

FEES COMMISSION SUBMISSION

06/09/2016

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For a while, I have been thinking about what I would submit to the commission regarding the current issue of fees. My work around fees did not begin in 2015 the protests of the time. In fact, I began to cast my gaze towards this issue of fees in 2011, when a dear friend of mine was financially excluded. In fact, it was this experience amongst others, that led me into student governance and politics. To watch a student who is academically eligible to continue with their studies being refused entry is a tough pill to swallow for another student. Especially one such as myself.

In my presentation I will be focusing on three particular issues as well as providing you with three potential unintended consequences of free education that I hope you commission is able to avoid. The first issue revolves around why we require a safety net such as free education. The second issue will revolve around the question of why to deny an academically successful student access due to a lack of funding is morally reprehensible. The third issue follows what Lupe Fiasco describes as FFF; Form Follows Function.

THE ADVANTAGE OF A SAFETY NET

I come from a quite an advantaged background. I am the son of a mother who has shown an almost endless amount of determination to ensure that no one in our family ever goes to bed hungry. She would go to the ends of the world for us. In fact, she has on numerous occasions. Whether it would be grabbing my brother out of his cot while the house we lived in was burnt

down due to a petrol bomb or ensuring that I never went to school without polished shoes. I am privileged because she has made me privileged. I am also the son of a father whose selflessness is contagious. He taught me to always punch above and always have an opinion regardless of who you are giving it to. My parents, through their sacrifice, allowed me to sit on the “right side” of inequality in this country. Couple this with financial stability and anyone’s university experience will be far much easier than most students in this country. But why should it be that our country such as ours should simply accept that privilege is only bestowed on those who win in the lottery of life.

You see, I have spent the entirety of my university career on either a scholarship or sitting on the knowledge that if I were to fail to obtain a scholarship that my parents would jump in to assist me. I have had the privilege of living with a proverbial safety net. Though it is a safety net shared amongst numerous individuals in my family with varying intensities. If the safety net is not given to me, it will be given to my cousin and so on and so forth.

It is this precise safety net that contributes extensively to my ability to excel at university and in other aspects of my life. However, it is a safety net that is not available to everyone. I cannot emphasise how much a safety net such as free education would mean to the thousands of students across the country. For students it’s the gateway to opportunity. A chance to better yourself, but more importantly you family.

It would be quite hubristic of me to come to this meeting with my suggestions on resolving the fees issue for the country. I neither have the experience within the realm economics regarding fee structuring nor the leverage of a representative constituency for my views. I come here not trying to represent any one particular group but rather my insights. I also don’t entirely believe that this Fees Commission is necessarily working in the best interests of students. The entire structure of your proposed approach to the commission reeks of a setup.

But alas I find myself giving credence to your cause by adding an additional student voice that in the end I fear will fall on deaf ears.

You and I both know, that when it comes to understanding what to do about the fees question in South Africa, the answer you will be looking for will most likely be found within the realm of economics rather than that of sociology or politics. For whatever reason, when one speaks of fees there is an automatic assumption that the solution lies in the economics of the problem. Now there are various problems with this approach to the fees question. The main issue is the common economic adage: There is no such thing as a free lunch. Free education is not truly free because someone must pay for it. Often this phrase is used to bash students over the head almost as if we are unaware of this fact. Though it is useful to understand that someone must pay for free education, your feasibility study should not depend on whether it is possible to find that person or grouping. Approaching this problem by simply asking what is the most feasible way to ask the country to contribute to fee education does not give true justice to the complexity of the problem you have on your hands. This commission already seems destined to set out to look for a solution that makes the most economic sense for a country such as ours. I have come to this commission to ask you to look for a solution that makes the most humane sense for our country.

You are engaging with a generation of young people who fully understand the economic consequences of their decisions and actions. We are not out here protesting for the fun of it, neither are we doing it because we are bored. Though on the surface it may seem as if we are simply disregarding the fact that our economy is essentially stagnating and that majority of the government budget goes into maintaining what can surely be described as a welfare state. This surface level view of students belies the fact that we are advocating for a solution that looks beyond a spreadsheet. And if you are unable to provide such a solution, then I am afraid to say it, but you would have wasted taxpayer's money and failed in your mandate.

My personal belief regarding fees is that free education for every student in the country is socially desirable. However, as a student of Public Policy I must think about the potential unintended consequences of such a proposal. So before I advocate for why your deliberations should throw out the common logic for why we should or should not have Free Education. I would like to highlight a few potential unintended consequences your deliberations may have.

The first is probably the most obvious. The economic impact that such a large expenditure would have on other sectors of the economy would be copious. Where would the money come from essentially is the question that will drive many of the unintended consequences.

The knee-jerk reaction is to simply say we should get the money white people and private business. I place the two together because inevitably the two intertwine. Though these groupings may just have the funds we require, the advocates of this position have a very one-dimensional opinion of universities. An opinion that I will elaborate on later but essentially views the Higher Education system from the lens of the advantaged rather than the disadvantaged. The problem of this approach is that it is often advocated by the die-hard communist or the student from a privileged university or schooling background. I acknowledge that there will be nuances in people's opinion but for the sake of my argument I will not consider them. Simply stating that the few must fund the many gives no regard to just how large and dependent the many already are. For instance, UCT for the past few years has used some form of cross subsidisation in order to maintain its financial aid scheme. However, if UCT struggles to use the elites within its own university to effectively cross subsidise those who need the most assistance. Then what is the likelihood that this particular group will be able to cross subsidise a nation. I mention this because solving the problem of fees from the vantage point of the advantaged will always create solutions that fail to take into account the current nature of funding in South Africa.

The second unintended consequence would be having to decide who gets to go to which university if education is free for all. I would love to see a matriculant from SACS or St Johns or even my own high school being forced to study at the Vaal University of Technology or the University of Mpumalanga. Not to say these are bad universities, however simply they don't compete at the same level as the University of Witwatersrand for instance. The problem is that free education will ensure that those who are privileged will continue to go to universities of privilege for free. Currently, South Africa's entire education system only favours those who come from some sort of privilege and ranks them appropriately. It is by no accident that the children of the political and business elite of South Africa consistently land up in the same educational spaces. Thought this is not a problem unique to South Africa, it is one that is uniquely structured into our society. Free Education won't solve the problem of educational inequality in South Africa, in fact, I believe that without the proper mechanisms to sort out who goes where then it will actually entrench the divide.

A third unintended consequence I want to bring to your attention regards international students, in particular African students. I recently came back from a programme in the United States of America where I spent almost two months with amazing individuals from across the continent. Both this experience as well as my experience of various African student leaders in the country has enabled to see clearly through a rather dastardly tactic used by Universities in the country as well as our own Department of Higher Education. The tactic usually states that if one fails to obtain the funds from the South African's then obtain them from the internationals.

You should be aware of is the potential exclusion of International Students in whatever model one uses. I firmly reject the idea that South Africa should care first and foremost about South Africans before their international comrades and colleagues on the continent with regards to the fee questions. We can't hope to integrate with the continent if we place barriers to the

transfer of knowledge between countries. Hundreds of years of colonialism already assured us of this barrier, so why should we persist with the same logic. What is the purpose of a free university that gives no assistance to students from the rest of the continent? For me, it would be decidedly unafrikan to embark on such an approach, it would be an obscene oversight to not think about how your deliberations and recommendations would impact international students. Whatever model you do decide on needs to remain as cognisant as possible about what unintended consequences you may be forcing onto an already fragile system.

But as I said, I am not here to give you my suggestions, but I am open to giving my two cents insight about how universities have approached this issue from a student perspective since 2011. Though I understand you may no longer be open to anymore submissions I came across an interesting economic document written by students from the University of Cape Town that I believe will be of value to this commission. It is the only document of its kind that I have come across that has been written and researched by students giving a vital economic insight into the problems that students face. I will be willing to give you access to it (if the authors permit me to) after these proceedings.

TO EXCLUDE THOSE WHO ACHIEVE IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF SOUTH AFRICA IS MORALLY REPREHENSIBLE.

I want to help your deliberations by helping you understand that #FeesMustFall was not a campaign meant to destabilise the Higher Education sector in order to achieve its demands of free education or a 0% fee increment - depending on what side of the fence you sit. In fact, the destabilisation of the Higher Education sector was caused by a long overdue relationship between two bodies within the higher education sector. There is a common split amongst student leaders between previously advantaged universities and previously disadvantaged

universities. The split centres on the methods that one is willing to go to achieve their goals. Where the advantaged had been more conservative and less politically motivated in their approaches to policy problems on campus. Previously disadvantaged are more active politically driven to achieve their objectives. This is often due to the nature of the management systems at Universities. Often when one looks at the higher education system it is through the lens of those institutions that are advantaged and well-resourced rather than the lens of those disadvantaged. This Commission I believe has fallen into a similar trap and it is one that I urge you to step out of. In fact, even my position in this room is taking up valuable space from those who could probably use it better.

We, from advantaged backgrounds and advantaged universities, have the propensity to take attention away from where it matters the most. For example, FMF did not start on October 14th, 2015. If one understands FMF as the act of shutting down a university because of a fee or finance related matter. Then we from Historically White Institutions (HWI's) are slow to enter the game – bar the activities of the 2008 Wits SRC. In fact, from my count, in 2014 alone we had 6 universities across the country that shut down due to a fee-related issue.

#FMF was a vehicle in which students from previously advantaged universities were finally able to join those from previously disadvantaged universities in the interrogation of the nonsensical nature of higher education funding in South Africa. It was arguably the first time that both the previously advantaged and disadvantaged universities used similar tactics to obtain similar goals. It is within the rationale of this uncommon relationship that I believe the Fees Commission should be attempting to understand the logic of the students of South Africa.

TUT and Fort Hare have for the longest time probably been our pillar of strength in trying to understand the logic of students protesting against increasing fees. TUT being a more

contemporary example of the “newer” universities in the country while Fort Hare has been asking this question long before the end of Apartheid. Though often labelled brash, irresponsible or my personal favourite “hooligans”. What the students from these universities have been asking is “How can one morally justify the financial exclusion of an academically achieving black student in the current context of South Africa?”. This is the question that is driving students in this country, not the economic question of how to save money.

I have grown up on stories of Apartheid and the trials and tribulations that many South African’s, including yourselves, had to go through to get the opportunity to even try to succeed. Yet, here we are, 22 years later and we are still denying young black students across the country the chance to succeed. It is probably the betrayal of young people by those who fought to end the injustice of the past that gripes young people the most. The end of the Rainbow nation is not due to a misunderstanding of our role as young people in the country. Its death knell was caused by an unnerving detachment that you, our custodians, fathers, mothers, mentors have towards the achievement and success of the black child. You have forgotten us, but we have not forgotten ourselves.

To answer the fee dilemma through economic models will only further send a clear and direct message to young people that you really don’t care about our opinion. Free Higher Education, in the context of South Africa’s socio-economic positioning, is a must. South Africa desperately requires skills, young people don’t have these skills, but universities can provide them. It’s the logic that drives the provision of free basic education in South Africa. So why endanger their ability to access the skills made available by these institutions?

There is a very common argument that even I to an extent believe and it was posited to you by Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib and no doubt many others. The argument follows the logic that not all people are suited for Higher Education within a university and should look for

other opportunities within the sector. Though this may be true, it's a red herring argument of truly absurd levels. It is another insight that truly fails to understand what drove students to protest against the system. That form of reasoning addresses the fact that even those students who excel academically are denied the opportunity to succeed. That's the problem that students currently have with the system. It's what drove thousands of students onto the streets of the country in protest. Regardless of race, class, gender, socio-economic status, whether you are a 1652 or a negus. . . To exclude young people who achieve in the current context of South Africa, due to financial constraints, is morally reprehensible.

We may use various ways of understanding this concept. Some will use the rhetoric of decolonisation while others will simultaneously call it the need for a more socialist approach to education. But these various ideologies understand that financial constraints should not equate to constraints on educational attainment.

PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

As someone who has been involved in two separate fee negotiations and discussed the matter extensively over the past three years, one begins to notice that the university's logic regarding fees is based on survival rather than what is best for students. Income in Universities comes in three distinct forms. Fees, Subsidies and third stream incomes. Third stream incomes being a convenient catch-all phrase for anything that doesn't fall within the ambit of the first two. With declining government subsidies and a complete failure to innovate around how to generate third stream income, universities knee jerk reaction to balancing the books is to increase fees.

I always wondered what conclusions a Consulting firm would come to if the University hired them to improve their business model. Would they recommend to the Chair of Council that even though your CEO has failed to diversify income streams – especially within an

economic climate that desperately needs one to diversify – he/she should be retained and should continue utilising an approach to management that relies on an extremely volatile form of revenue generation. I am not saying Universities should be seen as purely a business. However, the failure to encourage new forms of income leads to a survivalist mode of decision making. This lack of innovation is definitely disappointing, but it is definitely not from a lack of trying that VC's have failed. Many Vice-Chancellors will tell you that the majority of their time is spent trying to raise the income of the university through donations. But why must the burden of their failure fall on the shoulders of students? Utilising a model that relies on fee increases is simply a model that seeks the path of least resistance based off the need to continue surviving. This is not a trap I want this Commission to fall into.

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

I would like to also bring to your attention the question of what is the purpose of a Higher Education Institution in South Africa? It is not a question I wish to answer myself on this platform but it is a question I hope that you are asking yourself. This question encourages much academic debate, but when placed within the context of South Africa such debate becomes even more vociferous. Usually the debate centres on whether universities should be seen as the vehicle to commodify education, or as pseudo-consulting firms masquerading as educational institutions. Some view the function of the University to be gatekeepers to the capitalist ladder of success while others view it as a socialist bastion of knowledge generation or the home for the decolonisation of society etc. Identifying what this fees commission believes a university should be in the South African context should then inform how such a university's funding model should function. In other words, it would be ostentatious if you

were to come to a conclusion of how universities should financially function if you are unable to answer yourself what a university's form should be.

I believe a University space is indeed a microcosm of society. It lives and breathes. Each student contributes to the life of the university and each contributes to the feel of the university on any given day. You can feel a campus shift in mood in times of mourning and you can feel your heart skip a beat or feel the hair on your arm raise when the university is in celebration. Spaces such as these are few and far between in South Africa. So for me, a space like this must be protected. Even if it means protecting it from itself.

The form of a university should be of utmost priority regarding any question about the feasibility of free education. You are essentially trying to answer what kind of society will exist within a university and by extension of such an exercise, you are simultaneously trying to answer what kind of society you are looking to build. This is why the fees question for students is not a question that can be solved through spreadsheets. It's why if this commission fails (and to be honest I currently do not believe it will succeed in solving this problem) the consequences of its failure will reverberate across society.

The biggest limitation of the FeesMustFall campaign is that it is currently unable to expand its reach beyond the confines of the university. Now this is due to numerous reasons that I will not go into in this submission, but I can assure that the 4 million young people in the country who are not in any form of employment, education or training will be keenly waiting for the results of your deliberations. Your decision will be one of the reasons why they either join the cause of FMF or not.

I believe that South Africa is on the precipice of something either terrifying or truly memorable. Regardless of which way such a leap of faith over the edge takes us, it will be the role of this commission that will be remembered in the history books as either having failed

students or given them an honest opportunity to succeed. As I said at the beginning, I am not here to give you my suggestions around the feasibility of free education, but rather assist in providing insight to what I believe is needed by as a Commission in terms of providing stability to our country and Higher Education sector.