



## **The Nature of Students' Activism in Higher Education Institutions with a Focus on Universities in KwaZulu-Natal**

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### **Abstract**

Black students' academic progress and completion rates at South African higher education institutions are affected by the complex problem of student activism. Since many students are unable to pay the ever-increasing tuition fees, they have agitated for Free Higher Education (FHE) through the broad-based #FeesMustfall movement that gained traction in 2015-2016. Although financially challenged students receive some assistance through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), there are several aspects of poverty that need to be recognised. With a focus on agency and urgency, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 seeks to eradicate poverty in all of its manifestations globally. This study interrogates the type of activism among South African students to establish how it affects their social, psychological, and intellectual well-being. This article examines students' activism through the capability approach from a multifaceted and intersectional perspective. By taking this stance, we investigate the effects of student action from various perspectives while keeping alert to the well-being of the student as an agent. This study is desktop research that utilises the interpretive research paradigm. This research sheds light on the complex nature of student activism in South African higher education institutions and proffers suggestions for lowering student poverty and raising wellbeing among students. The study's conclusions inform policy choices and advance the more general objective of eradicating poverty in all its manifestations on a global scale.

**Keywords:** Capability approach, Student activism, Poverty, Entrepreneurship

## Introduction

It is essential to understand the various aspects of poverty since student activism in South African higher education is a complex topic that affects academic success and student completion rates. NSFAS offers significant support in the form of fees, accommodation and transport costs. In South African higher education, student activism is a complex problem that extends beyond budgetary capacity of sponsoring agencies. While the general population in South Africa has witnessed some improvement in reducing inequality and poverty (David, Guilbert, Hamaguchi, Higashi, Hino, Leibbrandt & Shifa, 2018), student poverty in higher education has not seen as much reduction. Students protested through the #FeesMustFall Movement in 2015 and 2016, calling for the elimination of what they perceived as exorbitant tuition costs. The students agitated for access to education for all underprivileged students, contesting financial exclusion from colleges, and raising many other larger societal issues including decolonising the curriculum in universities (Burchardt, 2023).

The student's demand for free higher education was successful, yet, battling poverty only addressed financial issues and not the root causes of poverty among students. Rall (2023) claims that some students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and Durban University of Technology (DUT) were waiting for NSFAS payments in order for them to register while others had offers that were still awaiting. While the students were still waiting for the completion of the NSFAS processes at the beginning of year 2023, student demonstrations disrupted this process. In addition, the major issues raised by NSFAS were extremely concerning to the Board of Directors of Universities South Africa (BDUSAF). Violent protests were directed towards several institutions in the sector that are affected by the new NSFAS allowance system, defunding, and capping of the costs of accommodation. Many academic programmes have been compelled to switch to online learning or abandon their scheduled in-person programmes to salvage the semester (Universities South Africa, USAF, 2023). This illustrates that self-funding is insufficient to end student poverty, therefore, examining and resolving the diverse manifestations of student poverty is essential to advancing the wellbeing of students. This study interrogates the nature of activism due to poverty that South African students face, and how this affects their social, academic, and psychological health, and proffers solutions for lowering it. The article uses the capability approach in a multifaceted and intersectional way to investigate this conundrum. Using this strategy, the article explores poverty from several perspectives while concentrating on the well-being of the individual.

### **Literature review and research problem**

South Africa's ongoing poverty problem mainly affects people of colour. Poverty is a result of the apartheid era that ended more than 20 years ago. In addition to having an impact on individuals, poverty has a multiplicity of socioeconomic effects, including a negative correlation with health (Barnes, 2021). Despite recent advancements in the continent's development, 534 million, or 48%, of the 1.1 billion multidimensionally poor people worldwide (out of 6.1 billion total population) reside in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023). It is anticipated that until at least 2030, a greater proportion of people in sub-Saharan Africa will still be living in extreme poverty (UNDP, 2023). In 2015, the #FeesMustFall Movement and the South African higher education system demanded free higher education in response to the actual struggles that impoverished students face. With a social assistance programme and redistributive fiscal policy that helped caregivers, people with disabilities, and retirees, South Africa made significant progress in reducing poverty after apartheid, (Francis & Webster, 2019). However, the most recent statistics show that poverty has begun to rise again in South Africa since 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2017). With the daily poverty line at 1.90 US dollars, 18.2 million people in South Africa are estimated to be living in extreme poverty as of 2023 in comparison to 2022. In 2023, there were 162,859 more people forced into poverty. Furthermore, it was anticipated that the headcount would rise in the coming years. More than 19.1 million South Africans are likely to survive on little more than 1.90 USD per day by 2030 (Statista, 2023).

KwaZulu-Natal University, Durban University of Technology, and Mangosuthu University of Technology are not the only institutions where there is extreme student poverty. The lack of financial resources, family support, the academic divide between high school and college, and poverty are all factors contributing to student poverty. These elements could cause students to drop out of their universities. For instance, when the NSFAS rejects the students, which is apparently the primary source of the students' funding for their studies, then they become stranded and withdraw from universities. According to Breier (2010), while some students receive financing from the NSFAS, it is often insufficient to meet all their demands due to complex and diverse circumstances. As a result, the poverty of students continues to be a barrier to their obtaining a tertiary qualification.

Few studies have been conducted using a multidimensional and intersectional approach to record student poverty in higher education, despite extensive research conducted nationally and

globally (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021; Liu, Peng & Luo, 2020; Mbirigenda, 2021; Letseka & Breier, 2008; Ruswa & Gore, 2022). Due to obstacles including restricted access to educational resources, poverty has a substantive negative influence on students' education, resulting in poorer academic performance and higher dropout rates. Studies indicate that parents' socioeconomic status has a significant impact on their children's educational outcomes, and that poverty impedes academic success (Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Ren, Wang & Huang, 2020). According to Statistics Canada (2022c), students enrolled in postsecondary institutions received stipends that fall short of the federal poverty limit. This shows that even in rich nations, poverty affects students. Student poverty in South African higher education institutions manifests in a lack of necessities, housing, educational resources, and mental health (Ruswa & Gore, 2022). Student poverty in this context refers to a person's inability to receive an education at par with that of their classmates, especially with the university students in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

KwaZulu-Natal University, Durban University of Technology, and Mangosuthu University of Technology enrol students who are mired in extreme student poverty. This is because some students come from families with low incomes or even socio-economic backgrounds which bar the access to education in universities (Langa, Ndelu, Edwin & Vilakazi, 2017). However, the general perception about inter-generational development is linked to the acquisition of education as a panacea to fight poverty. Section 29 of the South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996, outlines that "all citizens have the right to basic and further education" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, the lack of financial resources, family support, the academic divide between high school and college, and poverty are all factors contributing to student poverty. These elements could cause students to drop out of their universities. For instance, when the NSFAS, which appears to be the primary source of the students' funding for their studies, rejects the students, there is no recourse to alternative funders. According to Breier (2010), while some students receive financing from the NSFAS, it is often insufficient to meet all their demands. As a result, the poverty of students in these institutions continues to be a barrier to their obtaining a tertiary qualification.

### **The impact of poverty on the psychological, social, and academic well-being of students**

Poverty is detrimental to mental health when it is concentrated geographically, and this is

usually the case in rural communities. If poverty has a negative impact on a person's mental health, they may exhibit social disorders (Simon, Beder, & Manseau, 2018). Langa, et al., (2017) assert that the high fees and other related costs in higher education in South Africa provoke and instantiate decreasing opportunities for many South Africans. For example, students at "... the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and Durban University of Technology (DUT) held demonstrations calling for free accommodation for those affected by historical debt" (Ntombana, Gwala, & Sibanda, 2023). The cumulative effect of such issues might culminate in depression, students' poverty, and exert a negative impact on their mental health. Boni and Walker (2016) argue that the universities should serve both social justice and economic development, however, this is not the case at the three universities in this study. The students still drop out of these universities due to the shortage of fees, hence they remain poor. Emotional disturbance, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders could result from poverty, which subsequently causes poor mental health (Langa et al., 2017). The #FeesMustFall movement was widely supported but the terrain changed, especially when protests turned violent on most of the campuses.

According to Davidoff (1987, cited in Rikichi & Yakubu, 2021), there are several educational disadvantages linked to poverty, including negative attitudes about school, low academic skill levels, a lack of interest in formal instruction, and pessimistic parenting. In this sense, low parental and student motivation frequently generates academic ineptitude and subpar performance. Poverty is a pervasive problem that has multiple origins and impacts social, emotional, physical, and financial. Furthermore, poverty disrupts brain development and leads to disruptive behaviours in the classroom (Dike, 2017). Generally, human bodies release the hormone cortisol in response to stress (Jensen, 2012). Hence, student poverty might result in absenteeism from lectures, poor concentration during lectures, late submission of assignments. Cumulatively, this constellation of factors stirs a decline in academic performance. This is in line with Joseph (2017) who states that challenges emanating from student poverty may have unforeseen consequences for academic results.

### **Dimensions of Student Poverty**

The research conducted by Ruswa and Gore (2022) delves into the topic of student poverty, exposing the deprivation from fundamental necessities, educational opportunities, housing, involvement, and mental health. In addition, black students frequently experience food insecurity, showing up to lectures hungry and looking to their peers for solace and comfort

(Ruswa & Gore, 2022). The results also show that students lacked in several learning resources, including textbooks, the internet, technology, printing, and transportation. To assist students facing food poverty, the university's No Student Hungry campaign only helped a select few, excluding low-income Black students from the programme's benefits. The universities which embarked on this campaign were the University of Johannesburg and the University of Free State, which collaborated with non-government organisation "Stop Hunger Now" (eNews Channel Africa [eNCA], 2015). These institutions further encouraged and continue to spur the students to attend lectures.

Although several students lacked resources because of personal preferences or a lack of knowledge about budgeting, it is crucial to exercise caution when evaluating deprivations based on resources (Ruswa & Gore, 2022). In addition, a major cause of deprivation for low-income Black students is their living circumstances, which include uncomfortable living arrangements and insufficient prerequisites for university admission. These students frequently experience challenges and limitations with resources, noise, and unfair treatment by property owners. Consequently, university education can be quite challenging for them as finding housing on campus and creating ideal study environments become elusive ideals.

### **Methodology**

This study used desktop research methodology. Desktop research involves gathering data from secondary sources, either quantitatively or qualitatively, or both, without physically visiting the field (Jaleel & Prasad, 2018). Data from journal articles, case studies, novels, and gazetted documents are often the target materials. To address the study's research questions, an evaluation of the data was conducted to assess:

- Strategic ways to reduce poverty
- Reducing poverty through a capability approach

The humanising ethic, consideration for equitable chances, and engagement in terms of what students can do in and through higher education are the rationale behind the proposal of the Human Capability Theory in this study. To define key competencies for higher education, a capability frame is combined with considerations of decoloniality and epistemic justice (Walker, 2020). Sen (1999)'s work, in seminal books like *Development as Freedom and Inequality Re-examined*, is the source of human capacity theory. Sen, (1999); Nussbaum, (2000); Robeyns, (2000) further expanded the capacity approach, which is summed up as

follows: "When asking normative questions, we should ask what people can do and what lives they can lead." However, Robeyns' (2017) assertion is the most current extension of this capability approach. The author is concerned with people's actual freedom to achieve academically and reaching their potential level of well-being when making decisions based on available options. Hence, it is a "comprehensive, multifaceted strategy" to capability (Robeyns, 2017:7).

Therefore, the capability approach emphasises on people's abilities and functioning, moving the emphasis from material means of subsistence like income to real opportunities for well-being. Sen (1999:75) defines functioning's as the different things an individual is successful at doing or being, like being healthy, engaging in society, and so on. On the other hand, capabilities are the substantive freedoms an individual must accomplish these constructs, like being able to engage in society. Robeyns (2017) further explains that the capacity approach, as opposed to emphasising people's resources alone, addresses the different ways in which human lives are impoverished and highlights people's potential. Its focus is on an individual's potential, regardless of whether they choose to use it or not (Hicks, 2012).

The capacity approach places more emphasis on a person's abilities and qualities than on their possessions or emotions. Sen (2009:253) contends that when analysing well-being, we should turn attention away from material possessions like cash but focus on the real opportunities that exist or are available for everyone that is, their functioning and capabilities. Sen's work is expounded upon by Nussbaum who identifies two types of capabilities. According to Nussbaum (2011a:20), these two are "integrated capabilities and internal capabilities." According to Nussbaum, capability includes both an individual's innate qualities as well as the possibilities and freedoms made available by a person's unique combination of social, political, and economic circumstances. An individual's internal capabilities include their emotional and intellectual capacity as well as their level of fitness and health. A person's combined capabilities are all the options and chances they have in their political, social, and economic circumstances.

The distinction is crucial because a society may offer chances for students to improve their own skills but not allow them to use those skills to operate. The human development paradigm incorporates the capability approach, which promotes equity, participation, sustainability, and productivity (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). These principles consider the implications for human growth on an economic, environmental, political, and social level. A fundamental element of the human development approach to education is that quality of life is the central concern, in

direct contrast to a human capital concern with economic growth as development (Walker, 2011). In the human development model, success is redefined as the freedoms each individual needs to pursue a meaningful existence, including but not limited to financial resources (Walker, 2012). This contrasts with the human capital model, which counts "skills" as commodities as the "main criteria of human success" (Sen, 2009:233).

### **Student Entrepreneurship in Reducing Student Poverty**

According to research, one of the best strategies to end global poverty may be to encourage entrepreneurship in low-income nations (Bay, 2021). Students on campuses and in-residence halls might use this strategy to lessen poverty. For instance, they could order packets of chips and lollipops and sell them to their peers in a bid to fight poverty. Therefore, this article recommends that the students who are experiencing poverty may be given opportunity to open a tuckshop within the university premises where they can sell snacks, and other food stuffs. The profit generated might be used to cater for their well-being. This tactic builds on the Capability Approach, which privileges the potential of individuals. Entrepreneurship "captures a spirit of individuality capable of exploiting market conditions for the benefit of both entrepreneur and consumer" (Dyal-Chand & Rowan, 2014:841). This illustrates how entrepreneurship embodies a spirit of originality that could benefit both businesses and consumers by taking advantage of market conditions.

Broadening entrepreneurial choices, acquiring more knowledge and skills, creating socioeconomic institutions, enhancing lifelong learning, fostering positive views of women's entrepreneurship, and creating government policies are all necessary to increase entrepreneurship capabilities and end poverty (Vis, 2012). The ability to recognise and seize business opportunities, as well as technological aspects, strategies, and tactics, as well as the capacity to integrate and manage within organisations, are all considered components of entrepreneurial capability (EC) as recommended by Somwethee, Aujirapongpan & Ru-Zhuc, (2023).

### **Conclusion**

This study interrogated the types of poverty that South African university students face, how it affects their social, academic, and psychological health, and provided solutions for lowering it. It was established that by developing students' skills and striking a balance between poverty and mental health, universities may successfully combat multidimensional poverty. Moreover,



one strategy that students could use to combat poverty is entrepreneurship. The capability approach was used to understand poverty from multiple angles and intersections. By adopting this method, the study purposefully concentrates on the actions and attributes of students in addressing poverty. From this study, we recommend that students should consider their potential for reducing poverty through entrepreneurship. They might launch alternative ventures on campus or within the university premises to further their own development. The universities in KZN should also consider the Stop Hunger Now programmes in support of their students who are experiencing poverty. We also recommend for further studies on this current and under-explored topic.

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