



UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA

THERE IS NEED FOR A NEW SOCIAL COMPACT BETWEEN SOCIETY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

While the universities survived the demonstrations and destruction of 2015-17, it is not at all clear that they will survive further instability. Half of the institutions in our university system experienced some form of student and/or staff disruptions in 2018 – some lasting 8-10 weeks. The key question is whether South Africans see the long-term sustainability of our universities as being important or not.

There is a strong international consensus that universities are enormous resources for the construction and maintenance of societies that consider as paramount the social, political and economic wellbeing of their people and that of the physical environment in which we all live. South Africa's higher education system with all of its challenges must be regarded as central to the projects of national development, of building a globally competitive economy, of deepening our democracy and culture of human rights and to building a more equitable society; to bring to fruition a non-racist, non-sexist and socially-just egalitarian society.

It is a small system that punches way above its weight. A number of internally focused metrics attest to this. Between 1994 and 2017 the student numbers in the system more than doubled from about 450,000 to more than a million. Its graduation rates, though still between 50% and 62% depending on the discipline, have been steadily improving. It produced about 220,000 graduates last year. In 2015 its research produced more than 22,000 publications and more than 2,700 PhDs. South Africa has almost a 10% share of the top 10% of cited articles in the world. These are indications of a system that is highly productive.

It is also a system that is deeply troubled with constant instability, serious underfunding and chronically dysfunctional support systems such as the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Turnover in leadership is also at extraordinarily high levels. Over the last two months, two of our VCs have been recruited internationally.

The instability in 2018 has been driven primarily by NSFAS's catastrophic failure to make sufficient progress in the timeous distribution of financial aid to students, the increasing challenge of the provision of sufficient student accommodation and perhaps most seriously impactful, protracted strikes by academic and support staff for salaries that are unaffordable to the universities.

On the salary issue, universities are caught in a kind of vice-grip. The demands are for salary increases that are significantly above the inflation rate. With a gradual but sure decline in the state subsidy (per student), controlled tuition fee increases and larger than CPI higher education price index (HEPI), these salary demands have the potential to irreparably damage the finances, and sustainability, of the universities. More often, staff strikes are organised apparently to throttle out the fundamental cogs of the system: registrations, academic programmes and examinations, without which no university could sustain itself or even afford the salary increases being sought.

With the new student funding bursary programme announced on the 16th of December last year, there is pressure being brought to bear on universities by the state to restrict tuition fee increases to the CPI – in fact, by 2020 there will in all likelihood be a national regulatory framework for tuition fees. This is fully understandable. But this does mean that the overall annual income revenue to universities will be further decreased which then has to mean that larger than CPI salary increases will be more and more damaging to their financial wellbeing and their ability to maintain and improve the quantity and quality of teaching/learning and research.

As the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Minister Naledi Pandor indicated a week ago, the final sum of cost of damages to the infrastructure of the higher education sector during the instability of the 2015-2017 demonstrations has been calculated to be more than R780 million. This is truly an astonishing figure in its own right. Yet, this is just a fraction of the total cost of managing the universities during these periods of uncertainty, upheaval and violence. Just one example is the hundreds of millions of rand committed every year to the need for additional security.

The most important cost of course, is the human cost to members of staff and to students. At the most basic level there is vast disruption to the academic programme and its impact on success and throughput rates. Universities SA held a workshop last year to assess the impact of disruptions to the research enterprise and it was clear this is costly, multilayered and even dangerous due to the nature of experiments being carried out. Perhaps the most important issue is that the academic process is fundamentally dependent on the nature of the trust relationship between student and academic and if this is tampered with then the healing process could be a long, tedious one.

Each disruption, each strike, each sectorial/interest demand, each torching of a building cuts at the confidence that students and staff have with their university. The finances of our institutions, and some are much more vulnerable than others, are severely impacted. Their capacity and ability to make contributions to the large national projects is slowly but inexorably eroded.

With all of these challenges, most of which are beyond the system's control, it is ultimately the University, at the least its reputation, that gets battered by its own students, staff, society and its organs including the media. We are not calling here for faults in our system or leadership

failures to be ignored. But, if that is done in a manner that does not further develop, but chips at the University's essence, we shall soon have no university left worth its name.

The question is: do we, as a nation, think that the long-term sustainability of our universities is important?

If our answer, as a nation, is in the affirmative then there is need for universities and their many publics to agree on how we are to achieve this.

With all its limitations, the National Commission on Higher Education, established by President Nelson Mandela in 1996, provided some sort of framework for a social compact between the higher education system and society. Perhaps it is time for another social compact that will allow all parties – universities, staff, students, parents, government, industry and business, civil society – to arrive at a common understanding of what is expected of our universities and how we will achieve those expectations.

If we miss the opportunity of arriving at some sort of working consensus on how we may develop a period of stability at our universities, it is very likely that we shall see a gradual but definite erosion of a system of higher learning that is of great significance to South Africa and central to the project of constructing a society that fosters the flourishing of its people, has a deep sense of social justice, contributes to the global competitiveness of its economy and most importantly is compassionate to humanity.

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