

Exploring the Challenges of Higher Education in South Africa: A Comprehensive Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper examines the current problems in South Africa's higher education sector. There has been a considerable increase in the number of enrollments in South Africa's higher education institutions since 1994. This increase has led to significant problems that threaten the quality of South Africa's higher education output. A qualitative research approach was employed in this paper, and a narrative literature review was used to examine the current challenges in South Africa's higher education sector. Findings revealed that the massification of higher education, increasing rate of students dropping out, infrastructure deficits, student accommodation and challenges around funding have given rise to numerous issues, such as riots and protests, which have, in the process, damaged university infrastructure. The paper concludes that without an alignment between what higher education produces and what the market needs, there is likely to be an increase in the production of graduates who struggle to find employment, further impeding the need for inclusive socio-economic development.

Keywords: Development, Support, Higher Education, Policy.

استكشاف تحديات التعليم العالي في جنوب أفريقيا: مراجعة شاملة للمؤلفات

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المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث المشاكل الحالية في قطاع التعليم العالي في جنوب إفريقيا. وشهد عدد المسجلين في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في جنوب أفريقيا زيادة كبيرة منذ عام 1994. وأدت هذه الزيادة إلى مشاكل كبيرة تهدد جودة مخرجات التعليم العالي في جنوب أفريقيا. وجرى استخدام نهج بحث نوعي في هذا البحث، وأُستخدمت مراجعة المؤلفات السردية لدراسة التحديات الحالية في قطاع التعليم العالي في جنوب أفريقيا. وكشفت النتائج أن توسيع الوصول إلى التعليم العالي وزيادة معدل تسرب الطلاب وعجز البنية التحتية وأماكن إقامة الطلاب والتحديات المتعلقة بالتمويل أدت إلى ظهور العديد من المشاكل، مثل أعمال الشغب والاحتجاجات، التي ألحقت أضراراً بالبنية التحتية للجامعة. ويخلص البحث إلى أنه بدون المواءمة بين ما ينتجه التعليم العالي وما يحتاجه السوق، من المرجح حدوث زيادة في إنتاج خريجين يكافحون من أجل العثور على عمل، مما يزيد من إعاقة الحاجة إلى التنمية الاجتماعية والاقتصادية الشاملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : التطوير، الدعم، التعليم العالي، السياسة.

Introduction

When South Africa emerged from apartheid and the subsequent consolidation of multi-party politics in 1994, the newly elected African National Congress-led government inherited a segregated and divided country characterized by high levels of inequality and poverty. Subsequently, there was a need to implement policies to address these shortcomings. Policies had to be underpinned by the need to support socioeconomic inclusion and ensure that those disadvantaged under apartheid play a meaningful role in the new political dispensation (Mosala et al., 2017). Inclusive development is essential for any democratic government emerging from an undemocratic and discriminatory era.

There was an immediate need to ensure equal access to health care, social welfare and educational services. These were vital to ensure a vibrant population that could contribute to the new political dispensation (Van Niekerk, 2003). Hence, education became an important focal point for the newly elected government,

reflected in the increased budget allocation. The Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2011) reveals that R1.4 billion was allocated for school construction and maintenance through the Reconstruction and Development Programme between 1995-1997. Much progress was made in school electrification and increased water supply to schools.

Moreover, there has been a significant increase in education expenditure under the post-apartheid democratic government, from R31.8 billion in 1994 to R51.1 billion in 2000 (The Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2011). At almost 6 percent of the GDP, South Africa has one of the highest rates of government investment in education worldwide. Within the context of higher education, Kosie (2022) submits that the headcount of university enrolment has almost doubled in size, increasing from 495 356 in 1994 in universities, including technikons and teacher training colleges- to 938 201 in 2011 in public universities and universities of technology.

Moreover, government funding for higher education through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has increased considerably since 1994. The NSFAS budget increased from R70 million in 1994 to nearly R15 billion in 2018 (Pretorius, 2019). In 2023, Dyomfana (2023) revealed that in 2023, the government plans to spend R38.6 billion on funding for university students through NSFAS, further signalling the importance of education for the South African government.

While such efforts can welcome South Africa's socio-economic development post-1994, it has been fraught with numerous challenges. Poverty, inequality, unemployment, and, more recently, load shedding have come to cripple South Africa's economic growth potential (Munzoor & Eman, 2022). Even though the increase in higher education enrolment can be seen as a positive development, the increase has led to numerous problems within the higher education sector, which have begun to raise doubts about the quality of higher education. This paper examines the current problems in South Africa's higher education sector. It reflects how these problems cast doubt on the quality of higher education offered in South Africa's higher learning institutions.

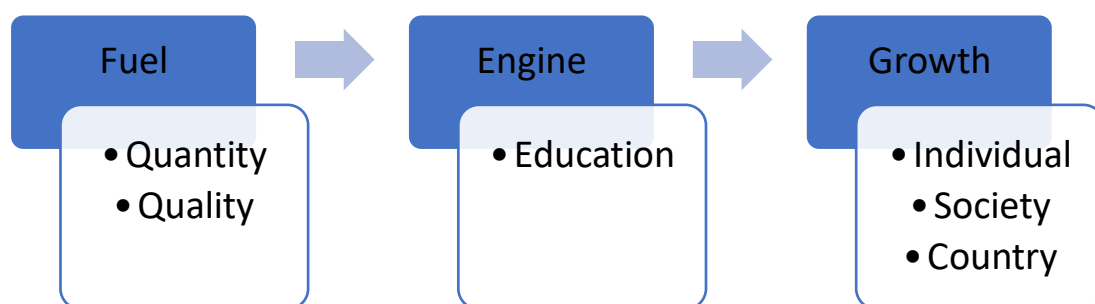
The paper argues that an increase in enrollment does not mean an increase in output; this has been the most significant problem in South Africa's higher education sector. The paper is guided by the following question: What are the problems of South Africa's higher education sector, and to what extent have they

given rise to the need for urgent interventions? This paper employs a narrative literature review approach to meet the objectives of this paper. Secondary sources were used to examine higher education challenges in South Africa. The ultimate aim was to use these concepts, their components, and their relationships to reach meaningful findings on the problem of higher education in South Africa.

Theoretical support

This paper applies the human capital theory to explain the importance of higher education in South Africa. Initially formulated by Becker (1962) and Rosen (1976), the theory asserts that individual workers have skills or abilities to improve or accumulate through training and education. Ross (2021) notes that the human capital theory relies on the assumption that formal education is highly instrumental and necessary to improve the productive capacity of a population. In short, human capital theorists argue that an educated population is a productive population. The human capital theory emphasizes how education increases workers' productivity and efficiency by increasing the cognitive stock of economically productive human capability, a product of innate abilities and investment in human beings (Ross, 2021). Figure 1 below explains the core underpinnings of the human capital theory.

Figure 1: Application of human capital theory in education



Source: Soe, 2019.

Investment is regarded as fuel to run the education engine. If the investment has positive results, the education engine will improve and have good results for individuals and society. Castelló-Climent & Hidalgo-Cabrillana (2012) note that

there is a belief that expanding educational opportunities and access can promote economic growth. Therefore, the provision of formal education is seen as an investment in human capital, which proponents of the theory have considered equally or even more worthwhile than physical capital. The South African government, for its part, has argued that education access is critical for development. Quality education can help ensure an improvement in human conditions and help contribute to the economy.

Moreover, for South Africa, Education is the critical driver for a vibrant economy, improved health care system, and lower unemployment and poverty, hence the justification for its ever-increasing budget. There is a widespread belief that an educated population will play a role in the country's development; hence, education has been at the centre of the government's developmental agenda.

Literature review

Current issue in South Africa's higher education sector

The massification of higher education

Education is a necessary process to shape the thinking capacity of people and allows them, through their skills and knowledge, to meaningfully contribute towards economic development. Therefore, education is widely regarded as an essential tool for empowering people (Adetiba, 2019). For several years, the massification of higher education in South Africa has been a source of discussion and debate. Massification refers to an increase in students enrolled in higher learning institutions (Adetiba, 2019).

The situation has been observed in South Africa, where there has been a significant increase in the number of students enrolling in various institutions and colleges around the country over the last several years. The government's efforts to improve access to higher learning institutions have been one of the key drivers leading to the massification of higher education in South Africa (Adetiba, 2019). South African institutions are currently facing a conundrum in terms of accommodating the large influx of students.

Apart from this, academics are under immense pressure to fulfil quality education's teaching and learning mandate, often with limited resources or support (Jansen, 2018). There has been overcrowding in lecture halls, with limited space; some have had to sit on the floor, and some cannot access the lecture hall (Mlambo

et al., 2021). There have been arguments that overcrowded lecture halls compromise the quality of education offered. As argued by Pillay (2020), lecturers who teach large classes have immense pressure from marking many tests and exam scripts. There is also the need to undertake academic publishing, partake in community engagement, and handle administrative tasks as part of their duties. When a classroom is overcrowded, students' participation levels tend to decrease, as students are unwilling to contribute (Marais, 2016).

Even though the South African government acknowledges problems associated with massifying higher education, the demand for higher education is just too great. It exceeds the number of available higher learning institutions to cater for this demand. Moreover, because the government has put higher education at the centre of economic development, addressing the massification issue will pressure the government into investing in new institutions of higher learning, especially since private higher education remains financially out of reach for most South Africans. Mokoena (2021) submits that more students are now finishing their secondary education, increasing the number of students eligible for admission to higher learning institutions.

The availability of scholarships, bursaries, and other financial assistance has also contributed to the massification of higher learning institutions in South Africa. Makwea (2023) notes that even though secondary school leavers may qualify for a particular course, they may not be able to enrol at a public university due to the lack of space. For the author, the situation will likely stay the same, and universities will continue to accept only a fraction of applications for the foreseeable future.

For example, universities witnessed an increase in applications from the matric class of 2021; the University of Johannesburg (UJ) received 306 000 first-year applications but could only admit 10 500 students, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) had 255 000 applications, who were competing for 10 000 spaces available and one of South Africa's youngest varsities, the University of Mpumalanga, had only 1 800 places available, but has received 80 000 applications (Mkize, 2022). South Africa's higher education sector comprises government-funded universities, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, and private colleges.

To offset the pressure on universities, the government has embarked on a drive to ensure learners see TVET colleges as an ideal option should they not be

admitted to university. This is driven by the notion that the South African government has identified artisanal and technical skills as being in 'strong demand' in the market and has listed them as 'priority skills'. More specifically, South Africa has a shortage of qualified electricians, boilermakers, fitters and turners, welders, and automotive motor mechanics (Smit, 2021). TVET colleges are assigned to furnish students with vocational and occupational courses designed to provide both theory and practical experience while training them for employment, thus ideal for addressing the abovementioned skills shortage.

On the other hand, many university courses offer programs that focus on theory. However, they are still seen from a superior perspective than TVET colleges, thus contributing to the massification of higher education in South Africa.

Increase in dropout rate at SA higher education institutions.

Ntema (2022) posits that in recent years, South Africa has seen a worrying rise in the number of students dropping out of higher education institutions. This trend is a cause for concern, as it highlights potential problems with the education system and has negative implications for the country's economic and social progress. Several factors contribute to the increase in dropout rates; however, more significant is financial constraints (Mokoena, 2021). Many students from low-income families cannot afford the high costs associated with higher education, including tuition fees, accommodation expenses, and textbooks (Ntema, 2022). As a result, they may struggle to cover these costs and may be forced to drop out to alleviate their financial burden. Another significant factor is the need for more academic support for students.

Some students may lack a solid educational foundation or come from underprivileged schools that fail to prepare them for the academic challenges of university. If these students receive adequate support, they may find it easier to keep up with the demands of university. Lastly, mental health issues can also contribute to the rise in dropout rates (Zajac et al., 2023). In order to identify the underlying causes of student dropouts, there is a need to discover the major causes of why students from higher learning institutions are dropping out. This signals a need for multiple stakeholder cooperation, i.e., students, parents, the government, and universities must address this growing problem jointly.

The Minister of Higher Education revealed that university dropout rates in South Africa are reportedly incredibly high, with 50-60% of first-year students dropping out (Mtshweni, 2022).

Moreover, Simelane (2022) mentions that one of the most significant factors influencing dropout rates was students' socioeconomic conditions. Not only do many students have insufficient funds to pay for all of their needs – such as tuition, meals, accommodation, books and personal necessities – but many were also expected to contribute to alleviating their families' needs for necessities. South Africa has one of the world's highest first-year university dropout rates. Many reasons are contributing to this, ranging from not being effectively prepared for life outside high school, being pushed to study something they are not interested in, not having the emotional maturity to cope with their studies and more (News24, 2021).

Student accommodation

There is one of the government's most pressing issues within the context of higher education. Even though the government, immediately after 1994, put significant efforts into access to higher education as a catalyst for ensuring inclusive socio-economic development, the massification of higher education and the lack of student accommodation have become another barrier to higher education access. Petersen (2022) supports this reflection and states that student housing poses one of the biggest stumbling blocks to expanding access to tertiary education in South Africa.

The supply-demand gap stands at 500 000 beds and is expected to grow to 780,000 beds in just two and a half years (Petersen, 2022). The provision of student accommodation has failed to keep up with the massification of higher education. Student accommodation is one of the students' most frustrating challenges when entering higher education. As a result, students have had to seek off-campus accommodation, which may provide below-par safety support, internet services and other basic needs compared to on-campus accommodation. The crisis of student accommodation has led to widespread protests across the country. Universities are struggling to deal with this problem, exacerbated by the steady increase in new entrants over the past few years.

In contrast, the rate of construction or acquisition of new residence facilities has not kept up with demand (Tshazi, 2020). To try and address this problem, universities have accredited off-campus private accommodations; often, these residences need to meet specific criteria for them to be considered. However,

Tshazi (2020) notes that the problem with most university-accredited private accommodation facilities is that because they are accredited, they charge exorbitant prices that are often out of reach for poor black students, leaving them at the mercy of "rogue" private landlords who can offer cheap accommodation with little security, comfort or space suitable for studying.

Gopal & Van Niekerk (2018) further reflect that most students seeking off-campus accommodation are often housed in unsafe areas and unacceptable conditions. News24 (2017) notes that the limitation of accommodation in universities results in students being unsecured, unsafe, victimized and exposed to all sorts of crime-related activities at off-campus accommodation. Students who are suffering from this crisis are rental over-charged. This mainly results in students changing their lives and turning to prostitution and some to criminals in order to get the money to pay rent. In 2020, the government allocated R64 billion over the next years in student accommodation, and the country was also going to leverage at least another R64 billion in private investment (South African government news agency, 2022). Even though there has been progress, it will take decades to ensure the availability of adequate student accommodation that can cater for the demand in higher education.

Quality of education: production and demand mismatch

Even though the increase in higher education access in South Africa can be viewed as a positive development, it also raises questions about the quality of higher education in South Africa. South Africa's higher education sector has undergone tremendous changes, where local and international trends continue to influence and shape higher education (Future Banker, 2021). The massification of higher education has increased pressure on lecturers and students. Overcrowded classrooms mean lecturers mark tests, assignments, and exam scripts above what they should mark.

This limits the role they ought to play in other essential functions, such as research and community engagement. The question of the quality of education offered has also been driven by the apparent mismatch between what higher education institutions are producing and what is needed by the market. African universities have been producing too many graduates with costly degrees and diplomas who lack the mastery of skills necessary in the 21st-century labour market. The African Development Bank revealed that most of the degrees awarded by African universities lack the academic rigour, relevance and career-focused skills to enable graduates to get decent jobs (Mlamlala, 2019).

In South Africa, Mkize (2022) also reflect that most TVET graduates are not absorbed into the labour market. The nature and structure of labour markets are critical determinants of the structure and quality of education and training for work. Improved pathways from education to work need a growing economy and reduced workforce fragmentation. Labour markets worldwide are undergoing significant changes – particularly in non-tech sectors. In 2019, South Africa had the largest share of mismatched workers, with more than 50% skills mismatches and the lowest productivity levels compared with 30 countries, including India and Russia (Mncayi, 2021). Other studies have found the incidence of educational mismatch to be similarly high in South Africa.

However, despite these reflections, students continue to enrol for qualifications with low employment prospects. According to the 2019 Post-School Education and Training Monitoring report, between 2010 and 2016, the field of humanities accounted for the most significant share of graduations (6.6) (Mncayi, 2021). With the above, while the South African education system has undergone several reforms to include many citizens, the benefits are not directly observed in the labour market. This has resulted in the rise in the ‘army’ of unemployed among the educated, which is a reflection of a growing mismatch persistent in the labour market. What employers seek regarding educational levels and skills does not match what is available in the labour market.

\Funding and violent protest

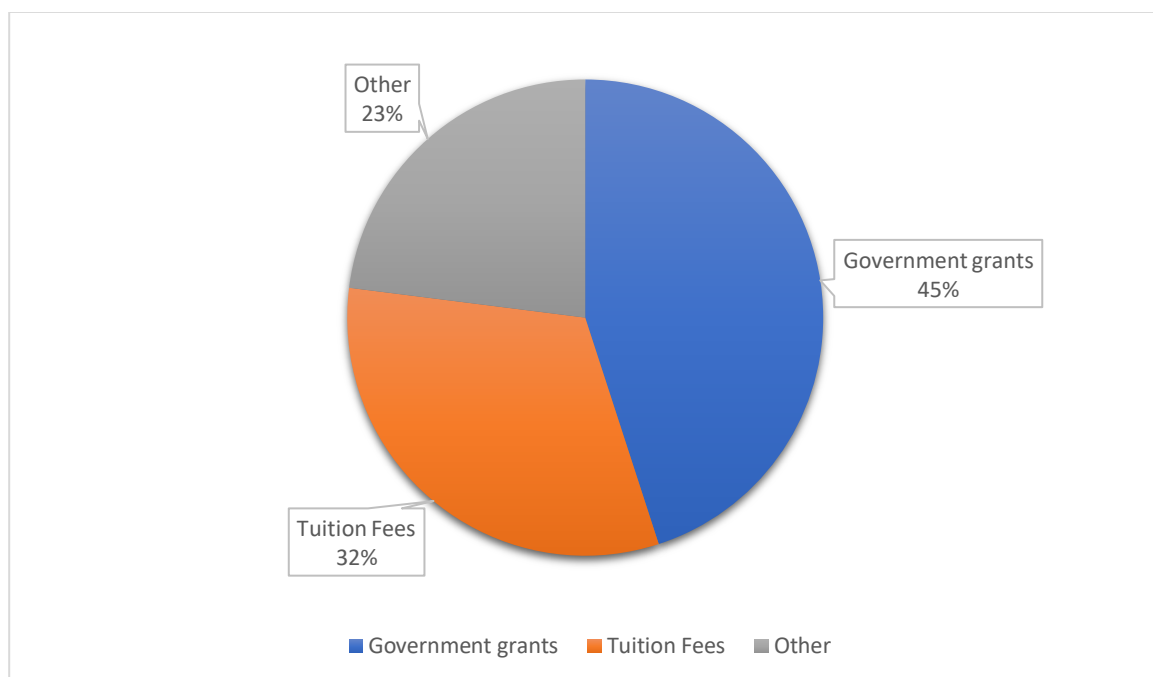
Funding higher education in South Africa has always been one of the most contentious issues; coupled with the massification of higher education, it has given rise to violent protests. In 2017, former president Jacob Zuma announced that the government would subsidize free higher education for poor and working-class students (Mlambo et al., 2017). While this was received with jubilation from most black South Africans, the fundamental question was where will the money to fund free higher education come from and to what extent the government would see its return on investment.

Since 1991, NSFAS has assisted 1.5 million students from poor backgrounds with R50 billion in loans and bursaries (Mbindwane, 2016). Higher education was running on a budget deficit of R22 billion for 2018/19, and due to yet another Zuma zero fee increase concession, there was likely to be a further R5 billion deficit bump (Mbindwane, 2016). At the 2023 Budget Speech, Finance

Minister Enoch Godongwana revealed that the government plans to spend R1.4 trillion over the next three years on higher and basic education, sports, arts and culture (McClean, 2023). The minister noted that over the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), the Department of Higher Education's (DHET) expenditure is expected to reach some R135,6 billion in 2023/24, R148,3 billion in 2024/25 and rise to R153 billion in 2025/26.

He said that for the 2023/24 financial year, at least R50 billion would be allocated to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), the department's most significant spending point. DHET's second biggest spending point in 2023/24 is expected to be universities' subsidies at R44.4 billion. (McClean, 2023). Spending at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and Community Education and Training (CET) centres combined will reach at least R15 billion in 2023/24 (McClean, 2023).

Figure 1: Funding Higher education in South Africa



Source: Statistics South Africa. (2017)

However, while the South African government has been a central figure in funding higher education, the South African economy has struggled to maintain consistent levels of economic growth ever since the 2008 global financial crisis.

Bestenbier (2017) reveals that South Africa's GDP grew 5.6% in 2006 and 5.4% in 2007. Over these two years preceding the global recession, the economy grew faster than in any year since 1994. It is evident that since the global financial crisis in 2008, South Africa's economic growth has been declining. Specifically, growth has been downward, with an average growth rate of just under 1.7% from 2008 to 2016 and worsened below 1% from 2015 to 2016 (Sheefeni, 2022). The African Development Bank revealed that South Africa's economy will grow by just 0.2% in 2023 and 1.5% in 2024 (African Development Bank, 2023).

The slowdown in economic growth tends to affect the government budget as economic growth is driven by consumer spending and business investment. Issues such as load shedding, crime and poor economic growth mean South Africa will struggle to attract investments, thus affecting government public spending. Wangenge-Ouma (2021) notes that state funding of universities is inadequate – it has not kept pace with enrolment pressures and the increasing costs of providing higher education. There has been concern that the issue of unpaid student debt was negatively affecting the operational stability of universities. According to Universities South Africa (2022), student debt stood at R16.5bn in March this year. This meant around 120,000 students were likely not to graduate because they owe higher education institutions – collectively, this group owes universities around R7bn (Lusengo & Banda, 2023).

Student debt and tuition fees have increased violent protests across SA higher education institutions, most notably the fees must fall protests that erupted in 2015. Wangenge-Ouma (2021) communicates that the protests once again highlighted various problems with higher education funding. They boil down to the challenges of affordability and sustainability. Wangenge-Ouma (2021) notes that the economic challenges facing the country, the high levels of inequality and the high number of students from poor and working-class families call for a funding model that does not create an affordability crisis for students and the state. Damage caused at universities and training colleges by so-called Fees Must Fall protests has soared to nearly R800 million. Regrettably, most of the costs associated with fixing the damage caused would be borne by students through the increase in tuition fees (Mphahlele, 2018).

Infrastructure deficient

Many analysts argue South Africa is on the verge of an infrastructure collapse. Public roads, rail, and general infrastructure are on the verge of collapse due to reasons such as a lack of infrastructure maintenance, corruption, lack of accountability and awarding of tenders to people who are not skilled (Gumede, 2022). There is also a lack of investments in new infrastructure. Within higher education, there is a considerable infrastructure disparity between universities in South Africa. Those favoured under apartheid boast significant infrastructure allowing seamless and integrated learning, whereas those in previously advantaged areas lack practical computer labs, residences, laboratories and general infrastructure. However, one must consider the issues at the basic level of education and how they feed into the problems with infrastructure in higher education. The South African education system, characterized by crumbling infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms and relatively poor educational outcomes, is perpetuating inequality and failing too many of its children, with the poor hardest hit (Amnesty International, 2022). Within higher education, the intentional lack of resource allocation during apartheid hindered infrastructural development in previously disadvantaged universities. However, from a holistic point of view, higher education institutions in South Africa have developed ways of coping with infrastructural and resource inadequacies.

For example, public HEIs have established voluntary regional consortia in some parts of South Africa. These take the form of, for example, shared academic programme offerings and shared infrastructure in such areas as libraries and information and communications technology. A report in 2008 found that in South Africa's higher education sector, many buildings at institutions are run down because of poor or completely absent institutional building maintenance strategies (Council on Higher Education, 2007). Moreover, there was increased ICT infrastructure spending to improve the learning experience. Today, new cost areas include new infrastructure (networked computers, Internet access, computer laboratories), maintenance and upgrading of existing infrastructure, software staff capacity, training, and other general administrative costs.

Higher education in South Africa: prospects

Consequently, this means there will be a need for improvement in the availability of infrastructure, funding and mechanisms to ensure a reduction in the

number of students dropping out. While the government has allocated billions and partnered with the private sector to ensure student accommodation, a large pool of students live in off-campus accommodation characterized by crime and lack of basic infrastructure, thus hindering one's learning potential. Such accommodation often lacks security, is crime-ridden, and does not have the effective telecommunication systems that students need to function. Sometimes, they are far from campus, and students must walk long distances to arrive in class tired, limiting their concentration levels. Therefore, while the increase in enrollment can be welcomed as a sign of inclusive access to education, it is fundamental to ensure that this massification does not impede the quality of education offered (Adetiba, 2019).

Moreover, one of the significant problems in South Africa's education sector today is the mismatch between what the market needs and what the sector is producing. Therefore, to ensure the quality of education is relevant and contributes to higher inclusive development, quality should be compromised due to massification and its associated challenges. Unemployment in South Africa has been categorized as a pandemic and is increasing daily. Therefore, it becomes fundamental to align what the market needs and what higher education is producing (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020).

The increase in demand for higher education also means an increase in funding. However, from observation, government resources cannot cater to the increasing demand, further warranting a collaborative approach between the public and private sectors to address these issues. A holistic and practical funding model is needed because most violent protests in South Africa's higher education sector are driven by increasing tuition fees, which many students feel they cannot afford (Universities South Africa, 2019). On the other hand, one cannot blame universities for increasing tuition fees, as economic growth stagnates and unpaid student debt increases; this puts the functioning of universities at a disadvantage. Hence, a credible and sustainable long-term funding model is needed to avoid protests, which usually damages infrastructure.

Concluding remarks

Higher education is vital for South Africa's economic development and growth. However, serious challenges still hamper higher education in South Africa, which must be addressed to ensure it can fully contribute to development. While

short-term solutions may be necessary, addressing these issues must be a top priority for lasting change. Long-term policies are needed to tackle issues like insufficient student housing, infrastructure deficiencies, high dropout rates, and reduced funding. For higher education to play a role in this context, there is an essential need for change and to ensure that what higher education produces aligns with what the market needs to avoid the problem of graduate unemployment.

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