

# Higher education not a commodity

In this submission to the Fees Commission, academics outline the implications of free higher education

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**T**hrough their protests, campaigns and actions students have placed several fundamental issues on the public agenda.

Among the most important of these is the question of the public good with regard to education — the requirement that a democratic state is enjoined by its mandates to give effect to the promise of quality higher education to all its citizens.

We examine the meaning and implication of publicly funded higher education in societies such as ours and set out what we regard as some of its constitutive elements.

We don't elaborate on the nuances of public education regarding quality, epistemic foundations, pedagogical practices and decolonisation.

Publicly funded quality higher education is inseparable from the right to early childhood and basic education and affirm the Constitutional obligations of the state in that regard.

Public higher education cannot be a commodity that is traded in the market of goods and services.

The perception that higher education is a private good, replacing public interest for commercial considerations and denuded of social and public purposes, is untenable.

The social benefits of publicly funded higher education are intended to address a wide range of public issues affecting the economic, political, cultural, social, psychological, scientific and technological aspects of human activity.

In the prevailing social system, higher education is obliged in policy and practice to concentrate on the private benefits of higher education based on considerations about earnings or social status in place of the social benefits to individuals — as social beings and on the role of institutions seeking to enhance the public good through the creation of a just society.

The public outcomes of higher education should engender in students the capacity for social and scientific literacy, foster effective citizenship, connectedness and economic and other competencies. Higher education has the ability to address global problems, such as ecological and social sustainability, that neither states nor markets alone are competent to do.

It has a potentially defining role in establishing the values of society, the development of its culture and social consciousness and is critical for any imagination of a just society.

It represents not only a set of centres of learning, continually creating and disseminating knowledge and inculcating skills and attitudes, but also the potential for setting the interactions between the youth and older generations in defining



**On the march for free education: The authors of this article argue that the perception that higher education is a private good — replacing public interest for commercial considerations and denuded of social and public purposes — is untenable.** Photo: Daylin Paul

the idea of nationhood.

Treating higher education as a commodity will perpetuate inequality and division, reproduce the contradictions of the present society and continue to engender conflict and social unrest.

The production of knowledge is inseparable from and indispensable to the sustainability and development of all societies in a complex and challenging world.

Such knowledge has been essential to the development of people and their relationship with the global environment since the dawn of human civilisation.

Universities are now the key public institutions of knowledge development through their role in research, teaching and supervision.

The production and dissemination of knowledge is inextricably linked to their mandate as institutions of social, economic, cultural and intellectual development.

The costs of education are not reconcilable with narrow economic goals alone or to ideas about the “rates of return” to individuals because the remit of education is simultaneously individual, social and global and has qualitative attributes that are not measurable

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in conventional ways.

Universities can enhance the body of knowledge for the multiplicity of related roles in advancing the values and goals of a democratic society. Especially in societies that are marked by historical iniquity — racism and injustice as in the case of South Africa — the challenges faced by universities are fundamental to the reconstruction of such societies.

**T**he funding of education is not, however, an end, as it is essential for the achievement of the sociopolitical, cultural and transformative goals of a society characterised by the cleavages of racist oppression and exploitative social relations.

The public interest is served particularly when students from poor families, those previously marginalised and first-generation higher education students receive quality publicly funded education.

Such education should not be subject to the logic of “user pays” models, the approach preferred by global financial institutions, nor indeed to the vagaries of individual philanthropy or corporate charity.

It should be premised on a recognition of the historical and structural characteristics of social inequality.

This implies taxing the super-rich, who have consistently avoided the payment of proper taxes, as the main source of the funding necessary for the provision of publicly funded higher education.

For realising the right to free education for all, serious consideration must be given to the idea of respon-

sible public service and citizen work by the recipients of its benefits.

This could engender greater social consciousness about the relationship between knowledge and society — especially its role in resolving the relationship between education and the social and environmental issues facing all societies.

Such a fellowship would not only engender forms of social solidarity but also develop a new consciousness beyond the narrow and largely self-interested limits imposed by the requirements of market-led systems.

We would favour an approach in which all students are regarded as beneficiaries of public funding, and participants in a system prioritising the public good.

Students should be expected to contribute to society when leaving university through community service and by working in public institutions after graduation. In effect equal participation in the benefits of public funding by virtue of citizenship would support the creation of socially cohesive attitudes among students.

An alternative approach to one that seeks to differentiate between rich and poor students is necessary for more far-reaching structural and systemic change and social equity.

Free education for all is more likely to bring students from rich and poor backgrounds together to create socially cohesive relations in society.

Moreover, students could be enjoined to reflect and act upon what they have learnt in the classroom to address priorities in “the community” through partnering with them for mutually beneficial ends.

**T**here are several practical considerations that are necessary to support the provision of quality public higher education.

These include increasing the quantity and quality of contact time between lecturers and students, improvements to the lecturer-student ratios, appropriately remunerated staff (academic and administrative), good support especially to underprepared students in their undergraduate years, and other measures such as zero tax on books and an end to the exorbitant amounts of money paid to multinational companies for journal subscriptions.

Universities need to re-examine their expenditure priorities critically, especially with regard to increased security on campuses, the pursuit of rankings, the payment of exorbitant salaries to top managers, which contributes towards the corporatism and managerialism that is pervasive in the university system. Nonacademic staff should be employed by the institution and paid a living wage.

One of the aims of publicly funded higher education is to encourage ideas about sharing and co-operation, ending the culture of individualism that is so pervasive in all capitalist societies.

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