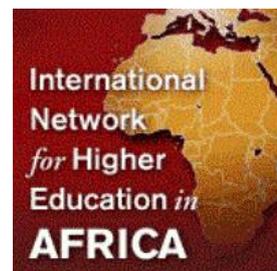


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A Country of Crises, Contrasts and Hope



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Our country, South Africa can be described in many ways, using many terms or adjectives. Each description would most probably be correct. Whichever description one chooses, there can be no doubt that, today, our country is far better and more equitable than the one we inherited in 1994. Its future is brighter and it provides more opportunities to a diverse group of its citizens under the Constitution; hence the hope and optimism.

However, as a country we face many crises: in education; health; energy and water; in the economy; in state capacity and a corruption crisis. The list is endless rendering the word 'crisis' meaningless. However, corruption, education, and health are my 'A list crises', in that particular order. The economy, energy, water and state capacity would be my 'B list crises'.

We also live in one of the most unequal societies in the world; where squalor and abject poverty live side by side with repugnant wealth. All of these descriptive words are captured eloquently in the National Development Plan – the non-partisan roadmap adopted for the nation's future.

A youthful courageous new vision

We are currently faced with a crisis in higher education where most, if not everything, 'MustFall'. However, the clever students behind this slogan have not revealed where and how these all 'MustFall'. It is likely that all may as well just 'FallApart'. Students, who are united on these issues across universities, national boundaries and the nation, have correctly identified a simple but obvious common story. This is one hallmark of leadership.

To be sure, this common story has been with us since the dawn of our democracy – and is growing in leaps and bounds. This story which resonates with the nation is consistent with the three pillars of the NDP, i.e., addressing inequality, unemployment and poverty. It is critical for the future of the students, the very survival of a healthy higher education system, the nation – and our place in the 'League of Nations'. It's a story that is directly and vigorously intertwined between access to university education and transformation of the university, although it appears to masquerade as 'FeesMustFall'. It simply cannot be ignored and must be urgently addressed.

University autonomy 'lost in panic'

Government in the form of the President responded swiftly and positively. However, several unintended consequences unfolded.

- i) University autonomy was handed to the state by the Vice-Chancellors (VCs) and Chairs of Councils. The President not only publicly made the announcement but also made the decision on university fees. Yet, VCs and Chairs of Councils have no legal authority to decide on fees unless mandated by their full Councils.
- ii) Agreeing to a 0% increase in fees is a temporary and palliative solution.
- iii) The government's response revealed poor leadership, and a lack of unity and planning amongst VCs on an issue of national importance; while students have elevated the protest to national level, VCs remained stuck at their institutions, negotiating individually without any clear and coherent plan to address the current crisis but more importantly without providing a plan for the future of university education.
- iv) The announcement by the President undermined the authority and leadership of the VCs and Councils in the eyes of the public. Of course, previously the VCs had committed another cardinal governance sin out of fear of student protest action. They abandoned their autonomy by fleeing to the President without their meeting being facilitated through the Minister of Higher Education and Training, in effect bypassing him!

There are many interpretations of this course of action. However, there can be no doubt that it gave the President authority and legitimacy which he duly exercised. No word on autonomy was uttered by any university leader during this protest period. These various actions lend themselves to the interpretation that university autonomy in South Africa has been lost and reduced to VC X not talking to/consulting VC Y in university decision-making! We no longer have autonomy.

University autonomy discourse in South Africa cannot follow the old African model or the European model. University governance in the old African model implies that the state is in control. The state selects the VCs; the head of state is often the Chancellor of every university. This model, still in effect in many countries, has led to the downfall of many great universities across the continent. It must be eschewed. The European model has evolved over many centuries based on the conventions and traditions of European countries, and in effect is a model of partnership. Our future model should evolve from the forgotten concept of 'Cooperative Governance' developed by the National Commission on Higher Education. It is critical that South Africa develops its own model of university autonomy that balances autonomy, accountability, social cohesion and our particular history, cultures and destiny.

The students outsmarted the VCs in many ways. Through their united, collective and successful national protest actions and international support, they caused the VCs to panic and flee to government for support and legitimacy. The students rendered the VCs impotent and slapped them with a vote of no confidence as they failed to respond to their obvious demands adequately and appropriately. Some VCs are often most vociferous in debates such as limits of terms of office, competences in government and other sectors but not about their own sector. At some universities, staff and students have already stated publicly that their VCs may not be 'fit-for-purpose' to lead them. Why have they remained dead silent on this and not done the 'honourable' thing?

In the face of these developments, and increasing national mobilization of students guided by a clear objective, the leadership and voice of the VCs remains mute. As the new academic year is looming fast, their proactive and collective leadership is critical in guiding this massive movement and meeting its demands.

Transformation at the heart

It has become obvious that what this generation of student leadership has unleashed is a unique opportunity to fundamentally overhaul and transform the higher education system. They are tired of the current system that hangs on the pillars of racism and white supremacy which continue to reproduce inequality in terms of whatever measure ones look at. The system, which contradicts the objectives of the NDP, continues to humiliate them and rob them of their dignity. What these students are also telling us is that a generational chasm (gap) exists between how they see and plan their future and that of the VCs.

Students want free quality education; our country, with careful and inclusive planning, can afford to do this; to this extent the minister and the presidency have afforded their thoughts. Students want good accommodation at 'varsity. They want quality education delivered by qualified staff and not the mediocrity we see across the sector. Students want the knowledge system decolonized and white institutional culture transformed to be in line with the identity and culture of our country and not the identity and culture of some foreign country.

Students want the funding of universities fundamentally transformed to reflect the types of universities we need for our national development. They also want universities to be led by reputable scholarly leaders.

In searching for solutions, we just cannot afford to focus on just one aspect, 'FeesMustFall', and ignore the others in the system. A piecemeal approach is bound to fail.

Thus, 'FeesMustFall' may be the opening salvo of a much deeper, complex and intricate package of access, success, quality education, institutional culture and a transformed knowledge system (decolonisation) that relates to South Africa's evolving identity. Transformation of the university system in its entirety is at the heart of these uprisings. '#FeesMustFall' is just a proxy. This is in similar vein to the 1976 student uprising. Transformation will not occur without pain and without financial resources dedicated to it. It cannot be led and driven by the very same people who created the mess; as Einstein reminds us, 'we cannot solve our problems by using the same thinking we used when creating them'! We will not wake up one day to find our country transformed! We must make it happen through planning and hard work.

As a nation we have the choice between adopting a short-term, palliative and single-issue focus and a long-term strategic but comprehensive solution to crisis management. I prefer the latter as the former tends to be unpredictable, unsystematic, and costly and conceals the big picture. Some have compared the current rumblings with tell-tell signs of an uprising of the likes of the 'Arab Spring'!

Our own 'free university education'

Our government has declared education a top priority and the NDP has identified it as an essential component of national development. The ANC adopted a resolution on free education at its Polokwane Conference in December 2007. Free education is integral to the Freedom Charter. Both the President and the minister have indicated that free university education is 'possible'. It is thus imperative to implement these 'possible' resolutions and positions, and stop the many dead-end debates. As a nation we can afford free university education with inclusive and meticulous planning!

University education, deliberately delimited in this article to describe universities only, is a small sector of the service sector, and even the entire education sector. However, successfully advancing it will afford South Africans the confidence to move from 'academic' debates to implementation and action. It is important to put passion and energy into solving these problems. It is crucial to establish a team of dedicated, non-partisan, non-party affiliated experts to identify all the elements involved in this complex crisis and come up with pragmatic solutions. This is a national priority in the interests of the future of our nation rather than party politics.

For over three centuries, the majority of our citizens were denied education and those that received it got an inferior version that consigned them to servitude. Now we have a generation hungry for quality education which is also prepared to sacrifice for it. We should give due recognition to this generation of students and their leaders. I often reminded my colleagues in my previous incarnation as a vice chancellor that 'no child leaves his/her home and parents to come and strike or break doors or windows at varsity'. If we do not appreciate this we are missing an important point. In fact I know many parents who advise their children to the contrary.

University education is free in Argentina, Brazil and Greece. Yes, in Greece, a country so bankrupt that it lives off borrowed money from its good neighbors. It values free tertiary education even in these times of high unemployment and economic misery. Cuba is another poor country, yet it spends 4.5% of its GDP on higher education while ours sits at between 0.68 and 0.72%. A sober analysis of our circumstances has revealed that free education is feasible and 'possible'. In these countries, tertiary education is free at public universities. Unless I am missing something, we are certainly not as poor as Greece or Cuba!

Investing in education is investing in the 'invisible and invincible'. The founding father of our democracy, Nelson Mandela, said 'education is a powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'. Our students demand this weapon in order to change their world and their future. Are they asking too much or asking something too complex to comprehend? No, let us make unwavering commitment to invest in them. Let us reprioritize the national budget to give future generations a footing in the cut-throat and competitive globalized economy. In light of so much squander, corruption and subtle looting that take place every day a critical agenda such as this must not be compromised.

University education is the pinnacle of an education system – the jewel in the crown. It creates innovation, fosters competitiveness and ensures a better quality of life. Its spin offs – both tangible and intangible – have enormous impact on economic growth, health, education, culture, democracy, and civil society, among others. Sustained and vigorous investment in university education will eliminate inequality, reduce poverty and unemployment and transform the nation.

The solution to the complex crisis is equally complex yet simple. That said no good deed comes cheap, without pain, hard work or without thinking/acting 'out of the box'. Cultivating the change agents to promote our fortunes is paramount. We must continue to believe in ourselves in defining a better destiny for our nation.

Finally, we should perhaps accept that the transformation of society may not happen due to mere good wishes without dedicated human and financial resources. Furthermore, piecemeal, rather than holistic approaches may not deliver the intended results. We steadfastly trust that transformation is the most critical vehicle in the

delivery of a non-racial, non-sexist and equitable South Africa. However, it may only occur through political will, proactive engagement, sustained vigilance and vocal activism. Alas, the students have already taken that road.

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