
The Opinion Pages

My South African University Is on Fire

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JOHANNESBURG — The university where I work is in crisis. Campuses across South Africa are on fire — in some cases literally — as students protesting impossibly high fees lock horns with reckless police officers. Students run a gantlet of rubber bullets, water cannons, stun grenades and tear gas just to make it to the library. Attendance has been sparse, with students, lecturers and other employees staying home in fear. Some universities have turned to overzealous police officers and the infamous private security industry in a bid to bring campuses under control.

Meanwhile protesters have become ever more attached to the uncompromising politics of shutdown, insisting that universities must stay closed until their demands are met. According to the police, 567 people have been arrested in connection with student protests this year. At least 16 of the country's 26 universities have been closed or seriously disrupted by protests this month. Damage to campuses is estimated at more than \$40 million.

The answer to the question of how we arrived at this dark place is not simple, and begins alongside the project of post-apartheid South Africa itself.

For more than 20 years the state has been asking universities to recruit more black students to redress the inequities caused by apartheid South Africa's racist

restriction of quality education to whites. In one of the most unequal countries in the world, a university education can be an important impetus for class mobility, with a degree often helping to lift future generations out of poverty.

But these pressures have not come with enough funding for public institutions. Recent research estimates that state funding for universities amounts to around 0.75 percent of gross domestic product, lower than in many countries with comparable economies. Faced with financial shortfalls, universities pushed the burden of payment back onto students, so that fees have risen steadily, locking many deserving young people — most of them black — out of higher education altogether.

While the comfortable, largely white middle classes criticize a “culture of entitlement,” student fees now make up a higher portion of university budgets than they did during my undergraduate studies in the 1990s. The state loan program, intended to help the most impoverished students, saddles them with crippling debt. Those who are granted loans find that the amount they have been given isn’t enough to cover tuition and room and board.

The situation erupted last year into the #FeesMustFall movement, which spread from my university to campuses across the country. The movement made a national call for accessible higher education that resulted in the cancellation of university fee increases for 2016. The #FeesMustFall movement also pushed for what students are calling the “decolonization” of Eurocentric institutions and curriculums, as well as protections for janitors and other poorly paid workers on campuses.

But the achievements of 2015 were not enough to create long-term change. The announcement earlier this year by Blade Nzimande, the minister of education, that universities could set their 2017 fee increases up to a maximum of 8 percent, led to a fresh round of protests, this time with demonstrators demanding free education for all. Protesters have become angrier and more militant, and university officials more intransigent. The movement is fractured and the response to it is hardening daily. Students are determined to close universities, whatever the consequences; in many cases, administrators are determined to keep them open, whatever the consequences. It’s a tragic standoff.

For the post-apartheid “born free” generation, those born after 1990, when

white-minority rule began to crumble, it's nothing short of shocking to witness clashes between young black protesters wielding stones and black police officers pointing rifles and wearing body armor. Students who live in dormitories report being harassed both by law enforcement agents and by protesters determined to stop classes. Reports and images of police brutality, racial profiling and sexual harassment by private security guards abound on social media.

Studying is almost impossible, and my campus resembles a burned-out war zone when staff members return tentatively to their offices on Monday mornings. Trust between students and university officials has been destroyed. Statements and positions by professors are scrutinized from both sides. Students who aren't involved in the protests feel like collateral damage, let down both by student leaders and by university administrators who have a duty to care for them.

Absent from all this anxious volatility is the state itself, locked in its own internal crises, with longstanding allegations of corruption at the highest levels, an economy in decline and a disgraced president clinging to power as calls to remove him from office mount even within his own party, the ruling African National Congress.

Despite the extent of the damage and the risk to the 2016 academic year, with disruptions in areas of vital national interest like the placement of new medical students at public hospitals, we have yet to see Mr. Nzimande, not to mention President Jacob Zuma, appear on a university campus. The A.N.C. seems content to let universities burn and young people be brutalized, rather than step in with a coherent plan for increasing access to higher education.

While some professors sit firmly on one or another end of the political spectrum, many of us who work at these institutions feel caught in an impossible bind. We believe strongly that quality education must be accessible to all, but we also want to do our jobs, which means teaching those who are desperate to learn and graduate. It's difficult not to feel that universities, held hostage by the student movement in the fight for free education, are being hung out to dry by a political inner circle that's more concerned with protecting a plundering president than with the economic and social stability that higher education can bring.

The public university offers little benefit to society if only the wealthy have access to it. But institutions are precious and fragile things. Without negotiation

and compromise their futures are uncertain. It remains to be seen whether the state, the students and university administrators have the collective will to save them, and with them the starry-eyed dream of a better South Africa for all.

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