

Chapter 8

(Un)feasibility of FeesMustFall Campaign From a Political Economy Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The FeesMustFall campaign since October 2015 has grown to be one of the biggest movements ever witnessed in the history of South African student politics. Similarly to the struggle waged by 1976 youth against the dominance of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, FMF challenges the current government and universities to provide free, quality, and decolonized higher education. Considering the slow pace of economic growth, the realization of free and quality education might be an impossible dream. Thus, dropping the fees seems to be a financial relieve to the poor students, but not the panacea to challenges faced by institutions of higher learning. FMF movement challenges both the government and ANC leadership to walk the talk by implementing policies and resolutions taken to transform higher education from declining. The question is, What are the costs and benefit of free education as advocated through FeesMustFall campaign? Can South Africa afford sustainable free education without compromising other areas of need?

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in (South) Africa has a long history. This history is linked to the decades of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid. Higher education in Africa is traceable to the pyramids of Egypt, the obelisks of Ethiopia and the Kingdom of

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Timbuktu (Teferra & Altbach, 2003, p. 4). These academic centers of higher learning since disappeared, hence the adoption of Western models tradition and learning. Common to colonial higher education were its limited access, imposition of the language of the colonizers, limited academic freedom and limited curriculum (Teferra & Altbach, 2003, p. 4). These factors became the basis for sustenance of the legacy of colonial higher education in Africa. In South Africa, formal education goes to the opening of first school by the Dutch East Indian Company in 1658 for the children of the settlers (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Since then the education has undergone through changes from 1910 Opinion of South Africa where white children were afforded an educational opportunity to the reinforcement of apartheid education in 1953 through the establishment of Bantu Education. It was the introduction of Bantu Education Act in 1953 under the Afrikaner-led National Party that the root of segregatory education based on racial and ethnicity was sown.

However, despite the progress made, the 8 percent fee increment in 2017 by most of the universities has angered the students who declared 2017 ‘the year of free education’ (Fengu, 2017: 9) or ‘freed education in our lifetime’ (Maseremule, 2016, p. 19) and vowed to intensify the campaign until their demands are met. The SA Union of Student has committed itself to a mantra that says ‘no academically serving student will be excluded on the basis of their financial status’ (Fengu, 2017, p. 9). Additionally, the student bodies have warned that protests could begin as the first week of the academic year if students are excluded on the basis of affordability (City Press, 2017, p. 2). However, London (2017, p. 9) warns against ‘big bang’ type of the solution to the challenges raised by the students and for the progress to be made in this regard, he proposed three mindset changes to take place. These changes entail focusing on what is possible in education, thus viewing real learning as a product of creative and constructive engagement from multiple viewpoints. Second, mindset should take place especially in understanding that any good educational system should be inherently developing. Third, mindset should not only embrace learning as the product of creative and constructive engagement, and evolving educational system, but also that education and learning should be incremental, thus work in progress. This chapter therefore interrogates the feasibility or non-feasibility of free education by narrating the implications of political rhetoric on the economy. The chapter begins by grounding the state of higher education in South Africa. The historical background is followed by theoretical exposition on the political economy as the conceptual framework guiding the chapter. A brief explanation and its genesis of #FeesMustFall campaign is traced followed by the political grounding informing the campaign.

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