

Institutional Autonomy, Social Responsiveness and Public Accountability in the South African University sector

Introduction

Over the past decade enrolment in the education sector more than doubled to over 1 million without the concomitant required increase in resources. The year on year decline in state subsidies which in turn pressurized fee increases led to the exclusion of precisely those students in need of liberation from poverty. Whilst the enrolment profile of students is beginning to reflect the demographic profile of South Africa the professoriate remains by and large untransformed supporting calls for a decolonized pedagogy. Overt and covert racism led to the exclusion and often alienation of black youth on campuses.

Currently in the higher education sector of South Africa vexing conundrums are being debated.

- Institutional autonomy vis a vis public accountability.
- Academic freedom vis a vis the imperative to transform
- The right to protests vis a vis the rights non protestors.

State subsidy to universities is divided into block and earmarked grants. Block grants are consolidated into a single transfer and the funds can be used for any legitimate university purpose. Currently block grants have four components: teaching input (based on enrolments), teaching output (based on graduations), research output (based on approved publications and research masters and doctoral graduations) and institutional factors (based on institution size and proportion of historically disadvantaged students).

The #feesmustfall campaign by students that started in 2015 have firmly placed the issue of access to higher education for all our citizens firmly on the agenda of South Africa. The students have won the concession from all that the current funding structure for higher education is inadequate in both its methodology of distribution and quantum.

This campaign had been marked with acrimonious and often destructive engagements that pitted Universities, Government and the student formations against each other, a situation of adversity that has the potential to derail the noble intent of the campaign. South Africa has won acclaim and is much admired across the globe for our ability to overcome seemingly impossible barriers and guided by our Ubuntu to reach across impossible chasms to reach negotiated outcomes. As chairpersons of the Universities we unreservedly recognized negotiated settlement as the only way to ensure the requisite stability to engage on the future funding structure of higher education.

We would like to thank all who participated thus far in the mediation process and want to encourage a step up in this regard. We are especially grateful for the inputs received from parents, business, government and all student formations. These contributions will most certainly shape our action around the many transformation issues that remain unfulfilled.

The role of Higher Education in South Africa

We remain cognizant of;

1. The critical role the tertiary education sector is uniquely able to fulfill in contributing to and shaping discourse on societal transformation in our fledgling democracy. Universities, underpinned by our understanding of the role and responsibilities of academic freedom, cannot remain aloof but must become responsive to the urgent and critical societal imperatives. Universities bear a responsibility to use subsidies raised from all taxpayers in South Africa, as well as rich endowments, to fulfill such moral imperatives and be accountable to society.
2. The imperative to arrest and reverse growing inequality in our country, an inequality that has entrenched itself along racial demographics and an inequality that exacerbates the exclusion of the poor and previously disenfranchised from meaningful participation in society at large and the economy in particular.
3. The unacceptably high unemployment rate of youth of close to 50% denies South Africa the benefits offered by the youth dividend. Education has an essential role to play in shilling young people and decreasing this level of unemployment.
4. The obligation to transform curricula and prevent the alienation of the black child on Eurocentric campuses and further to affirm multidisciplinary and multicultural pedagogy that acknowledges Africa's rich epistemological and unique contributions to knowledge.
5. The need to deliver world class and quality education to build the requisite skills profile that would ensure the competitiveness of South Africa in a globalised economy. Universities must recognize that quality and inclusiveness of all are complementary and that by nurturing and embracing diversity, scholarship is enhanced and intellectualism is promoted.
6. The enablement of studying and participating in all academic and campus activities in a dignified manner without fear of exclusion due to financial considerations. Our students should never be hungry or without decent accommodation whilst pursuing studies at Wits or for that matter at any other tertiary institution.

7. The values held dear by the University sector that robust and challenging debate (free of intimidation, violence or the threat of exclusion), critical thought and open dialogue and scholarship must be allowed to flourish.

Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in the Context of the campaign for free education

The Ministerial Commission on fee increases invited all stakeholders to deliver presentations to the Commission on the matter of institutional autonomy in relation to the determination of fees by Government as well as a zero percent fee increase proposal. The Commission wishes to engage with institutions regarding the matter as the intervention of Government by agreeing to zero fees may be seen as Government take over the role and responsibility of higher education institutions in the setting of fee increases for future academic years. The Minister of Higher Education and Training had frequently made reference during recent speeches to higher education institutions remaining autonomous while being socially responsible. Some vice-chancellors had expressed concerns over the possibility of Government intervention in the setting of fee increases seeing it to be erosion of the institutional autonomy. The capping of fee increases or benchmarking was conducted in many universities internationally without necessarily eroding institutional autonomy. Institution should take cognizance of the political phase that South Africa finds itself in and the limitations of the current higher education landscape.

The setting of fees by Government could bring certainty and support to university sector provided that it does not lead to a position of under-funding. A danger exists though that a fee free environment within the current subsidy structuring teaching may be prioritized over research.

Therefore, government determining the subsidy as it pertains to the fee setting process would necessitate a certain level of oversight by Government which could have implications for institutional strategic choices.

An obvious issue that would have to be debated in a fee free environment would be that of admissions. That Government should not be allowed to control the admission process of the University simply for the reason that they were in control of the subsidy allocation.

A possible zero percent fee increase would impact enormously on the admission process as it would prove impossible to admit all students who qualified for admission and therefore students from quintile one and two schools who achieved grades that other students could not compete with would be admitted resulting in poor students being unfairly disadvantaged.

Going forward the University would need to identify ways and means of substituting fees through possible 'business models' and should explore the processes of progressive institutions internationally in this regard.

An analysis should be conducted of the actual costs to ensure success of students the University as well as student contributions.

The privatization of Higher Education institutions must be debated by the fees commission.

Recommendations and Conclusion

We therefore resolve to;

1. Support the call to find appropriate policy mechanism that will ensure that no academically deserving student is excluded due to financial reasons. To this end we will support current initiatives aimed at interrogating the fiscal framework of our government to identify which reconfiguration will support this principle.
2. Apply all of its resources and robustly engage Government to reverse the trend of declining subsidies that manifested over the past decade.
3. Strive to ensure our academic staff profile represents the demography of our country and rigorously and without compromise drive transformation across all of its facets.
4. Significantly improve on the success rates of Black students we take into our stewardship and to promote their participation rate at postgraduate levels and work with schools in the basic education system to achieve this.

On behalf of Council chairpersons, I want to sincerely thank all student leaders who got right what we have been fighting to do for many years; placing access to free quality higher education firmly on the South African agenda. By doing so they emphasized, not only the right of inclusion of all our citizens, but have elevated education as probably the most important lever for true emancipation. I further want to thank all present here and look forward to a successful completion of the 2016 academic year and significant strides in the realization of free quality education.