

The Impact of Fees must Fall Protest in South African Universities

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Abstract

This aim of this paper is to reflect on the fees must fall movement, its impact on Universities and the current status of the crises in Universities in South Africa. The methodology adopted by the authors is an empirical study of related issues and from the current processes adopted by most Universities and Government determine possible outcomes on the crises of tuition fees applied in South African Universities. The fees must fall movement originated in October 2015 at the University of Witwatersrand (WITS) in South Africa. The protest action at Wits on 14 October 2015 was led by the Student Representative Council after the University wanted to implement a 10.5% fee increase for the 2016 Academic year. The action of students saw the development of the FEES MUST FALL movement which spread to most public higher education institutions in South Africa. While the advent of the WITS protest led to countrywide protests, fee protests have been experienced mainly at historically black universities which created during the apartheid regime. The historically black universities was part of the separate development policy of the former apartheid government and was grossly underfunded during apartheid. Despite the post-apartheid government's attempt to provide remedies through mergers of former white institutions with former black ones, the funding availability has been insufficient to address the huge backlog. The widespread protests led to the intervention by the Minister of Higher Education, Dr Blade Nzimande who on 20 October 2015 announced that 2016 fee increases will be capped at an inflation-linked 6%. In addition he indicated he would set up a task team to investigate the issue of fee increases. The student movement refused to accept the proposed 6% increase. With the protests continuing, the President of the Country Mr. Jacob Zuma met with student leaders and Vice-Chancellors on 23 October 2016 and in the face of chaotic and violent protests announced a 0% fee increase for the 2016 academic year. In January 2016 fees protests continued at most Universities and President Zuma established a commission of enquiry to determine the feasibility of free higher education. The slowness of the processes of the commission led to further instability in September 2016 when students again protested as a result of the Minister announcing that it will subsidise fee increases of up to 8% in the 2017 academic year for students who qualify for funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) or students from families who are categorized as the missing middle. The result of this announcement saw a countrywide destabilisation of universities in the country, leading to Universities finding alternative modes of academic delivery and assessments in order to complete the academic year.

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