

THE ISSUE OF FUNDING HIGHER EDUCATION: GLOBAL PATTERNS COMPARED TO SOUTH AFRICAN CASE

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ABSTRACT

In the past 30 years, since c. 1990, a higher education revolution has taken place in all parts of the world. This has been a costly exercise, and while the global higher education revolution can boast an enrolment explosion and has opened the doors of higher education to many, it has taken place within the parameters of the neoliberal economics, meaning that the imperatives of social justice and equity have not been adequately responded to. The pivot between this contextual force of neoliberal economics and the contextual imperative for social justice in higher education is funding. South Africa is part of this global revolution, although the specific contextual ecology of the country too has had an impact on the form this revolution has been taking on. In this article, the issue of higher education funding in South Africa is investigated from the theoretical framework and with the methodological apparatus of comparative and international education. This framework and methodological apparatus are explained. Then the main tenets and context of the worldwide higher education revolution vis-à-vis the imperatives of social justice and equity are reconstructed, and the South African case is interpreted and assessed against this global canvas in order to suggest a forward trajectory for South African higher education.

Keywords: higher education, equality, equity, funding, social justice, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

One of the most unappreciated, even often unnoticed, signature features of the current era (that is, the past 30 to 35 years) in world history has been the worldwide higher education revolution (see Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009). This revolution has permeated all parts of the world and, in view of the effect of education, virtually every aspect of the lives of individuals, communities, and societies (see Lutz and Klingholz 2017).

Higher education is an expensive enterprise in terms of both private costs (to students, parents, and families) and public costs (amidst other competing demands to the fiscus, such as supplying medical services, supplying public transport, enforcing law and order, providing social security, and supplying primary and secondary education). Education generally and higher education specifically have become such a large enterprise in national economies and

political affairs that education funding has at least once in recent history – the Penguin Revolution in Chile in 2006 – resulted in major political and legislative changes (see Chovanec and Benitez 2008); while at the time of writing this article – September 2022 – United States President Joe Biden’s introduction of a student debt relief plan was said to have affected (either minimising or reducing a debt burden of) a staggering 43 million people, a step that would result, according to Biden, in an entire national economy being better off (Smit 2022, 6).

The worldwide higher education revolution has taken place within the context of, on the one hand, the neoliberal economics and, on the other, the imperatives of social justice. The neoliberal economic revolution, which globally gained traction during the same time as the worldwide higher education revolution played out, that is, since 1990, represents a force that has had an impact on many more sectors in society than just economic organisation. Education, and institutions of higher education specifically, are increasingly predicated upon the considerations of neoliberal economics. On the other hand, the call for social justice (also in terms of gaining access to and taking part in higher education) has gotten stronger too. The pivot between these two forces is the funding or financing of higher education.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND AIM OF ARTICLE

Institutions in the higher education system of South Africa too has not escaped being placed at the centre of the two opposing forces described above. Financing South African higher education has, for long, been a challenge, moving centre stage in South African public life ever since the #FeesMustFall campaign in 2015 and 2016, and is still there, as can be seen from, for example, problems with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which led to lectures being terminated at several public South African universities in August 2023.

The aim of this article is to reconstruct the main tenets and context of the worldwide higher education revolution *vis-à-vis* the imperatives of social justice and equity, and to interpret and assess the South African case against this global canvas in order to suggest a forward trajectory for South African higher education. Thus, international comparative perspectives are called on, as a way to get to a better understanding of the South African problematic and suggest possible ways to address this challenge. The article commences with an explanation of the research method and an overview of the global higher education revolution as the canvas against which to view the South African case: the societal antecedents or causes of this revolution, the main features of the revolution, and an assessment of the outcomes of the revolution. Funding and equity are highlighted as two of the major unresolved issues in higher education globally. After that a portrayal of how the worldwide higher education revolution has played out within the specificities of the contours of the South African context will be given. The challenges of social

justice, equity or equality, and funding in South African higher education are analysed within the context of the global experience, and suggestions are made as to the way forward.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method that was employed in this research is that of comparative and international education. Also, it is then the theoretical apparatus and instrumentarium that informed the theoretical and conceptual framework of this article. The employment of international comparative perspectives is a widely used and accepted method to illuminate societal issues (see Pawson 2006), including issues in education (Crossley 2014).

Comparative and international education entails a study of education from three lenses, namely an education system lens, a contextual lense, and a comparative lens (Wolhuter et al. 2018). Comparative and international education focuses, in the first instance, on education *systems*. Even in this age of globalisation, *national* education systems remain the most common level of study of or focus on education systems (Carnoy 1999). Such (national) education systems, however, do not operate in a vacuum, and did not arise out of nothing, but were established by society to serve the specific needs of society. Therefore, education systems can only be understood within the frame of the societal context in which they function, that is, against the background of the societal shaping forces that have created education systems: from this, the contextual perspective of comparative and international education. Thirdly, various education systems are compared within their contextual interwovenness; this is the *comparative* perspective. Or education systems are compared with global trends and features of education (systems). That is the “international education” part of comparative and international education (Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014, 60). This comparison makes possible the formulation and refinement of statements, or the formulation of more nuanced statements, with respect to interrelationships between education systems and their societal contexts (see Schriewer 2018; Wolhuter et al. 2018). The deliberate and systematic use of foreign and international experience to arrive at a more complete understanding of domestic education issues, as well as the causal factors and possible consequences of such issues, and suggest solutions or ways to address such challenges stretches back at least two centuries (Wolhuter et al. 2018). The basic proviso for this exercise is always that contextual similarities and differences between the two units compared should always be thoroughly factored in.

THE WORLDWIDE HIGHER EDUCATION REVOLUTION

The key feature of the article is the global higher education revolution. This section deals with the origin, history, and development of this key concept. Education systems are the outcomes

of shaping contextual forces. The worldwide higher education revolution of the past 30 years too can be traced back to the societal context in which this revolution has occurred. It is these contextual causes that have given the revolution its characteristic form and have resulted in the particular set of outcomes of the revolution.

Societal antecedents or causes

The worldwide higher education revolution can be connected to at least nine contextual forces. These are demographic shifts, growing affluence, the emergence of knowledge economies, the neoliberal economics, the information, communication, and transport technology revolution, the emergence of culturally diverse societies, democratisation, individualisation, and the Code of Human Rights.

To commence with demography, the earth is experiencing a population explosion. While it has been decreasing for decades, the global population is still growing by 81 million every year. This means a constantly growing demand for places at institutions of higher education.

Three economic trends are giving impetus to the worldwide higher education revolution. As from around 1990, one of the most sustained and forceful economic upswings occurred in the world. In the short time span of a mere decade – 2005 to 2015 – the economic difficulties of 2008 notwithstanding, the total global economic output has grown by more than one hundred per cent, from US\$29,6 trillion to US\$78,3 trillion (World Bank 2016). Despite the convulsion caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, this figure reached US\$96,1 trillion in 2021 (World Bank 2022b). This rising levels of affluence renders higher education attainable for a larger segment of people. Further to the economic upswing, a second trend that has given impetus to the worldwide higher education revolution has been the rise of knowledge economies. Knowledge economies, that is where the production of and trade in and consumption of new knowledge have become the dynamo of national economies, render (in human capital terms) universities and university education even more valuable than in the past. A third economic trend that has had a radical impact on the higher education sector the past three decades is neoliberal economics. This revolution has seen to it that its principles (such as the pursuit of profit, performance appraisal, the cult of efficiency, and the valuing of demonstrable relevance) have been carried into institutions of higher education. The information and communications technology revolution of the past generation has made possible the extension of higher education to ever bigger sections of the population (especially by means of distance and hybrid modes of programme delivery).

A tide of democratisation has covered large parts of the world since 1990. The process of democratisation, together with the emergence of the Creed of Human Rights (to be discussed

later), and the power that the information, communication, and transport technology revolution gave to individuals have promoted another trend in contemporary society, namely individualisation. Finally, in the diverse multicultural, including multireligious societies in the contemporary world, the Creed of Human Rights has come to constitute the basis of the new (global) moral order. All these trends have left their mark on the higher education sector too and are visible in the architecture of the global higher education revolution, as will now be explained.

Features of the global higher education revolution

The signature feature of the worldwide higher education revolution is massification (Altbach et al. 2009). Elite higher education has been superseded by mass higher education. From 1990 to 2020, total global higher education enrolments has grown almost fourfold from 67,9 million to 235,3 million (UNESCO 2022). In the same time span, the global aggregate gross enrolment higher education ratio has grown more than threefold, from 14 per cent in 1990 to 40 per cent in 2020 (World Bank 2022c).

Besides massification, other defining aspects of the global higher education revolution include competition and differentiation of mission, a shift in funding patterns, changing relations with government, also a shift in relations with industry, a valuing of relevance, the valuing of Mode 2 knowledge, a particular growth of distance education, internationalisation, managerialism, a new type of student corps, and a changed academic profession. In a competitive, globalised world, fierce competition has developed between various national systems of education systems as well as between institutions themselves, as every institution strives to be a world-class university. At the same time, the proliferation of universities promotes a process whereby different institutions search for their own special or exclusive niches in the higher education sector or market. The values of the neoliberal economics have been transplanted to the higher education sector too. One manifestation of this is the downscaling of government funding for higher education and shifting the burden for funding of higher education to industry or prospective employers and the clientele of higher education (students or their parents or families). In as far as governments still fund higher education, they are claiming a say in higher education, as is industry (in return for its funding); thus, new relations between universities, on the one hand, and government and industry, on the other, are developing. In terms of these new relations, the autonomy that universities have historically been privileged to have, is denuded. The second result of neoliberal economics is the call for relevance, evident in programme offerings, curricula, and the rise of Mode 2 knowledge at universities. Third, the neoliberal economic revolution has seen to it that a regimen of

managerialism has precipitated over universities. In times of democratisation and individualisation, students have become clients and in themselves a powerful lobby on university campuses. The academic profession, once independent, powerful, and well-nigh sovereign, finds itself compressed between two powerful lobbies: on the one side, institutional managers and, on the other, the student corps.

Critical assessment of the global higher education revolution

The worldwide higher education revolution entailed an impressive swell in higher education enrolments worldwide and certainly meant that many more people could benefit from higher education. At the same time, this revolution brought with it a number of problems and challenges. To commence, graduate unemployment – and the mounting levels of graduate unemployment at that – is a challenge in many parts of the world (see World Bank 2022a). Even in a country known for high rates of economic growth in the recent past, such as China, special measures have had to be taken in the higher education sector to respond to the spectre of growing graduate unemployment (see Chiang, Papadakis, and Drakaki 2022). Having taken place under the aegis of neoliberal economics revolution, pivotal functions of the university (functions that no other institution can fulfil) were neglected, if not completely forsaken. These include the functions of the university regarding the custodianship, and development of the cultural treasures of humankind and the role of the university in engaging in societal critique (see Wolhuter and Jacobs 2021). Issues such as the Sustainable Development Goals and global challenges such as the ecology crisis do not get their rightful attention under the priorities of neoliberal economics. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom of academics have been seriously eroded. Basic research has been neglected. A much more concern-raising challenge in higher education, however, as the worldwide higher education revolution is playing out, is the intertwined issue of funding and social justice.

The conundrum of funding and the imperative for social justice

One of the unresolved (if it is resolvable at all) issues besetting higher education systems is that of funding: Who should carry the high cost of higher education? Arguments for the costs of higher education to be shouldered by students include that as they will eventually reap the benefits of higher education (in terms of income and career prospects), it is reasonable to expect them to shoulder the cost, instead of the taxpayers, many of whom are poorer and less privileged than the select few who gain access to higher education. Furthermore, governments have limited resources, and more deserving causes, such as housing, access to clean water, the creation of employment opportunities, and, within the education sector, primary and secondary education,

especially for those in need) should be accorded priority. Arguments against students shouldering the costs higher education (and for expecting the government to pay) include that a system of students financing their own higher education means that only the elite – the already privileged who can afford it – will then enjoy higher education; thus, higher education will serve to aggravate inequalities in society. It is also argued that that society as a whole or a collective benefits from the outcomes or products of higher education, and therefore, it makes sense to argue that public money should be allocated to higher education.

As was stated, the one major problem with the trend of shifting the cost of higher education to students and their families is that it works against the imperatives of social justice and equity. Social justice and equity (or equal education opportunities) have been two major motivations for the worldwide education expansion and reform spurt over the past 75 years (see Wolhuter, Espinoza, and McGinn 2022). For the purposes of this article, Piketty's (2020, 967) definition of a just society as "one that allows all of its members access to the widest range of fundamental goods" is used as a working definition of social justice. Education is then seen as one of the "fundamental goods". Equity in education (or what is by some meant by equal education opportunities) is a concept more difficult to define (see Espinoza 2007). Espinoza (2007) explains that the concepts "equality" and "equity" in education are conflated and even used as if they were interchangeable. While equality entails only a quantitative assessment, equity entails quantitative assessment as well as a subjective moral or ethical judgement that may override the letter of the law in the interest of the spirit of the law (Espinoza 2007, 346). While equity is more nuanced, data on equality are much more readily available. Equity, despite being more nuanced, is a much more complex concept to define, and furthermore, opinions as to what constitutes justice in a particular context are often divergent. For example, while gross tertiary enrolment rates in Engineering for the two common gender categories (male–female) are readily available and can give an easy and quick answer as to equality, the definition of what constitutes equity is more intractable and more difficult to measure, and even if a measurement equation can be found, data on it will, in all likelihood, not be as readily available. Farrel's (1999) often-cited model of equality in education, distinguishing between four forms of equality in education, namely equality of access, equality of survival, equality of output, and equality of outcome, is defined in terms of quantitative assessment. For example, equality of survival is defined as the probability of children hailing from various social categories staying in the school system to some specified level, for example the end of a complete cycle (primary, secondary, and higher) (Farrel 1999).

The well-nigh universal dimensions of inequality or inequity in education are, in the first place, the so-called trinity of inequality, namely gender, socio-economic status, and race or

ethnic status. Other such almost universal dimensions of inequality in education include geography (firstly along the core-periphery gradient, but also between various geographic regions), the rural-urban divide, age, and ableism.

Globally, there is much evidence that the funding patterns induced by the neoliberal economic revolution (i.e., funding patterns characteristic of the current worldwide higher education revolution) have exacerbated inequalities in education despite the impressive swell in enrolments (Boliver 2017). The enrolment ratios of disadvantaged categories are much lower than those of advantaged social categories (Boliver 2017). It is not only at the access or participation level where discrepancies are stark; students from disadvantaged categories are also more concentrated in lower prestige and income-generating or career prospect programmes and institutions (Boliver 2017). Their survival and graduation rates are also lower, and their lived experience of higher education is not comparable to that of students from advantaged social categories (Boliver 2017). Furthermore, even when students from disadvantaged social categories graduate from high-prestige programmes and universities, they are much less assured of securing equal graduate-level occupation, especially in a coveted organisation, with equal remuneration and career prospects, than their socio-economically advantaged co-students (Britten et al. 2016; Willis 1986). Causes of this inequality include the cost of education (not only the tuition fees but other costs too), primary and secondary education (which prepares disadvantaged students poorly for the exigencies of university study), and what Paul Bourdieu (2005) calls “cultural capital”.

Despite the massive expansion of education worldwide, the total global expenditure on education (public, as well as private) has grown during the 10 years of 2009 to 2019 in real terms 2,6 per annum, from US\$3,8 trillion in 2009 to US\$5 trillion in 2019 (in constant 2018 US\$ terms) (World Bank Group 2021, 3). This rate of growth in education expenditure is slower than the rate of economic growth and much lower than the rate of higher education expansion (World Bank Group 2021, 3). During this time, the share of private spending in the entire spending package has increased (World Bank Group 2021, 3).

Despite being mitigated by vigorous reconstruction policies, such as affirmative action or, as in the case of Chile, a school voucher system where the value of an education voucher was inversely related to family income (see Carnoy 1998), the expansion of education within the context of neoliberal economics, higher education included, could not significantly reduce education inequalities. Even in a very affluent society and with policies of affirmative action in place, such as the United States of America, the correlation between parental income and participation ratio in higher education is a straight line with a steep incline (see Piketty 2022, 177). Whereas the participation ratio of the 10th percentile of parental income in the United

States of America is 33 per cent, it rises to 87 per cent for the 90th percentile (Piketty 2022, 177). On a global scale, the portion of government spending to total spending on education is invertedly related to the level of affluence of countries. In 2018/19, for example, households in high-income countries was the origin of only 16 per cent of total education spending compared to 38 per cent in low-income countries (World Bank Group 2021, 4).

To summarise, internationally, the pattern has been a worldwide higher education revolution in the past 35 years. This revolution has been characterised by the massification of higher education or an enrolment explosion. However, this worldwide higher education revolution has taken place within the framework of neoliberal economics, which was a strong shaping factor of the worldwide higher education revolution. The rise of total expenditure on higher education was out of step with (lower than) economic growth, and much lower than the enrolment growth. Moreover, much of the costs of higher education was moved from the government to private households. Despite pro-social justice policies, the total picture was one where inequalities or inequities in higher education have not been significantly reduced. It is within this global framework that the case of the higher education project in South Africa will now be investigated.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CASE

For a better comprehension the South African higher education sector, the societal context will first be surveyed. That will be followed by sketch of the historical evolution of South African higher education and how the worldwide higher education revolution has been playing out in the South African context. The present state of South African higher education will then be assessed against the canvas of the worldwide higher education revolution. In the assessment, special emphasis will be placed to the conundrum of funding, equity or equality, and social justice.

Societal context

South Africa is a relatively vast country, covering just over a million square kilometres. Located at the southern tip of Africa, it is far removed from the node (Western Europe and North America, and from the growing second node, East Asia, too) of the global economic-political spatial economy and scholarly or scientific network. Even in the current era of globalisation and cyberconnectivity, that is a disadvantage.

The population of South Africa totals 60,6 million (mid-2022 estimate) (Statistics South Africa 2022c). The country has a youthful demographic profile, the median age being 27 years, and the growth rate, though declining since 1985, is positive, currently standing at 1,27 per cent

per year (Worldometers 2022). Politically, the country was characterised in the pre-1994 era by white power or control and stark policies of segregation. In 1994, a new political dispensation commenced, based on democracy (universal adult right to vote) and a constitution of a Western, liberal kind, buttressed by a very progressive Bill of Human Rights.

While in terms of per capita gross national product the country falls within the World Bank taxon of upper middle-income countries, it is, in terms of the Gini coefficient, one of the five most unequal societies in the world. What aggravates matters is that this inequality, though now increasingly less so than before 1994, still largely runs coterminous with the racial divide.

The historical development of higher education

With a colonial set-up and being situated very distal from the centre of the global spatial economy, the global geopolitical power, and the international scholarly network, higher education commenced in South Africa relatively late and was slow to develop. The first university came into being only during the second half of the nineteenth century. The pattern of higher education development fitted into the colonial and pre-1994 general policy framework of segregation. Separate institutions for people classified into various (racial) population categories were created. By 1994, enrolment ratios in higher education were low, and participation rates for the various population groups were highly unequal. The student body totalled 495 355 in 1994, which translated into a gross enrolment rate of 14 per cent (Wolhuter 2009). This was exceptionally low as, even at that stage, the corresponding figures for other upper middle-income countries, such as Brazil, Mexico, and Malaysia, were more than double that of South Africa (see Wolhuter et al. 2010). The South African situation was aggravated by the unequal participation rates of the various population groups. While, in terms of the official classification categories, the composition of the South African population was (in 1994) 76 per cent black, 3 per cent Indian, 9 per cent “coloured”, and 13 per cent white, the make-up of the student body in 1994 was 43 per cent black, 7 per cent Indian, 5 per cent coloured, and 45 per cent white (Wolhuter 2009). Furthermore, the system of segregated higher education institutions (as the entire system of segregated education) was rejected by black South Africans, and the historically black universities were regarded as institutions offering inferior education (see Herman 2020; Jansen 2018).

Higher education development since 1994: Domestic imperatives and the force of the worldwide higher education revolution

The forces of the worldwide higher education revolution, which took off around 1990, did not bypass South Africa. The same antecedental causes globally, as explained earlier, have been

extant in South Africa too. On top of that, domestic imperatives gave further momentum to the expansion of higher education. As explained above, enrolment ratios were low (hampering the economy) and very unequal. One of the slogans of the sociopolitical uprisings that culminated in the 1994 change was “the doors of learning shall be opened to all”, with unequal, segregated education being one of the driving forces of this turmoil. Because of these twin forces, South African higher education has experienced an era of swift expansion since 1994. Enrolments surged from 495 355 in 1994, to 539 271 in 1999, to 736 105 in 2005, to 1 184 215 in 2021 (UNESCO 2022).

Assessment

The same assessment tabled above regarding the global higher education worldwide pertains to the South African case. Enrolments have swollen, but at the same time, a number of stark challenges are facing higher education. The problem of rising graduate unemployment in the South African case is more severe than the general global pattern. Three points need to be made here. First, South Africa suffers a very high rate of unemployment. Second, the youth bears a disproportional part of this high unemployment rate. Third, although graduate unemployment is low, it is high among the youth segment.

The Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the first quarter of 2022, reported an unemployment rate stood at 34,5 per cent (Statistics South Africa 2022b). However, among those aged 25 to 34 years, it was 42,1 per cent, and 63,9 per cent for those aged 15 to 24 (*ibid.*). The overall graduate unemployment rate is 12,5 per cent, compared to 36,5 per cent for those who have completed secondary education and 40,7 per cent for those with a qualification lower than a secondary school termination examination certificate (*BusinessTech* 2021). However, the unemployment rate in the young graduates group (aged 15 to 24 years) was 32,6 per cent, and 22,4 per cent for the age group 25 to 34 years (Statistics South Africa 2022b).

The higher education expansion in South Africa over the past 30 years has also, as elsewhere in the world, taken place within the frame of neoliberal economics. No matter how strong the historic sentiments of the new government leaned in the opposite direction, in the post-1990 global context, they too followed neoliberal economic policies, not only with regard to managing the economy but also in respect of other societal spheres, including education. The neoliberal economic framework also had an effect on the funding of higher education and on progress made on the social justice front.

Funding

The share of government funding for the total cost of higher education decreased in the years

after 1990. State allocations per weighted full-time equivalent university student in South Africa dropped from R25 125 in 1986 to R16 119 in 2003 – a decline of 36 per cent (De Villiers and Steyn 2009, 44). In 1999, the government put in place the NSFAS, providing financial support to undergraduate students on condition that they pay back these loans once they enter employment and earn more than R80 000 per year. In order to qualify for NSFAS funding, students must be from families with an annual income of less than R350 000. This is a neoliberal policy direction that was also implemented in various other parts of the world, the Australian HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) being a well-known example.

After a spate of student protests under the name #FeesMustFall (see Mavunga 2019) and in the dynamics of national politics, the State President impromptu announced in December 2017 that the payback condition would be done away with, that is, the loans were converted to bursaries. In the 2022 government budget, R46 billion was allocated for NSFAS bursaries. An NSFAS bursary covers a student's tuition fees and accommodation expenses and includes money for books, transport, and personal care.

Equity and social justice

Despite the impressive growth in enrolments, the parameters of the post-1994 higher education expansion drive in South Africa, as elsewhere, placed severe limitations on progress on the social justice and equity or equality fronts. Given the historically developed context of South Africa, both the scholarly and the public discourse on higher education placed emphasis on the racial dimension of equality. The progress in the past 20 years, as measured in participation rates, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Progress in equalisation of participation rates in higher education, South Africa

Year Population group	2002 Participation rate (%)	2021 Participation rate (%)
Black	2,9	5,3
Coloured	3,6	6,2
Indian	12,8	16,2
White	15,5	24,6

Source of data: Statistics South Africa 2022a

From the statistics in Table 1, it is clear that stark inequalities remain. As is the global pattern, the inequalities at the access point or participation level are aggravated by differential attrition rates. For four-year degrees, the drop-out rates at South African universities are 21,5 per cent in the category of black students, 17,8 per cent in the category of coloured students, 12,2 per cent in the category of Indian students, and 10,3 per cent in the category of white students

(*BusinessTech* 2019). At the first-year level, the drop-out rate for four-year degrees is 22 per cent in the case of black students and 15 per cent in the case of white students (*BusinessTech* 2019).

The existence of a *de facto* largely two school systems – historically white and historically black, differing grossly in quality, and with the latter preparing students very poorly or inadequately for university study – surely is one reason behind this inequality, and the differential cultural capital that students from widely diverging school and socio-economic-family backgrounds bring with them to universities another one. These factors, in any case, limit students' ability to choose for which university and programme to enrol, NSFAS notwithstanding (see Walker 2022; Wiechers 2008). Then there is also evidence that the lived experience of higher education of students over these categories differs. This has been borne out by the Soudien Report (Department of Education 2008), as well as by other research (see e.g., Otu and Mkhize 2018). Conforming to the international pattern, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are also concentrated in lower prestige institutions and programmes (see Badat 2010). Turning to the outcome or employment level, a 2013 study by the Cape Education Consortium found that 61 per cent of white new graduates, 58 per cent of Indian new graduates, 45 per cent of coloured new graduates, and 35 per cent of black new graduates could find employment in the private sector (Qambela and Dlakavu 2014).

DISCUSSION

It is thus clear that the higher education expansion in South Africa over the past 30 years, brought about by the forces of the global higher education revolution, superimposed on those of domestic imperatives, could not eradicate racial inequalities, the massive enrolment explosion notwithstanding. While the domestic public and scholarly discourse has (understandably, given the historically evolved context) focused on the racial dimension of inequalities, it should be remembered that, as has transpired from the international experience and discourse, this is far from the only dimension of inequality. In this strong focus on racial inequalities, other dimensions of inequality, such as gender inequalities, which appear high on the agenda of international higher education research, have passed the South African scholarship on higher education by (see Wolhuter 1997; 2014).

With the introduction of free education in 2017, explained earlier, the public discourse foregrounded the problem of the so-called missing middle, that is, students from families above the R350 000 income threshold for qualifying for NSFAS but too poor to easily afford higher education, which makes out a substantial part of middle-class families (see Chawula 2021). However, the entire issue of socio-economic inequalities still needs to be incorporated in the

scholarly discourse on equality or inequity in higher education in South Africa, as do other dimensions of inequality, as well as the more complex reality of interlocking dimensions of inequality.

CONCLUSION

While globally, as well as in the case of South Africa in particular, an impressive, unprecedented higher education expansion has taken place in the past 30 years, the nature and context of this expansion drive or revolution could not eradicate inequalities or inequities. Despite various measures for redress (affirmative action), these remain tenaciously along the dimensions of gender, socio-economic descent, and race or ethnicity – the so-called trinity of inequality – as well as along the dimensions of geography, age, ableism, and sexual orientation at the levels of access (though at this point, inequalities may have been significantly reduced over the past 30 years), process (including lived experience), progress (survival), outcomes, and output. In South Africa, both the public discourse and the scholarly discourse on equity in higher education have laid emphasis on the racial dimension; however, this discourse needs to be broadened to include the other dimensions too. As to the far-from-perfect record of redress or equalisation policies and practices thus far, a project of total social engineering and decimation of all autonomy, freedom, and agency of civil society cannot be recommended. That leaves one option, taking a cue from John Hattie's Visible Learning Project (covering K12 schools). Described as the biggest meta-survey in the scholarly field of education, Hattie (2008) surveyed 800 studies (including more than 80 million students) on performance indicators of the academic achievement of (K12) students. Such painstaking research at the level of higher education and in pursuing the twin aims of equity and social justice is the best avenue of hope. First, the objectives of equity and social higher education should be precise, on every level of access, process, survival, output, and outcome. These should include more than purely academic achievement. Then the correlates of these, in various societal contexts, should be established and investigated, and that can form the basis for the reform of higher education to make higher education more equitable and socially just.

THE FORWARD TRAJECTORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

From the above analysis of South African higher education, placed against the canvas of and compared with the worldwide higher education revolution, suggestions as to the future trajectory, in order to best address the challenge of funding and addressing the need for social justice, can be made on two levels.

On the first level, the public and scholarly discourse on inequality in the higher education

system of South Africa needs to be broadened from its current narrow focus on racial inequalities. This means that, firstly, forms of education inequality need to be covered too. These include inequalities along the dimensions of class or socio-economic descent, gender, age, ableism, and geography. Then, secondly, mindful of Farrel's model, the discourse on inequality should be expanded from its focus on access to survival (attrition), output, and outcome (absorption into and equality in the labour market and career paths). Thirdly, referring to Espinoza's argument, the discourse on equality should be superseded by a more fine-tuned and nuanced discourse on equity.

On the basis of such a more complete and nuanced discourse on inequality, on the next level, attention can be given to how to address inequalities. Measures to do so will always require funding. While the neoliberal economic revolution, in many respects, constitutes a force working against social justice, neoliberal economics is such a compelling force in the world that it would be an exercise in futility to attempt to destroy it. In any case, macro- or total social engineering too has no track record based upon which it can be recommended. This leaves the obvious option to conduct research aimed at identifying the correlates of achieving equality or equity in (higher) education in various societal contexts and to use the outcomes of such research for targeted, measured, and informed intervention in the higher education sector.

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