Funding, inequalities, and access: An amalgam of challenges in South African higher education

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Abstract

The context of funding, inequalities, and access to higher education in South Africa is an ongoing challenge that has been tackled by government and private institutions. The nature of these challenges found in various public institutions of higher education across South Africa include limited social mobility, underrepresentation of certain groups in higher education, and financial insolvency of poor South Africans. This paper explores the source of the problem embedded in the history of South Africa because of the existence and intentions of apartheid and colonialism. A desktop method is used to collect the literature review on funding, inequalities, and access challenges. These includes the content and contextual analysis of the interconnection of the systemic, institutional, and personal challenges in higher education. John Rawl's Theory of Social Justice underpins this paper as a lens to analyse the application of funding, inequalities, and access in higher education. The recommendations on the challenges are presented by addressing the problem of funding, inequalities, and access to higher education such as expanding access to higher education (e.g. expanding access through online learning platforms), implementing affirmative action policies (e.g. increase students enrolment from the disadvantaged communities), increasing public funding, generating third-stream income funds, provision of scholarships and bursaries, corporate sponsorship, and students' agency.

Keywords: *South Africa, higher education, funding, inequalities, access*

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1. Introduction

The lack of funding in South African higher education has exacerbated existing inequalities and created new challenges for both students and institutions. Addressing these issues will require coordinated efforts by the government, higher education institutions, and stakeholders to ensure that all students have access to the support and opportunities they need to succeed in higher education. Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete (2008) reveal that a debate still exists on the funding of public higher education in South Africa and the chance of acquiring financial support is minimal. The raising of university fees, which is one of the main strategies public universities have used to alleviate declining state funding is still a problem in as much as efforts to increase access to tertiary institutions through initiatives such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and the expansion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, there remains a significant disparity in terms of access to higher education. This is particularly true for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often face financial constraints, inadequate preparation at the secondary level, and limited access to academic support and resources.

According to Badat (2015), it is necessary to make observations with respect to the context of the pursuit of social equity and redress, admissions, and the strategy of affirmative action in higher education in South Africa. Badat (2015) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) explain how higher education institutions were shaped by the apartheid ideology and planning. Further to that, how the higher education system was reserved for different 'race' groups and allocated different ideological, economic, and social functions in relation to the reproduction and duplication of the apartheid social order. The discourse of inequality in South African higher education also stretched to the issue of overreliance on disadvantaged students while neglecting the conundrums faced by low-income students (Allais et al., 2019). This narrative remains crucial in the canon of understanding the dichotomy of funding and inequality challenges for students in South African higher education institutions. To be sure, the socio-economic hardships and challenges faced by low-income students should be elevated to the front burner of issues of funding and inequality in South African higher education institutions (Gore, 2020).

To address the challenge of inequality, funding, and access signpost the need for the establishment of NSFAS. While the mandate of NSFAS can be described to have been

successful to an extent, there are pieces of evidence of challenges affecting the effectiveness of the scheme in the discharge of the assigned mandate including the increasing decline in state allocation, increasing access and demand to NSFAS loans and the poor recovery rate among others (Ruswa & Gore, 2021). In addition, the large constituents of historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa have poor mechanisms for generating internal revenue with a consequential burden on increasing student fees (Ayuk & Jacobs, 2018). Similarly, the effect of the rising student fees is further compounded by the upsurge in associated costs related to higher education including students' accommodation and other expenses related to living. Put together, these issues form a cog of analysis that this paper seeks to unpack.

The literature on higher education in South Africa is no doubt replete with studies on higher education funding challenges and its implication on students' enrolment (Cloete, 2016; Gore & Walker, 2020; Methebula, 2019). This present study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on higher education in South Africa by intersecting the discourse of inequality, funding, and access. This attempt will seek to broaden and provide a depth of analysis of the prevailing issues of funding and inequalities in South African higher education institutions. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to interrogate the challenges of funding, inequalities and access in terms of student's enrolment in South African higher education through a theoretical context. It is hoped this aim will lead to a nuanced understanding of the amalgam of these challenges for a policy change that will be geared towards addressing these challenges.

The main contribution of the paper is the examination of South African higher education institutions in the campaign for access and equality among students of historically disadvantaged and low-income advantaged. By further interrogating these issues, it is possible to engender a more robust perspective on the analysis of inequality funding and access in South African higher education institutions. The paper traced the sources and challenges of funding, inequalities, and access in South African higher education institutions. The paper then extrapolates the intersection between systemic, institutional, and personal levels of funding, inequality, and access problems. What follows was the contextual nature of funding, inequalities, and access in South African higher education institutions. The Social Justice Theory assumptions were presented as the theoretical lens.

2. Methodology

The literature review was employed as the methodology for this study. The qualitative secondary data collection approach was employed to gather theoretical and documentary analysis. The qualitative sources include review of journal articles, books, book chapters, government gazette and policy documents. The scholarly database where qualitative secondary information was retrieved include Wiley, JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, Emerald and the South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training. The key words employed include inequality in higher education, funding in higher education, education and access, social justice, and institutional and systemic challenge of higher education. The identified theoretical themes were analysed through contextual analysis.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Sources of the challenges and origin of the problem

Lack of funding. One of the biggest problems faced is the lack of funding for higher education, which means that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds are unable to afford to attend university. This is particularly true for Black students, who are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds due to historical contradictions. In addition, there are numerous financial barriers that prevent equal access to higher education. For example, many universities have admissions policies and educational programs that are designed to be inclusive of all students, but due to high tuition fees, students who lack such funds are excluded. This can lead to disparities in academic performance, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggling to keep up with their more privileged peers. Badat (2015) explains that commitment to social equity and diversity of the student body and affirmative action as a strategy to achieve their realization has implications for student recruitment, admissions, and support. This support, financial and academic, if academic, if access in higher education is substantive and epistemological and merely a formal process.

Inequality. Inequalities in higher education in South Africa are also perpetuated by societal attitudes and prejudices. There is still a pervasive belief that some students are simply not capable of succeeding in higher education, which can lead to stereotypes and biases that prevent students from accessing the resources they need to succeed (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012). Additionally, discrimination, racism, and other forms of bias can create an unwelcome

environment that makes it difficult for students from diverse backgrounds to thrive. However, Brown (2018) states that this enhanced understanding has then focused on the way in which the Neoliberal policies, which are the key enablers of increased inequality in general are being applied to higher education. There is a need to show how these policies are already leading to a wide range of costs, distortions, and detriments that mimic those associated with the adoption of Neoliberal policies generally (as well as actually reinforcing them): increased stratification; the rationalization of subjects, courses, and institutions; reduced diversity; less innovation; commodification and lower quality of student learning; wastage of resources; and the diversion of universities away from being autonomous centers of learning to be commercial purveyors of learning services (Shahjahan, 2014; Needham, 2019).

Access. Teferra and Altbachl (2004) and Ayuk and Koma (2019) separate studies explain that the number of enrolled students into higher education is growing and causing a strain on resources. They further explain how students have had to be admitted into institutions originally designed for fewer students yet with an increased in the number of students enrolled and limited financial resources. There is a scarcity of funds to increase the number of institutions. This is problematic given that existing institutions were designed for fewer students. In many countries, including South Africa, resources have declined due to inflation, devaluation of the currency exchange rate, economic and political turmoil, and structural adjustment programs, further stressing the financial stability of institutions and systems. Additionally, the allocation of funding to different institutions is also influenced by contextual factors such as historical and political context, the location of the institution, and its level of research output. For example, historically disadvantaged institutions, such as those established during apartheid for black students, inter alia, the University of Zululand, Fort Hare University, and Walter Sisulu University, received less funding than historically advantaged institutions, such as those that were established for white students.

3.2. Origins of the challenge of funding, inequality, and access in higher education

The sources of existing inequalities in higher education in South Africa can be traced back to the country's history of colonialism and apartheid. During apartheid, education was segregated, with Black students receiving inferior education compared to their White counterparts. This unequal system persisted even after apartheid ended, as the legacy of discrimination and inequality persisted, and many Black students continued to face obstacles

to accessing quality education. According to Wangenge-Ouma (2010), there are specifically three questions that are examined; (1) How does public funding of higher education encourage (or discourage) the attainment of higher education transformation goals in South Africa? (2) What impact does the frequent tuition fee increase have on the attainment of higher institution transformation goals? (3) What can be done to make South Africa's higher education affordable for indigent students and mostly Black students?

Shortages of funds have caused most universities to have opted to use their operating budgets to fund capital developments (Gore, 2020). The government through the Ministry of Education (MoE) has, however, recently allocated R3.5 billion to universities for improving institutional infrastructure and student outputs (Ruswa & Gore, 2021). The decline in state capitation for public higher education has had various consequences and implications for public universities. As a result of the decline in state capitation, public universities have to various extents experienced some degree of vulnerability that required a response, if they were to remain effective organisations. Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete (2008), argued that the most important source of financial support for South Africa's public universities, as is the case with most publicly funded higher education systems, is the state, which has historically provided the core support for these institutions operating and capital expenses.

The degree of dependence on state funds by individual universities differs. Some universities receive slightly more than 30 percent of their total income from the government while others receive almost 65 percent of their total revenues from this source (Ruswa & Gore, 2021). On average, public universities receive 50 percent of their total revenues from state appropriations (Ruswa & Gore, 2021). Recently, state funding for South Africa's higher education has declined (Gore & Botha, 2022; Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). This is confirmed by several indicators, viz. state funding of higher education as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), state funding of higher education as a percentage of total state finance, and state funding of higher education adjusted for inflation (De Villiers & Steyn, 2007).

3.3. Intersection between systemic, intersectional and personal levels of the problem

In South Africa, there is a clear intersection between systemic, institutional, and personal levels of inequalities in higher education. These levels of inequalities are interdependent and reinforce one another, creating a complex web of challenges that hinder access and success for marginalized groups.

The systemic level. At the systemic level, South Africa's history of apartheid has had a significant impact on higher education. The apartheid government implemented policies that prevented South Africans from accessing quality education. This legacy of systemic racism is still evident today, with black students facing significant barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education institutions. For example, the apartheid government's Bantu Education Act of 1953, led to the creation of segregated schools for black students. These schools were underfunded and provided an inferior education compared to white schools. The legacy of segregation in education has led to persisting socio-economic inequalities that are difficult to overcome. Wangenge-Ouma (2010) explains how the higher education system in apartheid South Africa was characterized, in the main, by racial and ethnic exclusivity, a fragmented and uncoordinated higher education system, and unacceptably low participation rates by Black students (Council on Higher Education-CHE, 1996). At the onset of democracy in 1994, the country's higher education system was characterized by several deficiencies, found by the Council of Higher Education (CHE), including: continuation of an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for students and staff along axes of race, gender, class, and geographic origin; the ongoing discrepancies in the participation rates of students from different population groups; and a mismatch between higher education's output and the needs of a modernizing economy, and discriminatory practices that limited the access of Black and women students into fields such as science, engineering, technology, and commerce. The deficiencies, and others, had to be the subject of transformation through, inter alia, providing for expanded access with a focus on equity and redress, establishing programs for capacity development, developing a new goal-orientated, performance-related funding system, and expansion of the national student loan scheme (CHE, 1996).

The institutional level. At the institutional level, South African higher education institutions face a range of inequalities that can limit access and success for marginalized groups. Universities in South Africa are often located in urban areas, which makes it difficult for students from rural areas to access higher education. Institutions also face problems with access to relevant technology and resources, which can impact the quality of teaching and learning. Adonis and Silinda (2021), elaborate on the ideology of apartheid's higher education system that was segregated by race, ethnicity, class, and geography; it was inequitable in terms of gender and language; and it was characterized by a highly uneven quality between and within different historical institutional types (Langa et al., 2016). The democratic government

in 1994 committed itself to reshaping unjust and discriminatory institutional structures and practices that were designed to privilege whites during apartheid South Africa, so as to create a more equitable society (Pattman & Carolissen, 2018). Ramrathan and Manik (2008) condemned the Department of Education (DoE) for suppressing the higher education institutions' autonomy and academic freedom for funding strategies and formulation, and the same sentiments were articulated by other institutional managers in the historically White universities who also accused the state and its bureaucrats of violating university autonomy and the freedom of individual academics (Habib et al., 2008).

The personal level. At a personal level, access to higher education is often influenced by factors such as socioeconomic background, race, and gender. Students from low-income households are more likely to struggle financially to meet the costs of higher education, forcing many to drop out or fail to enroll altogether. Women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus (LGBTQ+) students also face specific challenges regarding access to higher education, such as sexism and homophobia. One example of an initiative that addresses these intersecting inequalities is transformation. Transformation entails actively addressing bias and inequalities at the systemic and institutional levels of higher education. It involves targeted interventions to increase access and success for marginalized groups. For example, certain tertiary institutions in South Africa have implemented scholarship programs aimed at providing financial support to students from low-income communities and those who are first-generation graduates. They have also implemented mentorship programs and skills development activities to provide support and ensure equal opportunities for all students.

The intersection between systemic, institutional, and personal levels of inequalities in higher education in South Africa is multifaceted and needs critical attention. Addressing inequalities requires a concerted and sustained effort from all actors in the higher education sector. Increased funding, policies that promote diversity and inclusion, and targeted interventions are necessary to ensure that all students have access to quality and equitable higher education opportunities.

3.4. Contextual nature of funding, inequalities, and access to higher education

The contextual nature of inequalities and funding in South African higher education is complex and multifaceted. Addressing these challenges requires a long-term and sustained commitment to affirmative action and funding initiatives that are sensitive to context, and

which enable students from underprivileged backgrounds to access quality higher education. de Clercq (2020) emphasize the underlying historicity factors that gave rise to colonial authorities who feared widespread access to higher education. The colonial authorities were interested in training a small number of Africans to aid in the mediocre administering of the colonies.

Some colonial powers, such as the Belgians, disallowed higher education in their colonies. Others, such as the Spanish and the Portuguese, kept enrolment exceedingly small. The French government opted to send a few students from its colonies to study in France. In Africa, the size of the academic system was not big at the time of independence. In South Africa in particular, higher education funding is influenced by an intricate set of factors including historical, political, economic, and social contexts. These factors have a significant impact on the level of inequity within the higher education sector, and how funding is allocated to different institutions and students.

Historically, South Africa has a legacy of racial segregation and discrimination, which has led to significant disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for different groups. The legacy continues to be reflected in the higher education sector, where students from historically disadvantaged groups such as black, coloured, and Indian populations are underrepresented in higher education institutions. As a result, the government has introduced various affirmative action policies that refer to increasing educational opportunities for the underprivileged, and funding initiatives aimed at addressing equity gaps in higher education. For example, NSFAS provides financial assistance to students who come from families with a gross income of under R350 000 per annum. This policy is intended to enable students from low-income households to access higher education, and in the process address the racial and economic inequalities in higher education. However, while these policies have a positive impact on addressing inequalities in higher education, they are not without their challenges.

One of the main challenges of the NSFAS is that it does not cover all the costs incurred by students, particularly those who study at private institutions, which are often considered to provide a better quality of education. This means that while students from low-income households may be able to access higher education, they may not be able to access the same quality of education.

The ongoing attempt to alleviate the South African context of higher education in relation to funding, inequalities, and access seems to be a roller coaster mission. The attempt

to transform higher education occurs within the context of a formidable overall challenge of pursuing economic development (including restructuring economic relations to address inequitable historical patterns of ownership, wealth, and income distribution), social equity, and the extension and deepening of democracy simultaneously (Badat, 2015).

The problem of funding, inequalities, and access to higher education extends beyond the South African borders, and its strategies and financing formulae have been crafted to alleviate the problem. The dawn of democracy in South Africa and across the African continent birthed an influx (massification) into institutions of higher learning. Gore and Botha (2022) explain how funding and financing, which is the central reality for all African higher education systems at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is in severe budgetary crisis. Academia everywhere, even in wealthy industrialized nations, faces financial problems, but the extent of these problems is bigger in Africa than anywhere else in the world. Massification is the underlying factor since large numbers of students have been added to African academic institutions and systems. As a result, the economic challenge facing many African countries, including South Africa makes it difficult, and not impossible, to provide increased funding for higher education. The inability of students to afford the tuition rates necessary for financial stability and in some cases an inability to impose tuition fees due to political or other pressure.

South African universities operate in an environment profoundly affected by the socio-economic and politico-geographical realities of apartheid. The Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) struggle with basic operational funds, library resources, computer systems, transportation for students, conducive accommodation for students, and well-equipped lecture venues and laboratories. A grant specifically earmarked to address historical structural inefficiencies, the HDI Development Grant, was implemented in 2016. The concern revealed is the context that impacted and with funds redirected on the infrastructure and not teaching and learning. Confusion as to where the funds should be prioritized is evidence of fund shortages (Moyo & McKenna, 2021).

The context of management issues in universities, i.e., the efficient management and administrative systems are of paramount significance to the productivity and effectiveness of any enterprise; academic institutions are no exception. However, African universities suffer from poor, inefficient, and highly bureaucratic management systems. Poorly trained and poorly qualified personnel; inefficient, ineffective, and out-of-date management and administrative infrastructures; and poorly remunerated staff are the norm throughout the many systems.

Accounts of serious corruption charges and embezzlement of funds in African universities are not uncommon. Some blame the misappropriation of funds and poor prioritization as one of the factors for financial difficulties in the universities.

3.5 Theoretical resources underpinning the study

According to Wilson-Strydom (2015), 'social justice' is currently a mantra in higher education and various other fields, and together with related terms such as equity, for example, tend to "have a feel-good flavour to them that can cover up the absence of precise meaning." Naidoo and McKay (2018) state that it is necessary to interrogate the notion of social justice, what it means, and why it clarifies inequality in a higher education context. Debates about justice and fairness are common in the field of university access or participation, and so this provides a useful focus point for a discussion of theories of social justice in relation to higher education more broadly.

In theory of justice, Rawls (2009) presents a case for justice as fairness. To establish what a fair society would look like Rawls proposes a thought experiment that he calls the 'original position.' The original position is a space in which the thinker is placed behind a 'veil of ignorance' in the sense that one has no knowledge of one's place in society, one's gender, colour of one's skin, social class, profession, abilities etc. Rawls describes the original position as a hypothetical situation in which ''no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like.'' He argues further that when behind the veil of ignorance, one does not even know what their specific conception of the good life (well-being) is.

In this way, his theory of justice was set up to explicitly respect the many different views of what constitutes the good life common in a pluralist society. When deciding on principles of justice from the original position, people would not privilege specific individual characteristics, talents, social positions, social institutions, values, or judgments about what is good, but would select principles of justice that would be fair to everyone as they would not be able to select principles more favourable to the type of person that they are or their position in society.

There are some characteristics of Rawl's theory that are useful for understanding access and social justice. Rawl's critique of unfair advantage and the related people who hold power, as well as the idea that policy decisions should be made such that the worst-off benefit most

are important in the context of access, for example, in making decisions about how bursary funding for needy students should be distributed ("University access and theories of social justice ..."). However, there are two main criticisms of Rawl's approach to social justice that are relevant. Arguing against Rawl's identification of the worst off in society based on their access to primary goods, Sen (1979) points out that this approach does not adequately account for the differences in the extent to which unique individuals are able to make use of resources in their lives.

3.6. Addressing the problem of funding, inequalities, and access to higher education

Higher education transformation in South Africa, since the collapse of apartheid in the early 1990s, presents a particularly interesting case study of these social justice dilemmas. Any consideration of higher education in South Africa must take cognizance of the complex historical legacy, and the fact that the country is appearing from a deeply discriminatory, repressive, and socially unjust past. From the early 1990s, major changes took place across all levels of society including within higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). In the apartheid era, there were thirty-six higher education institutions serving different races and ethnic groups. The government embarked on a comprehensive restructuring process that saw thirty-six institutions amalgamated to form 23 institutions: eleven universities, five universities of technology, and six comprehensive universities (CHE, 2004). The policy context changed rapidly and explicitly supported increasing and broadening access to university study as one aspect of a strong focus on the redress of past inequalities (Spaull & Jansen, 2019).

Enrolment statistics. In terms of increasing access and participation (massification), the headcount enrolment in South African higher education increased from 394,700 in 1990 to 892,943 in 2010. In terms of equity, in 1993 African students accounted for 40% of total enrolment, and by 2010 this had increased to 67% (CHE, 2012). Despite these gains, the proportional representation or participation rate per population grouping (equity as inclusion) for African students was only 14% in 2010, compared to 57% for white students (CHE, 2012). Further, national cohort studies showed that while 44% of white students completed a 3-year bachelor's degree in minimum time, only 16% of African students did so. After 6 years, only 41% of African students had completed a three-year degree (CHE, 2012). The education sector thus stays inundated with disproportionate participation and an exceedingly high dropout, with many students exiting the system with no qualification but having accumulated debt

(Department of Higher Education and Technology-DHET, 2013). The costs of this large dropout create an unending accumulative debt that the government is battling to pay or write off.

Expanding access to higher education. One way to address inequalities in higher education is to increase access to universities and other higher education institutions. This could be done by providing support to disadvantaged students or by building new institutions in areas where there are none (Erdemir & Wu, 2023). The fourth United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal, Target 4.3 states that countries must supply inclusive, equitable, quality education and life-long learning opportunities for all by 2030 (United Nations, 2017). The equity problem is persistent and therefore compromising the quality and standard of the educational entire systems (de Clercq, 2020). The equity problems in Higher Education System (HES) admissions need to be addressed by examining the overall education system.

Implementing affirmative action policies. Affirmative action policies can help to address inequalities by giving preferential treatment to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This can include race-based policies, as well as policies that give preferences to students from rural areas or those with disabilities. Improving the quality of basic education is one of the biggest challenges facing South Africa. By improving the quality of basic education, students will be better prepared for higher education, and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students can be narrowed. The second would be to strengthen student support programs. Many students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to adjust to the demands of higher education. Providing support programs and services, such as mentoring, tutoring, and counseling, can help these students succeed. The third approach would be to address the legacy of apartheid. Apartheid had a profound impact on the education system in South Africa, and the legacy of this system is still being felt today. Addressing this legacy will require a long-term commitment to redressing historical injustices and promoting social and economic equality (Herbaut & Geven, 2020).

Increasing public funding. Increasing public funding is the most effective way to address funding inequalities in higher education. This can help to alleviate the financial burden of students who come from low-income backgrounds and cannot afford to pay for their education. Wangenge-Ouma (2012) describes how outreach and financial aid may help disadvantaged students to access and complete higher education if these interventions

efficiently address some of the barriers met by disadvantaged students. The national budget for higher education institutions (HEIs) is divided into three components; block grants, earmarked funds, and institutional restructuring funds. Block grants consist of four components, and they are (1) teaching input grants, (2) teaching output grants, (3) research output grants, and (4) institutional factor grants. The most earmarked grants are set aside for funds for NSFAS.

Generating third-stream income. The role of the executive management, i.e., the vice-chancellor, is to supply academic leadership in the university, and focus on teaching and learning, and research which is the core business of the university (Swartz et al., 2018). However, the lack of funds from the government has pushed into a space of generating a third-stream income for the university, to support the teaching and research functions. Universities that have a strong brand should restructure to create more online courses that would entice international students, thus generating more income for the universities. Since there is a general sentiment or anticipation that government funding is continually dwindling for the next ten years or more. There is more spending of twenty percent less and a twenty-percent worse staff-student ratio, twenty percent less time for research, and a gradual two percent decline in state funding every year.

Provision of scholarships and bursaries. Another way of addressing inequality in higher education is to provide scholarships and bursaries, particularly for students who come from underprivileged backgrounds. Higher education is linked to economic mobility, although South Africa has 26 public tertiary institutions (including three new tertiary institutions), the demand for access and funding for public tertiary education far exceeds the supply (Naidoo & McKay, 2018). In terms of access, part of the problem is that although the number of higher education students has drastically increased in the last 10 years, rising in 2011, all universities are now subjected to strict enrollment plans (DHET, 2013). Thus, enrollment quota is capped, i.e., institutions are allocated quotas that are aligned to the budget or subsidy funding for each student. If universities exceed the allocated quotas, the problem of funding or non-funded students is felt by the institutions.

A bulk of qualifying applications that meet the entrance criteria declined (Walker & Mkwananzi, 2015). However, there are additional obstacles for those who are admitted, in that they will not necessarily be able to pay their fees. While some qualify for bursaries from industry or other donors, and others qualify for NSFAS funding, there are those who do not. The NFSAS is a funding scheme that has been in operation since 1999, yet it has terms and

conditions that are very stringent, making it difficult for students to be funded. The severe terms and conditions include, (1) only those whose total household income is in the lowest tax bracket qualify for funding or (2) they must have attended a designated "no fee" school, or (3) they must reside in municipalities deemed to be priority districts, that is, financially marginal or deprived (Sader & Gabela, 2017). Although NSFAS assists many disadvantaged students, there seem to be shortages in the availability of funds that exclude students (Pillay, 2010; Sader & Gabela, 2017).

NSFAS is partly a 40 percent loan and 60 percent converted into a bursary. In addition, for the student to acquire the NSFAS funds, the student must pass the modules (Walker & Mkwananzi, 2015). It is pitiful that there are students who are not aware of the funding and therefore do not apply (Callender & Wilkinson, 2013; Walker & Mkwananzi, 2015). Thus, many go unfunded. Part of the problem is that demand for funding has reached excessive levels due to the combination of university fees having increased dramatically alongside a massive increase in enrolment numbers (DHET, 2013). The explosion of the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015/16 put this national student funding crisis firmly in the headlines and into the consciousness of the public Hodes (2017). South African students without bursaries must apply for bank loans or look for part-time work. Other forms of savings and support from parents and family to pay for their studies savings and parental or family contributions to pay for their studies (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Richardson et al., 2009). As a result, it is claimed that many of the 50 per cents of students who drop out of higher education institutions in South Africa do so for financial (Needham, 2019). Therefore, it is argued that students are being excluded from higher education due to insufficient funds. This places a huge burden on universities to assist students financially (Gore & Botha, 2022). In many cases, institutions of higher education are now forced to strategize and find money or risk riots, violent disruptions, and reputational damage if they do not. That this is unsustainable has been reported by many Vice Chancellors, one of whom is Prof. Ihron Rensburg of the University of Johannesburg (Naidoo & McKay, 2018).

Encouraging corporate sponsorship. Encouraging corporate sponsorship can also help address the funding gap in higher education. Companies can provide funding for scholarships, research, and other initiatives that benefit students. Introducing alternative funding models such as income-contingent loans or graduate tax can also help to address the funding gap in higher education. This will ensure that graduates pay a percentage of their income back to the

government after obtaining employment. Addressing support for student financial aid schemes, i.e., a greater allocation of resources to student financial aid schemes can help to address inequalities in higher education as some students lack access to funding for their education. Access to information is paramount, hence, addressing such would be beneficial to students. Establishing programmes that bridge the gap in information about tertiary education options, and financial opportunities available to underprivileged students is key to addressing inequalities in higher education. Lastly, inclusivity in curriculum means, the inclusion of diverse perspectives in South African higher education curricula that would mitigate inequalities by including voices and perspectives that have traditionally been excluded.

Student agency. The agency is central to Sen's (1999) approach because he understands people as agents in their own lives and not as passive spectators of development programs. In his conceptualization, agency relates to one's power and willingness to influence one's environment to act toward one's valuable goals. Thus, for Sen (1979), an agent is someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of own values and aims, whether assess them in terms of some external criteria as well. The agency can include the ability of students to make choices and to act in their studies so that they can graduate. The key to students' agency is to know their destination coupled with the responsibility and to strive to change their lives for the betterment of their future. It is important for individuals to be autonomous, self-determining, and able to challenge unfair systems (Sader & Gabela, 2007; Ruswa & Gore, 2021). Thus, agency means students can make their own decisions and act (or not). The ability to exercise agency then reflects a positive impact and creates an advantage (Walker & Mkwananzi, 2015). Advantage entails the absence of obstacles that limit the agency of some students but not others.

3.7. Addressing the problem through monitoring and evaluation

The addressing of inequalities and funding challenges can be monitored and evaluated through various methods, including data collection. Regular collection of data on enrollment rates, dropout rates, achievement levels, and other indicators can help identify disparities and track progress over time. Regular surveys and feedback tools must be used as a barometer to monitor and evaluate whether the problems of funding, inequality and access are addressed. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators can provide feedback through surveys or other means to evaluate how effectively resources are being allocated and used to address

inequalities. Konstantinovskiy (2017) stated that the monitoring of academic progress can help identify areas where additional support is needed and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

Analysis of budget allocations and expenditures can help ensure that resources are being distributed fairly and effectively. To avoid a biased approach and results, external evaluations should be augmented. External evaluations by independent organizations can provide an objective assessment of the effectiveness of policies and practices in addressing inequalities and funding challenges. An overall combination of these methods can be used to monitor and evaluate progress in addressing inequalities and funding challenges, and to ensure that resources are being effectively allocated and used to support students (Durnford, 2019).

4. Conclusion

The challenge of inequality, funding, and access has remained critical for educationists, the government, and other policy analysts in South Africa. This paper, through a theoretical argument has been able to again, bring the concern of inequality, funding, and access in South African higher education institutions to the front burner. The paper, through historical account, has been able to exhume and unpack the root causes and intentions of apartheid and colonialism in higher education in South Africa. The post-colonial government and the democratic era have implemented strategies to alleviate the challenges of funding, inequalities, and access. The assignment has argued that although the government and the private sector have executed plans to address the problem, the results of the plans are still found wanting.

The South African government needs to expand its horizon beyond funding and focus on strengthening the quality of basic education in preparation for entering the higher education system. Overall, the study concluded on the note of invoking strategic measures and policy evaluation into the South African higher education institutions, especially in the areas of addressing the consistent puzzle with funding and inequality. This view should be backed by actionable plans for improved access of historically disadvantaged and advantaged low-income South Africans to access higher education.

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