



Higher education funding crisis and access: Student protests, UWC#FMF, and social movements

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Abstract

Inadequate government funding for higher education, a higher education institutional funding crisis, and students' individual financial crises provoked students in 2015 and 2016 to mobilise themselves to protest against fee increases. Propelled by the #FeesMustFall movement which emerged in 2015, student activists demanded free access to higher education and succeeded in securing increased National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding and a 'no fee increase' for 2015 and 2016. The rise of fallist movements such as the #FeesMustFall movement signified new forms of social movements, new ways of mobilisation, and new forms of social movement learning. This chapter focuses on the UWC#FMF movement which emerged at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) to protest against the proposed 2015 fee increase prompted by the funding crisis in higher education.

Introduction

The government's policy to redress inequality and to transform higher education, is legislated. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training Act of 2013 are legislated policies that aim to promote an equitable society through the provision of higher education. The South African Constitution of 1996 outlines constitutional obligations that promote social justice by improving socio-economic rights and conditions of vulnerable citizens who were denied access to quality higher education during apartheid rule.

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training of 2013 acknowledges the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) commitment to progressively introduce free education for the poor in South African universities as resources become available (Department of Higher Education & Training [DHET] 2013b).

As the government developed the higher education sector after 1994, contradictions emerged between policy intentions and inadequate resource allocation for higher education institutions. Consequently, conflicts among government, management in higher education institutions and students prompted several student protests over many years.

Rebecca Hodes (2016: 140) describes the success of the South African government and higher education institutions' initiatives to expand access, as follows: '[B]etween 1994 and 2011, the number of students enrolled in higher education in South Africa almost doubled, increasing from 495 356 to 938 201'.

However, the increasing number of students placed a strain on universities' budgets. To meet the financial burden, universities were compelled to diversify their income from different sources such as government grants, student tuition fees and private income (Ministry of Education 2004).

The government's political and legislative mandate for higher education institutions to provide access to disadvantaged students created further challenges. According to Hodes (2016: 141):

In the third decade of South African democracy and a constitutional order that guaranteed the right 'to further education, which the state through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible', higher education became more expensive for students and their families.

As student fees at South African higher education institutions increased over the years, access and persistence at universities were challenging for many students. Limited NSFAS funding could not meet the financial needs of all disadvantaged

students. Consequently, registered students accumulated debt. In addition, political and financial pressure was placed on higher education institutions to allow access to indigent students who could not afford the fees.

Government's inadequate funding for institutional capacities to meet the needs of the increasing university student intake, and limited financial support for disadvantaged students, created an institutional funding crisis for many higher education institutions. Faced with mounting institutional debt, public higher education institutions were compelled to increase student fees. However, the announcement of a fee increase in 2015 ignited student activism and prompted the formation of the #FMF movements. Widespread #FMF student protests occurred across the country, continuing into 2016. Like their peers in the #FMF movement, the UWC#FMF activists were concerned about the increasing student fees at the institution and about accumulated debt resulting from the NSFAS loans that students could not reimburse.

This chapter sketches the higher education funding crisis and, drawing on a study of the UWC#FMF movement which emerged at the UWC during student protests in 2015, analyses this organisation as a social movement response to the funding crisis.

Higher education funding crisis: Implications for disadvantaged students' access

Contemporary crises related to access and higher education have their historical roots in colonial and apartheid policies and practices. The non-racial democratic government elected in 1994 undertook to address apartheid inequalities in higher education. Habib (2016: 113) reminds us about the constitutional imperatives that must guide South Africa through this process: '[T]he preamble of the South African Constitution demands that its public institutions simultaneously address the historical disparities bequeathed by Apartheid and build a collective national identity.'

Since 1994, the government has introduced various political, economic and education policies to expand access to higher education, especially for disadvantaged people. While there have been areas of success as a result of the pro-poor legislation that has been enacted, such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training of 2013, there are some barriers that countered the envisioned successes of these policies. In this regard, Badat (2016: 5) states:

The reality also is that the post 1994 African National Congress (ANC) government's economic policies, powerfully shaped by neoliberal

prescripts, have not generated the kind of level of economic growth and development that is required, and that could provide the state more resources to invest in higher education.

In their book, *Comrades in business: Post-liberation politics in South Africa*, Adam, Van Zyl Slabbert and Moodley (1997) shared their reflections:

The ANC's intentions were noble; from the clauses of the Freedom Charter to the policy goals of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Foremost among these were the eradication of poverty, inequality and the creation of a government of the people which would epitomise austerity and sacrifice and rid the country of exploitation, greed and corruption (Adam et al. 1997: 160).

However, Adam et al. (1997) acknowledged that the government abandoned the pro-poor RDP policy in 1996 in favour of a neoliberal market policy, known as Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), in order to pacify the capitalist system. Citing Harvey (2005), Badat (2016) explains that:

[n]eo-liberalism is a 'theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and the skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (Badat 2016: 6).

The government's shift away from its pro-poor policies and resource allocation was also evident in the sphere of higher education. Government's failure to address access to higher education for disadvantaged students more fully, prompted student protests over many years, most notably in 2015 and 2016. Jansen (2017: 28) acknowledges that a decline in funding in higher education institutions was the 'primary driver of the crisis in South African universities' during the #FEM student protests. This argument is also supported by data from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) South Africa's (2015) report which confirms the decline in funding of higher education. PwC's (2015: para 2) report reveals that 'state contributions to university education declined from 49% at the beginning of the century to 40% by 2012, while the burden on students increased from 24% to 31% during the same period'. This data refers to the actual decline in spending by the state on higher education that affected poor students.

Similarly, Badat (2016) alerts us to inadequate government funding for higher education:

South African higher education is inadequately funded by the state. One way of measuring the state's contribution is to consider the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that is allocated to higher education.

The percentage increased between 2004/2005 and 2015 and 2016, from 0.68% to 0.72%, ... in 2012, Brazil allocated 0.95% of GDP to higher education, 'Senegal and Ghana 1.4%, Norway, and Finland over 2% and Cuba 4.5%. If the state was to spend 1% of GDP on higher education, this would amount to R41 billion – an additional R11 billion' (Cloete 2015) (Badat 2016: 3).

As universities did not receive adequate government funding to absorb the growing student population that was allowed to study without paying fees, this created a funding crisis at many higher education institutions (HEIs). Consequently, HEIs were compelled to increase student fees. As many students from disadvantaged backgrounds could not afford the fees, a fee increase would create a more significant barrier regarding access to higher education.

The unaffordability of student fees was documented as an issue in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) UWC Fees Must Fall (UWC Fees Must Fall Responses 2015) between the UWC#FMF movement and university management. A participant complained that:

[f]ees were high and students could not afford [them]. Fees were expensive. (Participant 2)

Naicker (2016) acknowledges the promotion of the right to further education as one of the fundamental rights which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible. However, higher education has become prohibitively expensive for students from poor families.

The students' understanding of their families' financial positions seem to validate the protests of 2015 and 2016. A participant stated:

What is the moral justification to the parents of the students to even come and propose a tuition fees increase by 10%? (Participant 3)

The call for free education was necessary according to this participant:

[The] 10% ... annual tuition increase proposal on the table gave rise to the student protests in 2015 and 2016. (Participant 3)

The government was aware of students' financial crises and established NSFAS to address student funding (Parliamentary Monitoring Group [PMG] 2014). However, Paul Mashatile, the chairperson of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Appropriations, acknowledged that funds managed by NSFAS were inadequate to cover all financially needy and academically successful students at universities (PMG 2014). His committee therefore recommended full state subsidisation of poor students and those from working-class backgrounds to be realised progressively (PMG 2014).

Badat (2016) notes that there were significant, but not sufficient, increases in NSFAS funding:

The level of state funding for financial aid for students who are academically eligible for admission to universities and meet the criteria of the largely state-funded National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is inadequate to support all deserving students to appropriate ... levels for undergraduate and postgraduate study. This is notwithstanding that the funds voted to NSFAS have increased substantially over the years, from R578.2 million in 2004/5 to R4,095 billion in 2015/2016 (Badat 2016: 3).

Historical debt also became a significant barrier for some students, as they were unable to return to university to pursue postgraduate studies.

The student activists had to put pressure on the government, as indicated by a participant:

The students said education must be accessible. But there must be a commitment [from the government] to say by when... . (Participant 3)

To me education is key. It must be accessible to all... . (Participant 3)

These sentiments are crucial, because the then president of the Republic of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, in an interview during the period of the #FEM student protests, conceded that free education is indeed possible (Wild & Mbatha 2015). Naicker (2016) also confirms that:

the student protests that swept South Africa at the end of 2015, culminating in the fees must fall movement, resulted in a huge victory for university students, when President Jacob Zuma was forced to withdraw plans for a 11.5 percent tuition fee hike for 2016, after students shut down universities all over the country (Naicker 2016: 54).

During President Zuma's last term in office, he agreed to free higher education for poor students. However, the missing-middle students who are neither poor nor rich enough to afford academic fees at universities were not included.

Habib (2016: 116) asserts that historically black institutions (HBIs) 'have essentially become the educational reservoirs for the children of the marginalised communities in South Africa'. Should the government pursue the model of free education? Habib (2016: 127) explains: 'The Department of Higher Education and Training estimates that the total cost will be in the region of an additional R56 billion per annum, R19 billion for increased subsidy and a further R37 billion increased funding to NSFAS.'

Citing Saul and Gelb (1986), Badat (2016: 1) refers to the South African situation in higher education in 2015 and 2016 as an ‘organic crisis because of the existence of “incurable structural contradictions” of an ideological, political and economic nature’. The government’s political will and policy mandate stemming from the South African Constitution have created a political conundrum and a financial crisis in higher education.

Fallist movements and student protests

I know the government failed the students because free education is one of its promises. For example, the Freedom Charter says the doors of learning will be opened for all. (Participant 1)

This is an expression of thousands of students’ voices. It is my assertion that the #RMF student protests at the University of Cape Town (UCT) were a catalyst for the emergence of the #FMF student protests that erupted almost simultaneously at 23 universities in the country, including in HBIs, in 2015 and 2016.

Gillespie and Naidoo (2019: 1) argue that the 2015 and 2016 student movement protest had two origins and orientations:

The first emerged in March 2015 under the sign #RhodesMustFall at the University of Cape Town, demanding that a statue of the British colonist Cecil John Rhodes at the center of the campus be removed. Quickly, this movement developed into a critique of the Eurocentrism and white institutionality of South African universities and called for the ‘decolonization’ of higher education (Gillespie & Naidoo 2019: 1).

The second trajectory of the student movement emerged seven months later, but had a longer, less visible history across the country’s poorly resourced historically black universities. It erupted in October 2015 under the sign of #FeesMustFall (#FMF), beginning at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and quickly spreading to universities across the country (Gillespie & Naidoo 2019: 1).

While the abolition of, or a reduction in, tuition fees was the primary driver of the #FMF formation, student activists soon learnt that contextual factors affected their goals. In his contextualisation of the #FeesMustFall protests, Smith (2015) of *The Guardian* locates the immediate roots of these protests within the UCT student activists’ demand for the removal of the statue of British colonialist and arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes (1853–1902) and other symbols of colonialism at UCT. This demand initiated a social movement which the UCT students named the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement. Having its roots at UCT, the RMF movement was not limited to this institution. Instead, the ‘Rhodes Must Fall

campaign also had resonance with students' (O'Halloran 2016: 188) at Rhodes University (RU) in the Eastern Cape.

The RMF protest movement activities were not limited to protests. RMF activities and activism included students and staff initiating dialogues about free higher education, decolonisation of the academic curriculum, and increasing the proportion of black academics on campus (Andrews 2017). Furthermore, according to the UCT Rhodes Must Fall Movement (RMFM) (2017: 32), 'there were calls for ... radical actions by student activists, such as the removal of all statues and plaques on campus celebrating white supremacists, renaming of buildings and roads from names commemorating only white people amongst other demands'. The pertinent message of the fallists was to 'decolonise' the institution. Student activists at the HBIs also joined the FMF movement to share their plight about exorbitant student fees.

Decolonisation was an integral political pedagogical tool used in the FMF call for social transformation in various areas within higher education in South Africa at historical white institutions (HWIs) and HBIs.

UCT students and staff did not unanimously accept the demand for the removal of colonial symbols at the institution of higher learning advocated by the RMF movement. Some regarded Cecil Rhodes as 'one of Cape Town's grandest "sons": mining magnate, former prime minister of the Cape Colony, and conqueror of the colonial "hinterland"' (Luescher 2016: 22). In contrast, others perceived his being celebrated as the perpetuation of the colonial and racist legacy of South Africa (Badat 2016). Badat (2016: 12) reasoned that the black student community at UCT, under the banner of RMF, utilised the personality of Cecil Rhodes as a symbol to coerce the institutional authority to accelerate the transformational project, which included 'decolonization of the university' and 'transformation' of UCT in order to construct an institutional culture that does not alienate black students and staff (see also Habib 2016: 111). However, the students at UCT rejected the university's transformation agenda. According to the Rhodes Must Fall Movement (2017: 31), the students were in favour of a politicised programme of 'decolonisation of the university'.

Local parliamentarians and other social commentators publicly expressed their support for the goals of RMF (Maringira & Gukurume 2016). Thus, early in April 2015, the UCT Council voted to remove the Rhodes statue and management stated that 'the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign has been a "wake-up call", not only for tertiary institutions, but the entire country, as transformation issues needed to be addressed a long time ago' (Essop 2015: para. 1). The tripartite alliance of the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of the South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) contradicted itself on the issue of the RMF student protests. Some members expressed support for the student actions, while others disagreed.

Surely, the UCT student grievances and demands were legitimate and necessary? Importantly, the RMF activism approach became an example for the student protests that were about to follow. The RMF movement at UCT adopted the intersectional approach and highlighted this approach in its mission. It defined the approach as follows:

We want to state that while this movement emerged as a response to racism at UCT, we recognise that experiences of oppression on this campus are intersectional and we aim to adopt an approach that is cognisant of this going forward. An intersectional approach to our blackness takes into account that we are not only defined by our blackness, but that some of us are also defined by our gender, our sexuality, our able-bodiedness, our mental health, and our class, among other things (Daniel 2021: 20).

This intersectional approach to student protest initially spread to the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg following an announcement by the university's management that the tuition fees for the 2016 academic year would increase by 10% (Badat 2016). According to South African History Online (SAHO), the #WitsFeesMustFall protests started on 14 October 2015. These protests against the fee increases became the turning point for higher education and student activism in South Africa in the post-apartheid period.

Building on the success of the RMF movement, the embryonic student protests against increasing tuition fees at universities were organised under the hashtag banner of #FMF. FMF activists sparked solidarity action at most South African universities. The FMF movement gained momentum quickly and escalated to other universities across the country. *News24 Online* reported that RU students initiated their FMF protest on 19 October 2015, which resulted in the institution being shut down (Herman 2015). UCT students joined the FMF protest on 26 October 2015 (Herman 2015; Quintal 2015); the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) protest followed in late October 2015 (Langa 2016); the UWC protest began on 21 October 2015 (Qukula 2015); and University of Johannesburg (UJ) students initiated their support action on 22 October 2015 (Lenyaro 2015).

University of the Western Cape: Funding crisis, UWC#FMF, and protests

During the 1980s, UWC became a respected higher education institution attracting progressive anti-apartheid academics to its staff, which resulted in it becoming known as the 'intellectual home of the left' (Bozalek 2004: 2). This ensured that UWC was able to initiate a deliberate 'affirmative action admissions policy which has encouraged students from the "disadvantaged majority" to study at the institution' (Bozalek 2004: 2).

Tapscott, Slembrouck, Popkas et al. (2014: 15) confirm that, '[b]etween 1994 and 2000, student enrolments at UWC declined by approximately one third to below 10 000'. During this period, UWC experienced its own financial challenges in relation to student access and consequently could not continue to enrol students from marginalised communities. Politically, this posed a threat to the government's legislative framework of providing access to poor students at the institution. Tapscott et al. (2014) observe:

The period 1994-2000 was extremely difficult for the university. Because of the alignment with the liberation cause, it lost large numbers of its intellectual core to political and public leadership positions in the new democracy (Tapscott et al. 2014: 15).

UWC's support for the democratic government meant it had to face some serious challenges. Tapscott et al. (2014: 15) claim:

The new era also brought a mounting financial crisis. Although UWC tuition fees were among the lowest in the country, it naively heeded the Minister of Education's political call to suspend fee increases and allow indigent students to enrol without paying. This resulted in rising student debt with no relief from the state.

UWC student enrolment had to gradually increase to meet the government's legislative framework call for access to higher education. Under the leadership of the rector of UWC, Brian O'Connell, student intake doubled to a population of 20 269 students who studied in its seven faculties (Arts, Community Health Sciences, Dentistry, Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Law, and Natural Sciences) (UWC 2017).

The 2013 Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities, which was chaired by Cyril Ramaphosa, confirmed that many of the students who enrol at UWC come from low-quality schooling backgrounds and require extra support to succeed in their studies (DHET 2013a). While UWC's identity can be regarded as a pro-poor university, as it has affordable fees meant for marginalised students, simultaneously the diversity of the UWC student population is a microcosm of the South African population.

The UWC student population mirrors South African society. In 1998, Thabo Mbeki, the then deputy president of South Africa, suggested that South Africa is a country of two worlds. One of these worlds, mainly white middle class, is prosperous and globally integrated while the other, largely black and poor, lives in grossly underdeveloped conditions (Tapscott et al. 2014).

Lalu and Murray (2012) stated that UWC defied racial classification and government policy and, in fact, became the first South African university to officially open its doors to all racial groups. Cele and Koen (2003) described the

nature of student protests in black universities under apartheid as heterogeneous along racial lines as students vented their frustration against the state and institutions of higher learning.

As the majority of UWC students are poor, it can be argued that unaffordability of tuition has been a significant concern from the 1970s to date. This perspective is supported by the South African public intellectual, Jonathan Jansen (2003: 4), in his argument that students 'at HBUs were more uniformly poor, under-prepared and desperate for higher education – but without the ability to pay'.

Was the government aware of the concerns expressed by poor university students? Indeed, there is legislation that speaks to access and success that was promulgated by Parliament, as Badat (2008: 14) points out that the 'Higher Education Act 101 of 1997' calls for 'appropriate measures for the redress of past inequalities' to specifically cater for poor students.

Fees Must Fall Movement at the University of the Western Cape: Response to funding crisis

For some, the student protests during 2015 and 2016 were unsurprising. The pressure applied on the state and universities to address the plight of the 'fallist' movement forced the state to respond to the students' call for free higher education.

The call for a #NationalShutdown of higher learning institutions in South Africa led to UWC students joining the national FMF protests on 21 October 2015 (Pretorius 2015). This eventually gave rise to the formation of the so-called UWC#FMF initiative. Unlike FMF at the University of the Witwatersrand, where the South African Students Congress's (SASCO) politically aligned Student Representative Council (SRC) led the movement, student activists associated with the Pan Africanist Student Movement Association (PASMA), the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (EFFSC), the Democratic Alliance Student Organisation (DASO), and non-partisan feminist groups led FMF at UWC (Maringira & Gukurume 2016). SAHO also reports that the 'WitsFeesMustFall movement started as a PYA- [Progressive Youth Alliance] led SRC initiative and evolved into a student-led non-partisan movement, where decisions were made by a collective student body'.

As at other institutions, the UWC SASCO-led SRC distanced itself from the FMF movement and called on students to return to campus.

A cohort of PASMA student leaders replaced the SASCO-led SRC in a scheduled SRC election. In October 2015, following the announcement by the Minister of Higher Education and Training that the 2016 university fees increment should not exceed 6%, UWC students joined their mainly black counterparts from Cape

Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), UCT, and Stellenbosch University (SU) 'in a march to Parliament in Cape Town to demand that the Minister declare a 0% fee increase for the 2016' (Ndelu 2015: 14) academic year.

UWC students, like their peers at other HEIs, did not work in solidarity with the SRC to achieve the national student demand for a 0% fee increase. The UWC SRC released a statement to affirm its governance position, stating that '[a]s provided for and mandated by the Higher Education Act of 1997, the SRC is the only structure which is recognised as the vanguard and representative of the interests of students' (SRC UWC 2015).

Consequently, the government offer of 0% was not accepted. Instead, George Mavunga (2019: 93) confirms: 'The Minister of Higher Education and Training reached an agreement with the Minister of Police on the deployment of police to those university campuses rocked by violence.' Authors Rayner, Baldwin-Ragaven and Naidoo (2016: 4) state: 'Indiscriminate or unjustified use of force by the police in the enforcement of the university-imposed curfew' posed barriers to learning for students. Mavunga (2019: 88) writes that, '[i]n addition to relying on the power of the collective, the selected newspaper articles depict the students as perceiving violence as a form of agency through which the conflict in the #FeesMustFall protests could be resolved'.

MyBroadband reported on 28 October 2016 that the situation on campus was volatile, and it led to the destruction of university property such as the residential services building (#FeesMustFall Protestors' Rampage 2016). These events were a barrier to teaching and learning because classes and academic activities were suspended.

Allegations were levelled against private security companies that were associated with the apartheid regime. The crisis was almost reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s higher education (HE) landscape. Badat (2016) recalls:

Writing about the period after the Soweto student uprising of 1976, Saul and Geld characterized the apartheid state as being mired in an organic crisis because of the existence of incurable structural contradictions of an ideological, political and economic nature (Badat 2016: 1).

Badat (2016: 13) also confirms:

In some instances, student demonstrations that took to the streets or where protestors attempted to march to key public building[s], as with the case of the University of the Western Cape students, were treated with an especially heavy hand by police.

Badat (2016: 20) adds: [O]ther universities such as UWC and CPUT, which have a largely lower middle-class and working-class student body, experienced arson

and damage to buildings running into the millions, were closed early and the final examinations postponed until early 2016.’ Ten UWC#FMF activists were arrested on 11 November 2015 (Herman 2015; Lenyaro 2015; Quintal 2015). Even though there were elements of anarchy and violence during the protests that emerged as a response to the militarisation of campus by police and private security, the actions of the student protestors should be studied as revolutionary and as acts of radical student activism seeking radical transformation within social movement learning.

Badat (2016) disclosed that #FMF activists at HE institutions questioned the role of elected SRCs. #FMF activists accused these SRCs of failing to represent the interests of students. O’Halloran (2016: 192) recalled a parallel situation at RU where ‘students also questioned the role and legitimacy of the SRC as representatives of the student body’, as the SRC was considered ‘to be part of the institutional structure and culture and not a real or potential driver of change’. Ntuli and Teferra (2017: 74) put this into perspective by suggesting that the ‘internet-age social movements’ like #FMF ‘are horizontal, broad-based and leaderless, [and] negotiations between the DHET and SRCs were ineffective, as the movements did not recognise formal leadership as their representatives’.

Prior to the 2015 and 2016 FMF protests, UWC student leaders, like their counterparts at other HBIs, were already protesting, demanding student access and funding for tuition fees from management due to a lack of government funding and rising student debt and accommodation fees. However, the 2015 and 2016 protests were different from previous student protests. The student protests were popularised and advocated through social media under Twitter hashtags such as #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF).

Increasingly, from the #ArabSpring uprising, the use of Twitter became an integral part of student protests or demonstrations globally, and #FMF followed the trend nationally. This perspective is confirmed by Castells in the statement that ‘demonstrators used the hashtag #SidiBouZid on Twitter to debate and communicate, thus indexing the Tunisian revolution’ (Castells 2015: 28).

The #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, UWC#FMF and #WitsFeesMustFall, among others, were nascent social formations that collectively became known as ‘fallists’ movements and were characterised by the hashtag #...MustFall. According to Ahmed (2019: 5), the term ‘Fallism denoted the students’ demand to remove the Rhodes statue from UCT; for the statue to fall. But Fallism appears to have several meanings.’ Ahmed (2019: 5) shares that ‘Fallism is an attempt to make sense of the experiences of black bodies in a white, liberal university, through decolonial theories centred on Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, and Black radical feminism’.

Student protests at South African institutions of higher learning during 2015 and 2016 were not isolated from student protests that had occurred earlier

internationally. In the mid-2000s, students from developed economies, such as Germany, and developing African countries, such as Kenya and Mozambique, demanded free higher education (Langa et al. 2016). Likewise, these protests followed the 2011 United Kingdom public demonstrations against the exorbitant fees universities started to charge for tuition (Teicher 2011). The local university student protests, which called for free higher education, were influenced by common international demands. Fatima Moosa (2016), of the *Daily Vox*, identified a number of countries globally that experienced protests with similar demands.

The state has promulgated policies that support access to higher education for all. For poor students at HBIs, access to higher education was meant to create possibilities for many South Africans, especially for black citizens. Students at universities across the country challenged the government's status quo in relation to access to affordable higher education in 2015 and 2016.

Higher education funding crisis, social movements and social movement learning

The #FMF social movement in 2015 and 2016 presented a radical approach which involved informal and formal learning. Student activists gained insight into inclusive pedagogy, democratic and radicalised education, and transformative learning, as suggested by Glowacki-Dudka, Jones, Brooks et al. (2012).

Numerous scholars have examined social movements as sites of learning (Eyerman & Jamison 1991; Finger 1989; Kilgore 1999; Spencer 1995; Walters 2005). The scholarly literature generally discusses learning as a product of individual engagements with learning tasks (Billett 2001). However, learning and knowledge construction within social movements are generally understood as the outcome of shared activities, collaboration and cooperation among movement activists. The literature theorises social movement learning as a product of collective endeavours (Choudry & Kapoor 2010; Eyerman & Jamison 1991; Hall 2005). Alberto Melucci (1980) adds that collective behaviour as collective action theories also plays an important role in the formation of a social movement.

Theorists that have worked on the evolving nature of social movement learning have theorised learning as cognitive praxis (Eyerman & Jamison 1991; Finger 1989; Kilgore 1999; Spencer 1995; Walters 2005), collective learning (Kilgore 1999), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), collective behaviour (Melucci 1980), and collective action (Melucci 1980).

It is important to note that there are numerous definitions of what constitutes social movements. Morris and Herring (1984: 2) acknowledge that 'social movement' is a contested concept because each definition reflects the

theoretical assumption of the specific theorist. The literature suggests that social conflict and collective activism are two characteristics of any social movement. This is reflected in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition of a social movement as a collective that is 'loosely organized but [maintains a] sustained campaign in support of a social goal, typically either the implementation or the prevention of a change in society's structure or values' (Killian, Smelser & Turner 2019: para. 1). This conception is consistent with Diani's (1992: 9) review of multiple analytical definitions of social movements, which led him to conclude that social movements are networks of 'informal interactions between a plurality of individuals and/or organisations' which, through collective activities, develop shared 'beliefs and solidarity' and engage in 'collective action on conflictual issues'. Walters (2005: 3) concurs that social movements have a 'collective identity'; 'they exist in an antagonistic relation to an opposed group or interest', and 'they embody a mobilising ethic, moral code or set of beliefs that reflect shared values and purposes'.

Social movement learning has shown in the case of the FMF movement that crises can emerge when there is a contestation or conflict of political and socio-economic ideology in higher education. As a result, when dealing with matters of social change and social transformation in higher education, intellectual or political tensions may heighten for a social-good outcome. The study has also shown that the conception of social movements dictates that a group of individuals or activists as a collective are capable of challenging the status quo in order to bring about the desired change in society or a community. The desired outcomes are variable, and are prompted by material conditions and social dynamics, and the dire need to collectively address and find solutions to challenges using informal methods to demonstrate against authority.

Some scholars have taken a critical view of the debates about #FMF and believe demand for free education was justified and well intentioned:

[A]rguments against free higher education often cite its regressivity, in that it benefits the middle- and upper-middle socio-economic classes to which the great majority of students belong at the expense of the low-income taxpayers whose children are not well represented in higher education, as a reason to charge tuition fees and implement means-tested grant and loans programmes (Marcucci & Johnstone 2007: 37)

Conclusion

It was not surprising that adult learners at UWC took it upon themselves to participate in the national student protests in order to ensure that the call to access higher education was elevated. The FMF student protests provided an opportunity for the state and institutions of higher learning to reflect on access

to higher education by overcoming some of the financial and systemic barriers to ensuring student success.

Student mobilisation and solidarity played an integral role in assisting the student activists to ensure that there was a unified student voice across the country. Radical student activism elevated the students' call for the fees to fall. Importantly, student activism prompted discussions about a new financial model for HBIs, such as UWC, to receive more state funding for university infrastructure, and a student funding scheme to address the systemic disparities prevalent in HBIs inherited from the apartheid government.

The aspirational demands in respect of post-school education policy do not match the resources currently available to provide access to free higher education for all previously disadvantaged students. To address this challenge, government should conduct research into the phenomenon of the FMF protests from 2015 onwards, and examine all areas in higher education in order to gain credible data that can inform its short-, medium- and long-term planning. Planning should start for a five-year period and extend to a 30-year period into the future. Public and private social pacts looking into funding of higher education should be established; and a new repayment method to reimburse the funds should be explored as part of a national patriotic duty.

Despite the successes of the 2015 and 2016 student protests, the higher education funding crisis deepened. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created barriers to accessing higher education. Some students cannot afford pedagogical tools for online or blended learning. In an online learning environment, students are required to have devices such as tablets, laptops or smartphones to access learning materials provided by lecturers. Jansen (2020: 169) observes that 'there is an emphatic digital divide when it comes to opportunity to learn in the context of online learning and the conditions of a pandemic-enforced lockdown'. There are also issues associated with data costs. Jansen (2020: 170) states:

It is reasonable to project, even from the limited data in the stories of disadvantage, that, for most students in South Africa, there are neither devices, data or a connected teacher and this means that online learning – even if intermittent – simply does not exist.

Badat (2020: 24) agrees, stating:

The post-pandemic 'new normal' in higher education could further entrench and create new barriers to transform in and through higher education unless, learning from recent struggles, a coalition of social forces organises for radical reforms within and beyond higher education.

In 2021, the funding crisis in higher education again came to the fore when students protested by demanding access. According to Macupe (2021):

In reply to a parliamentary question in March, Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande said that between 2010 and 2020 more than 10 000 former students were yet to receive their qualification certificates, but this had not happened because they have outstanding fees totalling more than R10 billion. The information is based on submissions made by 21 of the 26 universities.

Comins (2021) states that to resolve the higher education funding crisis:

Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Blade Nzimande has announced the establishment of a task team to find a solution to problems facing the National Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding of university education, to help students and institutions which are struggling under a huge debt burden (Comins 2021: n.p.).

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