

Doors of learning not open to all

Struggle to reform higher education

Despite government insisting that it gives good support to higher education there is evidence to show this is not the case. **Kezia Lewins** and **Noor Nieftagodien** show that there is a steady downward trend in grants, salaries and academic teaching conditions which has forced a group of concerned people to launch the Higher Education Crisis Committee.

Democratic South Africa dawned with the promise of broad-based development, and social justice. Higher education was touted as a vital sector that could unlock the potential of the nation by opening 'the doors of learning and culture to all'.

Events within higher education over the past decade, but especially during the last 18 months, suggest that there is a crisis. It has taken a new form in that it excludes many who want to study and work in higher education institutions. The sector has experienced unprecedented levels of discontent, evidenced by regular protests on campuses across the country. It is also reflected in the constant murmurings and complaints by academics and administrators.

The causes lie in the re-organisation of the higher education sector pursued by the government since the late 1990s. It has been characterised by, among other things, underfunding and corporatisation.

NEW WAVE OF STRUGGLE

It is appropriate that the current wave of protests was launched with

a strike in August and September 2006 by those hardest hit by the privatisation of 'non-core' operations of universities – cleaning workers. Their month-long strike was aimed at improving their meagre wages caused by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) management's decision to outsource cleaning services to companies whose working conditions are similar to those under apartheid.

Students have also protested against a range of issues affecting their lives at institutions of higher learning. These include racism, rising fees, poor living conditions and exclusions.

Since August 2007 not a month has passed without some student protest. In that month, more than 2 000 students at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) demanded that management settle a salary dispute with employees. In September and October, students at Wits and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) protested against proposed fee increases, which they blamed on "a continuous trend by certain administrators of higher education to commodify education."

In January this year, students at

the Durban University of Technology (DUT) also protested against very high registration fees. An 18-year-old student echoed the frustration and anger of her generation when she explained: "I have R3 650 outstanding on my fees and because I can't afford to pay that they have not given me my results and I cannot register for my second year. I was promised 100% cover for my government student loan and because they never keep their promise I must suffer. Where must I get that kind of money from? Now my future is on hold." Similar demonstrations have taken place at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

This year has also witnessed protests against racism on campuses spurred by the exposé of the disgusting behaviour of white male students at the University of the Free State. Their actions show the reassertion of exploitative power relations of a racialised, gendered and class nature.

The recent salary negotiations at universities exposed deep discontent among university employees over low salaries, growing economic inequality within the sector and deteriorating



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working conditions. On 22 April 2008, more than 200 Wits employees drawn from all sectors of the institution submitted a memorandum to management objecting to the proposed salary increase of 8%, and demanding a 10.5% increment.

DOWNWARD TREND

These protests are symptoms of a deep crisis in the higher education sector.

The post-1994 plan for higher education promised a fundamental transformation from an elitist to an inclusive education system. But the achievements so far have been very uneven.

Undoubtedly, some progress has been made since 1994. Black student enrolment is now around 72%, and since 1986 there has been a 28% increase in black academics employed including in strategic positions. However, these gains mask serious shortcomings.

State expenditure on higher education appears in a healthy state, with annual figures of close to R11-billion. But, state funding of education in general and of the higher education sector has actually been declining in the post-apartheid period.

In 2003 the education budget represented 23% of the national

budget. This year it stands at 18.5%. Higher education funding as a proportion of GDP has decreased from 0.8% in 1999 to 0.64% in the current financial year. This contrasts with the global average in 2001 of 0.8%, and more tellingly, the African average of 0.85%.

The decrease in the state's financial support to higher education has occurred at a time when there has been a sharp increase in the numbers of students entering universities and technikons. Between 1994 and 2003 student numbers increased by 200 000. As a result, state expenditure per student has dropped by 15% between 2000 and 2006, continuing the downward trend that started under apartheid. In 2001, the state subsidy per student was R30 500, today it is a mere R19 500.

The state counters criticisms of this by pointing to its financial support for students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). But NSFAS only provides funding to 15% of higher education enrolments. In addition, the amount is not sufficient to cover study and living expenses and has decreased in real terms per student by 36% over 20 years. This is completely inadequate in South Africa with its entrenched inequality.

NFSAS also only provides bursaries to students who complete their degrees in a set time. So if students do a foundation year to assist with their degree they will not get a grant for this year. This puts finances above good education practices and places strain on students and staff who carry the burden of poor schooling. Recent reports have shown that higher education institutions have also failed to distribute all NFSAS funds leading to even fewer students receiving funding.

This problem is compounded by high tuition and residence fees, which make universities unaffordable for the majority of poor students. The recent trend to demand high upfront fees serves further to exclude poor students.

Government and university officials fail to acknowledge the serious impact that socioeconomic deprivation has on throughput and drop-out rates amongst students. Yet, only 25% of those who entered higher education institutions in 2000 had graduated by 2005.

Students who are lucky enough to get into universities often find them alienating places where racism, sexual harassment and rape, homophobia, gender violence and intolerance of diversity occur regularly. The difficulties experienced, especially by poor students, undermine the ethos of higher education as a place for the intellectual development of young people.

DETERIORATING WORK CONDITIONS

The increase in student numbers has not been met with an increase in academic and administrative staff. This results in much greater workloads for all staff. The burden is generally carried by junior staff and administrators, who are mostly

women.

There has been a big increase in the number of women and black staff in the junior to middle layers of higher education. There has, however, been less change in the middle to upper levels while the very top levels elude black women.

Further, many new entrants are employed on short-term contracts, placing them in a very precarious position. Contract workers do not enjoy the same benefits as full-time employees, have to carry the same workload or more, but without job security.

Underfunding by the state means that institutions do not have the finances to keep staff salaries apace with inflation, let alone remunerate staff with market-equivalent wages. Considering that inflation for food and transport is a few percentage points higher than CPIX, it is clear that salary settlements have been below inflation. Poorly paid staff, especially in grades 10-17 have been especially hard hit by these below-inflation increases.

And, it is getting worse. This year salary increases have ranged between 7-8%. Yet CPIX is above 10%, with the probability of further increases over the next year. Cleaners, who mostly earn under R2 000 per month and whose strike resulted in a two-year wage agreement of less than 7% per annum, have been the hardest hit by the 30% increase in basic commodities.

Of course, not everyone is feeling the pinch. Salaries of vice chancellors range between R1-million and R3.2-million per annum. The highest paid VC earns 160 times more than the average cleaner. Rhodes University VC, Saleem Badat, has opposed these exorbitant salaries and decided personally to take a salary cut, but no other VCs have followed.

HIGHER EDUCATION CRISIS COMMITTEE

At the end of 2007 in response to student demonstrations at UJ and Wits, a group of concerned staff from the Gauteng universities met to discuss the crisis. It recognised that for several years, academics, students and support workers have struggled against aspects of the higher education crisis, but often in isolation. So it was decided to launch an interim Higher Education Crisis Committee (HECC).

The HECC held a workshop on 15 March 2008, attended by about 45 people from UJ, Unisa, Wits, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), the South African Communist Party (Gauteng Education), South African Students Congress (Sasco), and representatives from the National Education and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) and the National Union of Technikon Employees of South Africa (Nutesa). Messages of support came from colleagues in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape.

The workshop resolved to work towards a representative national conference at the end of 2008. It identified underfunding as a critical issue with some participants suggesting a campaign to demand that education expenditure increase to 1% of GDP. The meaning of transformation was also discussed. The general feeling was that higher education institutions should become more responsive, respectful and representative with a comprehensive understanding and practice of transformation in order to produce socially responsible institutions and citizens.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The HECC is new and still mainly Gauteng-based. It sees its role as

contributing to the mobilisation of a national campaign to address the crisis in higher education. This would involve participating in, and supporting, the struggles of students and staff.

The HECC also wants to engage with other activists in the sector in order to formulate demands for a national campaign to press for fundamental transformation. The HECC has already held discussions with Nehawu, the largest union in the sector, and plans similar engagements with SASCO and the SACP.

Another challenge is the fragmentation of unions. This has contributed to divisions among staff and has allowed university administrators to impose policies through divide-and-rule tactics. Although more than 50% of employees are unionised, they are spread between seven national unions and 20 local unions/associations. The increasing number of contract academic staff has also made it difficult to unionise academics.

Nehawu has recognised these challenges and recently recommitted itself to "supporting the activities of the students and youth on the campaign for free education" and for "more public funding of tertiary institutions". It has also launched a programme to increase its membership in the higher education sector.

Hopefully, Nehawu's campaign, the HECC and other campaigns on campuses across the country will join into a national movement that can reverse the commodification of education. LE

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