

## **Submission to the Presidential commission fee free education**

# **SAFETSA**

## **South African Further Education and Training Student Association**

### **Introduction**

As a structure SAFETSA was established in 2013 through consensus with already organised Student Representative Councils (SRCs) in the further education and training sector. Whereas there has been a national structure representing the university branch of the post-school sector for more than a decade the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) suffered sector wide alienation. In this respects SAFETSA was born of utopian idea for 'self-creation' and to this end it should not be viewed as subset of any other student formation but representative of all other students' formations in the TVET branch. 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. SAFETSA and its constituents have direct interest in influencing the commission to protect the interests of students in the TVET sector.

### **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 helps both to shape and influence young people’s positions and dispositions. It has been mentioned before that, “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, 2006<sup>1</sup>).

In this insertion to the commission, SAFETSA seeks to present its current understanding of the social factors affecting students in the TVET sector, and how these contribute to the current political climate. In this regard, it would be prudent to acknowledge emergent political mood in terms of its context than content. Young people in the TVET sector are inundated by rise of protest. While there has been a temporal interval of lull in terms of widespread youth protest in the democratic epoch, incidents of protest seem to be on the rise again. In particular, 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 now 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.

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

As SAFETSA we want to make a case that it would not be correct to sacrifice the poor masses of our people in the TVET sector to protect the yet to be found middle. 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.

## **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. In many ways, escalating fees are a threat to the promised expressed in the charter. 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). To us free fees appears as a measure reasonable enough for making post-school education available and accessible. 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". Again, free fees make the right to access more attainable. In one accord these policy documents esteem education as a pivotal dimension of human life. And that means should be explored on how to make it accessible to those that value it and have reason to value (Sen, 1999).

By and large, this policy context provides the backdrop against which FMF can be best understood. At stake on this issue is the participation in education, by significant members of this society despite their creed and economic status. In this light free fee can also be seen as longterm strategy to reduce the number of those that joins the ranks of what has come to be labeled by the social exclusion unit of the Blair's administration as 'NEETs' (not in education, training and employment) (SEU, 1997). Fees have implication for meaningful participation in post-school education. Education is not a place for making money, but provides context to build a country. Fee free education may have implication for burgeoning private education in the country.

## **#Fees Must Fall**

'FMF' is both simple and complex phenomenon. What is common with the two calls students made on Rhodes and Fees is the strong demand for a 'fall'. 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 most admirable feature 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 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.

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 bring to the fore related factors 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 place the people at the centre then end with structure that could best serve them. In the end this debate take the form of chicken and egg with both competing for first place. The reality student face is that, souring fees can

temper with access and by extension with the country's foundational value of access. This reality poses a threat to block student from poor households from full participation in post-school education.

In media Phungo (2015) demonstrate how first levels of post-school education could be made free. 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 very hard about possible ways of funding the education that is free to citizens. There are few countries that have shown political will to explore free fees models.

### **Countries implementing fee free education**

As already alluded, fee free has been tried in few other countries in developed world contexts. 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. Already within the African context we have had university of Makerere as a case in point where fee free education was tried, nonetheless this could not be sustained. Observers argued that it failed because their economic climate was not yet ready for such drastic changes. However, as SAFETSA we argue that 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.

### **TVET Sector**

Composition of student body in the TVET sector is largely made out of poor students who generally struggle finding employment. Imposing fees on them would be tantamount to alienating them to a social abyss.

TVET graduates are better placed to help with entrepreneurial upshot that may heal the ailing economy. The sector promises to champion self-determined and self-determined post-education lifestyle in the light of deindustrialization and rise of service sector. However, indebting student with study loans imposes an extra burden on students to start life on a deficit.

In the few lines above, we sketched 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.

## **Recommendation**

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.

- In the light of the above, we herein thus recommend that South Africa makes undergraduate and all college studies to be free for all those who cannot afford to pay (the poor).
- 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 later on in life than in their embryonic phases of income generation.
- The contribution should be regulated and distributed throughout the sector so that richer universities and colleges do not overshadow poorer ones.

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