

South Africa's student protests have lessons for all universities

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The protests in South Africa began in the north, at Tshwane University of Technology, early last year, when students were prevented from registering because of outstanding fee debts. This was exacerbated by the inability of the state loan and bursary agency – the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) – to meet its commitments. Confrontations spread to other campuses, taking different forms.

Students at three universities in the south were next to act. At the University of Cape Town, students took issue with the legacy of colonialism, symbolised by the memorial to Cecil John Rhodes. Students at Stellenbosch distributed a powerfully evocative film – *Luister* (Listen) – that documented black students' daily experiences of racism and discrimination. Students at the University of the Western Cape protested against levels of debt that would prevent them from graduating.

Dissent crystallised into a national movement in October, when universities began to announce fee increases in excess of 10% for the 2016 academic year. The government, initially dismissive, was forced to impose a freeze on fee increases and find emergency funding to compensate universities for their loss of revenue. Following this compromise, the government has appointed a commission of inquiry into student funding that will report in October this year. The 2016 budget, tabled in parliament in late February, underwrote the extension of the freeze on fee increases for a further two years and included funding for NSFAS to meet its obligation to current students.

But despite these measures, protests have escalated and are likely to continue. This is because they are rooted in difficult economic realities that cannot be resolved within the current model of student funding. Even if fees are frozen at 2015 levels for three years, a place at a public university is still unattainable for those from average South African families.

South Africa's student protests have lessons for all universities

The uprising has specific roots in apartheid and colonialism. But issues of race, identity, fees and unemployment are provoking unrest across the world

Martin Hall

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Violence at South Africa's universities has escalated from damage to statues and artworks and confrontations with security staff and police, to the burning of buildings and brutal clashes between student factions. It's the second year of conflict over tuition fees, shortages of student accommodation, low-paid staff and the language of instruction.

Underlying youth anger are the legacies of racial discrimination and colonialism, high levels of unemployment and pronounced and increasing income inequality. While the form of campus protests is specific to South Africa, these fault lines have parallels in other higher education systems, including those of Britain and the US.

We see global concern about the low-paid and immigrant workers who provide essential campus services and the effects of inequality on participation in higher education. US campuses are riven by racial tensions, while Europe is witnessing a surge of xenophobia in the face of the refugee crisis.

The spark

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Even if fees are frozen at 2015 levels for three years, a place at a public university is still unattainable for those from average South African families. This is because income distribution is heavily skewed in favour of the top 20% of households. The average annual household income in South Africa is about £3,500; fees and living costs for a single year of university add up to more than this. These issues are outside the terms of reference of the commission of inquiry, and far more substantial than the short-term fix announced in February's budget.

Rising anger

The university crisis has shown how race and history continue to permeate almost every aspect of South Africa's public life. Intense debates across campuses and through the media have opened a window on the disillusionment and anger of many black South Africans born after the Mandela-led settlement of the early 1990s.

This protesters include both students dependent on financial aid and those from the insurgent black middle class. Their intellectual inspiration comes from the anti-colonialism of Franz Fanon, the black consciousness of Steve Biko. Their focus is on a curriculum that they see as narrow and unreformed and on cultures and practices that position them as unwelcome outsiders in public universities in their own country.

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Across South Africa, unemployment is high and inflation is rising, driven in part by drought. Municipal authorities have failed to keep pace with the demand for basic services such as water and sanitation.

These broader circumstances have shaped a parallel, worker-driven campaign at universities for higher wages and improved benefits. Workers demand that universities reverse the trend of outsourcing services such as security, catering, cleaning, transport and grounds maintenance to specialist companies in a campaign that mirrors the call for universities in Britain to pay the living wage rather than the mandatory minimum wage.

The bigger picture

South Africa's universities are a miner's canary for wider issues in higher education. Income inequality and widening participation, while extreme in South Africa, are issues for many countries. Unfair acts of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity and other identifiers are common concerns.

There are significant insights to be gained through comparison with growing racial tensions across campuses in the US, and with Britain's continuing difficulties in ensuring that universities are free from discrimination against Muslim students. And the rise of xenophobia and unjust discrimination against refugees is a problem that South African universities share with every university in Europe.

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