Chapter 7

#FeesMustFall Campaign and the Quest for Accessible, Quality, and Decolonized Higher Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is framed within the broader context of the transformative agenda of higher education sector in post-apartheid South Africa. The #FeesMustFall campaign started late October 2015 and the entire 2016 and has grown to become one of the biggest movements ever witnessed in the history of South African student politics. Similarly to the struggle waged by 1976 youth against the dominance of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, FMF challenges the current government and universities to provide free, quality, and decolonized higher education. The slow pace of transformation, inaccessibility institutions due to fee increment, and Eurocentric curriculum, among others prompted the students to demand accessible financial inclusion and education relevant to their needs and reality. The chapter makes use of qualitative approach with both secondary and primary data extracted from books, accredited articles, and empirical data from selected participants.

INTRODUCTION

Formal education in Africa and particularly in South Africa has a protracted history dating to the colonial and apartheid period. Castell (2001, p. 212) asserts that universities in particular are rooted in a colonial past. Unfortunately, formal education in most African countries was introduced during colonial times and was an instrument used by colonisers to train low-level clerical staff (Nshemererwe, 2016, p. 9). Similarly, education in South Africa has colonial-apartheid baggage with social, economic and political implications. Higher education is recognised as a major resource, especially for national development and knowledge production, however, it was also noticed that its structure and capacity was dented by apartheid's inheritance (ANC, 1994). Education in general and higher education in particular was pursued and encouraged for a domestication agenda as opposed to developing analytical and independent African thinkers and scholars. In essence, colonial education, borrowing from the Brazilian scholar, Freire (1993), highlighted that 'banking' education was designed to domesticate rather than 'problem-posing' aimed at liberating students. Freire further argues that the education system became a weapon of oppression and those who ran it were the oppressors. However, the attainment of independence saw the exodus of Africans to overseas universities and colleges to acquire education and training. The hunger for knowledge was prompted by these African scholars to assume leadership positions in government and educational institutions in post-colonial period. The crisis in education is fueled by the disconnection between education and employment coupled by a lack of resources for young people to acquire technical and vocational training demanded by the work force (World Bank Group, 2018). Honwana (2013, p. 39) argues that educational systems in Africa are unable to provide youth with the tools they need to compete in a labour market which requires high levels of specialised technical skills. However, in the African continent, the quest for accessible and quality education was reiterated by policy articulations and numerous struggles waged by students across the continent (Luyat, 2003). Despite the commitments shown by African governments through policy promulgated and signatories geared towards improving education sectors at all levels, Africa's education remains poor compared to their counterparts in the world. More than two decades of democratic governance as part of redress has seen the opening up of previously only white institutions (English and Afrikaans) such as Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Free State, Rand Afrikaanse (now University of Johannesburg) for black students for the first time.

Education remains one of the contested sectors and obstacles for South Africa's integrated development. With its central role in developing a skilled and competent work force, higher education is challenged to offer relevant and competitive education.

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