

Students, fees, undergraduate education and the doctorate in a shaken South African university system

THREE CONNECTED COMMENTARIES IN THE
SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNAL OF SCIENCE
(MARCH/APRIL 2016)

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What really matters for students in South African higher education?

AUTHOR: John Butler-Adam

He sat at his desk for a few minutes, then drew some papers towards him and looked at them, reading through the words, understanding each one but not certain he understood what they intended to say. He set them aside, then pulled them back to read them again; this time, the sentences made sense to him, though he could see no reason why anyone would find their messages important.^{1(p.49)}

Almost everyone who works in a university or research organisation has had this experience, and not only when reading institutional circulars or exam papers. But the experience has almost certainly increased exponentially in the face of what has been written about '#Rhodesmustfall', '#feesmustfall' and '#outsourcingmustfall' over the past five or six months – along with the volume of analyses of these events, and of what other people have written about these movements. Yet at least three messages that emerge from the endless sentences are important, in this instance, as preludes to what really matters for students in the South African higher education system.

Firstly, there is the matter of how to sustain the financing of higher education institutions, without fee increases (and in some cases, without registration fees too) being levied and paid. Assuming that universities should, at the very least, be no worse off than they were in 2015 in view of the rising consumer price index – which applies to operating costs and to acquiring intellectual materials with a weak Rand – the value of the unpaid increases needs to be sourced. There is a scramble underway to attempt to ensure that this happens. At the same time, students (both *revenant* and new) will need support for the fees that do still have to be paid; for their learning materials; and, critically, for their living costs.

For a very few, this will come from their families, but for students from 'squeezed' middle class families, and from families who are unable to make any contribution to these expenses (taking account of the unemployment figure of 8.3 million South Africans – affecting close to half the population), the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) will have to do better. It will need more funding, and it will need to be better administrated, both within the Fund and within universities. The appointment of Sizwe Nxasana as the new Chair of NSFAS is a remarkably positive step – but turning the Fund around may prove to be a task at least as challenging as managing First Rand.

The second issue spirals around the debates regarding free education for all. This shift in the '#feesmustfall' campaign was sparked by President Zuma's announcement last October that fees for 2016 would be capped at 2015 levels, stating that the government was understanding of the difficulties faced by students from poor households – and urged all students to allow the process to unfold to find long-term solutions. In response to this, he set up a Commission of Enquiry, none of whose members are educationists or economists, to investigate whether or how free higher education might be implemented for higher education students. Notably however, despite the costs of the student protests – damage to university buildings, deferred examinations, and problematic registration processes this year – the President devoted no more than two or three sentences in his State of the Nation Address to higher education. It is perhaps fitting then, that one of the banners carried by students protesting outside the Union Buildings last year declared 'Time For Educated Leaders!'

Articles in the popular press by those who have addressed this issue range from those of serious economists (including Thomas Picketty) who indicate that free education for all is primarily a benefit to the wealthy; through to the damage that a state of financial scarcity does to

sound educational decision-making; to the position taken by some who ignore economic reality and government expenditure patterns in order to claim that free higher education for all is undoubtedly possible; on to those who point to the failure of free higher education in other African countries. But in the face of South Africa's budget deficit and the fear of a junk bond status (and so higher borrowing costs), this seems to be a poorly considered position – the more so if the greatest benefits accrue not to the students who most need free education but to the economically better off.

The '#Rhodesmustfall' movement, of course, was the public face of the third issue (and another, addressed below): the decolonisation and (or) the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curricula of all universities. Clearly, both the 'decolonisation' of knowledge and respect for, and the inclusion of, relevant indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, are issues of the greatest importance. They are not, however, unique to South Africa, nor – in many instances – are they new issues. Many departments of literature in South African universities have, for instance, been teaching African literature and not only on the basis of 'European' theories of analysis. This might not yet be true in all departments of philosophy, sociology, or history, for instance (although there are some examples), but the idea is not entirely new. What's more, there are some limits to the process: how might genomics, the general theory of relativity, gravitational waves or the 10-min saliva test for cancer be decolonised – or enriched by indigenous knowledge? This is not to suggest that there are no real issues at stake for curriculum revision, but the demands should not overlook what has been done, what can be learned from those practices, as well as the limits that exist if South African universities are to teach disciplines that are, in fact, respected elements of international research. Relating those respected research findings to local contexts will, of course, require a knowledge and understanding of local circumstances – but the core knowledge will remain as it is. Until South African researchers change it.

The three issues are highly significant. Recognising them, taking them seriously, and dealing with them in ways that are intellectually rigorous and honest, are all essential to the future of higher education – not in South Africa alone, but in many other parts of the global south and north.

Access to higher education – to any level of education, of course – is critical and affordability is too, because access without affordability has no meaning; and do not forget sound and relevant curricula and teaching skills. But what matters after those issues are addressed? What counts next? Probably the most important matters of all are those to which the earlier issues are the preliminaries. Why take the trouble to access higher education, at no or low cost, with changed curricula and teaching (issues that might well be matters for contention), if what is learned is of low quality? If the worst of the hurdles are removed, but the race is not worth the running, it is all to no purpose. So the most critical matter that counts next is the high quality of the content, of the science, and of the research offered by institutions and recognised as such, not just in Europe or the USA, but also, of course, in India, China or Brazil. Adam Habib, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, and Chair of Universities South Africa, says:

There is a danger in this moment that if we allow the current populism to be unconstrained, it could result in a higher education system that enables access, but destroys quality. This is the history of the continent and it would be a tragedy if it were to be repeated. From 2016 onwards it is going to be a political and intellectual struggle between these two outcomes.²

HOW TO CITE: Butler-Adam J. What really matters for students in South African higher education? S Afr J Sci. 2016;112(3/4), Art. #a0151, 2 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2016/a0151>

Sadly, as this Leader is being written, the populism, partly fuelled by the '#Rhodesmustfall' movement, continues to be widespread, and completely misaligned with the fundamental needs of South African society. There are campus protests at four universities, some involving student arrests by police. The protests at one university included the burning of works of art of historical value and the fire-bombing of the Vice Chancellor's office and, at another, the destruction of a science laboratory for schoolchildren. The wealthy parent of one of the '#Rhodesmustfall' 'activists' involved in the protest, who is the CEO of a state owned enterprise, claimed that this 'builds character' and that it would 'spark intellectual debate'. Really? These are serious, criminal, destructive activities. The hapless indulgence and dismissal of law and order on the part of a parent, however well-placed she or he is, cannot be ignored, because this tolerance contributes, collectively, to the problem of a social movement that serves its own self-interests – and nothing more than that. Yet another parent, who fought consistently for liberation and democracy, is silent regarding his daughter's destruction of public property.

The second condition that matters (if the first were not disheartening enough) is learning that ultimately leads to the opposite, the creation of social value. If earning a worthless degree is a useless exercise, then earning a degree that is of no personal or social use is worthless. This is most definitely not intended to suggest that higher education must be nothing other than an instrumentalist process: being employable means, more than anything, having high level analytical and communication skills, the ability to solve problems, to be innovative, and adaptable. It is

not just about learning content, but also about developing flexible talent, and about how to make the most of those skills in new and challenging circumstances. In some instances, problem-solving and adaptability skills are of greater value than content that might have a brief half-life.

The third 'what matters' is learning, and then graduating with, knowledge and values that prepare students to be successful, confident world citizens. This does not imply that graduates should leave South Africa (although they might well choose to do so). More significantly, it points to the fact that South Africa's future depends on being part of a wider world in which countries, including South Africa, are generating new ideas, applications, and economies that are the foundation of our own national survival – and of the world.

There's a great deal at stake, more than can immediately be imagined, for higher education in South Africa, and so also for young South Africans (poor or rich) who enter universities; and even more at stake when it comes to their contributions to their own and the country's success and prosperity. We cannot afford to ignore the immensity of the consequences if we do not do everything possible to get higher education right.

Quidnunc?

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For sustainable funding and fees, the undergraduate system in South Africa must be restructured

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KEYWORDS:
Academic ranking; performance; private returns; completion rates; access

HOW TO CITE:
Cloete N. For sustainable funding and fees, the undergraduate system in South Africa must be restructured. *S Afr J Sci.* 2016;112(3/4), Art. #a0146, 5 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2016/a0146>

South Africa has the most diverse and differentiated higher education system in Africa – despite some persistent attempts at academic drift and mimetic normative isomorphism. Globally, in the 2008 country system ranking by the Shanghai JiaoTong Academic Ranking of World Universities, the South African higher education system was placed in the range between 27 and 33 along with the Czech Republic, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Ireland. It is well known that South Africa consistently has four of the five African universities that appear in the Shanghai top 500.

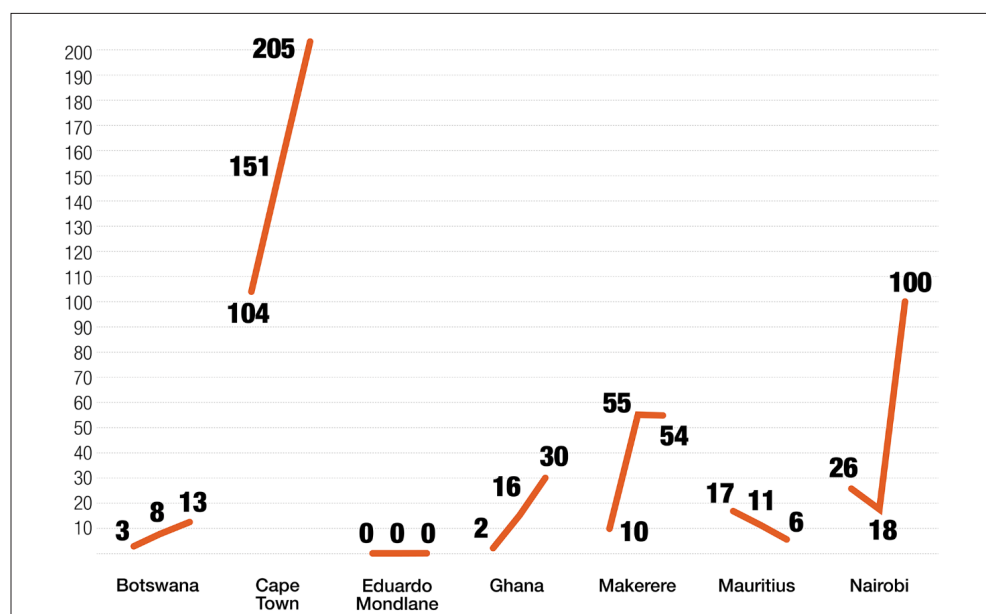
Even more impressive is that The Times Higher Education 2016 ranking of BRICS and emerging economies¹ places three South African universities in the top 12: the University of Cape Town (UCT) 4th, the University of the Witwatersrand 6th and Stellenbosch University 11th. Brazil and Russia each have only *one* university in the top 12, and India, with a billion people, has none. China, with their differentiation policy aimed at producing 30 world-class universities, has six in the top 12.

In the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa research programme, which consists of seven African flagship universities, UCT, the only South African university, published 2390 articles in 2014 journals that are listed in the Web of Science with the other six universities combined publishing only 1476. Similarly, in terms of doctoral production, UCT produced 205 graduates in 2013/2014, while the other six universities combined produced only 207 (Figure 1).

However, it is not only in terms of growth that South African universities have excelled in relation to those in the rest of Africa. There have also been considerable efficiency increases. Figure 2 shows that while the number of academic staff increased by 26%, publication output increased by 150%. The doctoral supervision load increased from 4600 academics supervising 5100 students in 1996 to 6700 academics supervising 13 900 students in 2012. In addition, in terms of years to graduate, South Africa did not perform as well as countries such as Norway, the USA and the United Kingdom, which have large proportions of full-time doctoral students. However, in terms of part-time students, South Africa was comparable to the United Kingdom.²

In a book on the doctorate in South Africa, Cloete et al argue that the model of doctoral education requires a radical change that would include moving from 40% full-time students to over 60%, different types of doctoral programmes and full-time students being employed as ‘pre-docs’, similar to post-doctoral students.²

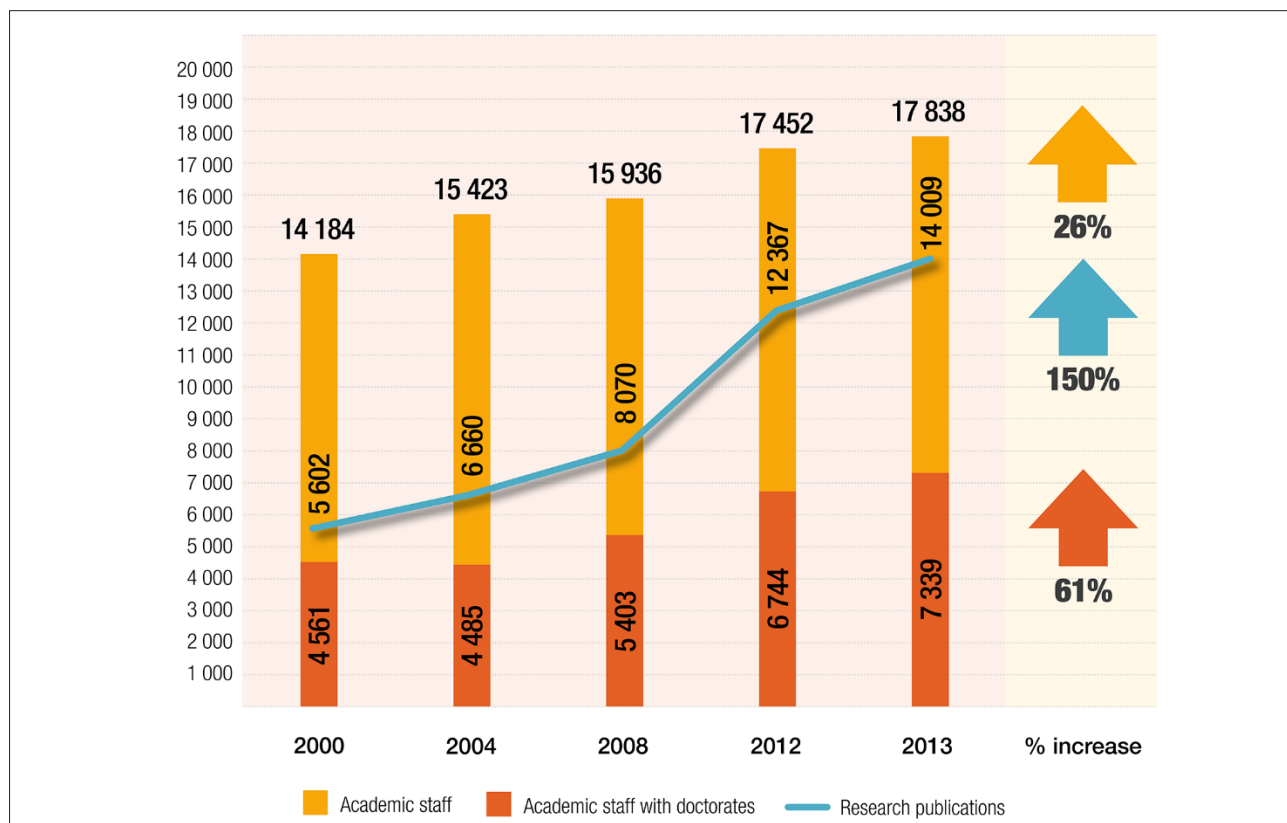
One of the most vocal criticisms against the South African higher education system at the postgraduate (doctoral) level has been the charge of a lack of transformation.³ The term ‘transformation’ has become so ideologised that it has little research or policy value. Perhaps one of the most inappropriate ways to use transformation is as a static concept; for example, to demand that universities must reflect, 20 years after apartheid, the demographics of the current population.⁴ What we should learn from this charge of a lack of transformation at postgraduate level is that bad policies have long-lasting consequences and cannot be redressed or wished away in a decade or two.



Source: Centre for Higher Education Trust/Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa data (2015)

Figure 1: Doctoral graduates at seven African universities (2001, 2009, 2014).

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Source: Department of Higher Education and Training's Higher Education Management Information System data for 2013. Compiled by Charles Sheppard.

Figure 2: Academic staff and research output at South Africa universities (2000–2013).

However, if transformation is understood as an indicator of change, then South African higher education has undergone seismic changes. Regarding the composition of the entire student body – a largely undergraduate population – Cooper and Subotzky⁵ declared that South Africa had experienced a ‘revolution’ and, by 2013, 74% of all higher education students were black.⁶

Some of the most substantial changes happened at the doctoral level. African doctoral graduates increased from 58 in 1996 to 821 in 2012, an increase of 706% in the post-1996 period. By contrast, white graduate numbers only grew by 71% (from 587 to 816). Over the same period, the proportion of African doctoral graduates increased from 8% to 44%, and in 2012, the number of African graduates exceeded those of whites. African female graduates, starting from a very low base of 10 in 1996, increased by 960% graduates to 106 in 2012, while African male graduates increased by 356%. By contrast, the number of white male graduates remained more or less constant – around 367 between 1996 and 2012. White female graduates increased from 219 in 1996 to 449 in 2012 (105%). If transformation is counted as improvement in percentage change, then Africans (and especially female Africans) have attained spectacular gains, particularly if contrasted to white males. We have not found another international example with such demographic changes in a national higher education system over such a short period (16 years).²

And, it should not be forgotten that from 2016, one of the world's largest science projects, the Square Kilometre Array – an international effort to build the world's largest radio telescope, with a square kilometre (one million square metres) of collecting area – will be led by scientists affiliated to South African universities.

One of the factors that sets UCT apart from the other African flagship universities mentioned above is that these flagship universities do not charge fees – they are all part of country systems in which public universities are free and those in private (no research undertaken) are not.

A very inefficient undergraduate system

The ‘best’ system described above is based mainly on the postgraduate system, which in South Africa is about 16% of the total higher education system,⁷ while at certain universities, such as UCT, it is over 30%. In the rest of Africa, the postgraduate systems comprise less than 5% of the total higher education system.²

A detailed analysis of the 2000 and 2006 cohorts shows that the proportion of intake into contact institutions of students who are sufficiently prepared to complete undergraduate curricula within the intended time, is small: only 27%, or roughly only one in every four. Performance is very poor for all groups across the three qualification types (diplomas, 3-year and 4-year degrees) with only 48% in contact universities graduating within 5 years. It is estimated that 45% will never graduate. For distance education, the figures for the University of South Africa are simply horrendous. Only 6% of students graduate within 5 years and it is estimated that 78% will never graduate. By the end of the regulation time for all three qualification types, more students have been lost to failure and dropout than have graduated – more than twice as many in the case of African students and those in diploma courses.⁸

Another method of assessing inefficiency is analysing the total number of undergraduate students entering and exiting the public university system on an annual basis. The Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) data show that total undergraduate enrolments in South Africa's public universities grew by 194 000 in 2013 compared to 2006, with less than 10% of the growth among first-time-entering undergraduates. The average annual growth rate for first-time-entering undergraduates between 2006 and 2013 was only 1.7%, compared to an average annual growth rate of 4.7% for the category of undergraduate students who had previously been in the university system. Undergraduate students in South Africa have high dropout and low graduation rates, which result in them remaining registered for long periods, well beyond the normal times required for the completion of their qualifications.

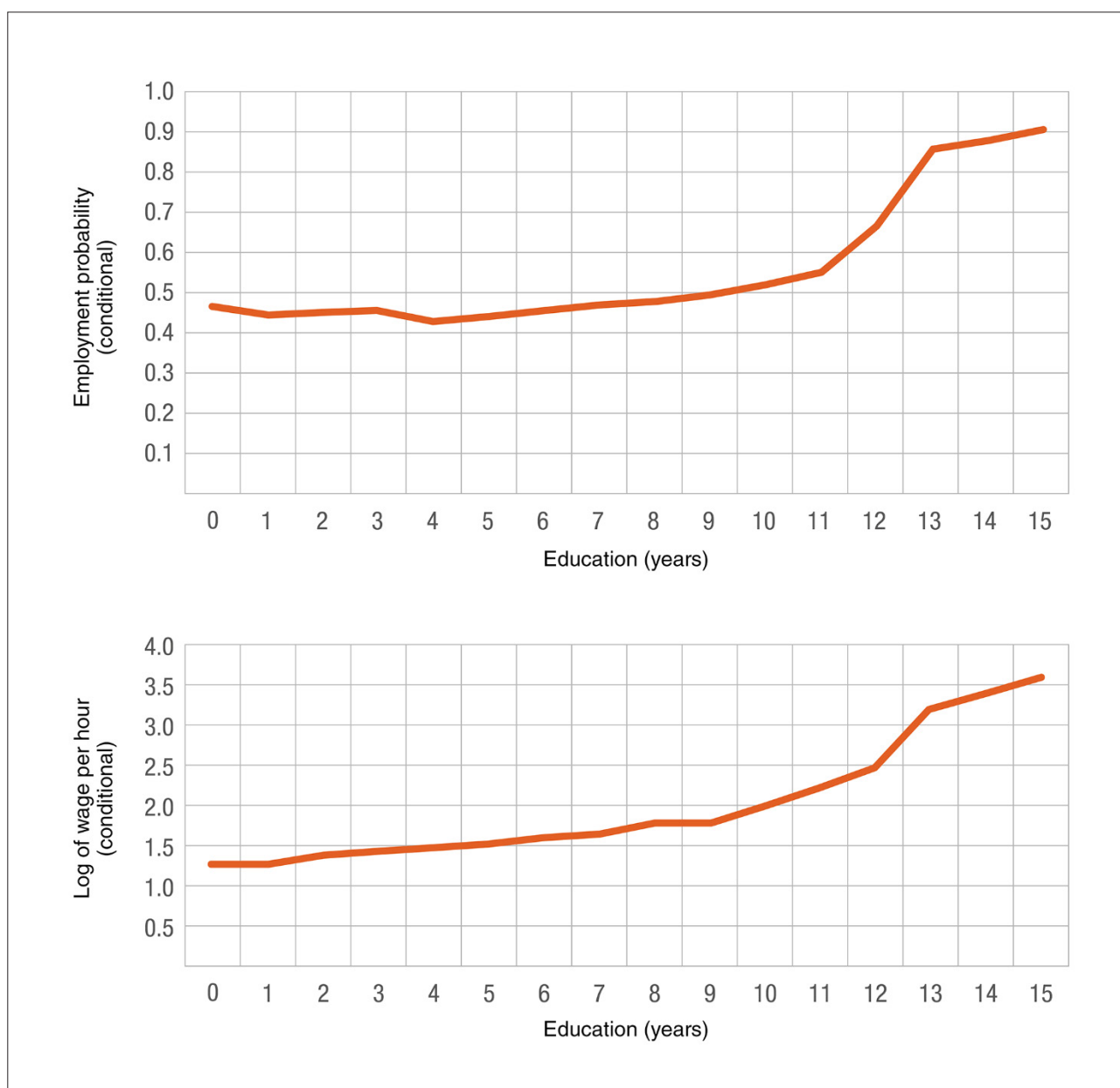
Higher education and inequality

According to both Van den Berg⁹ and Piketty¹⁰, technological innovation and globalisation have pushed up demand for highly skilled knowledge workers, even in service industries. If the supply of skills does not increase at the same pace as the growth in technology, then groups whose training is not sufficiently advanced will earn less. Furthermore, with more competition they are relegated to devalued lines of work, which increases inequality. In such economies, the ‘haves’ are the educated – and the more education, the better – while the ‘have-nots’ are those who did not finish school or did not graduate from tertiary education. The ‘college premium’ is known to all, and for many families justifies going deeply into debt to get that degree.¹¹

The effect of the kind of university system described above is reflected in a severely distorted labour market and skewed private returns (by students) to tertiary education. Van den Berg⁹ found that after controlling for a range of variables such as gender, experience, location, education does bring some rewards. However, the returns below matric are very

low. It is only after matric, and particularly at the level of degrees, that returns are extremely high, both in wages per hour but especially in employment probability (Figure 3). Van den Berg’s interpretation is that it is only certificates such as a matric (validated by a national exam) and tertiary certificates that signal to employers reliable cognitive gains. Statistically, there are still racial differences 20 years after apartheid, but for Van den Berg these differences are mainly a result of differences in quality of education. He concludes that:

The large differentials in earnings and access to jobs between the highly educated and the less educated lies at the heart of income inequality. The high wage premium to educated workers derives from a combination of a skills shortage at the top end of the educational spectrum, driving up wages of the educated, and a surfeit of poorly-educated workers competing for scarce unskilled jobs, thus dampening unskilled wages.^{9(p.214)}



Source: Van den Berg⁹

Figure 3: Conditional probability of employment and conditional log of wages by years of education.

Montenegro and Patrinos¹², in a background paper for the 2013 World Development Report, calculated private rates of returns from 800 household/labour force surveys. This study produced two surprises: firstly, that higher education has higher returns than primary education and, secondly, that the country in the world with the highest private returns to tertiary education is South Africa. The rate of return increased from 28.7 in 2000 to 39.5 in 2011, which is the same period that the Gini coefficient deteriorated from around 0.60 to 0.70.¹³ Responding to an email (14 December 2015) that sought to check whether the World Bank finding was correct, Patrinos confirmed the result and stated: 'I believe that high returns to tertiary and high levels of inequality are consistent.'¹²

The returns in South Africa are not just the highest by a small margin; the only other country with a figure over 30 was Rwanda in 2005, but they subsequently improved to 28 in 2010. Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire at 28 have the next highest returns in the world. To illustrate how big the disparity is, these are the figures for a selection of other countries: Mauritius 21, Mexico 20, Brazil 17, Portugal 14, Turkey 14, the USA 14, Argentina 12, Spain 11 and Norway 10.

Access to higher education is regarded by the haves as a means to maintaining privilege and by the have-nots as a means of getting out of poverty. But Piketty points out that in the US, the level of wage inequality results directly from a failure to invest sufficiently in higher education.¹¹ High tuition at both public and private universities keeps many individuals from receiving the training needed to shrink wage inequality and to make the country more equal and competitive globally. Given such trends, Piketty anticipates that social mobility will decline even further in the future as income increasingly determines access to US higher education. This problem is both amplified and racialised in South Africa: returns to higher education in South Africa are triple that of the USA and as in the USA, are also racially biased.

However, unlike the USA, the South African problem is exacerbated by a low participation rate, low undergraduate completion rates, and the absence of a college sector that can serve as an absorber for poor students, who are also academically and socially underprepared for graduate study. South Africa attempts to maintain a high level of quality, with very high rates of return for a completed undergraduate degree, but then also expects higher education to be a mechanism for reducing inequality. As far as I am aware, there is no system in the world that can achieve such an outcome.

The South African undergraduate system is too expensive, mainly as a result of government underfunding and inefficiencies at the undergraduate level. Thus, it cannot produce large numbers of highly skilled graduates (to drive down the exorbitant rates of return); neither can it absorb large numbers of successful (academically and materially) poor students. As the statistics from the Council on Higher Education⁸ show, what the South African undergraduate system is actually doing is taking in large numbers of students who they know have about a 30% chance of completing in 5 years. The universities have been able to maintain this unsustainable system through fee increases and a perverse incentive subsidy system.

Over the last decade, the government subsidy has decreased as a component of total university income from 49% to 40%, while the contribution from student fees has risen from 24% to 31%. It is difficult to gather information on university fees given the variation in costs across degree programmes; however, Statistics South Africa does collect information on higher education course costs from across the country and publishes this information in a 'tertiary education inflation index' annually.¹⁴ This index shows that between 2010 and 2011, the consumer price index was around 5% while the tertiary inflation index was close to 10%. From 2012 to 2014, the consumer price index hovered around 6% while tertiary inflation was between 9% and 10%. Given the fact that the block grant increases were declining at 1.35% per full-time equivalent per annum and that higher education inflation is higher than the Consumer Price Index, student fees increased at much higher levels than inflation.

There is certainly a need for a study into high tertiary inflation. Two contributors that immediately come to mind are the weakening Rand (import of books and equipment), and inflated salary packages of the ever-increasing cadre of university leadership above professorial level.

With regard to incentives, the undergraduate subsidy system pays universities 70% of the block grant subsidy for enrolments, as well as for institutional factors such as enrolments of disadvantaged students and size of institution, and 16% for graduation completion (the rest is for research and postgraduate outputs).¹⁵ In many countries there is now a debate about shifting the balance between input and output, with some countries discussing a 50-50 split. The low reward for graduation means that universities can take high-risk students, collect 70% of the subsidy and, by inflating fees, cover the cost of the inefficiency of low completion rates. What appears to be a survival strategy (a trade-off between demand for transformation and quality) is not only morally questionable, but also a lose-lose situation for the poor students and the economy.

For the poor students who do not graduate and do not pay back, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme is an extension of the social grant system, but could also be the 'revolving door' outcome against which the White Paper warned in 1997,¹⁶ where poor students are enabled to enter the higher education system, but being unable to complete their studies, are 'revolved' back into poverty, but in this case, with the additional burden of a student loan debt they are unable to repay because they lack the qualifications to secure formal employment. So, rather than higher education being an empowering mechanism, it instead disempowers poor students and puts them deeper into debt. Are we surprised that some of these students went beyond a protest march?

In 2015, both rich and poor students revolted and there is considerable anecdotal evidence that the ones who tried to burn down university administration buildings containing fee records were the ones with bad debt and bad academic records. The students had finally realised that this pretence by government and the higher education system to redress inequality through higher education was not working, and will not work. After all, even Piketty¹⁰ says that higher education does not solve inequalities; it can only keep them from becoming unsettling.

The system must change

For Piketty¹⁰, the best way to reduce inequality and increase the overall growth of the economy is to invest in higher education. He argues that not even minimum wage schedules can multiply wages by, say, factors of five or ten. To achieve that level of progress, education and technology are the decisive factors.

Patrinos¹⁷, from his study of 140 countries, makes three important policy points. Firstly, higher education returns are high and need to be funded better. Secondly, globally, and presumably even more so in South Africa, the high returns will fuel a demand for tertiary education and governments will need to seriously consider appropriate policies for financing this demand. Thirdly, in an environment of high returns to university education, any lowering of private costs means that the general taxpayer (who earns an average income) effectively pays for the education of the rich (who earn an above average income). This confirms the findings from a prominent South African economist that free higher education for all is a policy idea that will harm, rather than assist, the poor.¹⁸

So then what about free higher education for the poor? The South African government's own report makes a strong case for free higher education for the poor¹⁹ and this should be supported. But the really tough questions are: how will free education be undertaken and for how many? In most countries in the world, developed or developing, a very small proportion of the poor go to university, and ultimately complete successfully, because of lack of academic, social and material capital. There is no evidence anywhere in the world that large numbers of the poor can, through higher education alone, take one giant step into the middle class. China has proportionally invested in higher education at a rate never before observed,¹² but it is not free higher education and the university sector is an integral part of the state's development plan, while

in South Africa, higher education with its high private returns, is clearly seen as individual mobility.

To provide greater access and chances of success to poor students will force South Africa to confront the long-avoided differentiation choices. The first is that in order to maintain the best postgraduate system in Africa and to allow for successful access, universities must be differentiated into institutional types, somewhat like in California, which has the most successful higher education system in the world. In California, there are a range of institutions – from community colleges (remedial schools with some vocational offerings) and undergraduate universities (e.g. Los Angeles South West College) to world-class research universities (e.g. Berkeley and Stanford). This system is also under threat from low taxes and poor financial management.²⁰

The key for such a system is strong articulation – something South Africa has talked about for 20 years but has done very little about. Barack Obama started at Occidental College in Los Angeles, transferred to Columbia and then to Harvard. Obama's latest legacy programme is free community colleges. According to a brief issued by The White House, Obama's rationale is:

In the coming years, jobs requiring at least an associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as jobs requiring no college experience. We will not fill those jobs – or keep those jobs on our shores – without the training offered by community colleges.²¹

In the South African context, this would require a radical rethink of our current notion of a community college, never mind a technical and vocational education and training college.

An alternative is to change the current colonial legacy of a 3-year degree with an honours degree to a 4-year system, with the possibility of a diploma or associate degree exit after two years. The key issue is that the students, as Van den Berg shows, have to leave university with a qualification. Currently, South Africa has a 'have or have not' structure, meaning high returns for degrees or unemployment. The honours degree is a major stumbling block – particularly for black students – because there is limited postgraduate funding for the honours qualification.²²

If such a model is applied to all universities, the South African higher education system could become a kind of hybrid college/university system. Admittedly, this could have unanticipated consequences, but for a start it would serve the development-equity imperative better than the current system. Perhaps more important than decolonising the curriculum would be restructuring the undergraduate tertiary landscape.

With the highest private returns to higher education in the world, free higher education for all would not only be scandalous, it would destroy the best postgraduate university system in Africa. Higher education should resist the South African Airways bailout approach to fees. The debate should not just be about different models of direct or deferred fee payments, instead the structure of the undergraduate system needs to be rethought within a framework of empirical evidence about the features, and contradictory demands, of the system.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ian Bunting, Charles Sheppard, Daya Reddy and Servaas van den Berg for making inputs to this paper.

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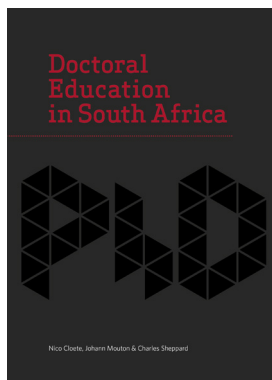
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Complexities and contradictions of doctoral education in South Africa

BOOK TITLE:

Doctoral education in South Africa



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ISBN:

9781928331001 (softcover)

PUBLISHER:

African Minds, Cape Town; ZAR220, (eBook is freely available)

PUBLISHED:

2015

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HOW TO CITE:

Wilson-Strydom M. Complexities and contradictions of doctoral education in South Africa. *S Afr J Sci.* 2016;112(3/4), Art. #a0147, 2 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2016/a0147>

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I read this lucidly written and empirically rich book with much interest as someone who both researches higher education and grapples with many of the supervision challenges discussed. The experienced authors of *Doctoral Education in South Africa* have provided a valuable overview of the central issues and topics relevant to doctoral education internationally and then applied more specifically to the African and South African contexts. The central thesis of the book is carefully mapped out in the first chapter. The thesis is that 'Four imperatives intersect in current debates on the production of PhDs in South Africa. These four discourses concern global and national competition (the imperative for growth), efficiency, transformation and equality' (p.20). The analytical framework that is constructed on the basis of these four imperatives 'capture[s] the ecology (the external demand and accountability environment) of doctoral education and training in South Africa today' (p.23). Particularly useful is the manner in which the framework takes account of the external factors as well as the dynamics between students and supervisors within universities. These four imperatives, or discourses, are then used as the basis for organising the empirical chapters of the book.

Firmly grounded in detailed and rigorous empirical analyses – both quantitative and qualitative – and drawing on several studies on doctoral education conducted by the Centre for Higher Education Trust and the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology over several years, the authors draw powerful (and likely somewhat controversial) conclusions regarding what it will take to reach the ambitious National Development Plan¹ target of 100 doctoral graduates per million of the population by 2030. Amongst others, the need to tackle the thorny issue of differentiation in the system is discussed, as is the tension between the significant growth of PhD enrolments (6.4% from 1996 to 2012) compared to only 2.9% growth for academic staff in the same period. Chapter 6, which presents an analysis of specific university departments that have been particularly productive with respect to doctoral education, shows the various ways in which the actors in the system have been responding to the contradictions of increasing numbers of PhDs without the requisite increase in resources. The examples and practices shared are of particular value to doctoral supervisors and departments who are seeking to improve their own practices. The major challenge created by the fact that more than 60% of South African PhD students study part-time is also highlighted as one of the main contributors to low completion rates, and the data show the huge impact this situation has on the entire doctoral education system. This finding raises critical issues related to system efficiency and, as is argued in the book, requires that the models of PhD education in the country be revisited.

What might these revised models look like? The authors argue that the system could either opt for incremental change, which would involve continuing with the practices that have shown results in the high performing departments, or could embrace a more radical approach that requires changing the dominant model of doctoral education in South Africa. The latter is presented as the preferred option. This new model (also called a paradigm shift in the book) would involve reversing the full-time to part-time student ratio such that 60% of students would be full-time students. Suggestions for how this might be done are presented, and the realities of the funding requirements (estimated to be about ZAR800 million per year) for such a shift are briefly addressed. The argument would have been strengthened though if more attention was given to possible funding models, particularly given the major resource constraints faced at all the levels in the post-school sector. The final chapter presents three policy options that emerge from the earlier chapters. The first centres on growing doctoral enrolments and graduates (including the setting out of 16 theoretical scenarios). The second policy option is a proposal to make South Africa a PhD hub for Africa, and the third policy is to implement more active differentiation of the sector, allowing for targeted investment in doctoral education, the provision of which is already differentiated across different groupings of universities. None of the options presents a panacea, and each raises a series of tough questions for policymakers and universities. As is emphasised in the concluding section of the book, the research has highlighted a need for better consideration and management of the policy trade-offs of any given policy position. These trade-offs are clearly articulated in the sections mapping out the three main policy options presented.

What is less clear from the arguments presented throughout the book is the normative position that a country like South Africa ought to take up in making these difficult policy trade-off decisions. Although there is some acknowledgement of wider purposes for the doctorate (raised particularly by some of the commentators included in Appendix 2), it seems that the main purpose of the doctorate is framed as contributing to building the knowledge economy and to economic development in South Africa, and Africa. However, what of the complex debates in the higher education landscape about the public good role of the university that have so powerfully been raised by students in the past few months?

Although perhaps beyond the scope of this book, but nonetheless critical when thinking about doctoral education in South Africa, and particularly what this means in terms of larger questions about the purpose of higher education in the country, we ought to also ask pressing questions about knowledge itself: 'What knowledge is produced? How has it been produced? Whose interests does it serve? And how does it serve society?'² These questions are particularly important to answer given the current juncture in the country's history, at which young people are increasingly standing up to pose critical questions about the colonial histories and persistent legacies within our universities as a basis for advocating for deeper change within the sector. In my reading of the analysis and arguments presented here, a possible gap is that little consideration has been given to the role that doctoral education has or could play in either subverting or maintaining the colonial heritage of our universities, and its role

in addressing broader social development imperatives of the country. Related points are made in Appendix 2 by Badat, Moja and Langa. Nonetheless, this important and well-researched book certainly takes the debate forward in meaningful ways, and clearly sets out the policy implications of different paths that might be considered as we continue to strive to improve doctoral education in South Africa. The data, conclusions, recommendations, and additional information included in the detailed appendices, are likely to be of much value across the sector, for doctoral students, supervisors, university management and leaders, and policymakers.

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