

A paradox of Access and Success in Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, access to higher education has become a mantra repeated by policymakers, educators, and students. The education transformation discourse took a different shape after the 2015-2016 student revolt demanding a decolonised and affordable access to education system. The discontents articulated by the student started a shift in the discourse of access to higher education, that prompted the President of South Africa to institute a Commission of Inquiry into the feasibility of making higher education fee-free. The Commission of Enquiry chaired by Honourable Justice Heher culminated in a report that was released in 2017. The recommendations in the Heher Commission report focused substantively on the funding of the post schooling education and training sector; and in particular the funding of student accommodation, technical vocation education and training (TVET) students, postgraduate students, and funding of university students. The problem now is that the Covid pandemic has affected fee income; and on top of that there is significant decline in student success rates. There is also a decline in public education expenditure, as well as an increase in access. All this has added a complex dynamic in the access-success debate in higher education in South Africa. Against this background, this paper seeks to address three questions: (1) What is the South African Higher Education funding trajectory after the release of the Heher Commission: (2) What accounts for the disjuncture between access to higher education and success? (3) With the onset of the Covid pandemic, with the state afford to fund higher education in South Africa? The paper uses data published in the South African Higher Education Management Information System to predict the future of state revenue to fund higher education in South Africa. Exponential Smoothing forecasting method is used to analyse time series data on stage funding for the past 20 year. The findings show a decline in the value of state university budget as % of GDP from 1,38% in 2021 to 1,35 in 2022. By 2027, the exponential smoothing method forecasts that the state funding as % of GDP will increase from 1.35% in 2022 to 1,53% in 2027.

Keywords: Heher Commission; access to higher education; student success; fee income; public education expenditure

