

The Free Higher Education Social Struggle in South Africa: Is the Nordic Model a Panacea for Developing Countries?

**Presentation by Prof. Nico Cloete at the Department of Education, University of Oslo,
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*Reflections on the presentation by Dr Jens Jungblut,
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Following up on Nico's detailed presentation is not an easy task. On the one hand, because I agree with many points that he has highlighted. On the other hand, because the complexity of the issues discussed would allow me to talk for another hour, but obviously that is not the idea behind my short intervention. So, let me make some brief reflections on the issue and provide some additional food for thought to spark the following discussion.

I would like to start out with supporting Nico's argument that higher education is not the silver bullet for all societal problems. It cannot and should not be seen as the one tool that equalizes all injustices in a society. Doing so, would not only overburden higher education but actually overestimates its potential for societal change as higher education can only operate in the conditions that its context provides.

When looking at higher education policy and the salience of it, tuition fees are always a hot topic that gets many people involved. Interestingly, it seems to be even more salient than debates over increased student support, which, based on the results of some studies, could be argued have the same if not a stronger effect on the re-distributive characteristics of higher education. So, tuition fee debates can easily be very heated and as (higher) education policies are in general "crowd pleasers", meaning nobody is really against educating people, these debates are often fundamental in nature because they touch questions linked to the balance between private and public gains as well as private and public funding responsibilities. Through this they go to the core of the understanding of what is perceived to be a social and just society.

This also means that it is difficult to copy paste policy solutions working in one context to another one as the framework conditions will determine in how far, for example, the same tuition fee policy will have similar effects on social mobility in two different contexts. To use an example, when we look at Germany we can see that it has a comparatively low participation rate in higher education, especially in relation to other OECD countries, and that it has a high level of educational inequality due early tracking of pupils in secondary schools. However, at the same time the social inequality (measured through the Gini index) is not as high as one might expect in such a situation. The reason for this is the strong vocational education and training system that presents a viable alternative to higher education with potentially high life-time-earnings that equalize the educational inequality (see: Busemeyer, 2015). This raises the question, whether a socially just society can only be achieved if everyone attends higher education, or whether we can imagine social mobility also to take place through measures outside of universities.

This example connects well to the idea of trade-offs in higher education policy that also Nico referred to and which is presented in greater detail in Ben Ansell's work (Ansell, 2010). At the same time, it is important to understand that the existing system of higher education finance also influences the perception and expectations of citizens, meaning that while tuition fees are a societal taboo in Norway, tuition free higher education is rather unthinkable in the US context (see: Garritzmann, 2016). Thus, one could describe the situation in South Africa as being a critical juncture for the

system in the sense that the way in which the conflict over funding higher education will be solved will determine the development of the system for the coming decades and shape the expectations of the next generations.

This has obvious democratic implications in the sense that departing from the existing system can be politically costly as there will be winners and losers. Especially, in a situation where higher education competes with other state expenditures due to a limited income of the state the situation and trade-offs get even more complex. In comparison to state expenditures for primary or secondary education or health care higher education is in the special situation that participation in it and thus also the gains from it are skewed towards the wealthy part of the population. This has an obvious impact on the redistributive effects that additional public spending on higher education has in comparison to other public sectors that have a more balanced accessibility. As higher education also cannot heal all the problems that already persist at the previous levels of the educational system, the situation gets even more complex (if e.g. there is high diversity in quality of secondary education, increased access to higher education might not be able to equalize social selections on secondary schools).

From a regional perspective, many Sub-Saharan African countries already spent a comparatively high percentage of their budgets on education. Even though the part of that budget that goes into higher education is often comparatively small, it is hard for these countries to make major shifts in their education budget, since many of them are still in a process where the secondary schooling quality is not at a coherently high level. At the same time, it is also hard for governments in these countries to argue for massive increases to the education budget as it consumes already a comparatively high percentage of the budget as a whole. Given the growing demographic pressure in the region that creates a need to increase access to higher education the issue of funding higher education will most probably be a hot topic for the coming decades. Especially, since a study from SARUA estimated that additional public investments in higher education will only start to pay off economically for governments in the region after several decades.¹ Thus, if a government has to win elections in four years, investing in the long-term development of higher education might be less attractive than building new houses or improving health care, as they have more immediate benefits for the population.

So, in a situation like the one in South Africa with large student protests that put pressure on the government to decrease or abolish tuition fees, there is a certain danger that governments take the easy way out and abolish tuition fees without providing public funds to balance out the loss in income for universities. Such a drop in funding can threaten both academic quality and the stability of the system in the long run. This in turn has a socio-economic effect. As higher education systems with poor quality will not be able to provide students with skills needed to turn their education into an asset for the labor market and while low and middle income students are tied to their national system, the students from more affluent backgrounds can opt out and visit universities abroad, which in turn gives them an additional advantage over those students who had to attend the local under-funded higher education institutions. So, for a government working under the budgetary constraints of a developing country or an emerging economy providing free higher education of a decent quality to an increasing percentage of young people is a serious challenge and a “Norwegian” solution might just not be possible or actually have negative effects on the social mobility and fairness of the system.

At the same time, one cannot forget that any system of tuition fees creates inequalities and potential social barriers that need to be analyzed and addressed through well-crafted counter measures. One example for this is a strong student support system that can balance out negative effects of tuition

¹ See:

<http://www.sarua.org/files/publications/SARUA%20leadership%20Dialogue%20Series/Leadership%20Dialogue%20Series%20Vol%203%20No%202.pdf>

fees and create more direct redistribution by favoring those students in need. An additional problem is that there is solid research from social psychology that points to the effect that especially people from lower socio economic background are debt averse with regard to educational investments that have a longer time horizon for their pay-off. Thus, it not only needs fiscal measures to support students but also some form of counseling to support students especially from lower socio economic backgrounds and motivate them to “risk” investing in higher education. Finally, every tuition fee and student support system will have grey areas of people that are in between the supported category and the category of those who can afford it. To make sure that nobody falls in between measures, it is necessary to constantly fine tune higher education funding and student support systems, ideally based on well-grounded empirical research that analyses the effects and short-comings of the existing mechanisms.

References

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