DETERMINANTS OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF FREE HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG STUDENTS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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─Abstract ─

The debate on the mode of financing of higher education is not a new one. For decades, there have been opposing views and conflicting efforts in as far as the financing of higher education is concerned. Most developed countries have more or less settled on a regime that does not compromise on both quality and equity by introducing financing mechanisms that allow the needy to borrow money or commonly known as soft loans only payable after graduating and securing a job. In developing countries, there is still antagonism and a lot of frustration among students and parents in the sense that higher education is still not accessible by many and the financing of the same still excludes the majority of deserving students. Towards the end of 2015 and beginning of 2016, students in South African universities rose up to first demand no increment of their tuition and thereafter free higher education. This paper looks at the perceptions of free higher education among students at one of the universities in South Africa and also assesses the demographic characteristics that inform their cosmological point of view and hence the perceptions.

Key Words: *Perceptions, higher education financing, free higher education, South Africa*

JEL Classification: O10, O21, R58

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education financing has been at the forefront of higher education debates for decades now, especially in developing countries (World Bank, 2004, 2008; Karkkainen, 2006; UNESCO, 2011; Dunga, 2013; Teferra, 2013). The debate has not managed to be finalised due to the equity rationale and the efficiency importance on both sides of the argument. Most developed countries such as United States, Britain and Germany, among others, have managed to come up with funding models that tend to satisfy the need of both the equity proponents and the efficiency contenders (OECD, 2014). At the center of it all is that higher education, much as it is a private investment, has a lot of externalities that are positive and hence it makes sense for the government to pay for this social contribution that educated individuals like doctors, lawyers, engineers and teachers, among others, make to society (Hull, 2015). The other side of the argument contends that higher education benefits the individual more than it benefits anyone else and with the free movement of labour in the modern global economy, there is no justification for any government to pay for such investment, which may end up in a different country anyway (Weber, 2005).

In South Africa, the debate has become intense, based on the protests that have become common in universities. The students argue that higher education should be free especially pointing to the Freedom Charter of the African National Congress (ANC), which students argue promises free higher education. However, the ANC has recently corrected the interpretation of what is in the charter and according to the general Secretary Gwede Mantashe; "*People say there will be free education, no, that's not what the Freedom Charter says. The Freedom Charter says higher education and technical training shall be open to all, that is the right to it. By means of state allowances and scholarship on the basis of merit. The right is open, but access is on the basis of merits. We have exceeded that. That's our submission for a public debate*," (ENCA 4 Oct, 2016:5). There have been a number of protests with the climax witnessed in 2015, where almost all the major universities in the country were shut down, as students were demanding a zero increase in fees under what was to become known as the #feesmustfall (Calitz and Fourie, 2016). However, the campaign has taken a sharp turn from no increase to a demand of free higher education. The paper analyses data from students in a South African university who were questioned on their view of whether higher education should be free or not in South Africa. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a detailed literature review, the section that follows focuses on the methodology and the data collection process

that were followed. Results and discussions are presented in Section 4 and Section 5 concludes the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 History of higher education financing in the world

Higher education is progressively perceived as being essential to social and employment success (World Bank, 2006; Riddell and Song, 2011). A lack of education greatly affects a person's ability in many aspects of life including the prospects of getting an income through employment. Among many advantages of higher education in society is that it does not just provide an educated workforce but also a workforce that can contribute to the growth and development of the economy (Tilak, 2011). This is evident in the 2015 State of Education in Africa report, which shows that a one-year increase in average tertiary education levels would, in the long run, yield up to a 12 percent expansion in the gross domestic product (AAI, 2015:10).

The positive returns of higher education have further led to its rapid expansion recent years. Socio economic factors such as poverty and unemployment have been some of the main reasons why participation in higher education has expanded. The already increasing enrolment rates in higher education have fuelled discussions on its financing. Traditionally, and in most countries of the world, financing of higher education primarily depends broadly on the government (UNESCO, 2011). For instance, Karkkainen (2006:4) found that in 66 percent of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, at least 80 percent of higher education funding has come from the government countries since the 1980s. However, the long queue of crucial needs that compete with public higher education for a share of scarce public revenues has been increasing the financial pressure on higher education, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Johnstone, 2010:3). The global economic crisis has further perpetuated pressure on government spending to the degree that less public resources have been distributed to education. Spending patterns decreased considerably between 2005 and 2012 in most countries of the world and the part of the decline was caused by the global financial crisis, which consequently negatively affected many country's income sources (OECD, 2015; Tilak, 2015).

In response, most regions have swung to diversifying their funding base in an effort to support their expanding higher education sectors – most of which are cost sharing. According to Johnstone (2010), cost sharing is supported by the obvious

inability of government revenues in almost all countries that are failing to keep up with increasing enrollments and rising higher education costs. Mechanisms such as student financial support schemes have assisted in promoting access and fairness while sharing expenses of higher education between the state and students (OECD, 2015). Other cost sharing mechanisms that have had increased usage over the years include dual-track systems which is used in some East African countries such as Kenya and Uganda; deferred tuition contributions, introduction of tuition only for certain public institutions or programs, the introduction of user charges/fees for lodging and food, the cutting of some student support grants and the freezing of student grants (Johnstone, 2003).

2.2 Developments in higher education financing in Africa: sub-Saharan Africa (SAA) case

There has been an increased demand for higher education, especially in regions with high population numbers and sub-Saharan Africa is no exception. Presently, the region has the fastest growing population in the world and is expected to reach 2.7 billion by 2060, with children under the age of 15 making up about 40 percent of the population (Bakilana, 2015; Pfeffermann, 2015). Given the high population growth projections for young people, the sub-Saharan African region is faced with challenges of creating opportunities and increasing access to higher education in order to improve future employment prospects. At the same time, higher education does not come cheap, given the already evident socio-economic challenges facing the region. As Teferra (2013:1) concludes, no place in the world is funding higher education more challenging than in sub-Saharan Africa. However, generalising about this diverse region is very difficult but the fact remains that majority of the countries face some common challenges. The challenges in education are also familiar, ranging from inadequate access at tertiary level, poor quality provision, low efficiency levels, which are reflected in the already high drop-out and repetition rates, inequity in resource distribution and geographical isolation, which prevent access to higher education (Pillay, 2010:3).

Despite tight economic constraints, higher education enrolments have increased quite significantly over the past few years. According to a report by the AAI, between 2000 and 2010 higher education enrolments in the region increased from 2.3 million to 5.2 million. Although this was a double increase, the fact of the matter is that on average this is a low number as only 6 percent of young people in the region are enrolled in higher education compared to the world average of 26 percent, pointing to a number of issues (AAI, 2015). Available public resources

have not been able to keep up with increasing higher education enrolments (World Bank, 2010). The lack of finance has been one of the main constraints to higher education growth in the region. Owing to the increasing competition for public funds together with tight budgets, it is argued that public sector funding is not adequate to meet the increased access to higher education, often compromising on quality (Pfeffermann, 2015). Altbach (2012:3) reminds us, "without a stable funding base, neither access nor excellence can be achieved".

While previously mentioned that the government traditionally has been the main financer of higher education in many countries of the world, throughout the years there has been a sound decrease in aggregate government spending on higher education in real terms (Tilak, 2011:7). Historically, the extent of spending plans distributed to higher education was for most developing countries under 10 percent of aggregate spending plans (Siphambe, 2010). Africa (including sub-Saharan Africa) is the only region in the world to have experienced a much larger decline in public spending per student – a 30 percent decline over the last 15 years (Maslen, 2010). Government expenditure on higher education in the continent (including the SSA region) is disappointingly small and does not even come close to some of the budgets of a few universities in the United States alone (Teferra and Altbach, 2004:27). In Lesotho, for instance, higher education institutions receive only a quarter of their budgets from the government, which is way below their budget requirements, often compromising on the quality of education and their ability to operate effectively (Lesotho Council on Higher Education, 2012:35). Adongo (2010) found that the financing of higher education in Namibia is not clear and as a result, there are frequently large gaps between institutional demand for funds and actual fund allocation. Even though the effect of this reduction in public expenditure on higher education differs significantly from country to country, it is perhaps more important in countries that have a low rate of public expenditure per student and at the same time face steep increases in the number of students (World Bank, 2010:22).

Notwithstanding many attempts to ease the financial pressure off government, cost sharing in sub-Saharan Africa has been successful only in a couple of countries (South Africa and to some extent, Kenya). According to Teferra (2013), cost-sharing efforts in the region are hampered by a number of factors such as ineffective and poorly equipped management, ineffective collecting mechanisms and poor employment environment, among others. Even when cost-sharing mechanisms are in place, cost recovery remains a crucial challenge for many countries.

2.3 An overview of higher education financing in South Africa

Higher education financing is a very controversial topic in South Africa. Even the dissatisfaction with high tuition fees is also not a distinct subject in the country (Govender, 2016). The increasing cost of higher education has seen students protest against fee increases. Although the most important source of financial support for the country's higher education is the government, the truth of the matter is that the support has been declining over the years. As observed recently, public spending on higher education institutions is at approximately 0.8 percent of GDP, which is very low according to international standards (HESA, 2014; Phungo, 2015; National Treasury, 2016), yet at the same time research shows that higher education can only be afforded by 5 percent of households in the country (Phungo, 2015:2). In response to the declining government support, higher education institutions have been forced to seek resources elsewhere in order to ensure a continuous survival, hence regular increases in tuition fees (Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete, 2008). A recent study by Calitz and Fourie (2016) shows that tuition fees in South Africa are currently excessively expensive compared to five decades ago.

Higher education institutions in South Africa depend largely on government for operating and capital expenses, which can be up to 50 percent of total income, depending on the university (Ntshoe and De Villiers, 2008; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete, 2008; Mouton *et al.*, 2013). These institutions generate further income from tuition fees and self-generated income. Government financing of higher education in South Africa is guided by standards of shared costs, equity, redress and development (Department of Education, 1996). In particular, the cost sharing principle maintains that the government and all relevant stakeholders must share the costs of higher education. Cost sharing is based on the observation that higher education is both a public good and a private benefit and, therefore, the cost of provision should be shared between the state and the individual beneficiary (HESA, 2008:27).

The main cost sharing model is the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFA), which was set up in 1999 to guarantee that academically capable students without financial resources can get the opportunity to attend higher education (Mouton *et al.*, 2013). While the vast majority of NSFAS financing comes from the government, different sources incorporate loan retrievals, higher education institutions, the private sector and other external donors (CHE, 2004). Eligibility is granted to disadvantaged students (all Black students including

Coloureds), although the degree of disadvantage varies with white students neither weighted nor excluded from eligibility (DHET, 2010). Black students are the biggest recipients of NSFAS funding, accounting for 87 percent of students in 2013, trailed by Coloured students at 4.2 percent (NSFAS, 2016).

Regardless of these funding mechanisms and even though the government has increased access to higher education for Black students, financial assistance remains deficient to address the issues of poor students including qualifying and deserving students given the poverty and unemployment levels in the country. According to NSFAS (2016), only 25 percent of the students benefit from the scheme. In 2014, about 18.7 percent of students who applied for NSFAS were not funded and even many of those who were assisted may not have been supported for their full cost of study (NSFAS, 2016). Another challenge is the higher education costs including living expenses and participation rates, which are increasing at a faster rate than NSFAS funds (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012; Nzimande, 2015). In the 2013/2014 academic year, the total number of students in higher education institutions was 986 559 while NSFAS students were only 226 909 (HESA, 2014). The same trend is also observed between 2009 and 2012. Funding, therefore, determines access to higher education in South Africa. Inadequate student financial support is arguably a contributing component that hinders equitable and extensive access to higher education, thereby preventing South Africa from responding to the socio-economic challenges it faces.

Repayment of loans starts when an individual is in full time permanent employment with an annual salary of at least R30 000. If the student never receives employment after graduation, then the loan is written off. However, loan recovery remains a serious challenge for the sustainability of NSFAS. NSFAS (2016) reports that between 2011 and 2015, the number of students awarded financial aid by NSFAS has increased massively, yet at the same time the rate of NSFAS debtors paying dropped by 23 percent to 12 percent, bringing about a 61 percent decline in loan recoveries during this period. Furthermore, students who over the years received assistance from the NSFAS still owe an estimated R21 billion (Tandwa, 2016:4), affecting the funding of current students needing financial assistance. The country's vision requires the higher education sector to increase enrolment levels every year from 950 000 in 2010 to 1.6 million by 2030 (NDP, 2012). However, it is without doubt that increased enrolments will call for increased funding. A report by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PWC, 2016) argues that expanding government spending on higher education from its current level to at least 2 percent of GDP will alleviate the weight on students to finance their own

education. Despite the aforementioned challenges and in comparison to some of its SSA counterparts, cost sharing has been more successful in South Africa than anywhere else in the sub-Saharan region (Teferra, 2013).

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

A simple questionnaire was administered to students in all the different years of study from one of the universities in South Africa. For ethical reasons, the name of the university is not disclosed. A random sample of 274 students was involved in the survey. According to Gujarati and Porter (2009), a sample size greater than 30 is deemed sufficient for normal approximation, so statistically, the 274 sample is large enough. A self-administered questionnaire was used to obtain the demographic characteristics of the respondents and whether they thought higher education should be free or not.

The analysis of the data is done by first presenting the frequencies of the demographic characteristics of the respondents in order to show that the sample was representative enough. Then a frequency analysis of the main question of interest is also presented to see how the respondents responded in general.

3.1 Model specification

The question on whether higher education must be free or not had a binary response – yes or no. In order to analyse, through a regression process, the demographic characteristics that determined the response, a binary logistic regression is modeled as follows:

$$P_i = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_1 + \beta_2)}} \ldots \qquad (1)$$

Or also expressed as

$$P_i = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-Z_i}} = \frac{e^z}{1 + e^z} \ldots \qquad (2)$$

Where $Z_i = \beta_1 + \beta_2 X_i$

Where equation (2) is known as the logistic distribution function. Thus as Z ranges from $-\infty \, to + \infty$ P_i ranges between 0 and 1 (Gujarati and Porter, 2009:554). This equation is simply linearised by expressing the ratio of the probability of the success event to that of the compliment in the case of a binary variable, also known as the odds ratio, which is given as follows:

$$L_i = ln\left(\frac{P_i}{1-P_i}\right) = \beta_1 + \beta_2 X_i \ \ldots \quad (3)$$

In addition, for estimation purposes, it has the error term and all the other explanatory variables included as follows:

$$L_i = ln\left(\frac{P_i}{1-P_i}\right) = \beta_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \cdots \beta_n X_n + u_i \ \ldots \quad (4)$$

Therefore, the dependent variable is the probability of wanting higher education to be free, as a yes response is coded as one and a no response is coded as zero.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The distribution of the sample in terms of gender, race and other demographics is presented before the multivariate analysis. The univariate analysis helps in painting a clear picture of the sample and how the respondents represent the wider picture of the population. Table 1 shows that the sample was almost evenly distributed between male and female students with a share of 47.4 and 52.6 percent respectively.

Table 1: Summary of the responses

Category	Variable	N = 274	Valid percent
Race	Black	230	85.2
	White	32	11.9
	Asian/Indian	3	1.1
	Coloured	4	1.5
	Other	1	0.4
Gender	Female	144	52.6
	Male	130	47.4
On a bursary	Yes	64	23.4
	No	209	76.3
On a loan (e.g. NSFAS, Edu-Loan)	Yes	89	32.7
	No	182	66.9
Neither on a bursary nor loan	Parents/Guardian paying	144	88.3
	Sibling	4	2.5
	Other	14	8.6
Free higher education?	Yes	119	43.4
	No	155	56.6
Why free higher education shouldn't be implemented?	The country has no capacity	50	32.1
	It would put a strain on resources and affect quality	46	29.5
	It would benefit the rich	24	15.4

Category	Variable	N = 274	Valid percent
	It should apply to the needy and academically deserving students	34	21.8
	Other reasons	2	1.3

Source: Survey Data: 2016

In terms of race, the sample had more black students compared to all other races, which is a reflection of the race distribution in the population. Table 1 shows the race percentages with black students at 85.2 percent, followed by white students at 11.9 percent. There were less Coloured and Indian students in the sample, at 1.5 and 1.1 percent, respectively. In the bursary category, a large number (76.3%) of the sampled students are not on bursaries with at least 33 percent studying through loans. Of those that were not on loans or bursaries, about 88 percent pay for their studies through their parents or guardians. The fact that a large number of students are paying from their pockets should have led to a majority arguing for free higher education. However, the results show that students did not agree with that assumed perception. When asked whether they think higher education should be free, students were split almost equally with slightly more disagreeing with the notion of free higher education as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Do you think higher education should be free?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Yes	119	43.4	43.4	43.4
	No	155	56.6	56.6	100.0
	Total	274	100.0	100.0	

Source: Calculations from survey data 2016

Students that felt higher education should not be free gave a number of reasons, as shown in Table 1. The majority of which pointed to the fact that the country has no capacity to offer free higher education and that forcing it would lead to a compromised quality. About 61.6 percent argued that it would strain the resources, which are not enough in any case. Other reasons were that it might end up benefiting the rich who do not need help with paying for their education (15.4%). The other 21.8 percent argued that this free higher education policy should only be allowed if it is only targeting needy and academically deserving students.

Regression results

A further analysis was done in a binary logistic regression to assess what factors determined the probability of a student agreeing with free higher education. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Binary logistic regression results

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Age	.146	.072	4.145	1	.042	1.157
Race Black			7.193	2	.027	
Race White	-1.283	.479	7.179	1	.007	.277
Race others	-.243	.618	.154	1	.694	.784
Gender (Male)	-.313	.261	1.440	1	.230	.731
On a bursary	-.120	.317	.144	1	.704	.886
Staying in the residence			.389	2	.823	
Staying at home	.089	.305	.084	1	.772	1.093
Renting	.249	.412	.365	1	.546	1.283
Not on students loan	.529	.287	3.406	1	.065	1.698
Constant	-3.170	1.498	4.480	1	.034	.042

The model is tested by the Hosmer and Lemeshow test, which has a null hypothesis that a model is a good fit. With a chi square test of 10.7 and a p-value of 0.216, we accept the null hypothesis, hence concluding that the model is a good fit. The coefficients present the signs showing the relationship between the variable and the probability of agreeing that higher education should be free. Age has a positive coefficient indicating that the older students had a higher probability of saying yes to free higher education. The exp B is the odds ratio and it is below one when the relationship is negative and above one when there is a positive relationship. In this case, age has the odds of 1.157, meaning that a unit change in age increases the odds of saying yes to free higher education by 1.157. The p-value for age is 0.042, which is significant at 5 percent significance level, meaning that age is an important determinant of the perceptions of whether higher education should be free or not

Race has a p-value of 0.027, which is also significant at the 5 percent significance level. This means that race is important in explaining the perception of free higher education. Much as the frequencies indicated that more black students did not agree with the idea of free higher education, white students had a higher probability of saying no to free higher education compared to the black students. The beta coefficient is negative since it is compared to the benchmark of black students. Being a white student reduced the odds ratio of saying yes by 0.277 and

it is significant at the 1 percent significance level with a p-value of 0.007. The other races, which included Indians, Coloureds and others, also had a higher probability of saying no to free higher education compared to the black students. This is evidenced by the negative beta value and by the odds ratio of less than one.

The place of residence and the fact of whether a participant was on a bursary did not significantly determine their perception as the p-values for these variables were all not significant at any significance level. It is interesting to note that those that were not on a student loan had a significant positive coefficient. The positive coefficient indicated that those that were not on a student loan were more likely to say yes to free higher education compared to those on a student loan and this makes sense as it indicates that those on a student loan do not feel the strain of fees compared to those that have to pay from their pockets. The p-value is 0.065, which is significant at the 10 percent level of significance.

5. CONCLUSION

The results from this study show that as the debate on whether higher education should be free or not continues, it is important not to make assumptions about what students think. The expectation in this survey was that all students would agree with the idea of introducing free higher education. However, the results have shown that is not the case. Actually, a higher percentage of the sampled students across races and years of study feel that free higher education is not feasible and that, if implemented, it should be only for the academically deserving needy students.

The binary logistic regression has also pointed to age, race and availability of student loan as some of the important determinants of the student's perception on whether higher education should be made free or not. It is safe to say, therefore, that the protesters are not speaking for everyone; however, the other position is not popular among students and hence becomes silent or is silenced by the passion on the other side. It is not to say that those arguing for free higher education do not have a valid argument, all this study does is point to the absence of consensus at least on the part of the students in the sample.

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