

How to take free public higher education from pipe dream to reality

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Universities are any nation's key public institutions of knowledge development. They drive research, teach students and supervise postgraduates.



Students have been agitating for an end to public university fees in South Africa. Photograph by: Nic Bothma/EPA via The Conversation

By producing and disseminating knowledge, universities can fulfil their mandate as institutions of social, economic, cultural and intellectual development for democratic societies and the global environment.

It's not easy to reconcile the costs of education with narrow economic goals alone. The remit of education is simultaneously individual, social and global. It has qualitative attributes that can't be measured in conventional ways. Higher education is a public good. Providing free education to all citizens has inestimable value and limitless possibilities.

This is especially true in South Africa today. The country is in transition from a [traumatic past](#). Its universities must respond to the many and profound challenges faced by the state and society. The challenges faced by universities are fundamental to the reconstruction of post-apartheid society. This is why universities should be funded as comprehensively as possible, allowing them to discharge their important socioeconomic, political and cultural mandates to the best of their capabilities.

Free public higher education for all is [possible and necessary](#). In this article, based on a submission made to the recent [Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training](#), or "Fees Commission", we will explain how to make it a reality.

Research for a deeper understanding

The starting point for any change is dedicated research. This must examine the costs of quality public education and must create space to open up the fiscal debate. Once this is done, ordinary South Africans can begin to understand what democratic choices could be made to inform fiscal and other policy decisions about the provision of education and potential funding sources.

Very importantly, research must be conducted that examines how institutional funding choices are made.

Student funding in South Africa depends on a variety of sources. These include parents' contributions, bank loans, and the goodwill of business and charitable institutions; the contributions of universities who are themselves [underfunded](#); as well as other bursaries and scholarships from the public and private sector.

All of these sources are unsustainable. None carry any legal obligation to fund students in the first place. This is even true in the case of parents, many of whom are likely to depend on bank loans for such funding.

The government must increase funding by at least an aggregate amount equal to the ratio [achieved](#) in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. In 2011, South Africa's [state budget for universities](#) as a percentage of gross domestic product was 0.75%, which is more or less in line with Africa as a whole (0.78%). But it lags behind when compared with OECD countries (1.21%) and the rest of the world (0.84%).

No student who meets the requirements for admission to a university course should be excluded for financial reasons. Students should be funded for the "full cost of study". This includes registration and other fees, accommodation, costs of meals, travel and books. Universities should also receive a subsidy per student from public funds that is sufficient for its recurrent operations.

Such a subsidy is crucial to ensure what has been called both "financial and epistemic access to university education". In other words it's not just about getting students into university, it's about tackling the push-out rate – those who are unable to finish their studies – and actively retaining those students who've traditionally borne a higher burden.

A determined state should examine the structure of personal taxation that could be levied for the top 10% of income earners in the country and for high-net-worth individuals – people who earn an annual income of more than R7 million (about US\$474,000 at current rates) or have assets of more than R70 million. This could generate a substantial increase in available public revenue to fund higher education.

This approach concentrates on the structural aspects of inequality. It puts tax revenues to good use. Some have mooted the idea of a differentiated approach to the "rich" and the "poor". In this model, a basic means test is applied to all students. But many South African students fall into the ["missing middle"](#) – their parents don't earn enough to pay fees, but they earn too much to qualify for state funding.

Our proposal supports the idea that those who earn the most pay for their children's education through taxation and the distribution of public funds – rather than through an individually based "wealthy user pays" model. Ours is a more democratic model of public interest and public funding than individual philanthropy or subsidy – which, we argue, is not sustainable.

Students have responsibilities, too

But, in our model, students will not simply take their fully funded qualifications and run. All students will be regarded as beneficiaries of public funding. They will be viewed as participants in a system that prioritises the public good. As such, they'll be expected to contribute to society when leaving university – through community service and by working in public institutions after graduation.

This approach will support the creation of socially cohesive attitudes among students. It is, we believe, necessary for genuine, far-reaching structural and systemic change.

For our suggestions to work, students should be widely consulted before any final decision is made. It is they, after all, who have led the charge for “fee-free” education. Such consultation should be meaningful, open and frank. Choices can't be left entirely to “experts”, “advisors”, “consultants” and the agents of institutions that represent a narrow, fiscal-driven approach to the provision of public goods like higher education.

Equality is the goal

Of course, making education free will not magically make all individuals equal. But the spirit of the sort of policy we're proposing must actively aim to end the culture of individualism, corporatisation and unnecessary managerialism that is pervasive in the university system.

This is important because of the role that higher education can play in a society with [high levels of unemployment](#) and [chronic inequality](#). Until now, education has been about elite transition within the framework of an ethic defined by the present market-driven capitalist system. This has engendered both uncritical thinking and isolation from the key issues facing the vast majority of society – in particular the black working classes and marginalised communities.

A properly funded university system is necessary to engender and encourage cooperation, collegiality, collaboration and a new social compact based on a set of values in which knowledge is not commodified and is socially relevant.

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