical and vocational as well as skills development sectors should be seen as inter-dependent sub-systems.

It has been said that 'education is the most powerful tool we can use to change the world' (Nelson Mandela). If education is the "means to succeed" and if education is one element to eliminate inter-generational poverty, why the poor and working class people are denied this fundamental right?

The issue of free education is likely to serve as catalyst to re-awaken consciousness linked to freedom charter. One of the clauses in the freedom charter is that "*all the doors of education and training shall be open*". In qualifying this statement, the masses who attended the Congress of the People in 1955, Kliptown said "*education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children*". Furthermore they agreed that "*higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit*" (Freedom Charter, 1955). Since then, youth protests that took place had embraced slogans such as "*free, quality and compulsory education*".

To the eyes of many, the issue of free education was downplayed during CODESA negotiations. Therefore there is a growing conviction that South Africa's political transition agenda was about taking care of former oppressors' needs at the expense of the black majority and the generally disadvantaged.

Furthermore there is acknowledgement of black people's toiling in the past centuries where they were subjected to slavery, colonialism and apartheid. To many, it will be fair to use free education as means for reparation. Hence the corporates and

governments who supported the colonial agenda in South Africa should play a pivotal role in funding the free education project.

The limited access to higher education due to financial constraints has added a burden to the already existing challenges such as the limited economic freedom, landlessness and joblessness which stands at 26,7% to date (Stats SA, 2016).

It is against this backdrop that many black parents supported the “# fees must fall” campaign due to their direct economic situation and the role they play in their children’s higher education. The parents’ wages and salaries only increase annually in line with or sometimes below inflation while food and utility bills continue to sky rocket.

After the “# fees must fall” protest, there has been a continued efforts to sustain such a movement (e.g. Free Education Forum) and the feeling being to tackle all political issues in a holistic manner. These forums are sometimes working against the implicit and explicit hostile mood in the country linked to scepticism of government’s capability or incapability to fund free education. It thus shows that free education protest will recur in the future unless it is adequately addressed. History has also taught South Africa that the youth’s anguish and anger may not be undermined as witnessed in the events of June 16 1976. The young and vibrant future leadership of South Africa may lead to the emergence of the first revolution under the democratic dispensation, which may be supported by the already frustrated working class. Therefore to try to be proactive thus curbing any future developments towards this direction, South African government together with the private sector should help make the free education undertaking a reality.

It has been proven that free education will motivate young people in high school to take seriously their academic work (Jeje & Roriguez, 2016) given that they look forward to the future academic path without financial stumbling blocks.

Moreover youth will pursue careers that they are passionate about rather than careers that will enable them to pay off their student loans. Also they will focus on careers that will solve societal challenges such as climate change, racism, labour disputes and so forth (Jeje & Roriguez, 2016).

The arts and heritage of our great nation will be preserved and cherished for generations to come through young people who will take up careers in music and arts, while Afro-centric think tank will be nurtured through studies such as philosophy, history, indigenous knowledge systems and so forth.

Youth have talent to be nurtured through free education in order to contribute towards innovation, Africa's knowledge economy and unleash economic potential through the skilled, knowledgeable and sophisticated workforce.

Having been empowered through free education, the youth will become the future intellectuals who will contribute to the setting of the developmental, scientific and political agenda in the African continent and the world. The emerging movement of placing the South in the forefront of being the world's 'think tank' as opposed to the people of the North, avails unprecedented opportunity for the South African youth to be the leader of such historical transformation that will see elimination of colonialism remnants.

By 2011, over R30bn could have been spent annually in funding the free education project. However others argued that such an amount could otherwise be utilised to create jobs, fund the frail health care system and address poverty, housing as well as other significant social needs (Badat, 2011). However, we argue that a number of government developmental policies and programmes achieve limited success due to inadequate skills and expertise in the South African economy. If government invests largely in higher education through free education, policies and programmes such as the National Health Insurance, re-industrialisation of the economy, low cost housing and enormous work at the local government level could be done with distinction. As a result more jobs will be created both in public and private sector. There will be an increase in the number of technically skilled entrepreneurs, making business models more sustainable and therefore offering viable jobs. Also there will be total elimination of inter-generational poverty scourge while all forms of protests that are a contributing factor in downgrading the economy as per the rating agencies and repelling foreign direct investment will be halted. These protests include those pertaining to service delivery, xenophobic attacks, fees must fall, and protracted strikes in the mines. The economy will no longer depend on extracting minerals in

the mines, but will depend more on innovation, developing new technologies, developing and processing products and so forth.

There should be free education that will target rural and urban poor as well as the working class (Badat, 2011), especially those weak segments of our society. There should be a means test to be undertaken and establish the super-rich who should be in the forefront of funding the free education project together with the corporates and governments who supported colonialism and apartheid. Students who become graduates through being beneficiaries of free education should be subjected to a graduate tax that will contribute towards the sustainability of this project.

Mr Xolani Mathews Shange