**COMMENT ON:**

**Interrogating Free Decolonised
Higher Education Funding**

12 MARCH 2017

**GENERALCOMMENT**

1. The following comments are consistent with the values and perspectives set out by my colleagues and I in several articles published over the last 18 months in the public media (The Conversation, Daily Vox, Guardian, Sunday Independent, Argus,) in academic texts (past and forthcoming) and in a formal submission to the Heher Commission.
2. Our arguments are about the fundamentals which I reiterate in outline. These arguments are more fully developed in the writings I refer to and can be made available if needed.
	1. The issue of free *quality education for all* is intrinsically about the possibilities for a transition to a post-capitalist society.
	2. Such a society must be achieved for reorganizing the prevailing system of social relations (and the forms of power it represents) and through this to address the problems of racism, gender and its related concepts, geographic discrimination and environmental sustainability.
	3. This reorganization presupposes an entirely different orientation to the process of knowledge creation, its dissemination and application.
	4. The decolonization of the form and content of higher education (the ‘idea of the university’, its curriculum, pedagogy, research and other activities) is about a reconstitution of the very form, content and nature of post-apartheid capitalist society and the continuities of the apartheid state and society.
	5. Reconceptualizing the university is inseparable from a clearer understanding of the power of corporate globalization and the neo-liberal ideas that drive the agenda of post-apartheid ‘reform.’ This agenda has deepened the power of corporate managerialism in public institutions and the commodification of all forms of knowledge. The continued power of racist, gendered and other discriminatory forms of knowledge production are inseparable from corporatist human capital theory and practice in which the primary function of education and training systems is to reproduce the prevailing relations of social power, exploitative work and oppression. Increasingly the ‘mandate’ of the university system is becoming an expression of the corporate agenda of global knowledge production for profit-making and control through such relations, profoundly influencing how the role of the university and knowledge systems in interpreted. If that is not recognized more fundamentally efforts to change the university systems will be incomplete and continue to reproduce the present social crisis.
	6. I accept the need for a transitional approach since an alternative post-capitalist society is not achievable overnight nor without the continued mobilization of broader student constituencies, sustained mobilization amongst broader layers of society, linkages with communities that share at least some of the fundamentals referred to – in particular the culpability of corporate agendas in preventing far reaching changes – and the development of sustainable organization through public mobilization. The forms of such organization have been central to the debates in #FMF and need much greater clarification. Students can play a critical role in engendering a much wider public debate about a post-capitalist society and its knowledge requirements so that more and more communities that share their perspective can be brought into the process of social change..
	7. The perspective I refer to is based on the power of social mobilization, its continued development and the processes necessary to place these larger issues on the agenda as part of the process including its transitional arrangements. Without such mobilization and the development of strong, enduring and planned actions, whatever is achieved will have limited and short term value alone limiting the broader issues for real long-term change.

**COMMENTS ON THE DOCUMENT**

1. The document provides a wealth of data about the background, political and institutional contexts and the historical, contemporary, and possible future scenarios that could inform the development of a perspective about the role of education. But it does not go far enough because its reference to a broader social view of the role of universities and higher education is only notional and not substantive. It has little conception of an alternative socially described role for the university as an agency for changing the dominant forms of power in society. It does not enter any discussion about the nature of a society that could be envisaged by and through the processes it refers to. This means that its approach to transformation is mainly about changes internal to the higher education system. This is not possible without reference to the real constraints and strong barriers arising from the interests of powerful constituencies outside the university system and their ability to subvert and prevent real change.
2. Its data is drawn largely from, and is over-reliant on, the very neo-classical approaches that prevent any examination of the fundamentals I refer to. Such data is drawn from sources that pre-empt any wider examination of the idea of the university in society. The larger part of the data used to describe the system is limited to the fiscal issues relative to the quantitative dimensions of the education system with some modifications necessary for ‘missing -middle’ students, in reality a reference to the class origins of students from middle class homes. In other words, it forecloses an examination of the more fundamental questions about how quality free education for all might be approached. This data privileges the framework of a selective ‘affirmative action’ approach which shuts out further possibilities because they are ‘unachievable’, unrealistic’ or ‘impractical’. Because of this, the document evinces a contradictory and inconsistent approach to this issue reproducing – especially in the wide use of human capital data - the premises of human capital theory despite. It shows little awareness of the range of criticisms directed at that approach and seems unwittingly to reproduce the ideological premises of human capital theory uncritically. Far from decolonizing the role of education this reproduces its most powerful instrumental elements – seeing education as simply the handmaiden of capitalist labour market, production and economic systems and is ultimately about the commodification of education and the reproduction of existing social relations in all their gendered and racist forms.
3. The funding crisis is inseparable from a larger crisis- i.e. the crisis engendered by the commodification of public services whether these are in education, housing, local government services, health or the use of the ‘commons’. In other words, the struggle against fee payment is no less one against the ‘user pay’ approaches to the provision of public goods like education. These approaches, promoted by powerful global lending agencies like the World Bank are being driven by the euphemistically called public private partnerships (of which the new ‘formula for education loans is an example) . There are important global examples of the power of such ‘partnerships’ in subverting the public good, committing states and citizens to long-term debt and subverting lending rates in nation states. Through it private interests insert themselves into the domain of public resources and engage both governments and private citizens to incur a permanent public debt which bind societies to the interests of private financiers in the long term[[1]](#footnote-1). Through this they determine not only the terms of the relationship, but also the quantity, quality, availability, nature and the limits on the public projects while appropriating public resources for the purpose. These considerations are at the centre of the framework of the political economy of globalization and its ideologies and the contemporary the crisis of capitalism. The commodification of knowledge, as I have argued, is the most important encompassing issue for the examination of the role of education, about its orientation to the public good and to issues of racism, transectionality, access to workers and other socially marginalized communities and the implications of these for scholarship (teaching, research, integrative knowledge, social engagement) and other purposes not referred to in more conventional approaches to the role of universities.
4. Discussions about the decolonization of education are inseparable from the commodification of education. If that relationship is ignored, the decolonization of education will be truncated because its objective roots in the present global relations of production and power will remain unchallenged. The decolonization project must simultaneously be a project of post-capitalist possibilities, the structures of knowledge for that purpose and the social aims to be achieved through them. Such an approach will not only be about whose knowledge, what knowledge and how knowledge is produced, organized and disseminated but also about the relationship between knowledge and society. This latter will deal with the extraordinary grip that ‘knowledge as a commodity’ has over the life and work of educational institutions, academics and students, reproducing ideas, practices and socially regressive institutions that are based on the concept of the ‘knowledge economy’, higher skills for higher levels of productivity, increases in GDP growth through competitiveness and approaches to *education and the economy* which disregard references to democratic society, empowered citizens and critical thought as inseparable from the form of any reconstituted economy.
5. In other words, we must reimagine fundamentally the role of education in society, beyond the sterile and repetitive claims about the inchoate links between education and work, competitiveness and economic growth, productivity and efficiency, good management and systemic governance and the elaborate vocabularies these have spawned amongst researchers and public representatives alike. Persisting with ideas that are irrelevant and harmful to the real challenges facing most of society can only lead to more paralysis and dystopia. It condemns young black lives to penury, alienation and to be social outcasts. And for those of us who are researchers It reflects an analytical impasse in our ability to go beyond the sterile explorations of the past. Hence, from the perspective of an education system the question we must address is about how one might conceptualize the overall relationship between a democratic society, education and training and socially useful labour, that is, the forms of work, labour and income producing livelihoods outside the formal labour market freed from the bondage of gendered work, racism and the forms of exclusion so prevalent in the present.
6. We are concerned in all of this too about conceptions of work driven by ‘job consciousness’ relative to conceptions of work as ‘socially useful labour’ to produce useful livelihoods, incomes and wealth and caring relations in a post-capitalist society, and commitments to a sustainable planetary environment. Many of these issues need a clearer focus and orientation in the document which at the moment is given to an eclectic set of descriptions which are not anchored either analytically or in practice to a more explicit value system.
7. The implication of the above is that choices about what elements of the 6 approaches identified can only be decided by reference to a framework of underlying principles which refer to the values and their accompanying criteria for making choices. How such a framework is applied once the underlying values and principles are clarified is a matter of practice, strategic possibilities, alliances, immediate and long term possibilities for far-reaching change.
8. The document refers to 4 ‘Evaluation Criteria’ relating to ‘Impact on stakeholders, i.e. students, universities, government and the public,’ and asks questions about the how each of these will be affected by the choice of funding model and what these effects will be on issues like teaching and learning, access, enrolment growth, financial exclusion, etc. It asks about the ‘sustainability’ of the ‘source of funding’ and the limitations of administrative systems; redress for ‘disadvantaged groups’ and social responsiveness. And these criteria ask the critical question about how funding is related to the role of education in society referring to its possible role ‘as knowledge commons belonging to the public, forming part of a social/moral economy, and creating democratic citizenry’ and provides an important note in this regard.[[2]](#footnote-2)
9. These are important and useful criteria but they pertain to a set of eclectic and potential choices without reference to a framework to inform the actual choices to be adopted. The document seems hesitant about explicating a set of values which will be pursued through its funding approach. For instance if it is for the approach adopted by those who favour ‘free education for the poor’ or a wider approach, or some other approach, the framework of funding choices becomes more explicit. This difficulty arises because although reference is made to the reconstitute role of education, its underlying socio-economic, political and cultural goals are not made explicit and so the consequential approach to funding is not spelt out. A more explicit statement of the values and purposes of education in society is necessary for establishing any view of its funding implications (as we have done in our public submission). In other words the technical requirements of determining the quantum of finance required for the system and its sustainability can only be achieved once its values and purposes are clarified in the first place.
10. Furthermore, the document imposes limits on its conceptualization of free education because of the sectarian nature of its point of reference to, in this case, the Freedom Charter. Part of the problem of rethinking possibilities comes from the exclusion of other historical narratives which were critical of the ‘conciliationist’ approaches of the ANC *throughout its history* which placed it in the ideal position to be at the forefront of the (liberal) democratic ‘negotiation’. In fact if other political/organizational traditions– especially to the left of the ANC/SACP alliance were to be examined, these would suggest alternative approaches which have been elided from history for their different orientations to land and agrarian reform, property rights, the ownership of productive assets and a different political framework beyond the constitutionalism of today. The importance of this is that an orientation to the Freedom Charter alone (excluding other orientations) limits the critique of the weaknesses of the present system because it draws on an historically sectarian approach instead of understanding the wider possibilities proposed by other political programmes, even if they did not have the organizational capability to lead the liberation movement. Some of these alternative approaches raise wider questions about the influence and role of capital in the form and structure of the post-apartheid state and its policies, based on its inordinate power in this period. It can be argued that the present crisis is hardly surprising and that the particular form of political settlement could have led to no other dispensation than the present, making it necessary to examine the roots of the present more rigorously. For instance, if one approaches these issues from a wider analytical perspective not limited to the Freedom Charter alone, other possibilities not contemplated here might well emerge in regard to how class, colour, gender and other relations could be reconstituted in a post-capitalist society.
11. Finally, a small point. I am concerned about the continued uncritical use of the apartheid racial categories without caveat or an explanatory note. I understand that that is how in the official documentation data is presented, here too without any reference to the historical origins of these racial nomenclatures or any orientation to the very important debates about the ‘race as a social construct’. Read as it stands the explanation here could perversely be interpreted to mean that ‘Black and Coloured’ children are inherently inferior – which is obviously not what is intended because of the subsequent references to the wider socio-economic and other causes of poor educational attainment. That is why a conscious attempt should be made to rethink the vocabulary of ‘race’ thinking so that a critical consciousness is encouraged. In fact, the least one can do is to note why the present racial usages are persisted with by reference to their usage in official data, and if need be, to signal their usage as ‘socially constructed categories’ that speak to historically developed nomenclatures. A student movement that has placed such critically important issues on the socio-political agenda cannot avoid reflecting on how it orients to these racialized social categories for analytical and explanatory purposes.

Enver Motala: 12/3/2017

1. See Di Muzio’s (2015)*The 1% And The Rest of US: A Political Economy of Dominant Ownership.* HSRC, Pretoria [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is difficult for many to understand: “Being at the heart of epistemic violence, the university is however not simply, as this moment attests, a conveyor belt of automatons, or robots or ideological zombies of the dominant interests and order. The modern university is also that site of constant invention, contestation, negotiation, subversion and potentially, reinvention.” Accessed: <http://africasacountry.com/2015/06/decolonizing-the-university/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)