

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION SECTOR

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Abstract

The high cost of providing higher education in South Africa currently remains a major source of conflict between government, private funding organisations, management of higher education institutions and students. The reality is that high levels of poverty and unemployment in the country make it extremely difficult for some families to afford the cost of sending and keeping their children at a higher education institution. Some parents believe if government can afford to build free Reconstruction and Development Planning (RDP) houses for poor people and, also, pay child support grants, it should also be possible for government to finance free higher education in the country. Others believe the national Budget can be adjusted or re-prioritised, to provide more funding for higher education.

Free Higher Education in South Africa

The issue of providing free higher education, as viewed by some key stakeholders, for example, private funding organisations, higher education institutions and government, remains quite complex to disentangle and resolve. It is an issue some policy analysts, education providers and public commentators believe may not be easily resolved between government and street protesting students alone. The issue involves conducting psychometric tests, to determine suitability of students for admission to various study disciplines at our institutions of higher education. The other issue is to make a clear distinction between parents who can afford and those who cannot, as well as the ability of government to provide such education.

Students' Demands

Expressed demands by students, particularly in their public "Fees Must Fall Campaigns", do not seem to provide a lasting solution to the problems at hand. One of the suggestions students have is that the private sector needs to shoulder the burden of financing free education in South Africa. The response from some private sector organisations is that they are already paying a lot of taxes to government, and that any additional tax might persuade them and future investors to relocate to other countries. In an effort to provide some solution to students' concerns, some private sector organisations have come up with proposals for new funding models that include a restructuring of the current National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NASFAS). It is not yet known if the new proposals will generally enjoy support by identified stakeholders.

The Nature of Problems

Tough problems, according to Kahane (2007), quite often do not get resolved peacefully. This should, however, not be the case with South Africa's institutions of higher education where one normally finds individuals skilled enough to guide and advise the rest of society about dangers of failing to resolve normal human conflicts. Higher education institutions consist of educated and enlightened individuals that should be able to guide society and provide strategies for success. Strikes and public protests quite often fail to contribute to sustained peace, prosperity and development.

All over the world, as Mkhize (2016) puts it, labour and management are coming to realise and appreciate that if they fail to work together, they may not work at all. The ability to cooperate with adversaries, in the case of labour, remains the key to survival. Equally, a family's ability to deal constructively with interpersonal conflicts determines whether it stays together or break apart. In society, at large, individuals and organisations are now realising that going to court is always costly, and often futile. They are increasingly turning to alternative methods of dispute resolution. On a global scale, cooperation is becoming the key to human survival.

From Confrontation to Cooperation

The only road from confrontation to cooperation is a commonly negotiated and agreed settlement of disputes. Such approach is about joint problem-solving. Instead of attacking each other, the parties to a dispute jointly attack the problem. Instead of glowering across the negotiation table, the parties sit next to each other, facing their common problem. In short, the parties turn face-to-face confrontation into side-by-side problem solving. This is a strategy that saves time and energy by cutting out the posturing, in order to ensure that both parties gain some benefit from the process leading to a mutually negotiated and agreed settlement of a common problem – a win-win style of negotiating conflict. Parties to the negotiation process should take into account each other's needs, and agree to change something or do something differently, in order to arrive at a mutually agreed upon settlement of the dispute.

Management and Administration

The other complicating issue in the management of higher education institutions is the extent to which political actors and student activists may need to be involved. In an ideal situation, political actors, including highly placed political actors, need to confine their interests and involvement to operations of established Councils, and not be involved in service staff appointments and promotions, including appointment of Vice-Chancellors. Student political activists also need to be assisted and equipped with skills to turn higher education institutions into Centres of Academic Excellence rather than behave in a manner that may be interpreted as dragging the institutions into political power plays. In this process, dialogue and negotiations should remain at the centre of tools used to resolve all possible human conflicts. Involved parties need to be patient with one another, particularly to talk and listen to one another consistently, and never getting tired of talking and listening.

Threats and Intimidation

Open, frank and honest negotiations *may not* be conducted on the basis of intimidation and threats of class boycotts or destruction of public property. Parties should forever remain willing to give and take at created negotiation forums. In all

negotiations involved parties should look for areas of compromise and agreement. Going to court should be considered as the last resort, and not something to precede negotiations. If one party has a progressive good plan or suggestion, such plan may mean nothing until it is shared with others and, through persuasion, gets approval and acceptance by other parties. The court option, in all negotiations, only helps enforce judgement imposed on parties by the court. Such dispute resolution mechanism, as already stated, is never sustainable. What the court does is to declare one party a winner, and the other a loser. From there, the parties quite often go away, to continue with their fights.

Some Public Policy Considerations

In ideal situations one of the roles, responsibilities and obligations of a Vice-Chancellor, Rector or Manager of an institution of higher education should be to orientate newly appointed Council members about the state and culture of his/her institution. Provided information may include a variety of issues, including matters relating to current and possible future challenges the institution continues to face. At such orientation newly appointed Council members may take decisions to accept or not to accept their appointments and responsibilities. Alternatively, members may right away offer some strategies to resolve identified challenges the institution may be facing.

In theory, Council should assume responsibility for formulating operational policy and delegate its responsibility for execution to the Vice-Chancellor, Rector or Manager. However, such clear distinctions are somewhat misleading. In practice, public policy-making is normally a shared responsibility of the Higher Education Department, Council and/or the Manager of a higher education institution, supported by his/her subordinate management structure (s). Managers, in particular, should play a significant and often leading role in operational policy formulation, and Council may sometimes carefully intervene directly in policy execution. A decision by Council to increase or not to increase user fees, for example, would almost surely be based on availability of resources, impact assessment, and/or comparisons with sister organisations. Such analysis is normally compiled by the Manager, with a recommendation for action by Council. In short, the symbiotic relationship between

Council and Management of a higher education institution is that of a shared responsibility for policy decision-making and administration.

Council and Management of an institution of higher education may quite often find it necessary to redefine their respective spheres of influence in better managing their institution. This re-definition of roles, responsibilities and obligations may quite often provide mechanisms for resolving disagreements on issues, particularly when one of the involved parties appears to have made an error of judgment or has made an improper incursion into the role of the other. Such arrangement sets a higher level of involvement for Council in setting the mission and general policies of the institution, while the Manager assumes a leadership role in the overall administration and management of the institution. Within the institution, policies are quite often initiated in response to identified problems or perceived need. Among other considerations that shape policy are technical feasibility, cost, and anticipated social benefit, as well as long-range environmental and other considerations.

Pressure and Interest Groups

Input that so often shapes public policy, in all public institutions, comes from interplays of competing forces in the environment. These forces include pressure and interest groups, such as professional bodies, business associations, trade unions, organised student groupings, employers' associations, political parties and others. In the context of institutions of higher education, students are one of the interest groups, and not the only interest group to be listened to or taken into account when rational policy decisions are taken, to safeguard societal interest, the interest of the involved institution, or to comply with existing regulations or observe existing constitutional and legal obligations and guidelines in managing higher education institutions. ***Yes. One must agree.*** Students have to be listened to, and engaged continuously in talks with management and other structures regarded as relevant to higher education: Management, Council, National Education Department and Public Courts. However, violence and destruction of public property serve no good purpose. Instead, such strategies breed more violence and cause misery for all: attacks and counter-attacks; fighting fire with fire; and creating an unnecessary state of public anarchy, such as perverted attitudes of thinking that the

other party should be given the taste of its medicine. In this regard, we can all obviously learn a lot of good lessons from past history that remains littered with many examples of the futility of violence by human beings to fellow human beings. Peace and more peace is what the global world desperately needs these days. Academic institutions, in South Africa and across the globe, are expected to lead such peace crusades, and not become or remain centres of all types of violence.

Some Responsibilities of a Higher Education Institution Council

Regardless of sources of power, knowledge or skills, an effective policy-maker, in this case Council of an institution of a higher education institution must maintain, at least, three levels of awareness, all of which ultimately affect the entire nation:

- Knowledge about the institution and its operations
- Understanding of national and global trends that influence higher education
- Awareness of the social, technological, economic and political changes taking place in society.

Council's role will vary from one institution to the, as does the Manager's role, but some duties, functions and responsibilities should apply to all Councils in one manner or another, at one time or another. Generally speaking, Council of an institution of higher education performs its major duties when it does the following:

- Sets short-, mid-, and long-range goals and the agenda for achieving them
- Defines the kind and level of services to be provided
- Monitors effectiveness of services
- Plays an oversight role over the entire management and administration of the institution
- Exercises overall leadership over the institution
- Arbitrates conflicts among competing interests
- Serves as facilitator/expediter of stakeholders inquiries and complaints

- Approves of senior appointments, and processes followed in such appointments.

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