

Dismantling the Public University?: Tertiary Education through Comparative Lenses* Gillian Hart

South African student protests are hardly surprising. Since 2000 the ANC government has devoted a low and declining share of GDP to tertiary education, despite large increases in student numbers.

More surprising are patterns that emerge from comparing this erosion of public higher education with tendencies in other regions of the world. First, over the same period, the share of GDP going to higher education has actually been increasing in a number of other middle-income countries.

Second, although defying the positive trends set by its middle-income peers, ironically and tragically South Africa is emulating the state of California, where a comprehensive system of public education has been systematically dismantled over the past several decades. What makes the California story all the more salient for South Africa is how they have converged on a similar path of eroding public higher education and intensifying race-class disparities, despite coming from dramatically different directions.

Eroding Public Higher Education in South Africa

There is in fact official recognition that public higher education in South Africa is severely underfunded relative to other countries. The *Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of Funding of Universities* (October 2013) chaired by Cyril Ramaphosa made clear that, from a comparative perspective, South Africa invests far less in tertiary education than other middle-income countries. The report notes that public expenditure on tertiary education in South Africa as a percentage of GDP stood at 0.75% in 2011 – considerably below the average for middle income countries in the rest of Africa (1.06%) and other middle income G20 countries (1.38%).

An even more startling picture shows up from data provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, the most authoritative source of comparative data on education spending. What they show is that, in a set of middle-income countries in Latin America and Asia, i.e. Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica and Malaysia, roughly the same size as South Africa and for which data are available, funding for tertiary education as a percentage of GDP *increased* from an average of 1.03% in 2000 to 1.46% in 2013. Over the same period, the proportion also increased in Brazil (0.87% to 0.97%) and India (0.86% to 1.23%), along with a number of other middle-income countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In contrast, South Africa moved in precisely the opposite direction. According to UNESCO, in 1999 the proportion stood at 0.90%, dropping to 0.79% in 2000 and falling further to 0.74% in 2013. In 2015/16, South Africa's state budget for universities continued its decline to 0.72% of GDP (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). These data include funding for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which provides loans and bursaries to students from low-income families.

Over the same period the number of university students shot up from around 600,000 to nearly a million, as growing numbers of black stu-

dents were drawn into higher education. Most universities now have a majority of black students, although the proportion of whites and blacks aged 20 to 24 in higher education is still significantly different. The failure of state funding to keep pace with growing student numbers has generated the cruel arithmetic of steadily increasing fees.

Far from providing a solution, NSFAS is a part of a vicious circle through which inadequate government funding drives up fees, necessitating more support for low-income students. Furthermore this support is by definition inadequate to the extent that increasing NSFAS comes at the expense of direct funding to universities, and thus pushes up fees even further.

It is little wonder, then, that many black university students feel as though they have been handed a poisoned chalice.

The Dismantling of Public Higher Education in California

Let us turn now to the state of California, where a structure of public tertiary education that enabled significant social mobility in the past has been wrecked in the words of Christopher Newfield (2016), and replaced by one that contributes to rising inequality and crippling student debt.

In 1960, at the height of apartheid, the state of California set in place what came to be seen as one of the most comprehensive and inclusive systems of public higher education in the world. The so-called 'Master plan' embodied a commitment to provide what was essentially free higher education to all California residents through three sets of institutions: the top 12.5% of high school graduates were eligible for admission to one of the University of California institutions; the top third could find a place at one of the California State Universities; and two-year California Community Colleges were open to all high school graduates as well as older re-entry students.

Most important, the system was (and still is, but to a far more limited degree) geared to enabling students to move up through the system. In the 25 years that I have taught at the University of California, Berkeley, the best undergraduates with whom I have worked have been transfers from Community Colleges.

When Ronald Reagan took over as governor of California in 1966, he moved quickly to try to dismantle what he perceived as a dangerously socialist welfare programme. He cut state funding for higher education, laid the foundations for a shift to a tuition/fee-based funding model, and called in the National Guard to crush student protest. The slogan of California student movements – 'Behind every fee hike, a line of riot cops' – resonates eerily in present-day South Africa.

Popular support for public higher education placed limits on Reagan's ambitions, but two key developments in post-Reagan California contributed to the erosion of public funding. First was a tax revolt in the late 1970s, which limited California property

taxes and the state budget. The second, starting in the 1980s, was a massive prison-building boom that drained funds from higher education while throwing huge numbers of people – disproportionately young African-American men – into prison. In her brilliant book *Golden Gulag* (2007:14), Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to this as ‘the most ambitious prison-building project in the history of the world’.

From 1981 to 2011, inflation-adjusted state funding for prisons ballooned by well over 400% while spending on higher education as a proportion of the budget declined sharply (Anand, 2012).

Thus in 1970 California universities received 14% of state spending, and prisons and correctional services 3.7%. By 2014 the share of the universities dropped to 5.2% and that of prisons shot up to over 9%. Measured as a proportion of state income, public investment in the three-tier higher education system fell by 40% between 1980 and 2005, and by a further 25 percent over the next 10 years (Mortenson, 2009).

Amplifying Inequalities

Just as in South Africa, shrinking state investment in public education in California has gone hand in hand with increasing fees and tuition. Between 2000 and 2011 fees/tuition in Californian universities more than doubled in inflation-adjusted terms at a time when median family income was falling.

In a report entitled *Defunding Higher Education*, the Public Policy Institute of California pointed to the declining university enrollment rates of eligible high school graduates over this period, with the sharpest declines among African Americans (Johnson, n.d.).

Campuses of the University of California like Berkeley and Los Angeles have sought to compensate for declining state support by admitting a higher proportion of out-of-state students who are able to pay tuition and fees equivalent to those at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, thus limiting the spaces available to lower income California students.

Young adults in California are now less likely to obtain a post-secondary qualification than their parents. Income gaps between those with and without tertiary qualifications are widening and measures of income inequality are rising more rapidly in California than in the United States as a whole (Johnson, n.d.). Private tertiary institutions have rushed in to fill the gaps left by contracting public investment, and student debt has skyrocketed.

What makes South Africa’s adherence to the declining portion of the California road so shocking and tragic is that, instead of just generating new inequalities, it is building upon the most vicious history of race-class inequalities in the world – and contributing to their perpetuation.

Furthermore, there is nothing inevitable about this process – as increasing public support for higher education in many middle-income countries makes clear. The dismantling of public education in both California and South Africa is not the consequence of an inexorable shift from the state to the market. It was the product of social priorities and power struggles that could have gone in different directions – and should do so in the future.

The #FMF (#FeesMustFall) call for free, quality, decolonised higher education resonates far beyond South Africa. Indeed, ongoing struggles to strengthen and transform public education in South Africa,

California, and other regions of the world have much to learn from each other – and much to gain by joining forces.

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