The future prospects of South African universities
Policy and funding options

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Is there a future for South African universities? For a country that has the developmental ambitions we have, this is a vital question. And its answer must start with the recognition of the very high value of a university degree. Indeed, by one estimation, ours is "the country with the highest private returns to tertiary education," with the rate of return increasing from 28.7% in 2000 to 39.5% in 2011.[1] Part of this is a result of the marked difference in the employment chances of a student with only a matriculation certificate and one with a degree: the unemployment rate for graduates stands at 7.4% but for those with only a matriculation certificate it is 27.9%.[2]

A university qualification therefore matters for the relatively small number of school students who manage to access higher education for a first degree; by last count the participation rate (total enrolments as percentage of population between ages 20-24) was only 19% on average, but was much lower for Africans (16%) and Coloureds (14.2%).[3]

At the same time, universities matter as the primary engine for the production of high-level skill and talent for economic growth, technological innovation and societal leadership. The stakes are high for individuals and for society. There are, however, major shifts taking place in South African universities that will impact on the future of these highly-prized institutions.

The first important phenomenon is the steady increase in the demand for higher education as is evident in the growth in enrolments from 799,490 in 2008 to 1,041,000 in 2018. With projections to reach 1.1 million in 2020/21, South Africa is on course for meeting the National Development Plan's target of 1.6 million students enrolled in 2030.[4]

In prior decades the principal role of the university in relation to undergraduate students was to provide quality teaching to comparatively small numbers of students leading to a degree that prepared new graduates for the world of work.

That has changed because the majority of youth now entering university are poor and have weak academic backgrounds. The new student profile brings with it two principal challenges – student poverty and the pressure on universities to address the social (as opposed to purely academic) needs of their new clientele as well as the need for universities to compensate for what was lacking in the preparation students received at school.

The growth in enrolments of many poor students has led to what has been called the welfarisation of the South African university.[5] This phenomenon was first observed by the eminent social historian Charles van Onselen who warned about "the quasi-welfare function of the tertiary sector" where universities were beginning to take over the welfare responsibility of the state with negative consequences for both.[6] Growing numbers of students are now in need of not only tuition (fees) but also accommodation, textbooks and other learning materials, transportation to and from campus (for non-residential students), food and even basic living expenses. It is not that some universities have not already taken on these expanded duties beyond the academic project; it is that these needs are now routinely listed on memoranda of demands that regularly make their way through a protest to the desk of the university management.

In response government not only greatly expanded the quantum of funding available to students, but also made unprecedented investments in accommodation facilities. Transfers and subsidies increased from R31.6 billion in 2017/18 to more than R45 billion in 2020/21, an annual average increase of 12.6 percent.[7] This sharp increase in spending is only partly a result of additional funding – R11.3 billion over three years – made available following President Zuma's announcement of fee-free higher education.

Spending on infrastructure also increased markedly with R6.964 billion allocated to infrastructure development between 2016/17 and 2017/18 of which R2.1 billion was set aside for student housing.[8] The rapid expansion of accommodation infrastructure in response to the logic that there is a "backlog of beds" for students has, together with the promised "free higher education," transformed universities into a massive social welfare net in which students can live and learn as comfortably as possible in the period between the drudgery of high school and the demands of the workplace.

This ideal outcome has not yet materialized in practice for three reasons. The funding doesn't cover all students' needs, is insufficient for the number of students who need it, and is inefficiently distributed. In addition, historical student debt hangs heavily over heads of universities' management - how will these financial backlogs be dealt with? Given the uncertainties of future funding, outstanding debt has become increasingly critical to university leaders and students are being pressed to settle debt in order to continue their studies. The question of the sustainability of state funding for growing enrolments also remains unresolved – this is recurrent funding and where will the money come from in every academic year to sustain such a large and unwieldy university system? Given these concerns, there are good reasons to believe that "free higher education" might not materialise at all.

In the meantime another major shift has happened in universities: the politics of student protests. The #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/16 demonstrated that, while instability continues at historically black universities and some universities of technology, it is also spreading to the major research universities. Indeed, for the first time in years, protests were led by the top tier of universities. Initially the protests were single-issue focused, broadly non-racial, largely nonviolent, and non-sectarian. However, by the time the protests were ending two years after they began, they had become increasingly violent. The new violence was directed at administrative buildings, artworks, libraries, residences, computer centres and also persons. Literally and figuratively, fire consumed many campuses and costs exceeded R1 billion.[9] In addition, party political interests had set student organisations in direct competition for political advantage.[10] By that point the protests had also taken on an anti-white character; and there were allegations that prominent leaders were involved in sexist and misogynistic acts.

For much of the period, protests targeted the management of universities as a specific strategy of pressuring government. In the logic of key elements in the protest movement, management of universities were like managers of municipalities – an extension of the state and therefore legitimate targets for attack. Slowly, however, the protests become multi-issue covering a range of issues from the colonial legacy incurricula to transgender discrimination. Most importantly, they become increasingly intolerant – in various institutions white speakers or senior black scholars were not allowed to speak; in one instance two Vice-Chancellors were removed from panels at public events. In another case, a prominent speaker was asked to stop until whites in the audience had left the venue. Classes were violently disrupted by small groups without regard for the rights of other students. Alternative views in mass audiences were quickly shut down.

More than any specific act of disruption or violence, what was beginning to manifest at universities was a creeping intolerance, intemperateness and incivility that has the potential of fundamentally altering campus cultures and, in the process, undermining the academic project. This, together with the day-to-day routines of protest, disruption and the loss of weeks and months of calendar teaching time, threatens the future of the universities themselves.

For now, the large research universities seem to be stabilising as students return to their studies, although those institutions in which instability has been a more permanent and continuous feature of life, continue to malfunction. Several have already been subjected to one or more administrative reviews by government, with outside authorities temporarily appointed as Council or Vice-Chancellor to restore stability. These kinds of external interventions might solve immediate crises but they do not create and sustain good management and governance. Moreover, routine disruptions, often violent, threaten the academic project at its core. Apart from anything else, top students and leading professors are not attracted to these universities and sometimes leave institutions

in which they cannot pursue higher functions such as advanced research, scholarly publication and postgraduate supervision.

These threats to the academic project have their origins in a systemic crisis in our schools. The overall low levels of academic attainment or, more specifically, learning outcomes are periodically exposed in comparative tests of achievement – for example, the PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study) study which this year revealed that almost 8 out of 10 children in Grade 4 cannot read for understanding, the lowest such achievement of participating countries. In short, the foundations of education in South Africa are weak. South African schools are also profoundly unequal in terms of "face inequality" (the physical impression of school infrastructures) and in terms of academic performance.[11] A recent study has shown that educational inequalities are already laid in the pre-school years, with large differentials in performance opening up between children who attended quality preschools and those who did not. These initial differences in cognitive attainment among children coming into school are not resolved in subsequent years of schooling and might even grow larger.

These weak foundations of the school system have direct implications for universities both in terms of the low participation rates (about half the students starting in Grade 2 do not reach Grade 12), but also in low throughput rates. The available cohort data show that in recent years less than 30% of students complete their three-year degrees in regulation time[12] and only 48% in contact universities graduate within five years.[13] Worse, for distance education, only 6% of students graduate inside of five years and estimates are that only 22% will ever graduate at all.[14]

The education system is therefore highly inefficient, and the costs of such inefficiency add to the overall burden of expenditure. All of which is worsened by a lopsided post-school education and training environment in which most of those who enter the system prefer a university degree to a technical and vocational qualification.

This problem has its roots in colonial and apartheid education. The notion that "working with your hands" (which of course is not accurate as a description of technical or technological education) was the destined vocation of "non-whites" still forms part of the consciousness of black people. It does not help that government has not been able to change the capacities, cultures and competences of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (the so-called TVETs) despite significant investment in infrastructure. The perception problem therefore remains – a university degree is better.

In order to compensate for the poor quality of incoming students, most South African universities have adjusted their academic standards downwards to accommodate the rising numbers of ill-prepared students. This is partly because government subsidies to institutions are based on enrolments and pass rates. Introductory level classes such as in economics and psychology are often crowded. Teaching in many cases is via the ubiquitous "notes". Assessment is streamlined often in the form of easy-to-mark multiple-choice-question formats. Students are offered two additional chances to pass a standard examination and, on appeal, further opportunities could be provided. In short, the mediocrity of the public school system has penetrated institutions of higher learning.

Within universities, the narrowing pipeline from school to undergraduate qualifications to the PhD also carries with it another danger - where will the next generation of professors come from?[15]

If so few students graduate with a first degree, even fewer continue to Honours, Masters and doctoral degrees. And of those who achieve the pinnacle qualification (PhD or equivalent), only a small fraction would choose academic careers. This has serious implications for the future of higher education. The South African professoriate is still predominantly white and this problem constitutes a major fault line in student protests. Yet it is unclear how a new, more representative generation of professors will emerge without a radical overhaul of the entire education system. As the pressure to transform South African society continues to fuel democratic protests, the question of the racial composition of the professoriate will continue to be a rallying point for student protests.

The issue is complicated by the fact that not all universities are the same, with some having considerably better academic reputations than others. Successive ministers concerned with higher education have pondered this politically explosive question – what to do with these more than 20 universities all of which claim to be, or on their way to becoming, research universities. What makes the question explosive is that the universities at the bottom in terms of academic and research performance are black and those at the top historically white. Given the historical underfunding of black universities, any attempt to impose differentiation on the system for otherwise rational purposes of mission and funding would be resisted on grounds of race even if the leading universities are now all majority black at least in terms of student enrolments.

Over time, the problem has generated a self-differentiated system. South Africa has world-ranked universities at the top with strong traditions of research reflected in the appointments of leading scholars across the disciplines (these included the majority of A- and B-rated scientists as classified by the National Research Foundation), the attraction of the top matriculants from the school system, and the 'production' of high quality postgraduate students. The libraries are well-stocked, the laboratories are world-class, and they attract a large proportion of the available private donor and corporate funding. They are world-leaders in disciplines such as chemistry, mining engineering and sociology. These institutions appear regularly in the lists of the world's top 100-500 universities produced by major international ranking systems. And the recent QS World University Rankings (2018) places two courses among the top 20 in the world – Development Studies at UCT (11th) and Mineral and Mining Engineering at Wits (15th).[16]

Below them, in the middle of the system, sits a group of universities with a reasonable distribution of excellent research programmes and researchers and strong teaching traditions, but without the numbers of top professors, material resources or productivity levels of the first tier of institutions. These universities attract a mix of really good students (in fields such as medicine) but also accept a larger percentage of weak academic students. They are generally well-managed but, because of their vulnerable reputation and resource constraints, they struggle to rise to the stature of the ranked institutions.

At the bottom of the system sit dysfunctional universities marked by weak management, chronic instability, crumbling infrastructure, and questionable academic standards. The loss of accreditation of key qualifications is one public sign of the demise of quality of education and the integrity of degrees – as in the case of the reviews of the MBA, the Masters of Education and more recently the Bachelor of Laws degree.[17] Yet these institutions continue to absorb a sizeable share of government's higher education expenditure – such as R900 million promised under the University Capacity Development Programme in 2018[18] – while at the same time churning out degrees and diplomas without conscience. As indicated, what prevents the closing of these campuses is politics – the ethnic claims on a university in rural areas of the former homelands and the racial claims for special protection given the historical disadvantage of some of these institutions.[19]

These are more-or-less settled arrangements, and South Africa simply does not have the political will, the intellectual imagination, and the management capacity that would allow for the designation of strong research universities existing alongside differently classified but strong teaching universities, along with, in the same ecology, top-quality technical colleges that provide career-oriented training. These three kinds of post-school institutions would be sufficiently flexible in their programming that students in technical colleges and teaching universities would

be able to transition to the major research universities given the attainment of requisite knowledge. This is currently not the case, because of inefficiency and mission confusion.

What does all of this mean for the future of the South African university? It is possible, as argued elsewhere, to have universities exist as physical spaces in which students attend classes, lecturers teach, assessments are done and qualifications completed.[20] Enrolments continue every year and graduate ceremonies bring to a close a cycle of study. But is that all a university does?

A university is an academic institution and at its heart lies something called the academic project. The contours of the academic project means that the best (undergraduate) students from the school system are invited into higher learning to be taught by the best, most qualified scholars in conditions that make for creative teaching and inspired learning. The academic project also means a context in which the free exchange of opinion is possible and where experimentation with novel ideas is encouraged; courage, risk-taking and failure are crucial to a vibrant academic project. It also means that a university is a place where open-mindedness is encouraged and differences in views are not simply tolerated, but encouraged. For its vitality, the academic project depends on disruption, intellectually and socially, and this should be part of a healthy academic environment. The academic project depends on the asking of tough questions and the constant testing of what is taken for granted. For its survival, the academic project depends on political independence from the state and abhors an imposed ideology or politics. A university's role, in other word, extends beyond its role in growth, innovation and leadership.

In sum, what threatens the academic project at South African universities are a series of critical developments. Chronic instability affects the quality and integrity of South Africa's degrees. The poor quality of incoming students undercuts the quality of academic teaching and requires compensatory teaching. Pressing demands for access coupled with poor enrolment management overwhelms both academic facilities (such as libraries, residences

and computer laboratories) as well as academic teaching staff, the complement of which is already kept to a minimum in the light of tightening budgets. The uncertainty in the funding of universities weakens institutional management. The new incivility on campuses undermines the democratic and intellectual ethos of an academic institution. Finally, the significant differences in the quality of degrees from a de facto differentiated system of higher education means that the employment take-up of students from the bottom tier universities will continue to be much lower than those from the more prestigious institutions.

What are the policy and funding choices available given this scenario for higher education?

It is clear that a much more substantial proportion of government and private sector funding should be directed at quality pre-school education for poor children. This means shifting the balance of funding from where the noise is to where the need is. It is understandable that unprecedented political pressure pushed government in the direction of what has been called "free higher education." But the pipeline of students from school to university will remain narrow unless there is greater participation in quality preschool and grade school enrolments.

The fee-free plan for funding students from households earning less than R350 000 per year would alleviate the financial burden of studies for this targeted group. The problem, as indicated, is whether this funding is adequate for the poorest students given their extensive needs and for whom the university is seen as a welfare net contributing to their overall needs including transport, learning materials, shelter and food. Worse, without an efficient way of managing state-financed loans and bursaries such that such funds return to the fiscus to assist successive generations of students, the fee-free plan will eventually collapse under its own weight. And finally, what should not be allowed – despite the political pressure from students – is for wealthy and middle class students whose parents can afford to pay, to benefit from fee-free education. Ultimately, the plan succeeds or fails based on a political settlement between government and protesting students about what is affordable and what not.

The decline of the academic project in the bottom tier of universities will continue given the lack of political will, financial resources and management capacity to turn around these institutions. Chronic instability will remain with unpredictable teaching calendars. Degrees will continue to have little market credibility, and it is even possible some may lose their accreditation. The funding required will never be enough given the scale of need. And key management and teaching staff will come and go. What will not change are the routine and disrupted functions of administration, management, teaching and graduations.[21]

What is not as clear is the future of the top tier universities. They have seen their financial reserves eroded in order to make-up for long periods of uncertainty in state funding. Some have also lost donors from among their alumni given bitter criticism of how the 2015/16 student crises were managed. And rated scholars as well as students from top schools have moved to institutions perceived as more stable or even abroad. Should the protests of 2015/16 return to these institutions and become chronic, as in the bottom tier universities, then the decline of South Africa's world-rated universities is also inevitable.

Finally, the negative shifts in campus cultures in terms of lowering academic standards as well as growing intolerance, even anti-intellectualism, threaten at its very foundations what a university is for. It will be especially difficult to transform campus cultures into places of reason, debate and dissent given the general erosion of civility in public spaces such as parliament. Students often model on campus what they see and hear in other contested spaces as in the political domain. And yet universities have a solemn duty to cultivate these "habits of democracy" among future leaders in society. Insisting on such intellectual habits against the grain of the demise of the public discourse remains the responsibility of university leaders.

Notes

[1] Nico Cloete (2016a) For sustainable funding and fees, the undergraduate system in South Africa must be restructured, South African Journal of Science 112(3/4): 4 **https://www.sajs.co.za/article/view/4053**

[2] Jump in government higher education spending, Statistics South Africa, 30 October 2017 **http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=10652**

[3] Council on Higher Education (2016) Higher Education Data: Participation, Pretoria, CHE **http://www.che.ac.za/focus_areas/ higher_education_data/2013/participation**

[4] National Treasury (2018) 2018 Budget, Estimates of National Expenditure, Vote 15, Higher Education and Training, Department: National Treasury, Republic of South Africa, pp 2-3

[5] The thesis here is elaborated in a chapter of JD Jansen (2017) As by fire: The end of the South African university, Cape Town, Tafelberg

[6] Charles van Onselen (1997) Closer to home: Student unrest and the welfare function, Focus 7, Second Quarter (Helen Suzman Foundation) **https://hsf.org.za/publications/focus/issue-7-second-quarter-1997/closer-to-home-student-unrest-and-the-welfare-function**

[7] National Treasury (2018), p3

[8] Budget Vote Speech, National Assembly, 16 May 2017, Minister of Higher education and Training

[9] This and surrounding paragraphs rely largely on research reported in JD Jansen (2017)

[10] Nico Cloete (2016b) The third force in South African higher education activism, Cape Town, CHET (Centre for Higher Education Transformation)

[11] This paragraph draws on new research reported in the forthcoming book by N Spaull and JD Jansen (2018), The enigma of inequality in South African education, New York, Springer

[12] Council on Higher Education (2018) VitalStats, Public Higher Education 2016, Pretoria, CHE

[13] Nico Cloete (2016), p 2

[14] I rely heavily here on data reported in Cloete (2016a), p2

[15] The only major study on the pipeline problem and the PhD was commissioned by the Academy of Science of South Africa (2010) The PhD Study: An evidence-based study on how to meet the demands for high-level skills in an emerging economy, Pretoria, ASSAf

[16] A useful summary of these world-class courses of South African universities is found in this BusinessTech publication: **https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/228675/these-south-african-university-courses-are-among-the-best-in-the-world/**

[17] The actual withdrawal of accreditation is the serious outcome and this results has mainly affected third tier institutions; provisional accreditation or even 'notice of withdrawal of accreditation' specify conditions that almost all of the middle and upper tier universities eventually meet **http://www.che.ac.za/focus_areas/national_reviews/reviews_and_projects**

[18] Budget Vote Speech (2017)

[19] The classic study describing these third tier institutions was done some time ago but the basic portrait painted by Adam Habib has not changed that much; see Adam Habib (2001) Structural disadvantage, leadership ineptitude, and stakeholder complicity: A study of the institutional crisis of the University of the Transkei, Paper commissioned by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation **file:///C:/Users/jonathanjansen/Downloads/HABIB%202001%20U%20of%20Transkei.pdf**

[20] Jansen (2017)

[21] Cloete (2016b)