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UCT tuition fees increased by nearly 400% from 1923 to 2020

Inflation-adjusted tuition fees at the University of Cape Town (UCT) increased by an average of nearly 400% from 1923 to 2020. Most of the increase in tuition fees happened after 1970. These are the main findings of a [paper](#) recently published in the *South African Journal of Higher Education*.

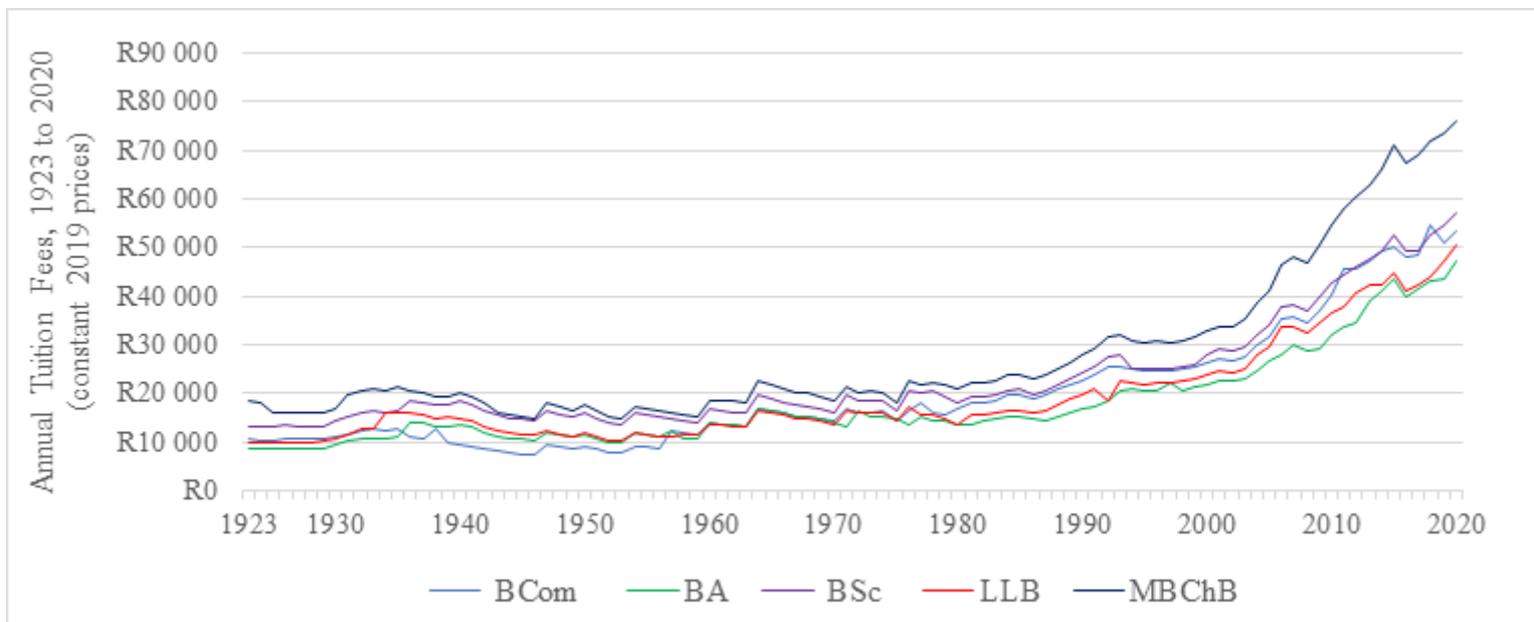
The #FeesMustFall protests (2016 to 2018) raised the issue of unaffordable university fees. According to the lead author, Katherine Davidson, the paper provides an historical context to students' arguments that high fees have made higher education an elite commodity. The other authors are Nicole Vellios and Professor Corné van Walbeek from the School of Economics at UCT.

Davidson spent many weeks in the UCT archives, working through old yearbooks and "calendars", as they used to be called. In 1923 the average tuition fee for a BA degree was less than 27 pounds (R54) per year. By 2020 this had increased to R59 413 per year. A very large proportion of this increase is due to inflation, which resulted in a massive increase in the prices of all consumer goods and services over this period of almost a century. The impact of inflation was removed using standard economic techniques. By doing this, the researchers could compare fees over this long period in real terms.

The authors considered tuition fees for five degrees: Bachelor of Commerce (BCom), Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Science (Engineering) (BSc), Bachelor of Surgery and Medicine (MBChB) and Bachelor of Laws (LLB). Tuition fees, in inflation-adjusted terms, remained fairly stable between 1923 and 1970 (Figure 1). Since 1970, tuition fees have increased on average by nearly 300%. The highest increase was for the MBChB degree (311%), while the lowest increase was for the BA degree (238%).

Until the early 1980s, the increases in UCT fees were such that they did not make studying at UCT unaffordable. As a percentage of per capita GDP, tuition fees did not increase. However, since the 1980s tuition fees have become increasingly less affordable, as the increase in tuition fees outpaced increases in per capita GDP.

Figure 1: Tuition Fees, 1923 to 2020 (constant 2019 prices)



Sources: Own calculations based on UCT fees handbooks and calendars (1923–2020), and Statistics South Africa CPI data (2020).

Government funding plays a vital role in supporting universities and other tertiary institutions. Large reductions in government funding, along with large increases in enrolment since the late 1990s, have placed enormous pressure on universities. In order to make up for decreased government funding, universities increased tuition fees. South Africa's experience is not unique. Many countries have experienced similar reductions in government funding, which have forced universities to increase their tuition fees.

This study shows that the problem of high tuition fees at UCT has been emerging for decades. Without substantive changes to the funding landscape, fees are likely to continue to rise.

[Read more on UCT student fees 1923 - 2020.](#)

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