

Universal Free Public Education **26/110/15**

The position of the Institute for Economic Research on Innovation (IERI) at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) on the issue of Universal Free Public Education has been consistent and unequivocal since the founding of the Institute. Because of the stance that it has adopted, IERI stands firmly behind the university student mass movements which have mobilised for a zero percent increase in tuition fees for 2016. While the success of this movement in achieving an agreement on the part of government that university tuition fees will not increase in 2016 we strongly maintain that in principle: quality education has to be free at all levels from pre-school to post-school in the context of lifelong learning.

This position stands on two arguments. The first concerns the value system of an effective, not simply legislative, democracy which should not discriminate on the life chances possibilities of its citizenry on any lines, including class, wealth, and income of households. From this perspective quality education has to be guaranteed at all levels to ensure that all have access to the chance of fulfilling their potential regardless of their socio-economic and political circumstances. The failure to ensure this guaranteed access has led to a deepening class rift in the current global hegemony of an extreme version of neoliberal doctrine over policy making. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the actually existing varieties of capitalism had measures to protect the reproduction of labour – hence the welfare state and largely free primary, secondary and, in many cases, free tertiary education. It is unacceptable that a country like South Africa which is only emerging from centuries of colonial dispossession, racial capitalism, and apartheid should now implicitly condone discrimination on class lines.

The second argument is a developmental one which identifies human beings as constituting the wealth of nations, rather than resources. History has repeatedly shown that those countries which have focussed on the broad based enhancement of the human capabilities of their population have inevitably developed towards relatively democratic political economies which still flourish even within the current globalised economy. The development trajectories of countries like Brazil and other Latin American economies over the past two decades have amply demonstrated the success of policies which have aimed at the democratisation of access. To the north of us, Botswana guarantees free university education to its population as a democratic value as well as in cognizance of the human capabilities requirement for successful development. The crushing constraint of South Africa's development potential which was the heritage of apartheid has been perpetuated with the decisive shift to a neoliberal planning paradigm at the start of democracy, a positioning which has been implicitly maintained in the National Development Plan. The result of this has been an enduring high level of poverty, deepening inequalities, and expanding chauvinisms over the recent decades. Neoliberal policy fixations in post-apartheid South Africa clearly serve to maintain the subjugation of the majority of the population roughly along racialised, patriarchal, and class lines.

The issue of the transformation of the education system in South Africa is therefore not disconnected from the broader transformation challenges that the country confronts – including economic, social, and political transformation. The construction of a better future cannot be based on a model of education that entrenches and perpetuates social divisions. In a country where income inequality remains the largest in the world, education opens doors and facilitates a much needed social, economic, and political mobility. For the majority of poor South African households, tertiary education has been and remains out of reach, unless accompanied with long-term indebtedness. Such circumstances trigger higher vulnerability and precarious work

conditions, leading many to further situations of poverty. This is particularly important in a country with one of the highest youth unemployment globally. To enact this change, South Africa must adhere to the urgent goal of building excellent and relevant skills amongst its youth, through universal free quality education.

IERI therefore maintains that both from a value and a developmental perspective, education cannot be a private good, regardless of the returns for the individual who is being educated. Its free access works towards the grounding of an effective democracy and towards laying the sound basis for economic development. IERI contends that the funding of education is solely the responsibility of the state which is mandated to allocate tax revenue in a manner which is both redistributive and developmental. It should also be the guarantor of free and high quality primary, secondary, and lifelong education to ensure an improved flow of students into the tertiary sector. IERI also advocates the provision of stipends to eligible students to ensure that the other considerable components of the cost of a university education (books, computers, residence, and transport, amongst others) are also covered.

Only through universal free quality public education can we, as a country, hope to fashion a progressive knowledge-intensive economy, politic, and society that enables transformation and operates for the benefit of our entire population within the emerging constraints of ecological planetary boundaries. The current trajectory remains premised on the exclusion of younger generations from participation in higher education and thereby reproduces a vicious circle of under-development, marginalisation, and ignorance. The failure to adopt and advance calls for universal free quality public education condemns us to remain a country constituted upon inequality, unemployment, and poverty for most and a better life for only some.