



Office of the President
STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL
Private Bag X17, Bellville, 7535 South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 21 959 3235/ 2802
Website: www.uwc.ac.za
srcpresident@uwc.ac.za
Cell: 0781218431

Submission of the Student Representative Council (SRC) of the University of the Western Cape to the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education (The Fees Commission)

1. INTRODUCTION

As the Student Representative Council of the University of the Western Cape we are pleased to make a contribution on behalf of the UWC student body into the debate on Fees Free Higher Education. It is our conviction that in the context of South Africa's Transition into a democratic system that ought to cater for all, such a debate is long overdue. We however hold the firm belief that it is better late than never.

In the context of the ethos embodied in our submission we believe that in fact a more appropriate name for the Commission would have been calling it the "FREE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION".

This belief stems in our view from a need to free Higher education from a number of trappings that we will expatiate on in our submission. Free it from amongst others:

- a) Exclusion on the basis of being poor;
- b) Dropout rates;
- c) Lack of academic support;
- d) Racialization of the systems
- e) Negative labelling of the youth
- f) Mismanagement of NSFAS and other funding



g) Inappropriate funding formula

Our submission thus is built on a critical examination of the challenges facing Higher Education in South Africa with specific emphasis on the funding model as directed and limited by the scope of the commission's mandate.

2. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SCOPE

Our understanding of what is required is that stakeholders are expected to provide input to the current debate on Fee Free Higher Education as informed by the report of the Working Group on Fee Free University Education for the poor in South Africa.

It is our reading of the Scope that stakeholder are expected to make input with regards to the feasibility of making Higher Education Fee Free, having regard to:

- a) All relevant legislative prescripts, policies and reports on the subject matter;
- b) The role of stakeholders in funding higher education;
- c) The Institutional independence or autonomy which should occur vis a vis the funding model.

Thus we make our submission fully aware of the limitations in the scope and abiding thereby. One of the key limitations in the scope relates to the joinder in the title that provides that such free education will only be for "poor students". This excludes any possibility of a proposal to the effect that a blanket fee free Higher Education be explored.

3. OUR OBSERVATIONS

The following are our observations with regards to Higher Education currently and its challenges:



- a) We have already made our observation above on how the scope limits the possibility of proposing a truly free Higher education system free of the trappings of a classification or categorisations of its beneficiaries as poor, not so poor, affluent etc. May we add that given the centrality of the term “poor” to the proposals of a new funding formula it is disheartening to learn that there isn’t any central definition for poor in South Africa. Given this anomaly it is important that the discourse should agree on a common understanding of who is to be classified as poor and thus deserving of being attended.
- b) Central to any policy shifts should be a recognition that there are policies in place that were geared towards creating and broadening access to Higher education and that these policies have not been adequately implemented:
- The White Paper (1997) that recognised that South Africa’s stark income disparities were a barrier to higher education enrolment, and argues that the direct cost to students be proportionate to their ability to pay.
 - The National Development Plan 2030 that recognises that there is a strong association between higher education participation rates and the level of the countries development. Thus emphasising the importance of a highly skilled workforce as well as innovation for development.
 - The Green Paper for Post School Education and Training (DHET 2012) Outlines government’s intention to gradually expand enrolments and participation rates.
- c) The huge dropout rate in South Africa is a problem; very few students complete their Higher education studies. The Ministerial Review of NSFAS (2010) found that 72% of NSFAS-funded students drop out indicating that access is not being translated into success.



The challenge with this premature exiting of the system is that it leaves the students without a qualification but yet with a massive student debt that most cannot service due to unemployment/

- d) The misnomer of funding institutions on intake of black students is also a problem given the reported assumption that all black students are poor. This lends its self to some former model C universities only accepting affluent black students and then receiving funding for such.
- e) The Challenges faced by NSFAS are also adversely affecting progress in meeting the challenges of our National Development Plan and the targets expressed in various papers. Firstly it has been proven that NSFAS receive insufficient funds from government to meet the growing demand for financial aid to poor students. Secondly it has over the years been badly managed. The systems to track owing graduates have been very poor. There isn't even an ability to ensure access is accompanied by success. There is no monitoring system at all.
- f) There is currently no capping of fees as such the cost of the provision of a fee free Higher education cannot be appropriately estimated.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the challenges identified above as the University of the Western Cape SRC we wish to make the following recommendation and commentary to the recommendations of the Commission:

a) Institutional Autonomy

Whilst we believe that the university must have a degree of autonomy in its governance and its academic freedom we are also alive to the need to have clear transformation targets that may be impacted on by absolute autonomy. We are thus of the view that a hybrid model with regards to autonomy must be investigated. Given the complexity of the matter we are of the view that a National Review Committee must be set up to investigate the possibility of the



proposed hybrid system. One of the key stakeholders to be considered for this committee are academics. Considerations must be made to ultimately adopt a Transformation Charter that will link the academic programmes of universities to the imperatives of the National Development Plan.

b) Capping of fees

We recommend that fees should be standardised or capped such that there is no discrimination in the system and that we are able to appropriately project the amount needed to deliver fees free higher education. Currently the projected amount fluctuates due to there being no standard fee capping structure.

c) Restructuring /Remodelling of NSFAS

As it is the National Student Financial Aid Scheme needs to be restructured to meet the challenge of the new funding formula. Better capacity needs to be created. We propose a new strategic plan and structure that is fully resourced for NSFAS. Such a structure must accommodate better communication and monitoring by NSFAS. NSFAS would need to communicate more efficiently with its beneficiaries. Monitoring and Evaluation system would need to be put in place with a fully functional M&E unit within NSFAS. Such a unit must explore reasons for the dropout rates of NSFAS beneficiaries.

NSFAS must invest in a proper tracking mechanism or system for its beneficiaries. Such a system must be linked to the public sector payroll agencies e.g. Department of Labour and SARS.

Additionally we believe that NSFAS must review the timing of when repayment is expected from a graduate. It is our belief that there should be no interest charged by NSFAS, as charging interest becomes a revolving door that spreads poverty.



d) Funding Sources

We propose that Free Education be funded through existing methods that include amongst others;

- The existing government grants
- Skills development funds from the SETAS
- Donor funding

Additionally we propose the establishment of a **National Education Redress Fund** that must be linked to the reparations process. The modalities of this may be further investigated.

We also propose that such a fund be additionally funded through Corporate Social Investment Programmes of the private sector. Contributors to the Funds must be given **Tax Rebates**.

5. CLOSURE

This submission is not by any means exhaustive. The country needs to apply itself in more detail to the free education shift. We are off the view that the current recommendation by the Commission by themselves have a component of assisting the poor but the challenge is to define the poor in a way that does not lead to further rationalisation and exclusion.

.....Emailed.....

Akhona Landu