

## Beyond #FeesMustFall: International students, fees and everyday agency in the era of decolonisation



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### ABSTRACT

The #FeesMustFall movement focused on the financial struggles of historically disadvantaged black students in South Africa. However, if decolonisation is to go beyond national boundaries and to incorporate pan-African visions fees must fall, not only in South Africa, but also for international students. Yet, international students and their financial situations are often overlooked in discussions over fees as they are seen as foreigners, or as privileged and seeking to reproduce advantage through international study. Although international fees cross-subsidise national students, international students are seen as an export category rather than at the level of the individual, so that the actual costs of study to the students is often ignored. This paper addresses that gap by examining how international distance education students studying at the University of South Africa (UNISA) navigate fees. We draw upon students' narratives to highlight the proactive and reactive agency they deploy to afford and manage fee payments. These quieter registers of everyday agency around fees demonstrate the entanglement of national and international fees in higher education. In particular, we suggest that focusing on international student fees raises important questions about whether lowering fees for higher education students, one part of the decolonisation agenda, should be contained within national borders.

### 1. Introduction

The whole #FeesMustFall was more a South African thing. As an international student I guess it's a feeling where you just think that maybe your voice won't be heard enough. So, it seems or feels like it's a South African fight and us international students don't necessarily have much say... although we would like the fees to fall, you know. But yeah it doesn't really feel like our voice will really make a difference because we're international students (Tendai, woman from Zimbabwe).

Since the end of Apartheid, the economic challenges many poor black students face and the way it impacts their studies has been a key policy issue in South African higher education (Schoole and Adeyemo, 2016). From the mid-2000s to 2015, the contribution of tuition fees to South African universities' total income went up from 27% to 34% (STATSA, 2016). The rising fees particularly impacted poor students, who are overwhelmingly black, and culminated in the student-led #FeesMustFall movement in October 2015. The movement originated in the #RhodesMustFall movement at the University of Cape Town, which focused on the demand to remove the statue of British colonialist, Cecil

Rhodes, from its campus, as they argued it stood for the history of racist colonialism in the country (Booyesen, 2016; Mbembe, 2015). The movement soon spread across the sector, coalescing to the much larger demand to decolonise the curriculum and then to reduce fees. Together these aimed to make higher education more representative and accessible to the needs of black students by changing the symbols, curriculum and fee structure.

#FeesMustFall is the latest attempt to achieve equality of access to higher education and has led to a discussion over the role of higher education as a public good in South Africa (Luescher et al., 2017; Naicker, 2016; Walker, 2018). The #FeesMustFall movement began as an attempt to challenge the inequalities created by the rising fees and falling government subsidies into national education, but the focus of the intervention, both by its protagonists, and its intended beneficiaries, was national students (Langa, 2017). As it has gained momentum it has expanded to question the epistemic injustices that fees represent and perpetuate, leading to a larger decolonisation movement in South African higher education.

While #FeesMustFall and the decolonisation agenda has captured public imagination, international students too have to pay fees. Yet, in the academic literature, their fees have largely been analysed through

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the figure of the privileged international student (see e.g. Tannock, 2013), often studying at ‘world class’ institutions in the global north (Findlay et al., 2012; Ma and Garcia-Murillo, 2017). Such studies highlight how students seek distinction and the reproduction of advantage through international study (Prazeres et al., 2017; Tindal et al., 2015; Waters, 2006). For governments, international study is an export industry (Kwaramba, 2012; Marginson, 2011), while institutions treat the students as cash cows (Robertson, 2011) so that international student fees are not posed as an issue that students face. Yet, not all international students are privileged; many opting for it because local forms of higher education are inaccessible to them (see e.g. Waters and Leung, 2013). However, their fee-paying strategies are rarely considered.

Reading international student fees contrapuntally (Said, 1984, 1994) as a simultaneous dimension, existing independently, but also sometimes subsumed within national student fees, is important for several reasons. First, discussing higher education financing as cost-sharing between the government and the fee-paying student (Cloete, 2016; Johnstone, 2004; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete, 2008) assumes that education is a national good. In that sense, decolonisation of education by arguing that the state pays for education, also implies that the state is the beneficiary of an educated citizenry. However, decolonisation of higher education in Africa is necessary because of the epistemic injustices that have been perpetuated through colonial and neo-colonial policies (Ndlovu-Gathsheni, 2018). Colonial policies that restricted Africans’ access to higher education were followed by World Bank policies, which prioritised primary education and curtailed higher education development. Along with budget cuts imposed by the IMF as part of Structural Adjustment programmes African students have had limited access to higher education (Brock-Utne, 2003). Moreover, racist policies around access have exacerbated these issues for black populations so that access to higher education by national youth is now a burning issue. Yet the nation is itself a colonial arrangement, with ethnic and social groups cut by national boundaries arising out of imperial negotiations about territory possession. Hence, both the nation and educational funding policies are colonial and neo-colonial inheritances.

In response to the ‘deskilling of the population’ through Western interventions, African writers have argued for African solutions, pointing to the limits of seeking epistemic justice through global institutions and instead developing an African agenda for decolonisation (Joseph Mbembe, 2016). They also raise important questions about whether African education should be nationalist or Africanist and how fees play into nationalising decolonisation. Thus, Okeke (2010), for instance, suggests that harmonisation of fees is an essential element in the search for more inclusive education. He argues that ‘promoting an all-inclusive higher education environment within Africa without a single unified tuition policy negates all efforts toward an African curriculum agenda’ (p. 40). These are all important steps in theorising the spatialities of education beyond methodological nationalism (Raghuram, 2013).

The question of international student fee policy, raised in Africa through the lens of inclusion, is also important in other parts of the world, although the reasons why it matters vary. For instance, national fee structures in many parts of the world are structurally dependent on the missing narrative of international fees. Limiting the discourse of ‘cost-sharing’ to the national exchequer-student dyad obscures the role that international student fees play in reducing both. The high fees that international students pay cross-subsidises both the state and the national student. Their fees are thus the constitutive inside to the higher education funding although is rarely acknowledged. Recognising international student fees is therefore important beyond Africa, although the nature and significance of international fees will depend on how national and international fees are entangled in different parts of the world.

Finally, exploring how students afford fees, pushes fees beyond an

economic strategy of a nation or institution to a social practice that is embedded in the spatio-temporalities of study. Research has pointed to how national students finance education – by borrowing (Willott, 2011), through family support (Some, 2010), and self-help groups (Muyia, 1994) – but international students too require agency and support to afford fees. This involves recalibrating study to fit one’s finances, delaying it, interrupting it, even stopping it, when students no longer have money to pay fees. This recognition of the individual and social costs of international fees highlights inequalities within international study.

These inequalities, and hence the affordability of fees, are likely to be of particular concern to transnational higher education students – those who do not travel internationally to study – and who are usually less privileged (Bilecen and Van Mol, 2017; Waters and Leung, 2013). Research on international students at home (Knight, 2008), i.e. those engaging in internationalisation ‘in situ’ (Waters and Leung, 2012, 2013), points to how this group of students is more disadvantaged than the typical international students and sometimes even local students. This is also true for those who engage in internationalisation at a distance (Mittelmeier et al., 2019). Distance education does not require mobility and its associated costs, so that both domestic and international part-time distance education students tend to be poorer than students who engage in internal and, especially, international mobility (Allen and Seaman, 2016), making it an appropriate example for exploring student agency in the context of inequalities in access to higher education.

Approximately one-third of the 68,000 international students registered for university study in South Africa (ICEF, 2013) are at UNISA, thus substantiating this empirical focus. Because international students’ relationships to fees have largely been overlooked (but see Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing, 2015; Lee and Sehoole, 2015), UNISA provides a unique context for study of agency, as it is one of the largest distance education institutions in Africa. Distance education is becoming increasingly important globally with the rise of a range of short, long, free and paid distance education courses (Hall, 2015). Distance education has, in some senses, dominated international study,<sup>1</sup> although the nature of what happens at a distance – teaching, examination – and how (through the post, broadcast media and online education) has changed over time (Brit, 1973; Lee, 2008; Wedmeyer, 1968). The increase in online education has made the agency of distance education students particularly pertinent (Breines et al., 2019).

The rest of this paper is divided into five substantive sections that addresses everyday agency as it pertains to fees of international students studying at UNISA. The first outlines our take on everyday agency and its relevance to students. The second section explores how and why everyday agency should be studied in the context of international student and fees in the Southern African context. The third section outlines the methodology of the study. The fourth section contextualises South African student fees – national and international and details the cost of fees in Southern Africa. The fifth turns to different forms of student agency around fees. It focuses on how students respond to the ongoing pressures of paying fees. We consider the conditions that shape student decision making and how they proactively plan for the financial pressure of paying student fees, before we consider students’ reactive agency when they respond to unexpected and sudden shifts in circumstances. In doing so, the paper looks at ‘study’ as an object of such agency, highlighting the actual costs of international study from the perspective of poorer international students in the global south. We suggest that such a focus is crucial in a context where international

<sup>1</sup> International Study involves all four GATS modes: international student mobility, branch campuses, distance education and movement of academics. The literature has primarily focused on the first and in part to the second of the modes mentioned above. However, this paper focuses on international distance students.

student fees are seen as easy money in an increasingly marketised higher education landscape.

## 2. Everyday agency and student fees

Theorising agency has been a critical endeavour in geography. Humanistic approaches that focus on agency have had a long history for example in possibilism in French geography (de la Blache, 1896). The spatial turn and its emphasis on patterns and structures shifted the debate to a more structural analysis but this then reignited questions about how to insert the intentional actions of human beings into this matrix – placing the question of agency centre stage as human geographers attempted to theorise the human as active and intentional in response to these structures. Geographers turned to phenomenology (Buttimer, 1976), symbolic interactionism (Ley, 1983) and psychoanalysis (Pile, 1993) amongst others to conceptualise the relationship between structure and agency. This relationship was also central to social sciences more widely when Giddens' (1984) structuration theory illuminating how structures shape but are also shaped by agency became central. One of the key contributors, Bourdieu (1977), used the notion of habitus to outline how structures produce and shape individual agency while such agency simultaneously reforms structures.

Agency, therefore, offers a route into thinking about how people actively and intentionally overcome the constraints they face in everyday life but in doing so in ways that go beyond theories of oppositional forms of power (and resistance as agentic response) (Nelson and Wright, 1995). It is this possibility that agency gives to conceptualise the ways in which some individuals and groups (relatively poor/black/women in the gender and development literature to which Nelson and Wright contribute, for instance) respond to struggles in quotidian ways that has made it an important tool for those writing in development studies, critical race and feminist studies (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004; Connell, 1997; McNay, 2000). For instance, Kabeer (1999) suggests that agency is often seen as purposive action, i.e. decision-making, encompassing the meanings and purpose people bring to these actions. However, in the context of poor women, her primary category of analysis, she argues that agency also requires 'bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis' (1999: 436). These highlight the obstacles to agency (or perhaps the power of the agency of others) and the manoeuvres required to work around these obstacles.

These differences are also picked up in research on student agency. Student agency is much vaunted as study is seen as inherently transformative, as a process of self-reflection but also of growth, individual and collective, whereby intentional actions are fostered (Marginson, 2014). Hence, students are seen as inherently agentic. Moreover, students also organise to change their surroundings, both social and political and to be agents of change (Zeilig and Ansell, 2008). The pivotal role of students in politics the world over has led to widespread interest in student activism, the most visible and hence researched element of student agency (Altbach, 1964, 1966; Forest and Altbach, 2006). Attempts have also been made to categorise student agency – based on its engagement with existing political situations, the temporal horizons of its operations, its strength and weakness and its outcomes (Klemenčič, 2014) and whether this is conducted individually, by proxy or collectively (Klemenčič, 2015). The object of such agency may be varied – from individual transformation to long-lasting political changes as epitomised by #FeesMustFall. Many emphasise the transformative potential of localised student struggles to fit into (Wilson Janssens, 2018) and even reshape society (Nkinyangi, 1991).

However, everyday agency may be played out in much quieter registers – simply maintaining one's status as a student. As Berlant argues 'we need to think about agency and personhood not only in inflated terms but also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics, and lifelong

accumulation or self-fashioning' (2011: 99). Here, agency may be exercised proactively through anticipating issues but also reactively through adaptive responses such as slowing down or interrupting study in order to mitigate the financial pressures of fees. This distinction, which we adopt here, has been particularly useful in the context of student lives (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate, 2015).

#FeesMustFall is a clear example of both collective and individual student agency, however, in this paper we focus on international student fees as the problematic to which students respond and how they do this, when students do not confront the fee regime, but by organising and reorganising their life, including study. By treating study as the driver of agency, we go beyond contemporary ways of thinking about student agency, but we also bring it to bear on an important contemporary political issue – student fees, especially international student fees. While national student fees have garnered attention (Balsvik, 1998) and become the object of intervention by both students and thus, of national education policies, international student fees are much less visible and hence pliable to more organised forms of agency. Moreover, where they are scrutinised, it is done in very particular registers, both in policy-making and by researchers, so that fees are rarely considered through the lens of everyday agency.

## 3. Inter/national students, fees and agency

Fees are, and have been, a critical issue for students globally. They have collectively challenged fees, both through activism and through organised student representation, and with variable degrees of success, as evidenced by the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, which has now spread to countries as such as Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire and Burundi (Moosa, 2016). In South Africa students have organised collectively, on campus and online (Bosch, 2017), in order to increase historically disadvantaged students' access to higher education, both symbolically as in the famous #RhodesMustFall movement in University of Cape Town, and financially, by demands that #FeesMustFall. The latter request was picked up by student unions on campuses around the country (Luescher et al., 2017) and can be seen as part of wider popular protests in South African policy (Naicker, 2016). As a result, fees became an important political agenda. Fee increases were stopped and subsequently became inflation-linked, grants were instituted, and the issue of making education affordable became the central element of education strategy and policy (DHET, 2015). Thus, national fees are high on student and national agendas.

International student fees, too, are on many agendas – national-institutional educational policy, research and among students. Globally, policy debates around international student fees have been dominated by the role it plays in marketisation strategies in an increasingly neoliberal university system. They emphasise the importance of international study as an export industry (Kauko and Medvedeva, 2016; Kwaramba, 2012) and in cross-subsidising national fees (Waters, 2018). Ambitious targets for increasing this income source in countries such as the UK (Department for Education and Department for International Trade, 2019), Australia (Marginson, 2011) and Malaysia (Ziguras and Law, 2006) have been met with criticisms that students should not simply be treated as cash cows (Robertson, 2011).

Because of the predominant view of international students as privileged (Findlay et al., 2012), their fee-paying strategies are rarely explored. While there has been some interest in how fees alter student decisions on destination (Findlay et al., 2018), most research has focused on the national and institutional economic benefits of international study while international students' own financial situation in terms of how they afford and pay fees has been less explored. Thus, when it comes to fees, it is the reverse of Findlay's (2011) claim that research has focused mostly on the demand side (student) and not on the supply (institutional) side. Rather, it is primarily the national economic benefit and institutional advantage of obtaining international fees that has been analysed.

However, not all international students are privileged (Bilecen and Van Mol, 2017). Cutting the cost of mobility and engaging in internationalisation at home (Knight, 2008) is one option (Waters and Leung, 2012, 2013). Another, and less well explored option has been to engage in internationalisation at a distance (Mittelmeier et al., 2019; Rye, 2014). This enables students to access higher education, and even international higher education but to allay the costs of travel. Moreover, they may also study part-time, a common strategy amongst the hard-up domestic and international distance education students (Allen and Seaman, 2016).

International students have shown agency (Zeilig and Ansell, 2008) – protesting about changing immigration regulations (Acharya, 2018) and working conditions among others (Robertson, 2013) in Australia; housing in the Netherlands (Langelier, 2018); fees in France (Marshall, 2018); and Canada, where the refrain ‘No student, a cash cow!’ was used by students from the Simon Fraser University to protest against rising fees (Naylor, 2018). However, for those who are studying at home as distance education students these forms of protest are harder or perhaps even impossible to participate in. Consequently, much of this debate on fees has been taken up by local students or on-site international students.

An expansive definition of agency which goes beyond student protests and includes the ‘capacity possessed by individuals and groups to act for their own benefit or for the well-being of others’ (Castree et al., 2004: 159), can be helpful to see how distance education students too show agency around fees. This approach requires a recognition of the differences between students and how their individual circumstances shape their opportunities to cope with the cost of fees as well as to act to mitigate the burden of fees. Such agency may not always be attention-grabbing, but through this focus we emphasise the ‘spaces of ordinariness’ (Berlant, 2011: 99) within which international student agency around fees has been ongoing. Towards this, we draw on the empirical case of distance education students at UNISA and how they display agency in the context of fee payment. UNISA is Africa’s largest distance education institution with more than 330,000 students, and of these, more than 29,000 are international students (UNISA, 2018). This paper examines how students in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Namibia navigate UNISA’s fee regime.

#### 4. Methodology

The paper is based on an international and interdisciplinary research project entitled ‘International Distance Education and African Students’ (IDEAS). The project involves a team at the Open University in the UK and at UNISA in South Africa. UNISA is the primary provider of mass distance education for international students in Africa, and the project specifically focuses on students who live in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Nigeria and South Africa. The overall aim of the project is to improve equitable access and the quality of distance education in South Africa through exploring the presence, adaptation, use of social media (Madge et al., 2019) and learning outcomes (Mittelmeier et al., 2018, 2019) of students in South Africa. The key question we are investigating in this project is: What drivers are influencing supply and demand for distance education in Africa and how far can distance education meet the Sustainable Development Goals of equitable access to education?

Fees emerged as a central topic in our examination of this and related questions that we explored through mixed methods, which included analytics of student learning data, an online questionnaire student survey, and interviews with UNISA students, educational providers and policy-makers. The questionnaire survey sampled students from the four internationalisation categories, using UNISA’s Management Information System. This enabled us to invite all international undergraduate students in the College of Science, Technology and Engineering over a two-semester period, a total of 7907 students. Altogether, 1295 students (430 South African, 738 international students and 127 who did not declare their nationality) participated in this

study. In our sample 63% were international students, representing 25 different countries across Africa including: Zimbabwe (33%), Namibia (14%), Botswana (5%), Swaziland (5%), Zambia (4%) and Nigeria (2%). A very small percentage (2%) of participants were from countries outside Africa. About 58% of the respondents were women. Participants had an average age of 34 and mostly lived in an urban environment (77%), thus being fairly typical for ‘modern’ distance learners. Most of the students were black ( $n = 64\%$ ), followed by white (21%), coloured (6%), and Indian or Asian (3%).<sup>2</sup> Most participants studied business (29%), followed by law (27%), social science (21%), science (9%), nursing and health (4%), computing (4%), arts (3%), or other (1%). The vast majority of students (83%) studied part time towards their degree and 12% indicated that they studied full-time. 69% of the participants were in full-time work, 10% were in part-time work and 12% were looking after the family. The survey also revealed that on average, the participants were responsible for 2.90 members in their household ( $SD = 2.09$ ), and shared a home with 3.10 people.

This paper focuses on semi-structured interviews conducted with the international students who were located in their home countries. Questionnaire respondents from four countries were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews through emails sent to their university email address. There is a risk of a bias in the selection as we do not know the underlying reasons why some participated in the research and others did not. A significant factor may be internet access, and we might have received a larger proportion of responses from students who were in relatively stable financial situations. We recruited 72 women and 89 men for interviews. 32 lived in South Africa, 85 in Zimbabwe, 36 in Namibia and 8 in Nigeria. Among these, 130 were black, 24 were white, six classified themselves as coloured and one as Indian.

A total of six postdoctoral researchers from Turkey, Zimbabwe, South Africa and the Netherlands conducted 161 interviews with South African, Namibian, Zimbabwean and Nigerian students (these countries were the case studies due to their high number of student enrolment at UNISA). The different positionalities of the researchers helped facilitate the interviews and overcome the challenges that emerged given that the distance education students would not have often interacted with academics due to the very nature of their study. Through close collaboration between the researchers and their frequent discussions about potential shortcomings, the project has sought to reduce the inherent biases and bring students’ voices to the fore. The interviews were conducted primarily via Skype-to-phone and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. In addition to reaching students in various locations, this qualitative method has enabled us to develop an understanding of the broader circumstances of being distance education students in Southern Africa, but also to explore their personal experiences of this distinct form of education and to collect narratives about how they managed to cover their fees.

#### 5. Funding Higher Education and the cost of fees in Southern Africa

The #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa was a direct response to a reduction in government subsidy and to steady increase in fees as universities deepened the user-pay model. Fig. 1 shows the average and highest fee increases for South Africa leading up to the protests.<sup>3</sup>

Like the rest of the world, challenges and searches for ‘non-traditional sources’ are taking place in Africa as public funding to universities is being reduced (Malete, 2016). Despite increasing fees, there is a continued growth in student numbers, which reflect ‘that demand exceeds supply for higher education’ across the world (Altbach, 2015:

<sup>2</sup> These four racial categories are defined by the South African government and asked to students in response to post-1994 legislation and regulatory frameworks

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, 1 South African Rand (ZAR) equals 0.073 USD.



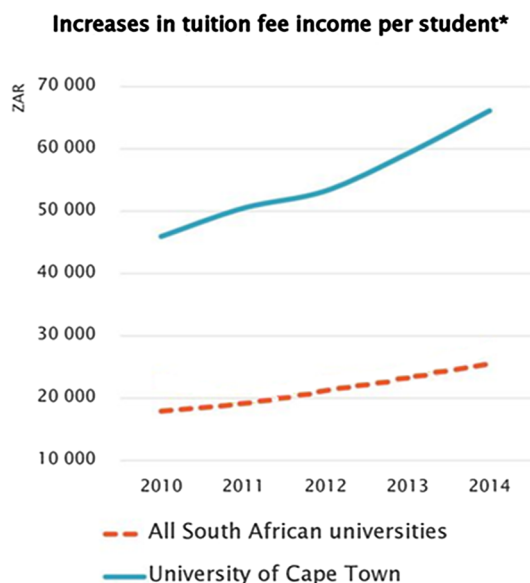


Fig. 1. Fee increases in South Africa from 2010 to 2014. Source: STATSA, 2015.

3), but especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018). Through the colonial period higher education was not fostered in Africa, as there were concerns over how higher education, including transnational study, produced nationalist pro-independence leadership (Mamdani, 2008). Post-independence, higher education was seen to drive economic growth but funding for higher education was not supported by international lending institutions leading to what Obamba (2013) calls the ‘unmaking of the knowledge economy in Africa’.

This historic underfunding has left a legacy - South Africa has one of the lowest spends on higher education as percentage of gross domestic product globally – at just 0.74% in 2015/16 but rose to 0.84% in 2016/17 (Africa Check, 2018). Moreover, government funding as percent of overall income of higher education institutions has declined gradually from 49% in 2000 to around 40% in 2008, where it has remained until 2016 (CHET, 2019) while student numbers doubled between 1994 and 2011 (Hodes, 2017). This issue of underfunding in the context of rapidly rising demand occurs through much of the region too.

Yet, alongside this financial crunch on universities is the recognition that higher education is crucial both for driving economic growth and for achieving equity in deeply unequal societies (Akoojee and McGrath, 2007). Thus, the South African government responded to political pressure from students - shutdown of many universities and student blockading parliament in 2015 – by setting fee increases at either zero or very close to zero (Bitzer and De Jager, 2018). The inability of South African universities to raise their fees to cover operational costs has placed an additional burden on the fiscus to increase the national subsidy to universities. Higher Education accounted for 4.7% of the budget in 2017 and has been increased by 17% per annum since then (Davis, 2017) to cover the deficit due to student fees being capped. Fig. 2 shows the grants awarded by national government to HEIs increasing significantly from 2015 to 2016.

Despite the increase in funding from the state, fees play a significant role in the overall funding of the university sector and remain a vital source of income. Most universities in South Africa rely on fees for as much as a third of their income. Even though the government controls fee increases, there is a vast difference between universities in terms of what they charge for a degree. Table 1 shows the cost of a first-year degree at selected South African universities. The most expensive on the list, Monash (recently rebranded to IEE MSA), is a private university, while the cheapest, UNISA, is an Open and Distance learning (ODL) institution.

The cost of fees is, however, also a major factor for international students who would like to study in South Africa. The average fee per year at UNISA is approximately US\$1000, which is comparable to the cost of private universities in Zimbabwe, Namibian and Nigeria (see Table 2).

UNISA offers an affordable option for obtaining an international degree from a regional education hub, while enabling students to remain in the country of origin and avoid travel to South Africa. The additional incentive to enrol at UNISA for regional students is the Southern African Development Co-operation protocol that requires that students from within the region pay lower fees - equivalent to those charged to local students. However, fee regimes, management of students and national sentiment around international students are not in sync with such protocols. A foreign levy is imposed but this is graded, with the SADC countries paying the least, other Africans a higher figure and the most being paid by those from beyond Africa as the needs of the large, historically excluded, black majority population in South Africa

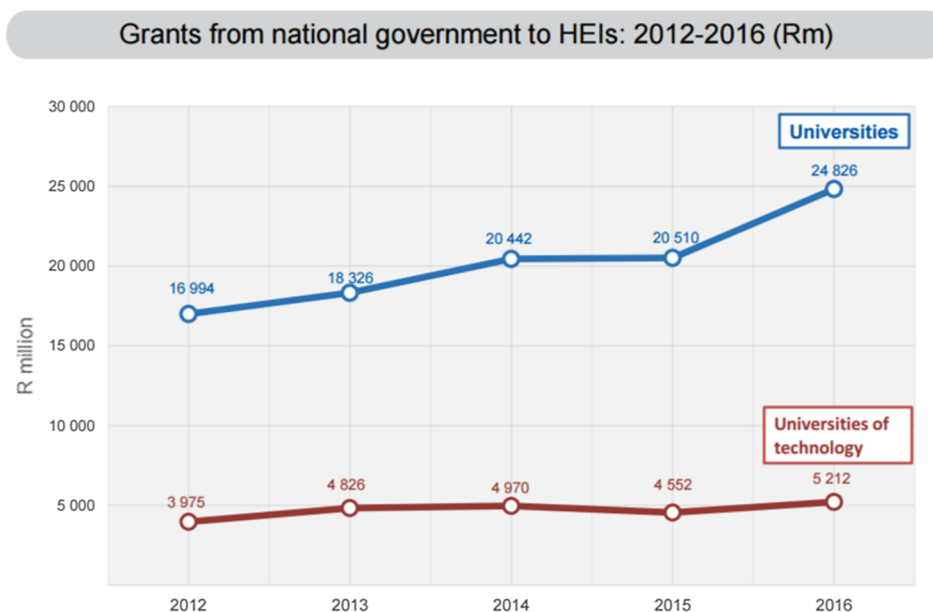


Fig. 2. Increase in State Spending on higher education in South Africa. Source: STATSA, 2017.

**Table 1**  
Fees at South African Universities (Traditional, Comprehensive and Private) Fees (2018) for a BA Degree.

Institution	Fee
Monash University (BSocSc) (Private University)	R81 100
North-West University	R46 740
Rhodes University	R43 390
St. Augustines (Private University)	R51 300
University of Cape Town	R53 440
University of Johannesburg	R31 500–R38 800
University of KwaZulu-Natal (BSocSc)	R42 000
University of Pretoria	R35 000
University of South Africa	R14 700
University of Stellenbosch	R39 700
University of the Witwatersrand	R39 240–R50 540
University of Venda	R26 760

Source: [Bevan and Davies-Laubscher, 2019](#).

**Table 2**  
Average University Fees in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Nigeria per year.

Country	Local student fee	International student fee
Zimbabwe (Public)	USD400	USD2500
Zimbabwe (Private)	USD1500	USD1500
Namibia (Public)	USD2100	Fees + USD178 levy
Namibia (Private)	USD1400	USD1400
Nigeria (Federal)	USD90	USD300
Nigeria (Private)	USD1500	USD1500

Source: Own research.

has to be balanced against the benefits of internationalism. Importantly, these benefits do not revolve around fees, as they do in much of the global north. Rather, internationalisation policies focus on the international exposure it offers to South Africans and South Africa's need to play its part especially in Southern African development and of Africa more widely ([DHET, 2015](#)). However, while there is a tentative attempt at encouraging internationalisation, it is not always followed through with the necessary management of the process ([Rouhani, 2007](#)). Nevertheless, as fees for international students in South Africa are nowhere near as high as for universities in the global north countries, the country continues to be an attractive hub for students in the region, particularly for distance education students.

Amidst the shifting economic landscape and rising costs of higher education for students, distance education provides an opportunity to avoid the higher fees and the expenses of studying on campus. The neoliberal logics that are being used to drive massification online, its effects ([Olds, 2013](#)), the critical possibilities and limits ([Rye, 2014](#); [Sparke, 2016](#)) of online distance education in offering radical pedagogies ([House-Peters et al., 2017](#)) and the new collectivities that distance study enables ([Gunter et al., forthcoming](#); [Madge et al., 2019](#)), perhaps even necessitates ([Longstaff, 2017](#)), have all been researched. Moreover, the lived experiences of distance education and what this means for distance and proximity have gained attention ([Chan et al., 2015](#)). However, engagement with the economies of distance education, especially from a student perspective, has been sparse. This is a loss as distance education affords large numbers of people in the Global South access to higher education. For instance, The Indira Gandhi National Open University in India has more than 3 million students enrolled ([Noronah, 2017](#)). Moreover, a number of distance education students also study part-time, although not all. This is often in response to the other commitments they have but also due to affordability. It is often the more disadvantaged students who pursue distance education, but what forms of everyday agency are required so that such students can afford and pay their fees?

## 6. Navigating fees through diverse forms of agency

Distance education is distinctive in that it tends to be modularised – offering the opportunity for those who are cash strapped to access international study by regulating how much they study according to what they can afford and to reduce costs of study by staying at home. In this case, where approximately 80% of the international students who responded to our survey said that they were self-funded, students' tactics to navigate fees reflected two distinct forms of agency: proactive agency, and reactive agency. But first we set out some key factors influencing international distance education students and fees.

First, distance education at UNISA offered flexibility and thus allowed those who could not have studied full time to register at a university. Crucially, these are students who needed to work and for whom study was something that was done in spite of their precarious everyday circumstances. Although the marketisation of higher education is making *working* while studying a norm ([Neill, 2015](#)), for many of our participants the opposite was true. This form of international study allowed them to *study* while *working*, making study precarious. Moreover, it is only by working and having acquired a certain degree of economic stability that the possibility of study even becomes an option. These findings move away from approaches to students' time poverty which highlight how the need to work impacts the quantity and quality of their studies ([Burston, 2017](#)). Instead, we argue, students make time for study amidst their already busy lives.

Secondly, the affordability of distance education appealed to both domestic and international students at UNISA, but there were distinct challenges for international students. Because of the foreign levy, international students faced a significantly higher cost of studying at UNISA than South African students.

Finally, students can break up costs of study into small components, registration, course materials, internet access, exams, getting the result, each of which is a price point along the way to a degree. This enables poorer students to pay for aspects of their study journey as they get the money. Moreover, students can also change the temporality and intensity of study – how much and where - to make study affordable. They can postpone elements of the study (and associated pricing) till they have the money to study. To consider how international students coped with the challenges relating to affording and paying fees, below we consider proactive and reactive agency.

### 6.1. Proactive agency

According to [Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate \(2015: 55\)](#), 'proactivity suggests a knowing and active individual, whose activity is oriented towards one's own goals instead of being driven from the outside'. Many international students at UNISA, like those elsewhere ([Findlay et al., 2018](#)), had compared the cost of the degrees between countries to decide where and how to study. A woman from Namibia, Mathabo, for example, pointed out that Namibian universities are expensive compared to South Africa: 'I still find UNISA very affordable. For instance, UNISA charges me 1400 for a module, that's low, and then in Namibia you can be studying IT for instance and your module is 1800–2000.'

The additional costs of moving away from home and living on campus was another factor that was central in our informants' choices of distance education through UNISA:

Basically, the course that I did was a higher certificate on environmental science and in comparison it's the same year cost as in Namibia, I pay 6000 Rand or Namibian Dollars.<sup>4</sup> But the problem was a fulltime university in Namibia, I would have to move from my home to the capital, Windhoek, which is about 300 km apart and the

<sup>4</sup> The Namibian Dollar is pegged to the South African Rand, which explains why some informants refer to the currencies interchangeably.

cost of living in Windhoek is really, really high so I couldn't actually afford the cost of living there. (Janet, Namibian woman).

Students' access to higher education was not determined by the cost of fees alone. Students also took into account other costs that would arise if they moved to study on campus, such as the cost of travel and higher living expenses because of having to rent accommodation away from home. The cost of travel is particularly high in large, sparsely populated countries like Namibia. Thus, unlike most existing research, we found that the overall lower costs are what made poorer students turn to international study; they proactively sought opportunities that were within their means and would enable them to achieve their goals.

Studying on campus was not a feasible option for many of our informants:

Some of us may not even afford to go on campus, definitely you will need to pay some [additional] fees for the accommodation. When I am already struggling to pay for the module, will I even manage to be on campus? Definitely not. (Bronwyn, Zimbabwean woman).

Although students at UNISA are from different social positions, experiences of economic hardship related to fees were common for students in all the different countries we focused on. The choice of UNISA did however provide an opportunity for higher education to be combined with students' existing responsibilities, despite adding to their burden for an extended period of time.

Rather than merely struggling to come up with the money, students developed strategies to manage the challenges of affording the fees:

The payments and the costs of the education can be stressful sometimes, but what I normally do is to avoid those challenges. In terms of the large sums of money that I have to find, when I'm working like now, I'm already paid up for the second semester of 2018. I'm now working towards my third year, 2019, so in July I'll have to set something up aside for UNISA every month until I get to December. I manage my time and maybe that's why I don't get very much stress. (Garai, Zimbabwean man)

This anticipatory logic, of preparing for study by saving up, was crucial for these students. However, not everyone was in a position to save up money in advance for the fees. Many were aware that studying would not be easy and had prepared themselves for enduring additional hardship to obtain a degree:

If you just analyse my situation, I have to go to work and work eight or nine hours, I have to put in extra jobs for me to afford my fees and on top of that I have to keep the family together. My son also goes to school, I have to make sure that his fees is paid for. I have to make sure everything is in order, the house is in order. I have got my mother, she needs to be taken care of. (Jenny, Zimbabwean woman)

Choosing to embark on a degree study in addition to her existing responsibilities illustrates a determination to make a change in her life and to improve conditions for her family, which shows her proactive agency and intention to achieve her own goals.

Another common practice among students was to obtain the money for fees through other sources, practices common elsewhere in the world too (Foskett et al., 2009). Some students had their fees paid for by their parents and some were supported by their spouses. Yet another strategy was to borrow money from relatives or friends, and in some cases from other institutions:

The institutions that offer loans, they know that we are studying; they give us a window period so that you manage to pay another loan or they offer you a loan so that you cover the previous loan and continue with a new one, so at least we are managing. The interest rates are high, it's about 16% per month, but at least we are able to do our studies. (Zira, Zimbabwean woman).

For many students, affording the fees placed them in an even more

precarious situation. They were in most cases well aware of the financial difficulties they would have to face, but considered their investment and challenges to be worth it in the long run as it was expected to open up new opportunities and prosperity in the future. In terms of agency, they were exerting a proactive form of agency to afford their studies and hopefully improve their lives. As such, the issue of affording fees is not merely a matter of economics, but is a complex endeavour that requires different forms of agency in many aspects of their lives.

International students faced an extra burden. As Mathabo, a student from Namibia notes: 'The only thing is we are charged for being foreign students, so that's the only problem that we have. I'm being charged 5000 extra for student levy.' Moreover, these charges were rising sharply. Bronwyn, a Zimbabwean woman, explained how the foreign levy had gone up twice during her study, and constituted a larger amount than the actual fees. This was a significant expense for many, and it meant that she could only afford to do three modules per term instead of five (which is the normal full-time study progression). This slowing down of study and calibrating it to what could be afforded showed the temporal adjustments that were required according to the situation. Thus, their agency with regard to study was tempered by the realities of navigating international student fee payments.

## 6.2. Reactive agency

The tenuousness of their study and the existing conditions of precarity within which study was conducted meant that unanticipated events required further reactive agency. Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2015) draw on Bruner (1994) to suggest that reactivity is a response to someone else's power to control their circumstances. Bruner (1994) sees reactive agency as a form of resistance to top-down power. We focus, however, not on resistance, but on reactive agency as ways of undertaking the maintenance work required to study, i.e. how students exercise everyday agency in the context of (extra)ordinary circumstances in order to get by.

The circumstances varied between national contexts and it was especially in Zimbabwe that many students struggled to resolve the issue of obtaining money for fees:

And you know the situation in our country of late, so we have to sweat in order to pay for the tuition fee, so there's one hell of a thing that stresses all of us is the need to pay the tuition fees. Where do I get the money? I need to run around to look for the money. (Stanley, Zimbabwean man).

Stanley's challenges of collecting enough money to cover his fees reflected an increasingly difficult economic situation in Zimbabwe in late 2018 (Chan, 2019). Although he may have had a clear plan of how to cover his fees when he began his UNISA studies, the deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe forced him to reconsider and find new ways of affording the fees. The intermittent immediacy of collecting the money and paying were felt also among students in other countries like Nigeria: 'Sometimes we're forced into the period of warning where you're required to pay half and you'll be given two days to pay within. We now go running here and there' (Ajulo, Nigerian man). When students had reached a point where they found themselves with a very limited timeframe for arranging their payments, they had little choice but to react and arrange to pay their fees in order to register for the next term.

Occasionally, there were issues relating to fees and registration that could not be resolved through obtaining the required amount of money. In some of these cases, complicated and expensive mobility became necessary to respond and resolve problems:

Usually it's very difficult to find foreign currency on the formal market. So what I'm doing is that I'm actually getting our local currency and trying to find the foreign currency from the black

market. I ultimately have to go to the nearest bank outside Zimbabwe. Then I would deposit my student fees and come back. So it will take me, yeah, a day or so for me to do that transaction. Let's say I want to deposit the money on Monday, I will have to travel on a Sunday evening so that I get to South Africa early in the morning. Then I do my transaction and come back home. [Wataida, Zimbabwean man].

Rather than being a form of resistance towards an economic system, Wataida's response illustrates how local circumstances put students in situations where their capacity to deal with the situation could have major impacts on their study progress. Whereas Wataida had found a way through which he could pay his fees, other students in Zimbabwe did not always have the financial means or the time to travel internationally in response to shifting economic circumstances and regulations. They simply dropped out.<sup>5</sup>

It was, however, not only the circumstances in each of the countries that made it necessary for students to respond with mobility. One student had used an agent in Zimbabwe at an earlier stage in her studies to help her arrange the practicalities relating to registration and payment of fees. However, this had caused unexpected challenges that were threatening to stop her from continuing her studies:

I considered dropping out but then I put my foot down and I said, "Let me just go straight to UNISA and see where the root problem is" and then I actually went to Pretoria, I had to take days off from work because my workplace is the one paying for my education. When I got there, they actually said to me "We are not the ones that blocked you, the country, where you're coming from, these people, your agent is the one that blocked you, so you have to go back to them to tell them to unblock you". I said to them, "They said you blocked me!" and they said, "No, they're the ones that said you haven't done something so we shouldn't put you through" and then I explained the situation to the lady and I said, "I am just coming off the bus and I cannot go back to Zimbabwe without clarifying this" and she was very helpful and directed me to the right offices. They told me, "Pay 40 Rand to unblock yourself". (Shamiso, Zimbabwean man)

While the use of agents, or licensees, to support students in their home countries has been reduced as part of UNISA's shift away from local study centres, Shamiso's experience illustrates how the circumstances put her in a difficult situation. Rather than dropping out, she responded by taking immediate action, at great cost in terms of time and taking time off work, but which enabled her to resolve the problem and continue her studies. The capacity to exert such reactive agency in this case depended on her financial situation and having the money to travel the relatively short distance to South Africa and the ability to use people as infrastructure (Simone, 2004).

In other cases, students developed different forms of responses. For example, students in Nigeria found it more expensive to travel to South Africa and hence more difficult to resolve emergent issues:

The situation where people like us have to face the issue at home, have to face the issue at work, have to face the issue in society, you cannot submit your assignment on Friday and by Monday the whole thing is shut down. Don't be surprised, some of us are having challenges and submitting because of electricity supply, you know, in some countries the electricity supply is not 100%. Internet may have disruption. For me, I lost out last year, I could not write my exam because I didn't also meet that assignment on time. I went for the exam and I got a result that I'm not admitted to that exam because I didn't also meet assignment. When you look at that... this

exam I prepared for, then because of the fact I didn't also meet the assignment on time, I lost that completely. It's very, very painful to people like me because after all the time and effort I put in. I paid for the module again, that's why I'm rewriting that module again this year. You lose your money and you go back to the next year again, you pay more, you pay for the module, you pay as an international student. That's how the system is. You cannot challenge it. (Adewale, Nigerian man).

The purported inflexibility of UNISA and the sense of not having any power to influence the system illustrates international students' lack of voice and feeling of being unable to contest the dimensions of the South African University system that they thought to be unfair. Adewale's reactive agency did not enable him to avoid the extra cost associated with having to rewrite the module but exemplifies how he exerted a form of agency where he decided to persist despite the additional cost and the delay of completing his degree. While he was in a more precarious situation than the students who managed to resolve the issues they faced, his reactive agency emerged in his persistence and continued effort to complete his degree within a system where he had very little say. For him, and many other students, agency is 'an activity of maintenance, not making' (Berlant, 2011: 100), seeking somehow to continue their studies while working and maintaining their family lives, hoping to improve their lives in the long run.

## 7. Conclusion

Underpinned by notions that higher education is an economic good, a tool to reduce inequality or a development goal, national students' fees have garnered considerable research attention. However, the fees that international students pay has generated much less interest, as these students are primarily seen as wealthy and reproducing privilege through accessing international study. This paper intervenes into the tenor of this debate by suggesting that not all international students are wealthy. Through stories of how distance education students studying at UNISA struggle to pay fees the paper inserts much-needed student perspectives into the political economy of international study, thus far dominated by national and institutional perspectives that emphasise international study as export earnings or part of marketisation strategies of institutions.

Yet, national student fees are the object of both student and institutional agency as national students act as vote banks. This is clear in the case of #FeesMustFall in South Africa, where these debates have been central to the decolonisation debates. The demand for epistemic justice for black South Africans, long denied a place in higher education is important. However, it is also important that decolonisation should not revert to national boundaries. Rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment is an everyday reality in many parts of the world and encompasses students too. In South Africa, the long-suppressed demands of local black populations need to be recognised but these groups share much with other black populations in Africa. These other populations are both diasporic Africans (Joseph Mbembe, 2016) but also those who have become 'other' through colonial boundary drawings. Decolonisation, falling fees and epistemic justice should therefore be a pan-African demand, questioning not only fees but also the national boundaries of these debates around fees.

Reading the absent presence of international fees contrapuntally into the literature on higher education funding raises important questions around the politics and ethics of internationalisation beyond Africa too. It points to the politics of cost-sharing debates that has retained the state and the national student as the primary players in funding higher education, even though international students cross-subsidise both in some parts of the world. As a result, national fees are increasingly underwritten by international student fees in these countries. Yet, both academics and institutions have failed to adequately question this entanglement and to highlight the political need to do so.

<sup>5</sup> As we only focused on existing students, the unsuccessful agency of students, those who tried but could not continue to pay, is not discussed here. However, many of the students we spoke to were on the brink and considering whether they could continue.



This paper, through its emphasis on the trials and tribulations around fee payment and the everyday agency required towards this, begins this process. It urges academics and policy makers to take the everyday implications of these fees seriously.

Recognising the spatial variability of these funding practices and where these international financial flows matter is a necessary part of building up an ethical debate around internationalisation. This debate is still in its infancy (Madge et al., 2009, 2015; Yang, 2019) and has yet to take on the ethical implications of the realities of student lives. This paper inserts a textured analysis of everyday agency in order to begin that conversation.

International students' ability to pay fees and study is bound up in their agency to manage study, work and finances. Moreover, the experiences of part-time distance learning international students show us how study is calibrated by students well beyond the credit-mobility/degree mobility split often seen in the literature on international study. Students seem to exercise their proactive and reactive agency by re-working the temporalities of study – everyday through different intensities of study and work, where and what they study but also *how much* and *when* based on their ability to pay. They invest in an education and the proportion and quality of that investment is greater amongst those who are most disadvantaged – such as black people in the Southern African region. They not only pay fees, but also the price of historical inequalities in their attempt to get a toe-hold in higher education. This paper suggests that this everyday agency too must figure in discussions of international study.

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#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Parvati Raghuram:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Markus Roos Breines:** Investigation, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Ashley Gunter:** Funding acquisition, Project administration, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Contributions to writing - original draft.

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