

Dauglous Tsanyau: Rising Fees and the Right to Protest in Zimbabwe

Following independence in 1980, the motherland of Zimbabwe declared education a basic human right, and became a signatory of international instruments that fosters and protects the right to education. As a result, Zimbabwe has long been respected as a leading country in the region in the field of basic education with a high literacy rate of 91%. Nonetheless, following a decade-long economic crisis that has impacted negatively on the social and economic rights, the quality of higher education has seen an enormous decline.

In January 2017, students stormed the oldest and largest university in Zimbabwe commonly known as “UZ” with protest against University Authorities its decision to increase fees by 35 per cent from \$773 to \$1 043, halting the University’s plans. Recently, in June the UZ authorities repeatedly increased fees for medical students, provoking protests and causing hullabaloo among citizens. Police exploded on the scene and arrested a number of students. Later, UZ officials issued a circular ordering medical students to vacate residence premises immediately. The students representative unions and organisations in Zimbabwe claimed that approximately 12 000 students dropped out of higher learning institutions in the first semester of 2016 alone.

Many rural students as well as students from towns which have no University in them leave home in order to study and their full expenses have to be paid somehow. Most families in the poorest brackets have little, if any funds to spare to pay for University costs. The Fees structure in Zimbabwe especially Higher education needs to be revisited before it’s too late for the economy.

What does this mean to the quality of education? Education is a fundamental human right in Zimbabwean constitution. Importantly, section 59 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to demonstrate and petition and Section 74 which provides for freedom from arbitrary eviction. I consciously believe free education for the poor and subsidies for the so called “missing middle class” is a necessity to heal injustices within the education arena. Fee-free education for all would go too exempting those who can afford fees from paying them and place unnecessary pressure on the Treasury. Zimbabwe’s economy is not yet ready for free education for all but a feasible and reasonable fee structure needs to be implemented urgently. Finding ways of ensuring that Universities are properly funded is where our energies should now be placed.

Student movements acknowledge the power of collective action and the intersectionality of student struggles. Hence, it is wrong for Universities to isolate student movements from intervening in student issues; they must be willing to unite under one umbrella and to fight for social ills within the education system as a whole.

We must address crucial questions as we consider the matter of low fees, for the larger crisis will continue unless it is taken in hand. Of these problems the most important is that Universities are inadequately funded. Many of these students are left to flounder within underfunded institutions and on less personal funding than they need to survive. Overstretching the limited resources of the few sponsors in Zimbabwe has diminished the quality of education and exacerbated an already high drop-out rate. Protests and subsequent call for “fee free education” are symptoms of a failing system.

The higher education system in Zimbabwe has very limited state bursaries. The few bursaries that exist are not given any additional funding by the state leaving the dismal drop-out rate intact. Low or falling subsidies directly and negatively affect the drop-out rate. The Universities should welcome Non-Government donors and companies, who pay the fees on behalf of the students and state subsidies, directed through the Ministry of Higher Education should be widely available to disadvantaged students and awarded based upon a fair and feasible formula.

Fees must not deprive citizens the right to education. It must be liberatory. Social justice demands demilitarisation and de-securitization of campuses. Government must promote, protect and fulfil its obligations as demanded by international norms. Perhaps the most important recommendation I can make, without which none of the Scenarios above would even be remotely possible, is for the National Treasury to be persuaded that a greater proportion of GDP must be allocated to Universities and students at large.