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THE call for affordable higher education linked to the #Fees Must Fall movement also has another face – the call for free higher education for all.

Many people are calling for free education for the financially needy, while others are calling for free education for all. They argue that they were promised free higher education and that government has not delivered.

It is widely recognised that high fees are a barrier to access to higher education, and that making higher education available to all South Africans who qualify is an imperative.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) agrees that the time has come to face the calls made by students and to provide clear explanations of our policy positions.

This article outlines the issues that must be considered and clarified to inform the publication and introduction of a sustainable policy on fee-free higher education in South Africa.

The Freedom Charter stated in no uncertain terms: “The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!” It emphasised that: “Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit.”

Here, “free” and “compulsory” refer squarely to basic education. Higher education and technical training, must “be opened to all” – that is, made accessible though financial support.

The Constitution (1996) took forward this promise: “Everyone has the right (a) to a basic education, including adult basic education; and (b) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.”

In other words, basic education is a fundamental right, while further education (i.e. higher education and technical and vocational education and training) must be made progressively available and accessible.

What does this mean?

To be “available” means the system must grow to provide sufficient spaces for study. “Accessible” means it should be affordable: individuals should not be denied access on the basis of financial need.

Before and following the promulgation of the Constitution, whether or not university education should be made free to all was extensively debated.

It was acknowledged that university education is expensive to deliver, and that, in a developing economy and fundamentally unequal society, it was not only unaffordable but also not desirable.

Implementing free education for all would further advantage the wealthiest sections of society: the poor would in effect subsidise the rich, and the quality of public higher education would be severely compromised.

There is sufficient evidence that the only countries that can afford to offer fee-free higher education for all are wealthy, highly developed and have a large tax base. It is debatable whether fee-free higher education can ever be labelled as free – in the end nothing is

What does ‘free education for all’ really mean?



free.

The principled position adopted in 1997, in line with the Freedom Charter and the Constitution, is expressed in White Paper 3. This says that higher education is both a private and a public good.

In addition: “The knowledge and skills acquired in the course of achieving higher education qualifications generate significant lifetime private benefits for successful students as well as long-range social benefits for the public at large.”

The principle of cost sharing in higher education is an important one in South Africa.

The costs of higher education should be shared between public and private interests – specifically the state in the form

of subsidies, the private sector through investments in research and scholarships, and families themselves, whose children will have access to the private goods of productive engagement in the economy by virtue of their access to higher education.

A cost-sharing model was implemented to enable higher education to expand and become accessible to all. White Paper 3 was clear: “... The direct cost to students should be proportionate to their ability to pay... Financial need should not be an insuperable barrier to access and success in higher education.”

“A realistic fee structure must therefore go hand-in-hand with a sustainable programme of student financial assistance.”

This was the basis for the establishment of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

The 2007 ANC Policy conference, supporting the previous policy decision, resolved that “free higher education for the poor up to undergraduate level” must be progressively implemented. This was reiterated at the Mangaung policy conference.

In 2011, Cabinet approved substantial increases in the NSFAS budget so that free higher and technical education for the poor could be more vigorously pursued.

However, the funds available, although substantially increased, have not kept up with demand, given increasing numbers of

school leavers with university entrance qualifications.

In 2012 the Minister appointed a working group to consider the feasibility and cost of fully implementing free higher education for the poor up to undergraduate level.

The working group suggested that free education for the poor was feasible, but that it would require substantial amounts of additional funding to implement.

The quantum of funding would be dependent on parameters that included agreeing on a definition of poverty.

It recommended that a policy dialogue should establish agreement and understanding of these terms before any policy statement could be published.

The working group affirmed the current cost sharing model implemented by NSFAS was an appropriate vehicle for the full implementation of free higher education for the poor.

Firstly, a student entering university is provided with an interest-free loan while they are studying.

The interest only kicks in one year after they have successfully completed their studies, at which time they become a debtor.

The interest calculated is way below the commercial lending rate.

In addition, if a student is successful and completes in minimum time, then 60% of the loan is effectively converted into a bursary.

However, if students never actually benefit from the goods of university education – that is, never find themselves in productive employment and so remain poor – they never pay back their loan and in effect receive their entire university education free (of course on the account of taxpayers).

Some hard policy decisions have to be made in order to extend the scheme to cover all qualifying students.

These decisions have to consider the poverty threshold (poverty is a relative concept); what should be covered (full cost of study or only tuition and books); the amount of the loan that should be converted to a bursary; the interest rate to be charged once the student has completed; the percentage of monthly income that should be paid back into the scheme once the graduate is successfully employed; and the definition of academic progress.

These parameters would determine how many students the scheme would support; and a broad policy dialogue on these issues is currently underway.

Higher education cannot be free for all South Africans. Those who can afford it must pay. Significant attempts have been made to provide fee-free HE for the poorest South Africans progressively through NSFAS, and this needs to grow.

At the same time there is a need to examine the overall funding for higher education to ensure that quality higher education that is affordable can be provided for all those who qualify.

The goal should be affordable higher education for all South Africans, with increased support for growing numbers of those who cannot afford university fees.

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