

## **FREE QUALITY COMPULSORY EDUCATION FOR THE POOR, TOWARDS SOCIALISM**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The campaign for free education was put on the agenda of the YCLSA immediately after the relaunch Congress and first National Lekgotla of the YCLSA in 2003. Despite various setbacks, confusion on the nature of free education we wanted and blanket criticism from those who had tactical differences with us, we continued with a consolidated campaign in demand for free quality compulsory education. In 2005 as we embarked on a programme of action in demand for free education, we proposed interventions that included that banks should offer student loans at lower interest rates, Universities should have a moratorium on fee increment and that NSFAS should gradually phase out the fee component.

The interventions we proposed then were not meant to delay the realisation of free education but to serve as immediate intervention while the struggle for free education is on course. Over the years, the political climate has changed since 1994 and since 2007 when the ANC adopted among its resolutions of Congress to deliver free quality education. We are of the view that the ANC led government has been in government long enough to be able to implement free education and we are going to give options in our discussion on how to reduce the cost of education and how to fund free education.

The YCLSA understands that education is one of the most crucial vehicles in shaping the broader societal values. It is always a carrier of particular messages, both explicitly and implicitly. For these reasons education is not neutral, and it is important to understand this truism as a basis for approaching the tasks at hand. We arise from a background that it is only the working class that has capacity to reconstitute the society from what it is to what it wants. Marx and Engels alludes that “the history of all hitherto existing society is a history of class struggle.....”

The process to transform the education system is not independent from the advancement of the National Democratic Revolution. Our argument was that education transformation should be in the interest of the working class and the poor challenging the ideas of the ruling class. Though there has been undisputed progress in education transformation, we believe there has been a deliberate stalemate by the government in introducing free quality compulsory education at the cost of the poor. Hence we believe that we need not continue with the systematic delay of the introduction of free quality education and we hope that the current presidential commission will not end up like other commissions (Balintuli Commission) whose recommendations are ignored and not wholly implemented.

### **OVERVIEW**

The vision of the YCLSA is to see free quality compulsory education in institutions of higher learning. We seek to strive for the creation of access and success in all institutions of higher learning without students having to pay. We further seek for transformation of curricula

content and a reconfiguration of institutional autonomy. In general, we want a transformed education system and the product thereof. In preparing to usher in free education, we want the government to evaluate the cost of education and introduce control over fees in the meantime. The demand for free education can only fail if it is reduced to cancellation of fees alone, it should be a demand for quality education too with necessary implications for the transformation of the curricula. The transformation of the curriculum and its content is a necessary pillar for the demand for free education.

South African education system is a product of prolonged history of oppression which was carefully crafted on the basis of class, race and gender, leading to a creation of two societies in one. This leads to maintaining the status quo in the difference between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. The current South African society was born out of consistent struggles against national, gender, and class oppression and has continuously been for the creation of a democratic non-racial and non-sexist Society. We need an education system that addresses the existing difference between historically white and black Universities and colleges. The difference between the two types of Universities must be addressed and the gap closed to ensure that the quality of education provided is the same across all institutions of higher learning. We need to recognise and redress the historical burdens of institutional inequities among higher education institutions, which resulted in financial, educational and geographical disadvantages.

The divide and rule tactics of the apartheid state reached epic moments through the Bantu Education Act 's enactment of ethnic allocation of schools. Whilst cautious of romanticisation, a case can be advanced that this was one of the means to deepen ethnic cleavages that could have been transcended with time. The Higher education landscape did not experience any different trajectory. In this case, the historically disadvantaged institutions received very little support from the government and had the worst infrastructure and facilities as well as student services. Thus the struggle for the democratisation of education and ridding it of its class, racial and gender biases which arose from our past.

The YCLSA is of a firm view that we cannot discuss free quality compulsory education without interrogating the legacy of apartheid in the education system. This is because the challenges in the education system of the Country are as a result of the inferior education apartheid provided to the majority. It is solely because of Apartheid education that we today experience huge infrastructure backlogs and concomitant unequal class sizes, unequal education quality among universities that find themselves in opposite sides of the apartheid inherited spatial geography. Lack of free quality education is amongst the major social injustices in contemporary South Africa. Therefore, we need to appreciate that we are dealing with a majority, the working class and the poor who did not have access to the best education in the Country, thus rendering them workers and peasants in the colonial and apartheid social division of labour.

The preoccupation of the democratic forces of our Country has been to build an inclusive democratic and socially responsive education system. We must build a single coordinated education system which focuses its attention on the development of the skills profile of the people as a whole, building a true people's education for people's power, a goal that is still largely illusive. While there is progress, the counter forces of market fundamentalism have influence on the shape and content of our education system.

We must struggle to free education from the stranglehold of capital and its ideology. We must fight against the running of institutions of higher learning like businesses because if not stopped, it has capacity to reverse the gains that have been made so far. Institutions must be transformed from ivory towers in to people 's centres for people's education. It is pointless to struggle for transformation of higher education whilst leaving class relations and patterns of property ownership untouched, hence our call for socialism in our lifetime as we struggle for free education.

The commodification and commercialisation of education remains the biggest challenge facing our higher education and further training sector. Most of the students who are largely from poor and working class background are denied access to higher education simply because they do not have the monetary means to buy education. Education is treated as a good by the institutions which is sold to customers who are students in exchange for money. The consequence of this sold good is that it is only those who can afford that can acquire it. Understanding the economic condition of our people and knowing that education should be a fundamental right, we need to develop systems and opportunities that allow the poorest of the poor to attain education without the burden of the cost. Education can only be compulsory if it is free because we cannot compel people who cannot afford to go to school.

In South Africa, the provision of NSFAS to poor students has proven to be a key intervention from government though its results are not satisfactory. However, the loan system of NSFAS has led to many black graduates being in debt after completing school. The students fall victim to unpaid loans which go on for years given the unemployment rate. The allocation of NSFAS itself is not sufficient because there are always huge numbers of students who are left out despite being deserving due to lack of funds from the coffers of NSFAS.

From one institution to the other, NSFAS does not cover all the costs and needs of poor and working class students. Further, the debate around the missing middle is very true. NSFAS does not have allocation through its means test for students who do not qualify but at the same time cannot afford to pay for their education. The parental income threshold must be revised as an immediate urgent measure to accommodate the missing middle. This must be done not to delay the implementation of free quality compulsory education for the working class and the poor but as an urgent measure as we usher in free education for all.

Students have become more conscious of the challenges they encounter every day in their institutions of higher learning. Their consciousness is a response to the harsh economic realities their families live in and their desire to attain education irregardless of such realities. We need to advance with speed the implementation of free education to resolve the challenges our education system is confronted with.

While still in the process of establishing how free education should be implemented, the government must ensure that Universities do not increase the fees for the coming academic years and measures are put in place to reduce the cost of learning. The private sector, government and Universities must come together and share the cost of learning without compromising quality and students in the process. We must not allow students to go the streets before we come up with proactive responses on how to fund education and also not deny students an opportunity to acquire education.

While the debate is still on how to fund free education, Finance capital through institutions and big monopolies like the South African Chamber of Commerce and the South African Banking Council and many others must contribute in covering the cost of education. The government need to take forward the issues that emerged in the 2015 student 's protests and introduce lasting solutions if we are to avoid the same kind of protests or more in 2016 and beyond.

We need to also interrogate private institutions of higher learning. Private institutions continue to charge exorbitant fees and justifies the compromise of quality in public institutions which charge far less than them. If we are to have a single coordinated education system and we stand against commodifying education, private institutions must be regulated to provide services at the same standard and level with public institutions. This is to challenge the expectation that private institutions must provide more quality education than public institutions. If we regulate and the education provided is of the same standard, we will deal with the marketability of private institutions which becomes accessed by only those who can afford.

When raising critical issues that are fundamental in shaping the discourse for higher education, a debate of institutional autonomy will be raised as a counter issue to the progressive changes we want. What they forget is that Universities cannot be autonomous from the public and society. They exist in the society and for society because its members of society that must acquire education through these universities. It is therefore wrong to treat Universities like they are their own world outside society. The innovative, intellectual function and teaching and learning in Universities must flourish to serve the people not capital. Institutional autonomy must not be exaggerated.

The contradiction exists between the aspiration of the students and the reality of education being a thorough alienating process has also steadily intensified. Instead of being about learning and contributing to society, Universities have intended to remain the key

indispensable of capital to reproduce and propagate bourgeois ideology. Students and workers are denied a meaningful opportunity and representation in to decision making over the functioning of the institution and such is called institutional autonomy.

“Institutional autonomy and academic freedom have, in the recent past, been central concepts and discursive buzzwords in south African public higher education system. These two concepts are raised in the face of an intransigent, less productive and slowly transforming higher education system still characterised by remnants of colonial and apartheid education and value systems. The central question around academic freedom and institutional autonomy is whether it is benefiting to and rewarding for the transitory and transforming south African society to let institutions of higher learning, disreputable for their minimal qualitative and quantitative productive levels, aloofness, slow transformation pace etc. to govern themselves and decide on the central questions of who to teach, what to teach, how to teach and when to teach.” – SASCO Discussion Document 2009

Our education system must be able to develop patriotic citizens. It is very difficult to become patriotic while being exploited by the system. At the introduction of free education, government must introduce community service with all sectors of learning, this will instil a sense of responsibility and ownership by students. Students will learn to respect the values and ethos we seek to uphold as a Country. The public will be more involved with the control of senates and academic boards with the intention of ensuring that we create centres of people’s education for people’s power. The transfer of power in institutions of higher learning to the public and society cannot happen if education remains a commodity.

### **THE COST OF EDUCATION**

Education must be rescued from its current status of a profit making good. Fees have increased in the past years above the inflation rate and above the increase of salaries and wages, this made education unaffordable for the working class and the poor. Tuition fees must be abolished and a grant be introduced for students. We call for more state funding for higher education to complement the loss of revenue from tuition fees and living costs for students. The responsibility to take a student to an institution of higher learning must belong to the nation and society as a whole and not a family.

The privatisation of services in public institutions have drastically increased the cost of learning, and the burden of the cost is borne by students and those who fend for them. The key services that are privatised are catering, cleaning, accommodation, security, transport, and textbooks etc. The increase in costs to these basic services provided in institutions of higher learning is mainly as a result of service providers wanting to solicit bigger profits. The privatisation of services in institutions of higher learning increase the cost of learning. Some of these service providers provide poor service and are corrupt in nature. For students to succeed they need proper student support and such support comes from the kind of service they receive in their institutions.

We call on all institutions of higher learning to get rid of private service providers and employ directly to drastically reduce the cost of learning while increasing quality services. It will be cheaper to employ directly in the provision of all the basic services offered to students on campus because there will be no urge to make profit like private service providers do. As an immediate intervention, all institutions must get rid of service providers and provide service themselves to reduce the cost that is borne by students as a result of outsourcing.

There have been many models of free education in different Countries with different funding models. Countries like Cuba, Sweden, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho have experienced free education at a particular time. We need to study these experiences of the different Countries, look deeper in to the advantages and disadvantages of the models they used but also strive to arrive at our own funding model using our concrete conditions as a Country. Ultimately, we must ensure that education does not remain a preserve of the rich to the exclusion of the majority. In these Countries we mention, historically free higher education was introduced through a grant system. This meant that students could study for free without being expected to pay back. This is something we can emulate as a Country.

We need all stakeholders to participate in the covering of the cost of education because education is a societal and a public good. Apart from the national fiscus, business must be able to contribute through a corporate education tax charged progressively on the size of profit they make with larger monopolies contributing more. While different corporate entities have been able to contribute towards education through their social investment policies, we need legislated tax that compels all of them to fund education not at their discretion but by law.

There should be a free education fund administered by the government where citizens, workers and organisations make a donation. The fund can be possible if we increase patriotism among our people and we allow education to be owned by the people for the greater good of the entire nation. The challenge is to improve the quality of education across the entire value chain without expecting students to pay. If we implement all our proposals, it is feasible and possible for fees to fall in South Africa.

A distinction that we need to make is between free education and fee-free education. While others may think the two mean one and the same thing and can be used interchangeably, we argue that is not the case. Free education is meant to speak to free quality compulsory education and addresses the question of quality, the content of education, transformation and fees while the loosely coined word of fee-free is used to divert attention away from all issues of the education and emphasizes the question of fees in exclusion from other important issues. Therefore, the debate must be on the provision of free quality compulsory transformed education and not on fee-free education.

## **EMMEDIATE INTERVENTION**

For the 2017 academic year and beyond until the introduction of free education, the government must introduce tuition fee cap and moratorium as a step towards free education. Fee caps are an immediate tactical necessity. The huge differences between what institutions charge as tuition fees perpetuates the apartheid class and racial make-up. The class pendulum in historically advantaged institutions is still tilted towards the descendants of the middle class and bourgeois classes and it is done through higher fees compared to historically disadvantaged institutions. Education expenditure by the government must increase drastically in proportion to the GDP. If we introduce fee cap, students will be able to attend at any University of their choice without the constraint of the variation in fees.

The demand for fee capping must be accompanied by the demand against upfront/registration fees and application fees. There should be national consensus that upfront payment of fees must be abolished and students be allowed to pay as and when they can pay during the academic year. Late payments must not lead to academic exclusion and the refusal by institutions to release results. Students owing must still be allowed to register despite this fact. That way, we will be able to widen access redress and success.

Universities are making a lot of profits from application fees collected from students who intend to study at their institutions. Application fees must be abolished as a measure to increase access to institutions of higher learning. Further, the collection of application fees from prospective students beyond the number of students required for enrolment (University has space for 10 000 students but collects application fees for 200 000 students) is running Universities as pure profit making ventures and defeats the core mandate to be centres of knowledge production, teaching and learning. Other matriculants do not even arrive at applying for enrolment and admission because they don't have application fee. This needs to be addressed urgently towards people's education.

To ensure that the DHET is accessible to institutions, students and all stake holders, we call for the expansion of the department of higher education and training and also the introduction of provincial offices for effective interaction with students and communities. Our immediate proposals are to be implemented and monitored by the DHET. We expect the department to be up to task and put in place these measures that usher in free education for the poor.

## **CONCLUSION**

The YCLSA will strive not to allow a vacuum in the higher education sector that leads to untrusted dishonest new emerging forces that will use the critical issues raised by students to mobilise and seek to build legitimacy through students' struggles. These new opportunists do not differ with us but they try to mobilise by using populist language appealing to the sentiments of students while not offering lasting solutions.

Education is arguably the single most important investment to make as a country if we are serious about job creation and sustainable development. However, education must be treated as an ideology and not as a neutral phenomenon. Education must continue to be used as an instrument of liberation through the provision of free, quality and relevant education up to the undergraduate level. Education today is a basic need and we must intensify the implementation of free, quality and compulsory education for the poor.

Education should be about the development of the consciousness of a person, achieving this goal and developing critical consciousness will allow the individual to participate in the community productively. We must set out our demands for transformation of Universities from ivory towers into ones serving the people. The demand for free quality education requires fundamental change in broader society in order to be met. We call for people's education for people's power towards socialism in our lifetime.

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