

# International resonances of the #FeesMustFall movement in South African universities, 2015–2017

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## Abstract

The FeesMustFall confrontation in the South African higher education system between 2015 and 2017 revealed a wide range of shortcomings and failures on the part of all participants including students. Violence proved an effective instrument in a constitutional democracy to change public policy. The urgency of addressing the cost/revenue imbalances in the higher education system was exposed. The FeesMustFall crisis revealed various tensions and pressures in higher education that may be of considerable relevance globally.

This article explores the resonances in contemporary international university reform debates of the issues raised between 2015 and 2017 in the often-violent FeesMustFall (FMF) movement's challenges to the fundamental values, purposes, governance, operations and financing of South African universities. Such challenges continue sporadically to the present. There is a considerable literature on the actions and consequences of FMF. A prominent contribution was made by Adam Habib, the then vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) (Habib, 2019), and a critical examination of this was offered in 'Adam Habib's rebels and rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall—A critical appraisal' (Blackmur, 2019). The references in this article, and in Habib's book, provide a useful, but relatively small, sample of the literature.

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A central concern of this article is whether South Africa's experience of FMF's assault on the higher education system has lessons of international interest. To this end, several themes are explored in the analysis that follows. They include:

1. The evolution of FMF.
2. The exceptional physical violence used by many participants in the FMF protests.
3. The motives for the FMF assault on the South African university system.
4. The financing of higher education qualifications.
5. Managing the costs of conducting higher education in traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions and the costs of alternative systems of qualification delivery.
6. FMF challenges to established values of institutional autonomy, intellectual inquiry and academic freedom.
7. The quality of strategic thinking in South African universities.

## **The evolution of FMF**

There were several seemingly isolated serious incidents on various university campuses in South Africa in the first six months of 2015. Physical attacks were made on statues of, for example, Cecil Rhodes and King George V; the use of Afrikaans as a language of instruction came under attack (reminiscent of the 1976 Soweto student riots); demands to rename buildings named for apartheid-era politicians were made; and, in some cases, the financial challenges faced especially by black students in accessing and/or attending university were the focus of attention. Many of these individual protests called for what was referred to as the decolonisation of universities, including the content of curriculums. University councils and vice-chancellors seemed generally sympathetic to much of this agitation, and various statues, memorials, apartheid-era building names and the language of instruction, for example, were changed accordingly. The ultimately successful 'Rhodes Must Fall' agitation at the University of Cape Town later resonated at Oxford University in the United Kingdom with demands that the statue of Rhodes be removed from Oriel College. The universities were less amenable, however, to accepting demands to cease the outsourcing of certain services that were directly related to the level of university costs. On the matter of fees, the universities sympathised with students who were experiencing financial difficulties but noted that only the national government had the power over policy and taxpayer resources to address these. Vice-chancellors noted, furthermore, that the government had for several years been reducing real per student taxpayer subsidies. The rise in the level of student agitation had, nevertheless, sounded warning bells in government quarters. In mid-October 2015, the Minister for Higher Education and Training hosted a stakeholder meeting on matters of university reform.

What were in many respects isolated protests assumed an increasingly coordinated and national character after 14 October 2015, when protests erupted in response to reports that a university (Wits) intended to increase its fees for 2016 by 10.5 per cent. From this time, the sobriquet ‘FeesMustFall’ was used to denote a ‘movement’ that rapidly became increasingly complex, loosely structured and tactically diverse; prone to ever-increasing, sometimes unclear, demands; internally defined along lines of, for example, skin colour, gender and political party allegiance; and, at times, very violent. These descriptions, however, fail to capture adequately the dynamic nature of FMF, which is explored by Chikane (2018; see also Booysen, 2016; Jansen, 2017; Dlamini, 2019; Habib, 2019; Blackmur, 2019). Social media was an important coordinating device that magnified the movement’s national impact. Few institutions in South Africa were untouched. Most supported the key objectives, if not all the means, of a cleverly crafted campaign that ultimately demanded free (to students), ‘decolonised’ higher education (including support from some university staff). The voices of the masses of urban and rural poor and the unemployed were, however, not invited and were unheard, although FMF spokespeople asserted that their actions and demands were, in the final analysis, in the interests of the poverty-stricken, the black majority and the marginalised. This last claim is contestable, of which more later.

Despite the amorphous nature and shifting leadership of FMF, its energies were increasingly concentrated on the demands for a ‘decolonised’, fee-free higher education for all students nationally. Government attempts to relieve the pressure by initially limiting the 2016 fee increases to 6 per cent, later revised to 0 per cent, were contemptuously rejected. It is impossible to measure the levels and fluctuations in the degree of support in the whole South African student body for the activities and goals of FMF, but the government probably underestimated them. The support was sufficient for FMF to adopt and implement tactics that, in 2016, ‘led to an eruption of the most violent protests on university campuses in the country’s history’: the protestors ‘took fire to lecture theatres, cars, libraries, computer laboratories, statues, university paintings, administration buildings, [student] residences, and the offices of vice-chancellors’ (Jansen, 2017, p. xi). The violence took other forms, such as abusive language, prevention of teaching and research, disruption of classes, intimidation, humiliation and ageist insults. It also involved the police and private security firms. ‘What was once a largely peaceful and broad-based student protest movement had become increasingly disruptive, violent and even racist in its character and demands’ (Jansen, 2017, p. xii). An example of this racism occurred at a student demonstration outside a Cape Town police station during which ‘[a] call was made for all white students in attendance to form a line between the police and protestors. It was believed that by merely being white, police would refrain from attacking them’ (Chikane, 2018, p. 169, see also p. 177).

In 2016, the government appointed a Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training (the Heher Commission) to examine the feasibility of fee-free higher education and training. From early 2017, a parallel, behind-the-scenes political process was taking place at the level of the African National Congress (ANC), public service and national Cabinet. Consideration was given to a funding plan presented by Morris Masutha, a government adviser with close connections to President Jacob Zuma, the cost of which was conservatively estimated at ZAR40 billion annually. The Heher Commission's report was publicly released on 13 November 2017. Its principal recommendation was that the funding of higher education qualifications be based on a cost-sharing model of government-guaranteed income-contingent loans sourced from commercial banks (for all the recommendations, see The Presidency, 2017). There was, however, little opportunity for public debate of these recommendations. In mid-December 2017, Zuma committed to Masutha's proposals whereby students from families with an annual income under ZAR350,000 would be funded by a bursary scheme. The wind was, at least for a few years, taken out of the Heher Commission's sails: approximately 90 per cent of tertiary students were eligible for funding under Zuma's model (Habib, 2019, p. 190; Wangenge-Ouma, 2021).

## **The exceptional physical violence of many FMF participants**

An important dimension of the FMF campaign against the national government and universities that was not reflected in contemporary international higher education reform debates was its frequent and exceptional use of violence against people and property. Violence also characterised police and private security company responses to the protests. Prominent in the protests was Rekgotsofetse Chikane, who subsequently wrote that

violence became an opioid for all involved ... Violence between students and police, between institutions, and even among students themselves, all contributed to a cycle in which violence begot violence ... Throughout 2016 and 2017, #MustFall movements became enamoured with violence. Sometimes this was righteous, occasionally vindictive and, more often than not, quite ugly. (Chikane, 2018, pp. 211–12)

He went on to say: 'If 2015 signalled the start of the revolution, the next two years tested our appetite for it. It constantly asked the question: how willing were we to forgo our humanity to achieve our goal?' (Chikane, 2018, pp. 213–14; see also Jansen, 2017, pp. 243–49).

Is there a convincing explanation for this violence? Chikane claims:

Our justification for the use of violence was predicated on the addiction and defence of our use of the opioid of ‘Fanon’ to understand our society. The rhetoric used to justify the violence ... had a variety of forms. One was the belief that our violence was due to the violent environment in which a black child grows up; that to be violent was only a response [to] and a product of the violence that surrounded us all our lives ... Another common justification for violence was that we were embarking on a process of decolonisation. Because colonisation was a violent process, its undoing would in turn require a violent act. (Chikane, 2018, pp. 225–26)

Such decolonisation was part of a composite goal: fee-free quality ‘decolonial’ education (Chikane, 2018, p. 229). Why was this goal of such extreme importance to FMF participants and supporters that it was pursued by often-violent means? In the next section, I offer some conjectures with respect to such motives in the hope that future research will establish whether they have any explanatory merit. Whatever the motives, however, the exceptional violence of the FMF campaign was highly effective in forcing the government to concede to FMF’s central demands regarding fees. In a country with only a thin veneer of law and order, sustained violence against the higher education system was a critical ingredient in forcing changes to public policy. In this respect, the restraints on violence found in many other countries were rejected by significant groups in South African society.

## **The grounds by which the FMF justified its assault on the South African university system**

Possession of a university degree(s), for almost all aspirants, is a fundamental requirement for entry to, and continued membership of, the South African economic, political and social elite. The economic return to higher education qualifications in South Africa is extremely high by international standards (Habib, 2019, p. 182). Youth unemployment is exceptionally severe and social support for the unemployed and otherwise disadvantaged is meagre. The distribution of income is close to the most unequal in the world. Failure to acquire a university degree thus means almost certain exclusion from ‘first world’ labour markets, top-level incomes and high social status in South Africa and internationally.

Significant increases in university fees (and other costs of university study) thus pose a threat to the future of most students (and, often, their families). This is arguably sufficient to explain the sustained and angry revolt against significant increases in fees and, later, against any fees. This relatively narrow, self-interested emphasis was, however, downplayed in FMF public explanations of its policies and actions. Instead, emphasis was placed on claims that the bulk of black university students were poor and thus unable to afford the rising costs of obtaining a university qualification;

this, it was claimed, offended social justice principles. Abolishing fees was seen as the answer to this conundrum. Some FMF members also asserted that their actions would complete the unfinished business of liberating South Africa; an element of revolutionary zeal was present. Others explained FMF's actions as being designed to provide the poor, the unemployed and the marginalised with 'economic freedom'; the often-violent struggle was for 'the greater good' (Chikane, 2018, pp. 229, 230, 231, 233, 234).

In some respects, FMF was part of a process that had been in the making for some years. With the growth of student numbers, universities 'were starting to sink under the weight of social demands from the new entrants to higher education'. Taxpayer support was less and less adequate to meet all the costs of attending university and

many poor students from communities on welfare brought ... the expectation that they would be cared for beyond tuition fees ... if the university—in their minds an extension of government services—did not deliver ... then protests, even violent ones, were a perfectly rational strategy for extracting their demands. (Jansen, 2017, p. 10)

The fiscal weight of the 'welfarisation' of South African universities sits in stark contrast to the extensive provision of extracurricular benefits used to attract students to some universities in, for example, the United States.

## **The financing of higher education qualifications**

Placing the demands for no fees (and other concessions) in a social justice framework, however, exposed a serious contradiction in the FMF's explanations of its motives and actions. Threats to students' access to the highly remunerative professional South African labour market posed by upfront fees and other costs were understandably resisted by FMF. On the other hand, the legacy of apartheid in general and decades of exposure to substandard primary and, for some, secondary education meant the poor and unemployed could not access labour markets to the extent necessary to provide even a basic income. Unlike the students, they could not use the welfarisation of the university and labour markets as a vehicle for poverty reduction. This could, and can, only occur by means of increasing transfers from the national budget.

Taxpayer funding to meet the demands of FMF would also have to be drawn from the national budget. Far from uplifting the poor, FMF was competing with them, since satisfaction of its demands meant taxpayer resources that were otherwise available for poverty reduction would have to be allocated instead to assisting students to access highly profitable labour markets. The only way this competition could have

been avoided was if students obtained loans that covered all the costs of a university degree against their increased earnings contingent on holding such a qualification. Another advantage of this approach, moreover, was that any links between access to university and individual and/or family incomes or wealth would be irrelevant (Blackmur, 2019, pp. 51–57).

The government rejected this approach with the implementation of the Zuma model. Political, and apparently significant community, support was given to the principle of taxpayer funding of free tertiary education for many students, even though most would eventually be remunerated far better than they would have been had they not acquired a tertiary qualification, and far higher than the majority of other South Africans. The trade-off in yielding to demands for taxpayer-funded free higher education was, in the final analysis, against the poor (Blackmur, 2019, p. 60). There was, however, an alternative. Students could have agreed to take full-cost loans against their much higher future incomes on condition the government increased, for example, social grants by an equivalent amount. Students could thus have used their bargaining strength to forge a direct link between their acquisition of qualifications, their enhanced employment conditions and their desire to see radically improved social justice for the poor (Blackmur, 2019, p. 60).

This reasoning has universal relevance. All countries must decide how the acquisition of post-compulsory education qualifications will be funded. It could be argued that a system of income-contingent loans will never be adopted in South Africa given student and other opposition. Against this, adoption of such a system may become close to inevitable if fiscal, debt, unemployment and exchange rate pressures render any fee-free model incapable of being financed by taxpayers (Vally, 2021). Policymakers would then need to consider international experience, which identifies possible outcomes associated with loan schemes. Perhaps the most important risk is that some graduates cannot repay their loans due to, for example, changed family circumstances, deteriorating health, accidents and/or remuneration packages that are significantly lower than those assumed when programs of study were initially chosen. A major policy issue here is should the taxpayer meet the costs of such incapacity to pay? Concerns over such financial matters resonate internationally. It might be said, for example, that there is a ‘LoansMustFall’ campaign in the United States (and elsewhere), elements of which call for expunging all university student debt, and which influenced recent presidential politics (Looney et al., 2020). The research literature addresses these, and a multitude of other, issues (see, for example, Hsu, 2019; Bennett et al., 2021; Webber & Burns, 2021).

## The costs of higher education qualifications in bricks-and-mortar institutions and under alternatives

The debate since 2015 over the abolition of fees and associated issues is missing any serious analysis of the relationship between fee levels, the demand for places and the costs of running the existing ‘elite’ model of university qualification delivery in South Africa. The management of this relationship, moreover, is arguably of universal concern although details will differ internationally. In South Africa, there seem to be sacred cows, including the view that the current university system ought—physically, organisationally and pedagogically—to be maintained in essential respects. Serious thinking about the costs of running this system seems to be excluded from the agenda of higher education reform; it is assumed that the taxpayer will willingly supply the funding regardless of the production costs. There is a risk that fundamental issues will thereby be ignored and thus condemn South African universities to student agitation over many more matters than fee levels. Such risks are not, moreover, specific to South Africa. FMF sent a signal to governments and higher education policymakers internationally that existing systems contain a potential for serious, disruptive conflict over financial access to tertiary education (and over other matters such as claims of systemic institutional racism). Addressing the level of costs is arguably a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for avoiding such outcomes. Consideration of some of the cost issues follows.

The levels of cost, student demand and fees are interrelated. If detailed knowledge of these relationships is lacking, designing intelligent cost-saving initiatives to finance fee reductions is well nigh impossible. Public inquiries into the costs of providing tertiary education, including the compliance and operating costs of higher education regulatory processes, could establish whether they can be significantly reduced while maintaining or enhancing the credibility of qualifications. Such inquiries ought also to examine the costs of various alternatives to current arrangements. The writing has been on the wall for some time in the area, for example, of educational technologies. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), for example, conducted research in 1998 into the implications for existing bricks-and-mortar universities of a possible International Internet University and what might constitute appropriate regulatory responses (NZQA, 1998, pp. 9, 10). Some universities do have relationships with global education technology companies by which certain activities, such as the delivery of various postgraduate programs, are outsourced. Historically, nevertheless, the four stages of qualification production—namely, design, delivery, assessment and certification—were vertically integrated within each university, although there are no *a priori* reasons why this should always obtain. There may be more scope for net economies through quite radical outsourcing of some of or all these stages. National cost inquiries, however, need to employ holistic



cost/revenue models such that savings in one area(s) that may come at the expense of cost increases elsewhere in the system can be identified and evaluated. Economic analysis, moreover, suggests that higher education costs may be reduced through productivity increases. A contemporary reassessment of Baumol and Bowen's argument that such potential is extremely limited, and that the prices of services such as higher education would necessarily increase, is timely (Baumol & Bowen, 1966; Nordhaus, 2006).

Developments in education technology are often seen as challenging traditional universities to compete against a possible expansion of 'online courses that are likely to be cheaper for students than paying university fees' (Dodd, 2021). Each of the stages of qualification production, and not just delivery, is arguably a candidate for cost-saving technological innovation. The pace and intensity of technological change in higher education delivery will likely accelerate with advances in, for example, network theories and construction and, later, in quantum computing (Houston-Edwards, 2021). Evidence of technology-driven changes in contemporary markets for higher education qualifications includes the sale by Harvard University and MIT of edX to 2U, an American education technology company, and Coursera's listing on the New York Stock Exchange. Some higher education entrepreneurs predict 'a time when "online education is normalised as, simply, education"' (Korn, 2021; Dodd, 2021; see also Davis, 2017, pp. 9–21, 104–28; Tapscott & Williams, 2011, pp. 139–56). Other structural considerations also come under notice. Subjecting universities to the discipline of capital markets, whereby, for example, they may be taken over by other organisations or form public–private partnerships, could be a device to improve not only cost control but also university governance, management and educational performance.

These changes will require a combination of new and/or revised legislation and regulatory philosophies and procedures in most countries. Public universities may resist such changes with support from regulators and governments. The Council on Higher Education in South Africa, for example, has a record of protecting South African public universities against international competition (Blackmur, 2006). Absent such barriers, regulators might with advantage create rules that will allow students to design their own degrees based, for example, on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) from high-class universities. International pilot studies of the costs and benefits of obtaining a degree under such arrangements are indicated. There are, however, limits: for the foreseeable future, important components of courses in, say, mechanical engineering will be delivered in a bricks-and-mortar environment (this assertion is made with caution).

The appropriateness and efficiency of the conduct of higher education regulators will necessarily need to come under scrutiny and reform in the light of education technological change, changes in student preferences, concerns over the performance of some universities in areas such as freedom of speech, changing

standards, institutional diversification (non-university providers, inhouse provision of qualifications), reservations over the performance of some regulators and a real reduction in taxpayer funding of higher education. A reduction of net regulatory compliance costs is a principal goal of this exercise. This is an extremely wide and deep area of analysis and cannot be addressed in this article. Some brief points are nevertheless raised to stimulate further inquiry. The adoption of new regulatory technologies, for example, will arguably need to be expanded to assist regulators to cope with the increasing volume and complexity of data, the better to 'automate or improve compliance and supervision' (Schizas et al., 2020, p. 18). Although the financial and legal services industries are the current principal sites for the use of regulation technology (RegTech), higher education regulation is a significant candidate for applications, especially where governments may expand the responsibilities of higher education regulators in the interests of cost and fee containment to include supervision of fee levels and determining whether the higher education sector displays any restraint on trade activity (although this last may be assigned to competition and/or consumer protection authorities). Wang has opined that RegTech 'has the potential to revolutionise a regulator's job' (Wang, 2019; see also Productivity Commission, 2020).

Systemic changes may have cost-reduction implications. All universities in some systems offer subjects in, say, economics when relatively cheap access may be had to economics courses offered online by world-class universities (and other providers). The costs of such duplication may not be trivial and can put pressure on fee levels. And, in certain cases, duplication of enrolment processes, moreover, can be more cost-effectively managed by a national, electronic university access system. The costs of producing higher education qualifications may also be influenced by public policies in international student participation. The 2008 Bradley review of Australian higher education, for example, set specific graduation targets, one of which was that, by 2020, 40 per cent of all 25–35-year-olds would hold a bachelor's degree (Southgate & Bennett, 2014, p. 23). Further expansion of the Australian higher education sector was thus mandated. For other countries inclined to adopt such a policy orientation, an alternative, and arguably less expensive, policy would be to eschew thinking in terms of numerical targets in favour of defining scholarly and intellectual goals for higher education (Blackmur, 2010, p. 69). Graduation rates would thus be a residual not an input. This could, moreover, contain undesirable incentives: gaming the system to get the numbers—while not wholly absent from any assessment and certification arrangements—is arguably more likely if graduation rates are publicly announced in advance.

## **FMF challenges to the established values of institutional autonomy, intellectual inquiry and academic freedom**

The power of university councils to set tuition fees has been an important aspect of university autonomy in South Africa. FMF pressure over planned fee increases, however, compromised this autonomy in favour of effectively forcing national government determination of fees. The autonomy of some university councils was also reduced by yielding to FMF's demands that certain outsourced functions be conducted internally. Whatever the social justice qualities of such insourcing, university cost levels and the pressures on university budgets and priorities were arguably inflated (Jansen, 2017, pp. 232–33, 241). Attacks on autonomy went even further (Linden, 2017, pp. 32–33, 40, 124). The South African Students' Congress (SASCO), for example, maintained that '[i]nstitutional autonomy and academic freedom continue to be used and abused as a defence mechanism by reactionary universities that refuse to transform' (SASCO, 2015, p. 4; see also Jansen, 2017, pp. 233–37). The international implication is that students may be exceptionally militant opponents of traditional concepts of university autonomy (Linden, 2017, pp. 32–33, 40, 124).

'Decolonising' and controlling the curriculum were central to the demands of FMF. A perceptive interpretation of these demands has been provided by Jonathan Jansen (2017, ch. 7; see also Liyanage, 2020; Blackmur, 2019, pp. 47–49). He argues that the curriculum politics advocated by FMF contained, among other things, pan-African impulses: '[T]he call for Africanisation in the curriculum is a nationalist imperative that asserts African identity and rejects the imitation of Europe in the quest for African knowledge, culture, and aspirations' (Jansen, 2017, p. 159). Jansen suggests, moreover, that 'at the heart of the protest movement's most popular understanding of decolonisation—namely, the "hard version" of Africanisation—sits a dangerous nativism often expressed in racist terms' and that FMF has disfigured Africanisation 'into some form of racial essentialism' (Jansen, 2017, pp. 167, 168).

Western scientific methods and knowledge had no place in the FMF's curriculum reform program. The most notable case involved claims by an FMF leader that the physical sciences were 'a product of western modernity, and should be scratched out. We would have to restart science from the way we experienced it'. The student argued that there were places 'where people believed that witchcraft could cause lightning to strike someone, and she wanted the science curriculum to explain and teach this' (Jansen, 2017, pp. 155–56; Habib, 2019, p. 107). A conjecture regarding the origins of such thinking is that the student had embraced postmodern theories associated with Paul Feyerabend (Blackmur, 2019, pp. 47–49). Perhaps many students are exposed in some South African universities (and elsewhere) to an uncritical reading

of ‘a turgid mishmash of Heidegger, Derrida and Lacan’ (Gray, 2019)? Scholarship born of genuine debate, valid argumentation, adducing proper evidence and so on was alien to FMF. It dismissed associated principles of academic freedom, for example, by rejecting the teaching of conventional economics, or even a heterodox economics, in favour of Marxian economics exclusively. The demand was for the curriculum to accord with students’ specific ideological and political predispositions (Habib, 2019, pp. 107–8).

All this has stimulated conversation over the future of liberal scholarship, especially in the humanities, in South African universities (Stewart, 2015). Historically, the values that underpin liberal democracy have been contested and resisted from various quarters in South Africa, most recently by FMF. Such debates are, of course, widespread internationally, especially in universities. Canada’s ‘Maple Spring’ is noteworthy. There is, furthermore, a potential contradiction in FMF’s model of the reformed university. Suppose that FMF were to succeed in securing all its curriculum, management, financial and governance goals. The wider society, in South Africa and internationally, would then be dealing with many graduates who arguably were ill-equipped to respond adequately to employer requirements for professional staff (Jansen, 2017, p. 242). Under such circumstances, the future of the South African university would be uncertain. In the shorter term, graduates and university academics who wished to secure international postings may be unwelcome given the reputation of South African higher education had been severely compromised. The violence and destruction that accompanied the FMF protests, moreover, may have soured investors’ willingness to engage further with the South African economy. Such an outcome would disadvantage the poor and the marginalised. FMF’s actions showed that major disruptions to higher education can also have macroeconomic effects. Jansen has written pessimistically on the possibility of ‘the end of the South African university’ in the light of the pressures generated by and around FMF (Jansen, 2017, pp. 249–51). A possibly temporary recent easing of some of these pressures may have only papered over the cracks.

## **The quality of thinking in South African higher education**

A few years before the FMF deluge, Deacon et al. summarised the criticisms of South African universities made by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) in 2000: the universities ‘are deemed too costly for what they produce; as well as inefficient; duplicated; fragmented; underutilised; insufficiently rationalised and ... “a drag on the economy”’ (Deacon et al., 2010, p. 102). A decade after the CDE’s report, these scholars argued that change in South African higher education ‘has been driven not only from the centre but equally as much by institutions themselves, which have exhibited a wide range of often unexpected responses (ranging from

aggressive self-marketing, to waiting for redress, to flexibly “going with the flow”) in the face of various global and market trends (Deacon et al., 2010, p. 102). Taken together, these conclusions did not suggest that strategic thinking was the South African university system’s strong suit in the pre-FMF period.

One of Adam Habib’s assessments of FMF was that there was ‘confusion among student leaders about the purpose of university education ... they have confused the university with the political party school’ (Habib, 2019, p. 108). A university’s strategic approach to its student body, however, arguably ought to include nourishing its education in the history, purposes, values, expectations, ethics and standards of the institution. Habib’s disappointment may be evidence of strategic thinking failures in these respects.

One of the CDE’s concerns in 2000 was with the costs of the higher education system. Fifteen years later, members of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology (2015) were still asking for an analysis of the relationship between costs and increases in university fees. The Department of Higher Education and Training’s revised strategic plan for 2015–16 to 2019–20 was, moreover, silent on the matter of cost and fee levels. The cost/fee connection was apparently not especially high on the strategic thinking agenda although it was critical to understanding the FMF protests.

Strategic thinking in South African higher education has nevertheless identified certain important issues. Some senior university managers were aware of various cost drivers such as the pressure for the welfare university in the context of the movement from an elite system of higher education towards much greater participation. Others understood the parlous state of the 10 most impoverished universities in which ‘the black poor are still being fed a microwaved diet of Bantu Education barely distinguishable in quality or impact from what was offered in apartheid’s colleges’ (Jansen, 2017, p. 231). Still others wondered whether various universities might experience ‘white flight’, which could trap ‘working-class and poor students in substandard, low-quality, mass-produced higher education institutions’ (Jansen, 2017, p. 227). All were very aware of the declining real value of taxpayer subsidies. A problematic aspect of all this thinking was, however, that the recommended response to the several problems was that the taxpayer must significantly increase the funding for higher education. Alternatives were rarely analysed. These included: could universities access the bond market, were productivity-enhancing systems feasible in administrative and/or academic spheres, were partnerships with business likely to produce significant third-stream income, could some decentralisation of university functions yield net cost advantages, were there opportunities for the commercialisation of research, could reliance on bricks-and-mortar means of education delivery be reduced to net advantage, have the opportunities for scale and/or scope economies been fully explored, could regulatory compliance costs be renegotiated and were there too many universities and/or students?

The taxpayer funding crisis did not arise overnight. There was presumably some time to examine options, yet at least some universities were apparently taken by surprise by the FMF campaign and made concessions that would not normally have been made (Jansen, 2017, p. 221). A further sign of rushed (or little) strategic thinking was a senior administrator's suggestion that certain universities consider issuing something like a unilateral declaration of independence from the public system and become private institutions that would 'find a way of funding ourselves' (Jansen, 2017, pp. 223–24). Given the realities of South Africa's political economy, this may have been uttered tongue-in-cheek.

Certain further barriers to high-quality strategic thinking may obtain. The performance of several university governing councils arguably left much to be desired. Jansen reported that some council meetings 'are lengthy and heated events where the distinction between governance and management has long dissolved into contestations around every issue ... The last thing demanding attention ... is the academic project' (Jansen, 2017, p. 231). The composition of councils can be extremely problematic: government appointees 'are political activists or union members allied with the ruling party. Seldom are independent experts appointed' (Jansen, 2017, p. 234).

Habib maintains that the FMF enterprise put 'policy and financial options that had not been previously available on the systemic agenda' (Habib, 2019, pp. 195–96). These options were, however, available in the higher education policy experiences of many other countries. None was new and/or unique to South Africa. If the violence, disruption, personal costs, economic damage and community dislocation associated with FMF were, as Habib (2019, p. 197) has argued, necessary to impel a 'systemic opening' that resulted in serious policy thinking, 'this constitutes prima facie evidence of major inadequacies in the strategic thinking conducted at the top levels of South African university governance' (Blackmur, 2019, p. 58).

## Conclusion

The FMF's confrontation with the South African higher education system exposed a wide range of shortcomings and failures by all participants, including students. Certain unpleasant features of South African society were displayed on the world stage. Violence was shown to be an effective instrument to change public policy in a constitutional democracy. If the Zuma model of higher education funding fails in important respects, as it might, further disruption and violence are on the agenda. A dozen or so historically black universities are the most immediately vulnerable.

It is imperative in this context for public policy development to concentrate more on innovative ways of addressing the cost/revenue imbalances in the higher education system, which may, moreover, require radical reform of the system itself. This article

has emphasised cost issues and has suggested some initiatives. This emphasis encourages thinking about the relevance of many assumptions that underpin university finances and structures, not only in South Africa but also internationally. The emphasis is especially apposite in South Africa since the prospects of substantial increases in taxpayer funding are remote. Public finances are severely constrained; the economy is growing relatively slowly, Covid-19 has placed additional burdens on the fiscus and there is evidence that taxpayer willingness to fund universities has diminished in recent years.

There may have been several unintended consequences of the FMF's pressures on South African universities. Adherence to the principles of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and scientific inquiry is not guaranteed; doubt has been cast on the integrity of some degrees obtained in recent years under conditions of great instability; failures in strategic thinking (and planning) have been revealed; and doubts have been expressed about the quality of some international research and other linkages that South African universities have forged since the end of apartheid. Efforts to extend and nurture such links are at risk as parts of the international academy look askance at the events of 2015–17. It would be a cruel irony if a democratic South Africa found its higher education system relatively isolated in international scholarship. Such reputational effects arguably have the potential, for example, to discourage foreign students from contemplating study in South Africa, and to enter the deliberations of credit ratings agencies and domestic and foreign investors. A positive outcome may be to stimulate government reconsideration of the utility of South Africa's current higher education regulatory system.

These considerations can play a part in the international debates over the pace and direction of change in higher education. It would be short-sighted to regard them as particular only to South Africa. Some undoubtedly are—the apartheid legacy is still a force—but the FMF experience revealed various tensions in contemporary higher education that may be of considerable relevance globally.

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