

SUBMISSION DOCUMENT
THE COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING
(THE FEES COMMISSION)

Authored on behalf of the NTEU by
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1. GENERAL

- 1.1. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) firstly wishes to express our gratitude for the opportunity to make this submission into the Commission's enquiry into the feasibility of fee-free higher education.
- 1.2. It is pursuant upon all relevant and responsible stakeholders within the tertiary education sector to critically assess the demands being placed upon our university institutions. As one of the only trade unions in South Africa that organises solely in higher education institutions, the NTEU believes these transformational discussions are vitally important.
- 1.3. One of the objectives of the NTEU is to *"...critically examine the role of institutions of tertiary education in a changing society in an effort to promote the equitable and fullest utilisation of the resources of these institutions..."*. We also aim to promote equitable education opportunities at tertiary institutions.
- 1.4. Primarily our role as an organisation is to represent the economic, job security and workplace interests of workers, both academic and support staff.
- 1.5. It is against this backdrop that we make this submission.

2. THE PRINCIPLE OF FEE-FREE HIGHER EDUCATION

- 2.1. As a starting point we have to decide whether Higher Education is something we value as a nation. If Government is serious about confronting the country's triple challenge of unemployment, poverty and inequality, then it has to be said that Education in general must be accorded a high priority position and value, if not the highest.

Financial Sustainability

- 2.2. The NTEU believes that access to Higher Education should be more affordable and accessible than it is now, however this cannot be merely interpreted as a “free-for-all” system. It is not our position that university access should be free-for-all, but for all it should be cheaper. An option that has been considered is “low-cost” Higher Education. The question of course is what is “low-cost” and then how could this be achieved without cheapening the quality of the education? If this is taken into consideration then debate must be engaged on the meaning of “low-cost”: to the Government, the institutions, the student or a combination. This must be in the context of extremely high costs for essential research equipment and other capital expenses.
- 2.3. We already have the first generation of “born-frees” exiting high school, yet access to higher education is still mainly an option for an elite group due to cost.
- 2.4. If the Commission agrees that Higher Education is a high value national interest and that more emphasis should be placed on it, then access must be made easier by decreasing the financial hurdles. Then, alternatives must be made even easier to access, such as TVETs for those who cannot access universities, whether it be for financial or academic reasons. One of the greatest mistakes we make as leaders is denying something without providing a reasonable alternative. The viability of TVETs as alternative fee-free institutions should be considered.
- 2.5. Government would also need to re-prioritise its spending habits and construct a more equitable funding model for higher education, balancing institutional and student needs. Progression for people development should be the main aim of any developing country and education, particularly as Higher Education is paramount to achieving this goal. Currently only around 1% of GDP is spent on Higher Education – a figure closer to 3% would be needed and would be keeping in line with the spending of other African economies on tertiary education. The quality of Higher Education institutions goes beyond simple teaching and learning and requires significant funding intervention at the level of research equipment capitalisation supporting knowledge generation and then knowledge dissemination. The nation cannot afford to allow reduction in funding, as has happened over the past decade, to devalue quality through constricted funding. The division of cost between State / institutions and students must provide low-cost regarding the student input, inevitably this means a rise in State input into the running cost of institutions.
- 2.6. An option to transfer the substantive budget items from universities such as salaries and wage costs should be considered. What the practical application of this would result in is something that will require further debate. The split between capital, teaching, research

and maintenance costs will then be a negotiation item with institutions and student representation.

Autonomy and Academic and Research Freedoms

- 2.7. One of the reoccurring concerns is the outlook for university managements' after this Commission has determined its findings. Assuming it is decided that university access should be cheaper, low-cost or even free, the State would need to find creative ways to fund the shortfall. In a stagnant economy the options are limited. Should the consumer, tax-payer and/or big business be taxed for this national-good service? Either way, Government will need to fund a much larger portion than it has been willing to up until now.
- 2.8. Of course, this brings the contentious issues of university autonomy (qualified as it may be) and academic and research freedom into question; the latter being Constitutional rights. This however would not need to be a decisive factor for this Commission, but certainly something to keep in mind for the next phase of discussion.

3. CONCLUSION

- 3.1. NTEU reiterates our comments above: that the question of how much value we place on Higher Education (Universities and TVETs) must be a decisive in-principle position taken by this Commission. This then needs to drive Government budgeting processes.
- 3.2. NTEU submits that:
- 3.2.1. Low-cost higher education be considered.
 - 3.2.2. Free-higher education is, while generally supported in principle, not viable. A co-determined division of costs between State, institutions and students can lead to a "low-cost" fee-per-student solution.
 - 3.2.3. Academic and research freedom must be guarded as a right enshrined in the Constitution. Whatever the solution, and in the context of the above comment, the NTEU stands firmly behind the principles and absolute maintenance of both academic and research freedoms. The introduction of direct State funding of salary budgets, for instance, cannot be an invitation to the State to direct the academic and research activities of our membership or other academic staff.
 - 3.2.4. Restructuring of funding must not imperil staffing levels.
 - 3.2.5. Equitable and future sustainable quality Higher Education must not suffer.
- 3.3. We have also attached hereto two response documents presented to the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities in July 2012. At the time it was

addressing the request to reconsider the university funding model, but many of the comments and inputs made there are relevant for this commission to consider.

- 3.4. NTEU is willing and prepared at the Commission's convenience to present on our submissions should the Commission deem it necessary to do so.

Mr Grant Abbott

GENERAL SECRETARY
NATIONAL TERTIARY EDUCATION UNION