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Unmasking the ramifications of the fees-must-fall-conundrum in higher education institutions in South Africa: A critical perspective

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the ramifications of the fees-must-fall-protests that rocked South Africa's universities for a couple of months in the years 2015 and 2016. Using a critical perspective, the thesis of the study is that the shutting down of universities in the context of student protests was neither unique nor original to South Africa for it has been a preferred weapon of repression by dictators all over the world. Several post-independence African governments invoke this weapon many times to silence dissenting voices. The data to embellish arguments in this study were gathered through focus group discussion interview sessions (FGDIS) from 40 participants purposefully sampled from 26 South African universities. The analysis of data followed a thematic approach with themes emerging from the FGDIS forming the basis of the discussion of the findings. Chief among the findings was that despite the salutary role of student protests as a force for social change well-established and never being gainsaid, higher education fees needs to fall, albeit cautiously. The fees-must-fall protests raised an important consciousness of how challenging a colonised education system can lead to academic disruptions. The key conclusion drawn was that if tuition fees dry up as would be the case if a fee-free decolonised education policy were to be adopted prematurely, the country could suffer severe consequences such as inevitable budget cuts, compromised research standards, demoralised academics and curtailed university offerings. The recommendations made included a need for governmental commitment to calm the students' temper tantrums before they spiral out of control and for curriculum decolonisation advocates to denounce the government's repressive tendencies if a truly decolonised education system is to be realised.

Keywords: *Curriculum, conundrum, decolonisation, fees-must-fall-protests*

1. Introduction

In the last couple of months of 2016, academia was rocked by student protests despite negotiations, concessions and attempts to return to normalcy. The situation certainly saw a repeat of the university disruptions of 2015. Despite warnings of the dire consequences of their anti-academic actions, students protested on university campuses around

the country for a fee-free decolonised education system (Gaunt, 2016). Duncan (2016) notes that the chilling statement, *"Burn to be heard"* was doing the rounds on social media platforms among students weeks before the violent protests started. The message was then seriously taken heed of by rioting university students given that buildings and vehicles at several universities were burnt in the wave of protests that kicked off in the middle of September 2016. The arsonists were not clearly identified although government and university management's fingers pointed to student protesters (Duncan, 2016). Some students adopted disruptive tactics to shut their campuses down until their demands for a decolonised fee-free education system were addressed (Le Grange, 2016). Many universities responded by increasing security on their campuses, seeking wide-ranging court interdicts against students as well as deploying private security guards on campuses in a manner that is akin to what Althusser (1972) describes as evoking the repressive state apparatus to silence dissenting voices.

2. Background to the study

The question of a fee-free decolonised education system has been a priority for the South African government for a very long time and for the student community any further excuses were something they could no longer stomach (Somo, 2016). Nonetheless, Le Grange (2016) maintains that students need not shy away from the view that our country has, in many areas, made remarkable progress since the dawn of democracy and therefore they must remember we came from a repressive education system as a country. Notwithstanding this view, they still need to acknowledge that more still needs to be done to emancipate and change not only the lives of many poor people but also the education they consume through higher education institutions and this should not blind them to the successes the country has so far achieved (Le Grange, 2016). Drawing from the National Development Plan (NDP), which makes it categorically clear that education, training and innovation are central to South Africa's long-term development, one needs to underscore the importance of these aspects as the core elements in eliminating poverty and reducing inequality by bringing in the foundations of an equal society (Somo, 2016). Statistics South Africa (2016) asserts that more than three million are disengaged from school. Further to this, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that approximately one third of those aged between 15 and 24 or 3.4 million are not formally employed or in education and training. At the same time, two million of these young people have not finished grade 12 due to the strings attached to the current higher education curriculum, which calls for a real decolonisation agenda (OECD, 2017).

3. The need for a decolonised higher education system in South Africa

Given the aforementioned, it follows therefore that the need for a decolonised higher education curriculum needs to be given serious thought if students are to be fully empowered to take charge of their own destinies. This view takes the discussion to an assertion by De Carvalho and Florez-Florez (2014) that universities cannot decolonise the curriculum without defining decolonisation first. In their views, a decolonised curriculum – though the concept remains a grey area – typically entails academics and students ridding higher education institutions of the procedures, values, norms, practices, thinking, beliefs and choices that mark anything non-European and not white as inferior (De Carvalho & Florez-Florez, 2014). Commenting on the above, American social theorist William Pinar (2010) views the need

for a decolonised education as a curriculum theory, an interdisciplinary study of educational experiences that seek to replace Eurocentric and American-centric views with Afrocentric ones. For Pinar (2010) the issue of a decolonised curriculum is complex in that a change in educational experiences involves more than just topics covered in a course to encompass the attitudes, values, dispositions and world views that are learnt, un-learnt, re-learnt, re-formed, deconstructed and reconstructed while studying towards a course. Pinar's (2010) argument takes the issue of a decolonised education system to four approaches to curriculum theory and practices: curriculum as a product, process, context and praxis.

Curriculum as a product implies that there are certain skills to master and facts to know, while curriculum as a process describes interaction of instructors, students and knowledge (Pinar, 2010). Curriculum as context entails a contextually shaped education system and curriculum as praxis refers to the view that practice should not focus exclusively on individuals alone or the group alone but must also explore how both create understandings and practices (Le Grange, 2016). Perhaps as noted by Gough (2011), focusing particularly on curriculum as context and as praxis would resonate with the need for decolonising university education given that these approaches seem to align well with the aforementioned conceptualisation of decolonising the curriculum. A contextual approach to the curriculum does open doors for universities to critique how the curriculum and therefore the education system reproduces unequal social relations after graduation (Gough, 2011). Praxis creates conditions for democratising learning spaces making room for individual and group identities within the teaching and learning context. This creates shared and negotiated understandings and practices while knowledge is being generated and disseminated (Le Grange, 2014). Therefore for universities that wish to decolonise their curricula, the above approaches offer some insights and help people to stop conflating transformation (yet another imperative in universities and in South Africa more broadly) with decolonisation (Gough, 2011).

4. Problem statement

The South African higher education (HE) student community has constantly accused its government of not giving education the priority it deserves, preferring to compare it with that of other developing countries such as Cuba. Cuba's population of approximately 11047251 people as of 2015 is one hundred per cent subsidized by the government (Somo, 2016) and yet remains the best education system in Latin America and the Caribbean, and is the only country on the continent to have a high-level teaching faculty. Proponents of a decolonised fee-free higher education policy in South Africa, for example, members of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an opposition political party in South Africa, build their argument around the view that Cuba allocates its highest budget share of 13 per cent to education and they want the South African government to do the same (Somo, 2016). They are thus blatantly oblivious of the fact that economic growth in South Africa has been respectable, although recent Statistics South Africa (2016) reports that it has become weaker than many emerging economies. Further to the above, Statistics South Africa (hereafter, Stats SA, 2016) reports that South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 3.3 per cent quarter to quarter in the second quarter of 2016 in contrast to the 1.2 per cent in the previous quarter. This certainly indicates the economy has been growing very slowly and Stats SA further notes that this year's growth rate tells the same story as the past three or four years in terms of GDP growth. Given that the South African government has always claimed to be aware of these higher education (HE) problems and a preparedness to tackle them and yet not much

has been happening on the ground, the South African HE student community regards this as ideological, drawing from the Althusserian neo-Marxist terminology (Althusser, 1972). They therefore came to a realisation that empty promises are mere political rhetoric to lull them into docility (Bourdieu, 2008). Thus, Lehola (2015) cautions parents and students not to deceive themselves about the existence of a fee-free decolonised education system in South Africa for there can never be one.

5. Research questions

The following research questions guided this study:

• What effects do the fees-must-fall-protests have on the smooth flow of university life?

• How did the fees-must-fall-protest conundrum lead to disruptive and violent protests in South Africa's universities?

• How can university education be genuinely decolonised?

6. Aim and objectives

The study's aim was to explore and unmask the ramifications of the fees-must-fall-protests on student life. Pursuant to this aim, the following objectives were designed:

• To establish how the chains of the fees-must-fall-protests conundrum led to violent disruptions in South Africa's universities

• To examine the ways through which university education can be decolonised

• To unmask the strategies university authorities need to adopt to ameliorate destructive tendencies from students during protests.

7. Theoretical framework

By adopting a critical conflict perspective, the argument in this study is that conflict is not always dysfunctional as assumed by functionalist social theorists such as Durkheim and Parsons (Ritzer, 2015). More often than not, it is a source of harmony in society given that the tensions between members of the dominant and subject classes or class struggles between the capitalists and their exploited victims sometimes lead to the need for harmony. Similar to what happened in the era of apartheid South Africa, where a protracted racial and class struggle between the dominant and subjugated social groups over the means of production culminated in a conflict resolution that brought a peace settlement and democracy to South Africa in 1994 (Jansen, 2017). Further to the above, critical social movement theorists such as Tilly, Porta and Diani (2012) have written extensively on why protests turn violent. Porta (2012) for example, argues that protest movements tend to become radicalised by two factors, namely escalating policing and, according to Porta (2012:117) "competitive escalations", which imply protestors competing for space with political adversaries and other protesting groups. A clear illustration of this view was evident in the fees-must-fall protests on many university campuses, especially where members of the South African Police Services (SAPS) and the private security guards on campuses were too quick to use force to thwart the protesters' temper tantrums (Mapheta, 2016). Consequently, these interactions psyched and predisposed the protesting students towards violence with their actions creating what sociologist Gamson (2012:37) calls "injustice flames" around the state, when the state itself tended to be viewed as fundamentally unjust. According to the above view, state repression

tends to create and fuel solidarity among movement participants, who thus find some justification in their violence as a form of self-defence. In Porta's (2012) discourse, violence always emerges from violence. Unfortunately, in the public debates, disruptive and violent protests have often been conflated. The sad reality in the South African legal system was that the SAPS and university management authorities were interdicted from interfering with peaceful, non-disruptive protests yet they were the ones that then degenerated into violent protests at a later stage (Somo, 2016). Outside of the university context, civic organisations such as *Abahlali base Mjondolo* had also set up roadblocks because their more conventional protests were ignored. What protesting university students had come to realise was that unless the normal functioning of an unequal and decolonised educational system is disrupted, the situation was unlikely to change (Apple, 2010).

Given that the fees-must-fall-protests needed to be given constitutional protection and that such protection was supported by legislation in view of the fact that the Regulation of Gatherings Act allows protests to be prohibited only if they cause serious disruption (Duncan, 2016). Even then, the Act states that municipalities and the police force must consult protesters before dispersing them (Somo, 2016). What this implies in the context of student sit-ins and their effort to get others to join in can be considered protected conduct, provided they seek to persuade as opposed to coercing those around them (Disemelo, 2015). Unfortunately, that is not how protesters were being treated on university campuses because ill-trained private security guards had been deployed on many of the university campuses (Mapheta, 2016). Several universities thus had limited protection rights through wide ranging interdicts that prohibited all disruptions. Since interdicts are blunt instruments that prohibit particular actions on a blanket basis, they became problematic in simply serving as a form of prior restraint to expressive acts (Duncan, 2016). The protests indicated that sections of the protesting student movements were competing with one another to claim the victories associated with the fees-must-fall-struggles (Duncan, 2016). Sociologists from the critical social perspective such as Ogburn (1998) argue that political violence by protesters is rarely adopted over night or consciously. Rather in the early stages of the protest cycle, such violence is generally unplanned, small in scale and limited in scope but often occurring as a spontaneous reaction to an escalation of force by members of the police force or the closure of democratic space (Ogburn, 1998). Most significantly, this shifts the struggle onto a terrain that is overwhelmingly dominated by the state and its repressive state apparatus (Althusser, 1972). In the fees-must-fall-protests in South Africa, this cycle began to manifest itself on many campuses during the student riots and its emergence made the official narrative in that in 2015, the movement was noble but in 2016, it lost its legitimacy and degenerated into full-scale violence.

8. Research methodology

The study adopted an interpretive paradigmatic perspective utilising a qualitative methodology, which Nieuwenhuis (2016) views as having a subjective ontology, allowing the researcher and the researched an opportunity to generate multiple subjective realities as both parties have the chance to co-construct the knowledge. Given the focus of this study, which was to explore the ramifications of the fees-must-fall protests in universities, this approach (qualitative) was ideal on account of its ability to elicit multiple perspectives, a feature that is not possible in the quantitative tradition owing to its thrust on a single objective reality (Hesse-Biber, 2012). By adopting open-ended questions and posing them to the participants, the study managed to

generate detailed and comprehensive explanations that culminated in the thick descriptions discussed and presented in the findings section of the study (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

9. Participant selection

The population for this study comprised students from South Africa's 26 universities and it was from this population that a total sample size of 40 participants was purposefully sampled. This process guided the sampling procedure, which was as a result, non-random. The rationale for such a sample size was to ensure that the views expressed reflected the diverse perceptions of virtually all higher education students on the subject.

10. Data collection

Data were gathered through FGDIS with a purposive sample size of 40 student participants from the 26 South African universities categorised into 5 separate focus groups in line with the caution by Dzvimbo *et al.* (2010) that to be effective, a focus group discussion session (FGDS) needs to have not more than 12 members. This view was further guided by insights from Fayisetani (2010) who advises that focus group discussions need to adopt a funnel technique while utilising a focus group discussion guide (FGDG). The process thus began with a semi-structured set of questions that allowed the participants easy access into the deep discussions through an encouraging rapport between the researcher and the participants, allaying the latter's fears in expressing their views on the ramifications of the fees-must-fall protests in their respective universities. This became evidently clear in the level of confidence exhibited by the participants as the FGDIS gained momentum. They became so absorbed in the debates that they ended up more enthusiastic than before, leading to the generation of more in-depths views on their perceptions of how the fees-must-fall-protests needed to be handled by members of SAPS and the university communities.

11. Data analysis

The data analysis process followed a thematic approach where superordinate themes arising from the FGDIS were used as the basis for the discussion of the research findings. Guided by Hesse-Biber's (2012) assertion that data analysis in qualitative researches ought to be done in terms of meanings mediated through language and action tied to particular contexts, a descriptive and interpretive mode of data analysis was adopted involving the use of themes emerging from the FGDIS.

12. Ethical considerations

The instrument for data collection was first pilot tested with a group of students in one university to guarantee their transferability to different university students (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). As a result, the reliability of the focus group discussion guide (FGDG) could not be doubted (Dzvimbo *et al.,* 2010) as the differences amongst the student population within the different universities proved insignificant in the main study. The patterns of interactions and attitudes within the university communities were generally characteristic of prevalent cultures during the fees-must-fall-protests. In the main study, the data collection process was initiated by clarifying the purpose of the research and to reassure participants of their rights during the study especially in terms of issues to do with anonymity and confidentiality as well as their liberty to withdraw from the study at any moment. Fortunately, none of them withdrew prematurely. Other ethical principles taken into account in the study included informed consent, which had to be sought

from the Department of Higher Education and Training through the existing ethical clearance protocols of the universities, the right to self-determination, privacy and dignity, fair treatment and protection from harm (non-maleficence) during the course of the study.

13. Results and discussion

The findings of this study are discussed under the six themes as they emerged from the FGDS. The effects of the fees-must-fall disruptions on student learning; how student demands turned political; students on the frontline in a battle waged against themselves; the illusion of conflating transformation with decolonisation of education; ways through which university authorities dealt with the fees-must-fall-protests and how hope could have calmed students' temper tantrums. Findings under each of these themes are discussed in the subsequent sections.

14. The effects of the fees-must-fall disruptions on student learning

From the FGDIS, it was apparent that there were some macabre politics of university shutdowns with multiple duels of risk-taking at the time the student protesters were in action. The voices lamenting the dire consequences of shutting down universities were based on the need to help students not to lengthen their study durations. Consequently, where some university management teams took the initiative, however, tentative and called for constructive engagement, the more vociferous sections of student protesters would problematise and filibuster the motives and terms as well as the rules of engagement proposed (Hughes, 2017). The participants alleged they could even be some unspoken risk-taking between the various universities because it was taking long for university students to join forces in confronting the government that had since thrown the curved ball at the universities while watching developments at a distance. Following from this view one participant remarked as follows:

> **Student 2:** *Apart from his cameo appearance at the largely disastrous fees imbizo, the president has been nowhere to be seen as if our educational demands are a non-event.*

Participants also observed that the trigger for the current wave of student protests was not anything done or said by the universities but by the higher education minister's announcement of the fee increases for the 2017 academic year coupled with government's lack of urgency in handling matters put before it early enough for action.

15. How student demands turned political

Asked why their demands turned political, many participants echoed Maluleke's (2016) assertion that the shutting down of universities in the context of student protests was never unique or original to South Africa with some students in the FGDIS arguing that several post-independent African government dictators do that when cornered by students over their political rhetoric during election campaigns. The above views resonate well with those of Randi Bolsvik (2010) following his research on the relationship between governments and university protests in several African countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia where he concluded that students have been a major driving force in the second liberation of the continent (democratisation).

As evidence that they had read their political history well, particularly in terms of the relationships between dictatorial governments and HE students, many FGDIS participants had the audacity to dwell on the highlights of the patterns followed in the confrontations

between state and students in many African countries. They argued that it is as predictable as it is banal and, as Bolsvik (2010) notes, it would generally proceed in that students would announce a demand, followed by a protest march. Next comes a confrontation with riot police officers often with tragic consequences. Examples cited include events in the then Zaire on the eleventh and twelfth of May 1990 when at least 12 students were killed during a university campus student protest in Lubumbashi. Other cited examples are the 1986 Ahmadu Bello University where up to 15 students lost their lives when the army moved in to quell a student protest in Nigeria, as well as the violent exploits, including rape and murder of Idi Amin's army at Uganda's Makerere University in the 1970s (Jansen, 2017). One participant even stated that it is for this reason that virtually all standard texts of decolonisation still in vogue today were written during times of great national upheavals. In his own words:

> **Student 12:** *Examples of such texts include the famous influential works of Dambudzo Maretyera, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Steve Biko, Cheikh Anta Diop, Paulo Freira and Okot p' Bitek among others. In my view, the protests were, of course, never over struggle theory. Rather the theory produced by such thinkers was born out of the crucible of struggles in which students and universities were central. Some remarkable differences notwithstanding, citizens of our fellow African countries would also be pardoned for viewing the current #fees-must-fall wave of student protests sweeping over the South African University sector with a sense of both deja vu and deja fait. Of course, #fees-must-fall, #Rhodes-must-fall and # Afrikaans-must-fall come with their own South African particularities.*

The above views revealed the need to learn from rather than merely repeat history and the view that unlike in many other African states, in South Africa, it has been the protesters rather than the state that has been demanding the shutdown of universities and this made a remarkable difference.

16. Students on the frontline in a battle waged against themselves

The FGDIS results showed that in light of the power dynamics in South Africa, the fees-must-fall protests have pitted, in the main, black police officers against black university student leaders. Had the demonstrations continued to spread with the rage spilling from campuses into the streets, the results would have been a deepening animosity and resentment among the role players. One thing for sure was that black police officers would have gone into a crisis mode, if they were not already in it. On the one hand, they were saddled with an obligation to carry out instructions from the state, their employer; while on the other hand, they had to face inevitable confrontations with the students barely out of their teens, young enough to be their children. Many participants argued that history offers lessons that often, when public confidence in the government, ebbs to its lowest levels, state power becomes synonymous with brute force as exercised through the police and military forces as the repressive state apparatus (Althusser, 1972). Put differently, when things fall apart because the centre cannot hold mere anarchy is lost upon the world, as the Irish poet William Butler Yeats observed almost over a century ago in *The Second Coming.* It is not because they do not identify with the call for fee-free decolonised education that black police officers did not bat an eyelid in beating the protesting students. It was in spite of their identification with the protests that they meted out violence on their fellow blacks repeating what they did at Marikana in 2012 where 34 miners were killed following work protests. Police officers were aware of the exploitation suffered by the black underground mineworkers and they were receptive to the indignities of black life (Jansen, 2017).

Participating students noted however that given that whiteness is condescending and all powerful, black police officers could not help but be numbed into meek obeisance. However, a collective expression of black anger, as seen in the fees-must-fall-protest, provoked a black police officer's latent emotions of self-hate. They know that they are in no better a position than any black worker in the anti-black world that South Africa is and yet they earn a living from defending the system (Althusser, 1972). Despite having children who cannot afford the prohibitively high university fees, they still went in a war with themselves, an internal war that induced a psychosis of collective fear and alienation, uncannily similar to what USA psychologist Joy De Gruy (2005) labels a post-traumatic slave syndrome. The war was externalised through the outlet of violence against themselves and more often than not, against others. It was yet another form of black-on-black violence; this time presided over by a black government unlike how it happened prior to the advent of democracy, where blacks upheld the philosophy of black consciousness as an antidote for collective black victimhood (Somo, 2016).

17. The illusion of conflating transformation with the decolonisation of education

It was apparent in the results of the FGDIS that many participants were under the impression that transforming and decolonising the curriculum are the same. Asked to debate the distinction between the two concepts, they echoed the following sentiments:

> **Student 13:** *When it comes to university curricula, the decolonisation seems to involve replacing works from Europe or the global North with local theorists and African authors to prevent African universities from becoming more extensions of their former colonisers.*

> **Student 17:** *What I feel is that black and white South African academics should be in the decolonisation of higher education agenda together implying that white South African academics are as vital in driving genuine curriculum decolonisation as are their black counterparts.*

Substantiating on how curriculum decolonisation should be unveiled, many FGDIS participants argued that this should involve a conscious, deliberate, non-hypocritical and diligent interest by black and white academics in indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, peoples and languages (De Carvalho & Florez-Florez, 2014). The aforementioned lends credence to the words of Charles Eliot (2005), a former Harvard University President, who maintained that the characteristics of a university need to grow from seed, as it could not be transplanted from England or Germany in full leaf and bearing. The FGDIS also showed that many students in South Africa use the terms transformation and decolonisation interchangeably. In curriculum debates after apartheid, transformation has come to mean replacing texts by scholars and writers who are white, European or American with works done by those who are neither (Chetty & Knaus, 2016). It was also apparent in the FGDIS that these debates invoked strong emotions and responses from students. No wonder an overwhelming impression emerged that decolonisation equals an attack on white academics by black students and black academics – a perception that certainly requires a resolution (Odora-Hoppers & Richards, 2011).

A few students seemed to be aware that decolonisation is therefore not a project over which one racial group can claim sole custodianship and for them South Africans, as a people, need to agree that colonisation and apartheid robbed the country of ideas, skills,

creativity, originality, talent and knowledge. Many of these attributes got lost through legislated discrimination of the black people, most of whom could have enriched the country even further (Kamanzi, 2017). By reasoning from the previously mentioned, it is clear that decolonised education is not the same as a transformed education because for the former to be introduced, the existing system must be overthrown and the people it is supposed to serve must define it for themselves.

18. How university authorities dealt with student protests

The FGDIS participants asserted that no student should be excluded from university on financial grounds because there is a way to fund that. In their views, vice chancellors of South African universities needed to take steps to ensure that campus libraries, study areas, online platforms and computer laboratories remain open and critical across campuses to sustain the students as they work to complete their studies. Some of the participants, who felt that political malcontents were hijacking their genuine causes, lauded the measures adopted by other universities to enforce strict access control on campus. They agreed that the missing middle would thus qualify for government-backed loans whose repayment would be contingent upon graduating and earning above a certain threshold (income contingent loans) while the wealthy students would pay fees as they are currently doing. As a way forward, those students who receive government-backed loans would carry little financial risks, receive subsidised interest rates and capped loan repayments that would revert only in the event that they earn above a certain threshold. The FGDIS participants were also unanimous that the above view was not glamorous, as it did not have a catchy hashtag though it did grapple with the budgetary realities South Africa faces as a nation.

19. How hope could have calmed student tantrums

Many FGDIS participants argued that their frustrations were not unwarranted and therefore a government commitment was required. That universities continued to witness ongoing student protests despite negotiations, concessions and attempts to return to normalcy implies that students' tantrums needed to be calmed by giving them some hope for the better. One thing that participants wished was that some higher education officials needed to understand what one participant noted that:

> **Student 14:** *A decolonised education system needs to exist in dialogue and contestation with the Greek, Arab and European worlds for it cannot be seen to be everything about all things.*

They also needed to convey a sense that the student frustrations were to be addressed as this was certainly going to give them hope and a justification to allow a return to functional university education. This would be unlike unleashing private security, the police force and the army as was the case at other universities to harass, smack and bludgeon a frustrated student community. Further to the above, some FGDIS participants argued that since the student demands and frustrations could not be resolved in weeks and months, there was a real need for positive efforts towards alleviating the crisis as opposed to worsening it by promoting a long-term disruption to education.

20. Conclusion

Drawing from the years 2015 and 2016 student protests, it was clear that an impetus was given to a renewed interest in the decolonisation of the higher education curriculum in general and universities in particular. The following conclusions were made from the study: it is not all clear why the different student movements were insisting on free education for everyone (including the rich) in spite of all the evidence that this would be fiscally irresponsible and socially regressive. Subsidising the rich certainly wastes the precious tax income that could have otherwise supported more of the poor working class students. Further to this was the view that there is a need for a decolonised fee free education. This is especially in view of the fact that looking at the present role of higher education institutions, considering the physical locations, layouts and dispositions of the existing institutions, particularly the historically white ones, a vision of benchmarking and leadership cohorts, which remain unapologetically and uncritically aspirant to emulate the likes of Harvard and Oxford universities through form and function. The debates raised herein also highlight and raise questions as old as the formation of universities themselves and raises such questions as what is knowledge? How is it produced? And who is allowed to produce it?

21. Recommendations

Chief among the recommendations of this study are that higher education students need to shift their conversational demands from an unworkable ideological free decolonised education for all to a more pragmatic funding for all. They also need to understand, accept, concentrate on their academic work and desist from deceiving themselves about free education for there can never be a truly genuine one. Further to this, it is crucial for students to note that while there are several approaches to adopt in decolonising the higher education curriculum, central to any approach must be a rethink of the subject. Thoughts should also be liberated from the fetters of cartesian duality – from Descartes cogito, "I think therefore I am" and to argue that Ubuntu (I am because we are) and the active force of *currere,* celebrate the oneness of mind and body and the oneness of humans and the more-than-human-world. A decolonised curriculum should thus be epitomised by a shift in subjectivity from the arrogant "I" typical of Western individualism to a humble *"I"* to the *"I"* that is embedded, embodied, extended and enacted.

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