

## **Fee noise, fury obscures massive advances, real challenges**

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As the national debate on the future of fees in our universities continues with great passion it is crucial that we not lose sight of the massive advances we continue making in empowering young people through knowledge and skills, enabling ever more to contribute to the continent's most industrialised economy.

Perhaps even more crucially, we must not lose sight of the real challenges facing the higher education and training sector even after government's announcement this week that it will find the money to support those students who cannot afford the fee increases the universities need to continue functioning properly. Above and beyond fee support, these larger challenges require real resources and real focus from government, universities, colleges, and students if we are to continue transforming access, content, and particularly outcomes in the form of marketable skills.

And while we are about it, let's not lose sight of our ultimate, shared goal: sustaining and enhancing our country's ability to grow the economy and create jobs through continuous expansion of our research, knowledge and skills base, the essential growth platform for any advanced industrial economy like ours.

Our advances have perhaps gone largely unnoticed because they lie hidden in a tome headed "Statistical release PO318 General household survey". Issued by Statistics South Africa and running to 195 pages, the study indicates among many other things that at least part of the current pressure on university cost structures is a result of the massive opening of higher education and training in recent years to young people who were previously denied access.

Stats SA notes that 710 139 students were enrolled at universities and universities of technology last year. Its findings show an increase from 9.3% in 2009 in the number of people over 20 with post school education to 14.1% in 2015 and those with a Grade 12 as their highest qualification rising from 21.9% in 2002 to 28% in 2015.

These figures tell us that South Africa is empowering ever more young people through access to post school education and training. At least as significantly for the continent's industrial powerhouse, the numbers making use successfully of the opportunities this expansion provides by achieving the qualifications they set out to gain is also growing.

The fact is that there have never in the country's history been more young people at university and college than today. Never before have so many school leavers been in possession of the qualifications needed for training as skilled artisans. And never before has a government put so much effort into post school training as this one, working wherever possible hand in hand with business, industry, and the public sector.

But even these numbers don't tell the whole story. Because while we are proud within the DHET - justifiably in my view — of the 51.6% rise in the numbers of young

people achieving tertiary qualifications since the creation of the department seven years ago, we are also very aware as to where the ongoing challenges lie.

As Statistician General Pali Lehohla noted the other day, we currently produce only 48 000 black graduates per year, less than a quarter of the 200 000 we continue to aim for. Proportionally far fewer young black people are studying than their share of the population would require.

Stats SA shows that 4,2% of persons aged 18 to 29 were enrolled at a higher education institution, but proportions differ significantly when broken down by ethnic origin. An estimated 15,7% of whites in this age group and 14,3% of Indians were at university, compared to only 3,7% of coloureds and 3,1% of black Africans between 18 and 29.

Put another way, young people from backgrounds which are on average poorer and less educated make it to university or college less frequently, no matter how capable they may be. Add to this the fact that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not complete their courses even if they manage to get to university or college, and the complexity of the issue begins to emerge.

Making sure that this all changes is not just another numbers game. It goes to the heart of ensuring that our economy, our administration, indeed our entire society can draw from a skills pool deep enough to allow us to continuously improve the quality of what we do, whether in the public or the private sector.

For anyone following the fees debate, it might seem as though by comparison with universities, nothing else in our society matters or deserves state funding, whether health, pensions, or child support. But the sound and fury around fees is in danger of obscuring not only the complex fiscal balance any responsible government must achieve, it also ignores the very real starting point for any discussion on spending within higher education and training.

This is particularly true since the announcement this week by Minister Blade Nzimande that government will foot the bill on the 2017 fee adjustment for all students whose families have an income of R 600 000 or less per year.

Against the backdrop of this massive additional support, surely the task can only ever be to empower the largest possible number of young people with education, training, and usable skills? A narrow focus on reducing or abolishing fees for all already studying would perpetuate existing privileges by spending more of the available resources on those already benefitting from expanded access to universities and colleges, including those whose families can afford to pay, while shutting out those who could benefit from university or college time if the resources were spread more evenly.

The blanket “fees must fall” approach, which calls for even the most well off in our country to be given larger study subsidies, runs the risk of starving many young people of opportunity and our economy of urgently needed skills. As any statistician knows: the greater proportion of available resources spent on the few, the higher the number unable to benefit at all.