



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### **THE MANIFOLD CHALLENGES FACING SA'S HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNMENT POLICY**

*By Dr Douglas Blackmur*

The FeesMustFall (FMF) movement in South Africa, from 2015 to 2017, provoked significant academic discourse and literature as well as broad debates in the education sector and the public about the future direction of South Africa's universities.

The movement, characterised by nationwide protests demanding reduced or free higher education fees to students and curricula reforms, marked a departure from the relative calm in universities since 1994.

*Statues and Storms: Leading through Change*, by former University of Cape Town vice-chancellor Max Price, is a recent addition to the literature. It provides a context and a point of departure for identifying and analysing the challenges South African universities and the national government face in achieving meaningful and intelligent transformation and other important goals, as discussed, for example, by the South African Human Rights Commission in its 2016 report.

This report criticised what it called slow progress in transforming higher education due to various factors, including a lack of shared understanding of transformation, institutional inertia, governance failures, underfunding, and inadequate oversight by the Department of Higher Education and Training.

In my view, there are in essence three key public policy areas that need to be examined and addressed by the national government.

First, assessing the quality of the government's understanding of the higher education system's performance and the availability of reliable data for policymaking.

Second, addressing matters of funding for higher education. It is not at all clear that the taxpayer can, or should, fund the acquisition of university qualifications.

And third, discussing public policy challenges related to calls for the decolonisation of higher education curricula. This has the potential to change radically the nature of South African higher education and thus requires major participation by the national government.

Max Price refers in his book to a "colonial institutional landscape and culture of UCT". This raises important research questions regarding the adequacy of communication and response mechanisms within UCT (and other universities), government agencies and the Cabinet in the period leading up to the FMF movement. This matter is also critical in determining future reforms to the government's higher education public policy-making processes.

These questions include were there submissions from various stakeholders such as students, alumni, staff associations, and trade unions that foreshadowed the FMF's demands? Were any such

submissions effectively analysed and acted on by university management? Did regulatory bodies such as the South African Qualifications Authority and the Council on Higher Education, as well as government departments, parliamentary committees, ANC-affiliated student organisations and the State Security Agency advise the government on the political temperature on university campuses?

Political decision-makers, of course, may not have taken any such warnings seriously or may have failed to convert them into actionable policies. If there were a lack of effective information flow and response mechanisms in the government then this may indicate the existence of systemic weaknesses in higher education public policy development and implementation.

This opinion piece advocates a national inquiry to identify any such shortcomings and to propose reforms to public higher education decision-making processes. This could involve assessing the performance of regulatory bodies like the Council on Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Committee to ensure they act as effective early warning systems to assist government to design responses to emerging pressures in universities. The government may consider extending the responsibilities of the HEQC to embrace those of both an economic regulator and a complaints-based regulator.

Challenges facing South Africa's higher education system include cost, revenue, governance, curriculum and other policy considerations. Almost certain future limitations on higher education funding may lead to disruptions similar to those initiated by the FMF movement in 2015. South Africa needs to conduct an urgent, deep debate over how each element of tertiary education should be funded. Given that our first responsibility is arguably to the millions of citizens who survive on social grants, future tertiary funding, from whatever source, must not compromise improvements to the welfare of the poor and unemployed. A fundamental question is to what extent taxpayers should fund the components of higher education.

There are ominous signs that a repeat of the FMF challenge to government higher education policy and to system performance may occur in the foreseeable future. These include matters such as governance quality and racial concerns as exposed by the Mpati report on UCT, student accommodation, widespread corruption as revealed by Jonathan Jansen and the almost unbelievable events at Fort Hare, and the apparently deplorable performance of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. These developments sustain an argument in favour of urgent public inquiries into Higher Education costs, governance and funding options.

Examples of what such enquiries might investigate include Jansen's concept of the "welfare university". This involves the expanding social welfare functions undertaken by universities and their associated costs. Furthermore, innovative approaches like allowing students to design their degree programmes based on Massive Open Online Courses may reduce costs to students and increase accessibility to high-quality education.

The higher education public policy agenda must also embrace the complexities and controversies surrounding the agitation over the decolonisation of curricula. This raises questions about the definition of decolonisation, what is to be included in decolonised curricula, and the role of government and regulators in shaping curriculum changes. Regulators may, for example, determine guidelines for curriculum reform and may ultimately audit samples of re-designed curricular.

The concept of decolonisation encompasses a wide range of contested ideas. The principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, for example, will be important in this regard and will need to be stress tested as to their proper meaning and if/how they ought to be used to guide curriculum design processes. The waters will no doubt be muddied by the presence of certain

ideological biases that will certainly emerge in the decolonisation debates, but there is surely no room for, say,  $2+2=5$  thinking in serious discussions about curriculum. Indeed, perhaps it may be appropriate for the national government, while engaging them in the process, to remove ultimate responsibility for curriculum matters from universities. Public policy, furthermore, will need to anticipate unintended consequences and the financial costs of implementing revolutionary curriculum reforms.

The major challenge, however, for South African higher education public policy is to ensure that the reputation of South African higher education qualifications meets the highest international standards. This is the benchmark test. If we fail it, the consequences for graduates, and the wider society, will be dire.

***Dr Blackmur is an independent higher education researcher and a member of the Inclusive Society Institute's (ISI) Advisory Council. This is an abridged and edited version of the article "The Significance of Max Price's 'Statues and Storms. Leading Through Change' for Higher Education Public Policy in South Africa" published in the ISI's Journal for Inclusive Public Policy, Volume 4, Issue 1, in January 2024.***