

[Drucilla Cornell](#) [1]

[Mabogo More and Sampie Terreblanche](#) [2]

Thursday, November 3, 2016 - 11:45

In 2008, in response to what were called the “xenophobic riots” in the townships, we argued that only complete reform of the economy can provide solutions to the despair and desperation of the majority Black population who have been living in horrific poverty. At that time, we called for a Justice and Reconciliation Commission, which two of the authors, Professors Mahmood Mamdani and Sampie Terreblanche, had already argued in 1998 was absolutely necessary for a full review of the supply-side capitalist economics that had already come to dominate the economic policy in South Africa.

In 2016, we call again for such a Commission in light of the devastating reality that most of the universities in South Africa have shut down because there has been no creative and thoughtful solution to demands of the students for fee reduction in education. But we would take this demand one step further and argue and defend the right to free public higher education.

The question of free public higher education is not only one for South Africa but is one that needs to be addressed worldwide. Free public education is not some crazy utopian fantasy. It is simply one that demands the rethinking of fiscal priorities that would lead South Africa out of its current state of being a post-colonial satellite of the United States-led global empire and its triumphalist vision of neoliberal capitalism.

We support the students not only in their demand for free education but for free higher public education as a right that should be defended by the Constitution and the ethic of *uBuntu*.

Let's look at some of the facts. Between 2000 and 2013, government grants to universities dropped from 50% of their income to 40%. Between 2000 and 2013, student numbers rose by 80% from 560,000 to 980,000. The government spent only 0.7% of the GDP on universities. Releasing the 2015 Higher Education statistics on the 24/10/2016, the Statistician-General of the country, Dr Pali Lehohlo said that among the priorities South Africa set itself since 1994, education ranked number 18 in the list.

South African universities (particularly Historically Black Institutions) are over-crowded. While they only have an enrolment capacity of 600,000 students, these universities have however enrolled about a million students, resulting in terrible learning and teaching conditions, lack of necessary resources and facilities capable of producing high quality teaching and learning; poor pay for faculty, insufficient teaching staff, low morale among faculty and ultimately a serious compromise on quality. In short, the university system in South Africa, according to Lehohlo, is inefficient.

The level of university education among the Black majority is presently lower than was the case in 1994. The fragility of Black student lives and the righteous protest that it has inspired needs to be taken very seriously notwithstanding the recent increase in budget allocations.

But as we said in 2008, and we will say it again, the crisis of the university can only be seen as the result of the capitulation of the supply-side capitalist economics which is completely inadequate for the project of decolonisation and economic justice.

Students are being jailed on trumped-up charges. The universities have been militarised. And, all too

horribly, Black students are being racially profiled and kept out of university buildings—crucially library access. The online solution which many universities have adopted, which is to provide education only through the Internet is not only shortsighted but also fails to grapple with the problem which is the gross resource and income inequality of the students in South Africa. Many students do not have Internet facilities in their homes or their Townships and would have to travel miles to access and pay the Internet fees at Internet cafes. Many Black students rely on access to the library in order to be able to connect to the Internet.

But the problem of universities, and let us say it again, cannot be resolved until the structure of the economy is finally put up for political and ethical discussion. And in order to do that we need a Justice and Reconciliation Commission.

As we have said before, the aim of such a commission is to focus on the systematic character of racial capitalism, which began long before the institutionalisation of apartheid. A crucial aspect of this commission would be to return to programmes such as advocated by one of the authors, Professor Sampie Terreblanche who proposed a wealth tax to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997. The proposal was aimed at raising billions of rand for a comprehensive redistributive justice programme towards eradicating apartheid inequalities, including education backlogs. At the time Professor Terreblanche made this suggestion, he was ridiculed as an out of date leftist. But his proposals have never been more necessary and had they been adopted there would not be the desperate cycle of education and poverty crises in South African that we see today. The Statistician-General has, in the midst of student protest, recently reiterated Professor Terreblanche's call for greater prioritisation of education as a necessary solution to the country's higher education crisis.

We completely disagree with statements that we have to choose between higher education and primary and secondary education. What we need to do is finally have a democratic discussion of what kind of economy the people of this country need and deserve.

Once again, we call for a two-year commission which would explore alternatives to the current Anglo-Americanisation of the South African economy which has effectively blocked transformation.

We, of course, given the current crisis would focus on education and how to develop a comprehensive education policy. The commission would work with community organisations who have sought to develop programmes of restitution and reparation that must be seriously considered as part of a democratic discussion of economic reform.

Consultation with economists who are exploring alternatives to capitalism would also be vital.

The outcome of the commission would be a comprehensive programme of reform of all basic areas of life: education, housing, health, land reform, and the organisation of production.

With a different set of economic priorities we believe that a demand for free higher education is perfectly reasonable, but more importantly at this point we need to have an open and democratic discussion of the economy and we need to build an institution that would facilitate that.

So we repeat our call for a Justice and Reconciliation Commission which would allow us to address the horrific injustice that is undermining every aspect of life in South Africa.

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Article-Summary:

Many universities have been shut down due to student protests demanding free higher education. This is the latest expression of the deep inequalities that affect the majority Black population in South Africa. The promise of a better future that underpinned the anti-Apartheid struggle remains unfulfilled. The nation's unjust economy must be discussed.

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