

## Is the decline and fall of South African universities looming?

Over the past few weeks, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of words have been written or spoken about the student protests and marches that led to President Zuma's clearly panicked response, declaring that there would be no fee increases at South African universities in 2016.

There are three considerations that reveal the extent of the President's alarm. Firstly, it is not clear who in his cabinet he consulted before making his announcement. Secondly, it is very clear that, at the very least, he did not consult anyone in his financial cluster as to how he expected his country's universities to survive without the funds they need in order to operate effectively and to deliver decent tertiary-level education. And, thirdly, it is constitutionally unclear as to whether or not the President has the authority to arrogate, to himself, powers that are legally assigned to the councils of South African universities.

The most fundamental reason for the President's inopportune and alarmist response without (it would seem) any consideration of the short- and long-term consequences of his announcement, is that the government has, for 20 years, paid little or no attention to the critical role and significance of post-school and higher education, and scientific research, in the country. While other BRICS countries which are, apart from India, all in dire financial straits are, as a consequence, providing substantial funding for higher education as they understand the importance of education in creating and sustaining development, South Africa has shown short shrift for this sector. The history of neglect and its consequence – the absence of consultation and careful planning – resulted in newspaper headlines such as 'Scramble to fund 0% hike', 'Blade waits to hear from Zuma', 'Chaos rocks Nene's budget', 'Zuma slips away', 'Blade beats a retreat' and, perhaps the most telling of all, this statement from the Director General of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Mr Gwebs Qonde: 'We don't know where we'll get the money. That's a fact.'

Of course, one might point to what would seem to be policies and practices that are contrary to these three assertions. The Department of Science and Technology (DST) has, through a number of ventures, managed primarily by the National Research Foundation (NRF), invested funds in support of postgraduate students, institutional research projects and the Square Kilometre Array, amongst others. But the country's investment in research through the DST, the NRF and private sources remains below 1% (at 0.92%) while China's contribution is 1.98%, and Brazil's is 1.21%. The irony is that the National Development Plan, approved by the Cabinet, mentions (almost 150 times) research as being critical to economic growth and development, and specifically states that the National Treasury is to use fiscal instruments to subsidise research and development, and that research capacity in higher education must be nurtured and coordinated, and linked to postgraduate studies in universities.

In direct contradiction to this, the Minister of Finance has effectively frozen research and post-education budgets for 2016, and has reduced the funds available for technical and vocational education and training. At the same time, he has increased the budget for public service salaries by ZAR20 billion a year for 3 years, bringing the total to ZAR359 billion for 2016 or 35% of the total national budget.

One might also point to efforts made by the DHET to fund research publications, support improved teaching and help to develop research skills in universities. None of these is in any way insignificant – but the funds for these ventures come from an existing and diminishing budget rather than from additional funds. In other words, these admirable and necessary ventures serve to reduce the overall funds available for the general support for and operations of South Africa's universities, whose expenditures increase far above the official inflation rates.

The cost of electricity is increasing at close to 25% each year, and the increase in the cost of water is, on average, about 9%. Worse still, however, is that the cost of scholarly and scientific books is escalating rapidly; universities have to pay for the research that is core to their role, and then pay for that research to be published. As if that were not bad enough, the universities have then to pay, yet again, for students and staff to have access to the books and journals in which their researchers have published their findings, with each of these costs increasing beyond the so-called 'official' inflation rate. Operational costs – those which make it possible for universities to do their best by way of teaching well, supporting their students, and undertaking development-related research – keep going up and state contributions keep declining, in real terms.

And then there is a further challenge, lurking in the shadows of the future. Demands, backed by protests (some violent), that are so rashly and ignorantly acceded to, produce the understandable notion that the next round of demands will also result in acquiescence.

Here, then, are the remaining items on the 'demand list'. *Polity* recently reported<sup>1</sup> a meeting between members of the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC), and the Progressive Youth Association (PYA) chaired by ANC Secretary General Gwede Mantashe:

*The [NEC] led by the Secretary General of the ANC... received a report from the PYA on the student protests against increments in university fees.*

*The meeting acknowledged and commended students for running a predominantly peaceful protest campaign nationally that brought to the fore the critical challenges facing education, particularly in the context of fees that excludes many students from tertiary education.*

*The meeting agreed to urgently raise...the demand for a 0% increase in university fees, the scrapping of registration fees, long-term solution to realise free education, a review of the autonomy of universities and the capping of earnings of academics.*

The agreement reached by the meeting formed part of a presentation and recommendations tabled before President Zuma ahead of his meeting with student representatives.

That the NEC commended the students for their lack of violence is, at the very least, disingenuous, as there were violent protests outside the Union Buildings in Pretoria, threats of violence on campuses, and the destruction of, or damage to, buildings on at least two university campuses. The agenda is, however, of greater concern.

The first item – a 0% increase in fees – has been achieved, with consequences yet to be understood and resolved, other than that universities have been asked to trim their budgets, while Minister Nzimande scrambles around to find ways of determining where the compensatory funds may be found – and the civil service salary budget is increased by ZAR20 billion a year for 3 years.

A start, of course, would be a compensatory reduction in the budgets of those state departments identified by the Auditor General as having spent large sums of monies fraudulently and unaccountably – funds which, then, they would not have needed had they been operating honestly and accountably in their use of public monies.

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That item one was met, makes the others cause for concern. Where will the Minister and/or the President draw the line? And why would they do so at that point?

The second item – scrapping registration fees – reduces university income in addition to the loss of fee increases – while institutional expenses continue to grow. The third item – free education – means one of two things: growing DHET support for universities through the state, or inevitable decline. Unless ‘no fee’ education is replaced by a continuing and growing state income that will retain and improve the quality of the country’s world-class universities and, at the same time, develop and improve those institutions that were the victims of apartheid and extended periods of mismanagement, this item simply means that students (and the government) would be happy for their successors in universities to receive a low-quality education.

So to item four: a review of the autonomy of the universities. This item is difficult, because it is not clear what is meant by ‘autonomy’. If it is just a matter of control over fee increases or no fees at all, then it is the same issue covered by item three. If, however, the ‘review’ means looking at autonomy more widely, as is envisaged in the *Higher Education Amendment Act* now before Parliament, then this could mean that universities might no longer select their own Chancellors, appoint their own Vice Chancellors, set staff salaries, and determine and teach their own curricula. This would turn South Africa’s universities into the equivalent of those elsewhere in Africa 20 years ago, and end any notion of international standing and quality – and intellectual and scientific integrity. This is not to say that universities should not be

expected to act in ways that are socially accountable – but the means for holding institutions to their legal and social responsibilities are already firmly in place.

Finally, item 5: capping earnings of academics. It is almost tempting to laugh at this notion; yet it is not a laughing matter. South Africa’s academics are not particularly well paid, and in face of salary increases for the employees of the state sector amounting to ZAR20 billion a year for the next 3 years, this item is nothing less than insulting – and thoughtless. It is to be assumed that students who wish to pay no fees nonetheless wish to be educated in ways that make them effective players in the world economy. Capping the salaries of researchers and teachers will have two consequences: those staff who can, will leave; and those who are unable to do so will take on additional work – unpublishable contract research or multiple teaching responsibilities. Either or both consequences will result in the move from the decline to the fall of South Africa’s universities.

Is this really what the PYA, the NEC and the government wish for? To move a reasonably sound system into the backwaters of international higher education, producing little or no serious research? And, worst of all, graduating students whose education will join the worst in the world?

## Reference

1. ANC. Statement: ANC: Meeting with the Progressive Youth Alliance [homepage on the Internet]. c2015 [cited 2015 Oct 30]. Available from: <http://www.polity.org.za/article/anc-meeting-with-the-progressive-youth-alliance-2015-10-22>



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