

# **POLICE AND PRISONS CIVIL RIGHTS UNION**



## **POPCRU'S SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

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A Submission Prepared by the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU)

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**MARCH 2017**

*“Today we are seeking what should be and will be, in our judgment, an education system that increasingly corresponds to the equality, full justice, self-esteem and moral and social needs of all people in the type of society that [we] have decided to build”...Fidel Castro*

POPCRU acknowledges the fact that the South African history has been plagued by an unjust past of colonialism and apartheid. It is due to these historical misfortunes of racial discrimination and oppression that the country encountered the scourge of inequality on all aspects, be it economically, socially, politically or otherwise. It is thus against this backdrop that POPCRU views education as a right and a developmental imperative for South Africa, this notion was equally demonstrated by the youth of 1976 when they lost their lives in the cause of freedom, and in the struggle for a just education system in particular. It is in memory of these gallant heroes and heroines that we should continuously strive to reach the educational goals for which we struggled.

It is an obvious fact that in the South African context, we cannot speak about fee free education outside the legacy of apartheid education. Lest we forget, apartheid education sought to deliberately provide inferior education to the majority of our people. The master plan of unequal education provision as plotted by the Eiselen Commission of 1948 found its statutory expression in the Bantu Education Act of 1953<sup>1</sup>. It is through this open expression of statutory racism that at one stage the ratio of White: Black education expenditure stood at 14:1. It is solely because of apartheid education that we today experience huge infrastructure backlogs and concomitant unequal classroom sizes, and unequal quality of education among schools that find themselves in opposite location of the apartheid inherited spatial geography.

There have been heated debates from time immemorial on the nature of education as a public good versus the libertarianism ideology of education as a private good that should be sold and bought in the market place. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Bantu Education Act, 1953.

for this reason that the quest for free education has been an integral part of the struggle for social justice in South Africa and internationally. With the historical position of Africans in the social division of labour, and the abject levels of poverty that many face, it is evident that where education is a commodity to be bought in the marketplace, its affordability will equally become a barrier for many people, mainly the poor. Hence educating the poor and the working class must be on top of the list of the government's priorities as a means of redressing the imbalances of the previous regime.

It is a well-known fact that the then education system reproduced and reinforced structural inequalities, it is therefore unjust to advocate for fee free higher education for all in a highly unequal societies, this call will mainly benefit the already-privileged, who have the significant social, cultural and economic capital required to access, participate and succeed in higher education. It is therefore on this principle that POPCRU is in objection with the popularised notion of a blanket fee free higher education for all; we cannot afford to entrench the current inequality instead of bridging the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have not'. In a nutshell, our view is that a fee free education should be considered specifically to empower and liberate the poor in order to alleviate class struggles, especially in the capitalist system such as ours.

It is thus inarguable that the only means of redressing the apartheid legacy in education is through a decolonised, quality education free of financial barriers – a system which does not discriminate against the previously disadvantaged. The decolonisation encapsulates a review on all inherently exploitative and exclusionary aspects which deepens inequality – we need to start thinking of the accessible and relevant system which will impact positively to the life of an African child as the majority of the marginalised are black deserving students who can change their future when given an opportunity to access higher quality education and training.

The South African history has taught us that bad policies have long-lasting effects which cannot be redressed over a decade or two. It is then appropriate for the democratic government to continuously review and improve its education policies for the benefit of the masses. Hence it is now crucial for the the government to develop a roadmap towards the realisation of a fee free education for the poor. Inclusive to the roadmap should be various forms of funding through private businesses, alumni, NGOs, etc. A number of revenue sources such as the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and the National Skills Fund (NSF) should be pursued to fund fee free education for the poor, at all levels, including post-graduate.

Another means of funding should be raised by increasing tax for the elites (the 10% of income earners) and stopping the illicit outflow of capital. Another alternative might be a review of the current expenditure on higher education (0.72% of the GDP in 2016), which is less than the African (0.78%) and international average (0.84%)<sup>2</sup>.

It is also worth noting that both the constitution of South Africa and the Freedom Charter do not specifically make reference to "fee free higher education and training" as alluded to by many South African on various occasions. The charter states that "*The doors of learning and culture shall be opened*"..."*Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children*<sup>3</sup>". The word "Children" denotes that fee free education should be provided at the level of elementary and secondary education, higher education and technical training were therefore imagined differently from what the Charter means. In terms of the universal access to basic education, the conceptual idea of "*shall be free*" was not used in the formulation that relates to higher education and technical training, but rather by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit.

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<sup>2</sup> Fin24 Markets, 2016

<sup>3</sup> The Freedom Charter, 1955

It is common knowledge that the Constitution of the democratic South Africa was derived from the aspects of the Freedom Charter; hence education is regarded as one of the socio-economic rights enshrined in the Constitution as follows: “*Everybody has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education; and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible*”<sup>4</sup>. This clause does not, by any means, encapsulate “*free education*”, but the availability and accessibility of education. We therefore reiterate that the “*accessibility*” in reference should provide high quality professionals with great prospects for success to the previously disadvantaged. This will be an appropriate measure of redressing the historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

POPCRU does not underestimate the student’s struggle as higher tuition at the institutions of higher learning is a stumbling block for many individuals to receiving education and skills necessary to bridge the existing wage inequality and to make the country competitive globally. We equally acknowledge the fact that higher institutions of learning require sufficient funding in order to effectively serve as the nerve-centre of the country’s national development. However, without the corresponding levels of funding, these institutions are most likely to be pushed further from realising these national ideals as they will ultimately collapse, resulting in the wealthy sending their children to private institutions locally and overseas, leaving the poor to remain even more poorer. This will be adverse to the aspirations of the National Development Plan<sup>5</sup> (NDP) of a more knowledge-intensive, transformed economy and a wider system of innovation by 2030.

It is then eminent that the wealthy must contribute through their fees to the sustainability of the higher learning institutions whilst the government addresses the needs of the poor.

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<sup>4</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

<sup>5</sup> National Development Plan 2030, 2012

Based on the presented argument, it is thus evident that fee free higher education and training for all is not a viable solution for South Africa, let alone Africa at large. A typical example can be made with the most developed country like Europe, which is still struggling to provide free education for all, what more of a third world country like South Africa when even countries which previously offered free higher education such as China, Australia, Mozambique, Kenya and England, have since implemented cost-sharing policies and models due to unsustainability of free education<sup>6</sup>. South

We however acknowledge that several countries have managed to provide fee free education for their citizens. These include countries such as the United States of America (USA), Cuba and Sri Lanka. Below are synopses of how these countries funded free education

### **USA**

- The funding of education is drawn largely from the state (average about 48%) and local taxes (average about 45%). As a federal state, the government provides about 7% of the funding of schools;
- Property taxes have remained the most dominant source of funding, although this led to inequalities in funding as states and local districts have different tax bases. In general, school districts with higher property values receive much of their funding from property taxes, while districts with lower property values receive much of their funding from state resources.

### **Cuba**

- Education is free at all levels, including university.
- All funding for free education in Cuba comes from state coffers and is enabled by the fact that the country puts more emphasis on education expenditure as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

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<sup>6</sup> South Africa and the illusion of free higher education, 2016

- This is in keeping with high levels of expenditure in social services in a socialist country, where a different macro and micro-economic model is followed.

### **Sri Lanka**

- This is also one of the developing countries where education is free at all levels, including university level (although university education is limited to very few graduates of the schooling system – about 12%).
- Funding for the majority of schools is derived from provincial sources, with about 320 ‘national schools’ being funded centrally by the (national) Ministry of Education.

### **Germany**

Germany is frequently referred to as an example of a tuition-free higher education system. However, unlike South Africa; Germany has a rather low participation rate in higher education. This is mainly owing to an extensive and successful vocational education and training system, which provides a viable alternative to higher education and allows for comparatively high lifetime earnings. Even though Germany have managed to maintain the fee free education system, comparing it to South Africa could be a bit problematic as this is funded through income tax which is among the most exacting in the world (45%)<sup>7</sup> and this country is also amongst the most advanced economies.

Based on this comparative analysis, we are of the view that with regard to free higher education, South Africa should look at her counterpart within the continent for lessons and pitfalls to avoid. For instance, we noted that Mozambique and Kenya are two countries that have tried implementing the system but failed. One common factor that contributed to this failure was that while implementing the fee free education system, primary and secondary education took the strain as the government started investing less on it while it forms a concrete foundation for students to gain a

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<sup>7</sup> South Africa and the illusion of free higher education, 2016

university entrance. Hence these countries opted for better options which are justifiable and improves the quality of education at all levels.

It is therefore key that South Africa strives towards a sustainable funding model. As from a social justice viewpoint, higher education is a public good and should be prioritised as a source of the country's social and economic upliftment because we all benefit from it, whether personally or societally. We therefore reiterate that funding higher education should not just be a burden that the public purse must bear, but the government, institutions of higher learning, the private sector and society at large must all collaborate towards this mammoth task of creating solutions to the higher education funding crisis.

Higher education offers both public and private benefits; hence a diversified source of funding is needed. We do take into consideration that currently, besides the general taxes and other means of fund raising, the private sector supports universities by allocating funds for specific projects and providing support to mostly students who are potential employees. However, there is a need for a systematic mechanism that channels private sector funds to all institutions of higher learning. This is despite the fact that the entire private sector is a beneficiary of graduates produced from South African universities.

It is therefore evident that South Africa needs a reviewed funding model which will be meaningful towards the accessibility of quality higher education, especially for the students who cannot afford fees. Such a model will obviously require a multi-faceted approach in which the government, private sector and tertiary institutions all contribute in various ways to the general well-being and sustainability of this sector. It is thus recommended that legislative processes be embarked upon to ensure effective operation of this model.

Notwithstanding these facts, what we are witnessing at most all South Africa's universities is the gradual but systematic insertion of the



(educational) demands and needs of the capitalist market. It is a 'smart' privatisation which fits neatly into the neoliberal educational regime of cost-benefit analysis, where the 'service' provided becomes commodified as it enters into a market relationship with its 'users'. Consequently, these institutions deviated from providing a holistic public education which can equip students with both intellectual knowledge and practical skills that are defined by the pursuit of social justice and equality and centred on human development and needs. It is therefore prominent that the current curricula should be redesigned in accordance with the relevant skills and training which will best meet socially and economically useful (public and collective) needs of society. This will fill the gap in the market and thus also reduce the high unemployment rate.

It is undeniable that university fees in South Africa are extremely exorbitant. They are undoubtedly exclusionary to the working class (domestic workers, farm workers, nurses, teachers, and other civil servants) whom their children will not be able to afford tertiary education without being recipients of subsidies in the form of grants, scholarships and loans. This is why there is consensus around the appropriate interventions that seek to address this concern for this social class as exclusion on financial grounds is morally unacceptable because it denies some of the brightest minds the ability to flourish.

The inability of the poor students to afford higher education versus government's incapability of providing fee free higher education and training is a very serious national dilemma which requires intensive measures to overcome. This Commission should redirect its focus on the roadmap towards the realisation of a state-funded higher education for the poor as this is a much bigger concept which can galvanise a historical commitment that all South Africans are responsible for ensuring that education is a public good. The education of an African child is a matter of national importance and should be realised as such.

Lest we forget that *“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that a son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of the farm worker can become the president of the country”*, Nelson Mandela.

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