

Conclusion

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Democracy has always been at the heart of student demonstrations in African institutions of higher learning. The root cause of such demonstrations is found in the various University Acts themselves which envisage very undemocratic structures and administrations that are more suitable for civil departments or commercial companies than for academic institutions. For example, many African University Acts stipulate that the council shall be the governing body whereas the majority of council members are required to be non-academics. According to critics, such non-academics generally know nothing about how the university functions and only contribute in entrenching the managerial administrative system, which they are familiar with.

In many universities, vice-chancellors enjoy broad powers which allow them to: suspend any member of staff; prohibit the admission of a student or group of students to classes or to the university; expel or suspend any student or group of students; dissolve or suspend the students' union. Even many who believe that greater discipline is needed at the universities consider that many of the laws introduced by governments are disproportionately severe and will compromise the universities' generally good record of academic freedom and independence from governments.

Just as it is necessary to understand the character and development of higher education and further education, it is equally vital to know the circumstances under which African students live and study so as to understand the dynamics of students' movements or politics. This volume consists of accounts from four African countries: Cameroon, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Eritrea. The accounts focus on some very important aspects of the situation in which African students find themselves in many countries – a situation characterized by undemocratic university administrations, inadequate funding, poor living conditions and institutional and educational problems.

The four case studies from Africa clearly reveal that students' conditions in general have deteriorated since independence. The economic and political situation in the countries concerned has not made things easier. From the student's point of view, their economic, social and academic condition has been deteriorating at a steady pace since independence. Students are also gravely concerned about the cuts in educational funding. The cuts have affected students in all sorts of painful ways. The case studies highlight some of the sad realities. For example, the lack of essential learning materials, such as books and journals, and the very non-conducive learning environment, lack of adequate accommodation, sharing of rooms by several students, stinking toilets and leaking roofs are some of the students' grievances.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the most recent clashes between students and police were caused by students' demands for an increase in financial aid. African governments have been usually slow in responding to such demands and the financial aid given has been rejected by students as inadequate and disproportionate to the escalating living cost of living.

Moreover, the cuts, coupled with galloping inflation in some of the countries studied, have drastically curtailed students' purchasing power, not only with regard to food and lodging, but also books, stationary, and other practical training needs. In some cases, students show genuine concern for the plight of their teachers, most of whom are surviving by the skin of their intellect, frantically running around trying to get consultancies from international donors.

There are basically four issues which underlie the dramatic and often spectacular confrontation between students and the state that have come to dominate university politics in African universities, as highlighted by the case studies from Cameroon, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Eritrea. Essentially, these hinge on efforts by African states to encroach on jealously guarded freedoms enjoyed by the universities. In recent years, African states have tried to appropriate the right to appoint top university officials. They have also adopted measures which impinge on academic freedom. They have attempted to stifle free speech on campuses. Moreover, they have ignored student welfare issues.

It should be recalled that, immediately after independence, university-state relations in Africa were, by and large, cordial. Disputes were resolved through dialogue. But this came to an end as African economies began to decline. The social composition of the various student bodies also changed following the opening up of education to all social groups after independence. Eventually the majority of the student population came from peasant and working class families. This meant they were more keenly aware of the consequences of the economic decline in the respective countries than their predecessors.

It is clear from the studies carried out in the four countries that in some of them economic decline also put an end to the 'anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist'

alliance between the state and the students and other intellectual groupings in universities. Government policies were just not delivering the goods. Other subjective weaknesses, like corruption, nepotism and regionalism became prevalent. The failure of the African governments' political and economic policies led to the rise in frustration and militancy amongst students who increasingly began to feel the pinch.

For the student movements in higher educational institutions as revealed by cases in this volume, the grants issue has three essential elements: first, every student suffers in some way and is capable of being mobilized into action around demands for change; second, the level of grants is a crucial factor bearing on educational opportunity; third, inadequate grant levels will act as a disincentive to access to higher and further education -- a barrier particularly for working-class young people and those whose parents are unwilling or unable to provide a substantial subsidy.

Finally, it should be recognized that there has been a number of positive changes as a result of student pressure. The future will depend on the extent to which student movements and their allies are able to campaign effectively for reforms. Without the sternest opposition, many African governments' policies, as they are currently mapped out, will lead to a worsening of the situation in the years to come.

