

Free higher education in South Africa - Why not?

Dr. Saleem Badat (vc@ru.ac.za)
Vice Chancellor, Rhodes University, South Africa

Introduction

Recently, the largest national student organization in South Africa, the South African Students Congress (SASCO), demonstrated in support of free higher education. In many quarters this demand was considered outlandish.

But is it? Are the ideas that health care should be available free of charge to all in need, and that economic and social policies should prioritize full employment so that all can enjoy dignity to be scoffed at? Should we be shy of aspiring to live in societies that put human development and well-being first and prize highly educated, informed and critical citizenry's? Is free higher education necessarily an undesirable *ideal*?

Social policy changes

The problem with the SASCO call is that it is a demand for immediate free higher education *for all*, rather than for those who are *in need*. Given the radical politics of SASCO, this is strange call as in the South African context a large number of beneficiaries will be from the wealthy and middle classes.

However, if the SASCO demand was, more sensibly, for free higher education for those who are in need, this would be far from an undesirable ideal. Indeed, such a policy *is possible in South Africa* and elsewhere. It is a question of making reasoned public choices, and of understanding the consequences of public policies of both free and non-free higher education.

Of course, a policy of free higher education for those who are in need would require a fundamental re-thinking of and changes in social goals, priorities and policies. Without such significant changes, it is difficult to see how free higher education can be provided, or supported by those who may cherish such an ideal.

State financing

The public subsidies that public universities receive from government increasingly do not cover their full running costs. They must rely on tuition and residence fees from students, as well as income from donors, research and other activities to maintain themselves.

If free higher education for all was to be introduced in South Africa, the government would need to provide, apart from the current public subsidy of R 17.5 billion (\$2.5 billion), an additional R 7.7 billion (\$1.1 billion) to universities. If funding for accommodation in university residences was included, a further R 1.3 billion (\$186 million) would be needed. If accommodation and subsistence for all students was to be provided, R 21 billion (\$3 billion) more would have to be made available. These funds

could be at the expense of addressing poverty, job creation, health, housing and other significant social needs.

Unless the government made good the funding shortfall that universities would experience as a result of free higher education for all, South African universities would collapse.

Other consequences

There would be other consequences that SASCO does not appear to fully appreciate.

South Africa is the most unequal society on earth, in which there are huge income and other inequalities. Free higher education would be a great boon for wealthy and middle-class parents that can afford to pay university tuition/residence fees and associated costs. In effect, this would be a fulsome public subsidy to the very rich and well-off middle classes and a further entrenchment of inequalities.

Currently, private higher education institutions in South Africa do not enjoy prestige. Introducing free higher education for all without increasing public funding, would create a fertile environment in which the wealthy would send their children to private institutions, or to overseas universities. Higher education would become even more of a generator of class and other divisions and inequalities.

A university education has both public and private benefits. The graduates of universities contribute in various ways to the public good – as teachers, health professionals, engineers, public servants and the like.

However, they currently also derive, often handsome, private benefits in the forms of better prospects of decent employment, earning substantially higher incomes, enjoying higher standards of living, and having many more of life's pleasures available to them than those who do not have a university degree.

Given this, it is neither unreasonable nor unfair that students should contribute financially towards higher education.

Real problems

The problems to which the SASCO-led protests seek to draw attention are real as they are urgent. Thousands of working class and rural poor students with potential and talent find themselves without the means to access universities. At the same time, many hundreds of potentially outstanding postgraduate students, much needed by South Africa, languish without financial support, or toil with inadequate funding.

This is notwithstanding that thousands of professional jobs in the private sector and public service remain unfilled because of a shortage of high quality graduates. Much needed and welcome state investment in public infrastructure is not matched by investments in humans.

Another approach

To begin with, South Africa should strive to progressively realize the ideal of free higher education for all those in financial need. A number of priorities should be pursued.

The state-supported National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which has been critical in supporting indigent students, requires large capital injections so that such students can be better supported to access and succeed at universities.

A NSFAS-like scheme also needs to be established for postgraduate students in financial need. South Africa cannot waste the talents of students that have the ability to be the next generations of academics, scientists, writers, artists and critical intellectuals. This is also necessary to redress historical racial and gender inequalities.

There must be increased investments in academic development programmes to support the largely black and poor students who are under-prepared by schools for the rigours of a university education. Access without real opportunities for success is a waste of scarce resources and an injustice to these students.

Given the private benefits that accrue to graduates, those who earn above a certain level should be expected to contribute to NSFAS so that future generations of students can be supported. Perhaps all graduates that earn above a certain level should be subject to a graduate tax payable to NSFAS.

Conclusion

Outside of such an approach, the call for immediate free higher education for all will simply further entrench and reproduce the very inequalities that SASCO protests.

Still and more generally, we should not fear to debate ideals that current neo-liberal economic and social orthodoxies disdain, or that may not be immediately desirable or achievable.

Is free higher education for all really an impossible dream? Why should it not be an ideal, one of the markers of the just and humane society that is sustainably developed and left as a legacy for future generations? Of course, this would have to be part of a wider and radical reformulation of social goals, priorities and policies.