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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE 2015 STUDENT MOBILIZATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA. CONTESTING POST-APARTHEID HIGHER EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT:** In October 2015, a student protest at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), a historically white university (HWU), arising in opposition to the decision taken by the University Council to increase tuition fees, spurred a massive wave of mobilizations across the country. The protests drew national and international media attention to what became the #FeesMustFall movement, named after the most popular twitter hashtag adopted by the protesters. Why did a local mobilization at WITS in 2015 trigger a national wave of student protests? After ten days of protests, the South African President intervened directly to calm down the situation by announcing a 0% increase in tuition fees for 2016. To all appearances, ten days of protests allowed South African students to win their battle over the hike in tuition fees. How and why did they obtain this concession? To answer the questions above, I have combined various qualitative methods of analysis. I carried out several in-depth interviews with relevant actors involved in the issue; I analysed movement documents elaborated by the students in the year of the protest (2015) as well as the main policy documents on higher education in post-apartheid South Africa (1994-2016) released by the government.

**KEYWORDS:** (at least five keywords separated by comma) Black Students, Neoliberal University, Post-apartheid South Africa, Student Protests, Tuition Fees, #FeesMustFall.

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## 1. Introduction

Student protests have been a relatively frequent phenomenon in post-apartheid South Africa (Cele et al. 2016). In particular, student unrest over financial exclusion (i.e. tuition and registration fees, accommodation, transport, and food issues) has been a recurrent experience within the campuses of the ‘historically black universities’ (HBU) since 1994. Most of the black students that come from a working-class background and have accessed the higher education (HE) system over the past twenty years have been unable to afford the full cost of a university education (Hodes 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Yet in 2015 a student protest at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), a historically white university (HWU), arising in opposition to the decision taken by the University Council to increase tuition fees, spurred a massive wave of mobilizations across the country. The protests drew national and international media attention to what became the #Fees-MustFall (#FMF) movement, named after the most popular twitter hashtag adopted by the protesters (Booyesen 2016). Why did a local mobilization at WITS in 2015 trigger a national wave of student protests?

Furthermore, after ten days of massive and disruptive protests, which also brought about the full shutdown of most of the universities in the country, the South African President, Jacob Zuma, directly intervened to calm down the situation by announcing a 0% increase in tuition fees for 2016 (Nyamnjoh 2016). To all appearances, ten days of protests allowed South African students to win their battle over the hike in tuition fees. How and why did they win? In looking at the political trajectory of the 2015 student mobilizations and of their relative success, I consider and explore below the peculiarities of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa.

The article comprises six sections in addition to this introduction. In ‘Student mobilizations in young democratic contexts’ (section 2), I present a short literature review of the relevant sociological works upon which I have based the analysis of the South Afri-

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<sup>1</sup> The apartheid regime heavily shaped South African higher education by creating a university system based on race divisions. The regime established three types of university. There was a majority of (poor and under-funded) universities only accessible to black people (historically black universities, such as the University of Fort Hare); a few richly funded only for white people (‘historically white universities’, HWU, such as the University of Cape Town or WITS); and one each for coloured people (the University of the Western Cape) and for Indian people (the University of Durban-Westville). Although after the end of apartheid the ANC government sought actively to overcome these divisions, South African higher education is still economically and racially differentiated despite a series of mergers in the early 2000s. All the actors I interviewed confirmed this situation. According to Prof. Noor (WITS), today there are still ‘three tiers of universities: 1) top tier, Afrikaans and English-speaking universities [HWU]; 2) the bush universities [HBU] established by the apartheid regime; 3) middle-level universities.’

can student mobilizations. In 'Research questions and methodology', I reformulate the research questions of my study and give a short overview of the methods. The section on 'The higher education sector in the broader political and economic context of post-apartheid South Africa' provides a historical overview of post-apartheid South Africa by connecting HE with the broader political and economic context of the country to show how specific persistent features of this context represented one of the sources of student discontent in 2015. In 'The nationalization of the WITS mobilization in 2015', I respond to the first research question of the article by accounting for the political trajectory of the 2015 student mobilizations. 'Winning the zero-tuition fee increase for 2016' responds to the second question by making sense of the outcomes. Finally, in 'Concluding remarks', I summarize the main findings of this study by showing the empirical and theoretical gaps I have filled.

## **2. Student mobilizations in young democratic contexts**

An increasing number of scholars contend that mobilizations occurring in relatively new democratic regimes cannot be explained and assessed with the theories elaborated for the mobilizations in the established democracies of the global North (Cini et al. 2017; Fadaee 2016; Ness 2016; Paret et al. 2018; von Holdt and Naidoo 2019). In other words, the type of socio-political context in which the protest takes place is crucial to the understanding and assessment of the protest's effectiveness (Bosi et al. 2016). In short, not all contexts matter in the same way. Kapstein and Converse (2008, 4) have, for instance, demonstrated that 'young democracies are likely to be characterized by institutional weaknesses, including ineffectual political parties and an absence of effective checks and balances on the chief executive'. Considering such weaknesses, organized or more vocal groups at the social level may somehow play a supplementary political role.

These findings seem to especially hold for cases involving students as an organized actor. In this respect, Altbach (1992) argues that a student protest occurring in a 'young democracy' is likely to have a greater political impact than a protest in a relatively consolidated democracy. While in established democracies 'students do not see themselves nor are they seen by society as being legitimate political actors [...]', in new democracies students have often played an important part in liberation movements. 'Thus, historically, the student movement has established a degree of political legitimacy that allows it to 'speak truth to power' with considerable authority' (Altbach 1992, 142). Therefore, in contrast to consolidated democracies, where student activism is

seen by most people to be an illegitimate intrusion into politics, students in young democracies are expected to participate directly in politics and activism is regarded as a legitimate part of the political system.

As a result, students in young democracies are often seen as spokespersons for a broader population. In a sense, they have authority beyond their relatively small numbers and those in power often take student demonstrations and grievances seriously for this reason. In many cases, seemingly small student agitations have been effective in quickly mobilizing larger social movements or have had a surprising impact on the authorities. As it has been noted, students mobilizing in young democracies act as the 'conscience' of their societies (see again Altbach 1992).

In such contexts, students are thus considered a key societal actor and/or constituency, whose capacity to be politically effective seems relatively significant (Luescher 2015). A low consideration of their concerns may bring about a decline in the regime's legitimacy and/or in the government's credibility (Altbach 1992). Widespread student dissatisfaction may soon grow into a serious political issue, and this may induce the government to offer a prompt and positive response to the protesters' demands.

In South Africa, students played an important role in the liberation movement and have thus become an important constituency for the post-apartheid government (Nyamnjoh 2016), led by Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) since 1994. More notably, the ANC leadership has always perceived black students as 'children' of its revolution, in terms of both political and generational linkages (Booyesen 2016). The massive and disruptive mobilizations of 2015 may have produced a breach in this linkage and in its narrative, so much so that it impelled the government to directly intervene in favour of the students to prevent a decline in public support (see also Cini forthcoming).

What is more, the type of policy field in which students mobilize also affects their capacity to be politically effective. Altbach and Klemenčič (2014) argue that student protests are expected to achieve greater success when dealing with educational issues (such as student funding, academic curricula, university governance) rather than national political issues. Even though students may be politically powerful when attending to educational matters in the educational arena, they become weaker when they take on broader political issues in the general arena, as they cannot rely upon powerful and reliable allies. Societal politics—Altbach and Klemenčič clarify—is generally about political power vested in economic and military resources, about the ability to build alliances and forge compromises. While energetic and driven, if students enter the political arena they may become only a marginal voice—since they seldom possess the sub-

stantial and procedural knowledge, experience, and networks required for the larger political stage.

The (partial) success of the 2015 student protests in South Africa seems to be well explained by such an interpretation. Students were relatively successful when opposing the hike in tuition fees for 2016, but then failed to scale up to the national arena with a unitary voice to pursue greater goals (i.e. a radical program of redistributive policies) due to the presence of stronger actors, namely, national political parties (especially the ANC), which hijacked the pursuit of such goals (Booyesen 2016). More notably, the return of the influence of party politics over the student movement after the peak of protests (October 2015) played a big role in the movement's ideological factionalism, which prevented the students from persevering with a unitary mobilization and from building a nationwide subject in the broader political arena (see von Holdt and Naidoo 2019 for a similar argument).

### **3. Research questions and methodology**

Why did a student protest in reaction to a hike in tuition fees at WITS spur a national wave of mobilizations in 2015? How did these students successfully oppose such a hike? The methodology that I adopted to identify the causal mechanism underlying the political trajectory and success of the South African students' protest campaign of 2015 is 'process tracing' (Bennett and George 2001; Bennet 2004). Process tracing is a research procedure 'designed to identify processes linking a set of initial conditions to a particular outcome' (Vennesson 2008, 224); or seeking the 'processes connecting movement actions to observed outcomes' (Bosi et al. 2016, 24).

Following this approach, I sought to identify those processes which, related to traits of the protest and to South African higher education policy, connect the former (i.e. protests, 'movement actions') to the latter (i.e. 'observed outcomes'). More specifically, I identified, on the one hand, the factors and processes which led to the 'nationalization' of the WITS protest; and, on the other, the conditions and dynamics of the mobilization which favoured the movement impact ('zero fee increase for 2016'). In doing so, and unlike some recent work in social movement research (see, for instance, Stefanovski 2016), I employed a non-positivist approach. Rather than establishing an objective causal relation between independent and dependent variables narrowly defined, I pinpointed those processes linking various conditions to the observed outcomes ('the

nationalization of the protest', the 'zero tuition fees'), based on the perceptions of the actors involved<sup>2</sup>.

As for data collection, I triangulated by combining two qualitative methods, in-depth interviews and document analysis. I carried out 30 in-depth interviews (Blee and Taylor 2002) with various actors involved in the issues at stake, namely, student leaders and activists, policy experts, and university leaders (13 of them are explicitly quoted in the article). More specifically, in interviewing the student activists and leaders, I was interested in knowing the political and cultural context affecting the mobilizations as well as the students' goals and strategies. In interviewing the policy experts, I was interested in retracing the origin, history, and peculiarities of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. Finally, in interviewing the university leaders, I was interested in collecting information about their reaction to the student mobilizations of which they were the target. As for the documentary evidence, I analysed the main documents produced by the student activists during the period of protest and the policy documents and secondary literature on post-apartheid higher education in South Africa.

#### **4. The higher education sector in the broader political and economic context of post-apartheid South Africa**

South Africa represents a 'young' democracy (Haynes 2001; Kapstein and Converse 2008). After a long period of social and political struggles, the apartheid regime was brought down by the strength of unions and by the movements on the ground, in conjunction with the ANC led by Nelson Mandela. The political elections of 1994 marked officially the end of apartheid. The ANC achieved a massive success: it obtained over 60% of the vote in an election which boasted a remarkable turnout of 86% (Johnson and Schlemmer 1996). In preparation for the 1994 elections, the ANC formed a political coalition, the so-called Tripartite Alliance (TA), with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The TA has governed South Africa from 1994 to the present day. Despite its rhetorical commitment to social

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<sup>2</sup> Aware of the limitations of such a 'constructivist' approach to process tracing, I do not claim to have identified the full and exhaustive set of conditions and processes explaining the observed outcomes. In this respect, a full-fledged process tracing methodology would require engaging with the problem of equifinality. My 'interpretative' approach, based on actors' perceptions, does not allow me to fully tackle such a problem. Spotting the correct causal mechanism is particularly needed for the second research question, looking at the causes of the observed outcome. To partially solve this issue, I examine contrasting cases in the final part of the empirical section devoted to this question.

justice and redistribution, the TA (and especially the ANC faction) has 'aimed at achieving sustainable long-term economic growth, based on fiscal and monetary discipline as well as the reduction of government debt' (Maree 1998, 49). Closely advised by the IMF, the ANC thus embraced the neoliberal prescriptions of wage restraint for workers, easing of labour regulations, strict fiscal targets, and widespread privatization of state assets<sup>3</sup>.

In other words, the post-apartheid democracy was founded on the implicit compromise between political inclusion and economic moderation: the acceptance of the former was carried out by paying the cost of the latter (von Holdt and Naidoo 2019). The white economic 'elites gained constitutional protection of the status quo distribution of wealth in return for accepting electoral and other forms of democratic competition as the terrain on which they would henceforth pursue their interests' (Wood 2000, 6). This approach to the economy and to politics worsened the living conditions of the South African population, especially those of the poorest social groups, such as the workers, unemployed, public employees, and students. More specifically, these policies caused a general increase in levels of unemployment, the stagnation of real wages, and the rise of socio-economic inequality (Alexander 2013; von Holdt 2014). What is more, the ANC government privatised important industries, including the Kumba Iron Ore mine, one of South Africa's most profitable businesses, now owned by Anglo American, the multinational mining company with headquarters in Johannesburg and London.

The policy intervention in the sector of higher education has been characterized by the same political trajectory. The ANC's new ruling elite expected higher education (and the related graduate population) to become the key economic engine of a new South African society based on knowledge production (Johnson and Schlemmer 1996). Furthermore, the initial design of the ANC government was to democratize higher education by making it more universally accessible, especially for the black population<sup>4</sup>. In the terminology of the post-apartheid government, this approach was defined as a philosophy of cooperative governance, ensuring the extension of student representation

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<sup>3</sup> This capitulation was partially contested within the ANC itself. As von Holdt and Naidoo (2019, 172) have recently noted: 'In spite of fierce contestation from within the party and the broader alliance, in 1996, the ANC government adopted a neoliberal macro-economic policy framework that would constrain the possibility for change.'

<sup>4</sup> While initially the ANC made a commitment to free education (based on the 1955 Freedom Charter statement and on more recent policy proposals in the 1990s), once in office it chose to water down this promise by adopting a neoliberal macro-economic policy and by fulfilling various fiscal constraints. This being said, higher education in South Africa has never been free. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers who helped me clarify this point.

across all institutions in university governing bodies and in their committee structures, as well as at systemic level, in the higher education bodies<sup>5</sup> (Klemenčič et al. 2016).

However, under the fiscal constraints of the reduction of public debt, the South African government rapidly readdressed its higher education policy by opening the way to the privatization of higher education costs. The reduction of public funding, along with the increase in student loans and tuition fees, were the main political measures that the ANC designed and implemented in the second half of the 2000s to handle the imminent crisis of neoliberal capitalism and its political repercussions on the field of higher education. As a result, a significant share of black students could no longer afford the costs of higher education and of university life.

For several South African policy observers (Booyesen 2016; Cloete et al. 2015; Nyamnjoh 2016), this situation was simply the result of the contradictory and, to a certain extent, paradoxical policy orientation that the ANC government led by Mandela had adopted in the matter of higher education since 1994. Although the ANC aimed to promote student expansion and participation (White Paper 1997), it provided insufficient funding to pursue this goal. Cele et al. (2016) called it the 'paradox of post-apartheid higher education' in South Africa. The ANC government pursued simultaneously two very contradictory goals:

*(1) a massive expansion of higher education for black students, which in effect meant creating opportunities of access to higher education for historically disadvantaged students who came mostly from working class and poor backgrounds; and (2) a self-imposed commitment to fiscal austerity reflected in the rejection of free education, the continuation of cost-sharing, and only limited provision of financial aid, which required that students, including the working class and poor, were expected to pay a significant share of the costs of study' (Cele et al. 2016, 182).*

Significantly, in terms of gross enrolment rates (GER), the expansion of South African higher education reached the level of mass education systems (between 15% and 50% in the typology developed by Trow 2006) in the early 2000s, when 18% of the 18-24 age cohort was enrolled (Klemenčič et al. 2016). Yet 'state funding for higher education

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<sup>5</sup> The South African Higher Education Act of 1997 prescribed the establishment of a student representation in every public higher education institution (the 'student representative council', SRC), as well as a student representation in major decision-making structures at that level. Student participation in university governing bodies is statutorily granted in legislation. Co-decision, whereby student representatives have full voting rights on all or some issues in governing bodies, is also widespread (Luescher and Klemencic 2016; Klemencic et al. 2016).



as a component of total university income decreased from 49 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2012. [...] During this time, the contribution of student fees to total university income increased from 24 percent to 31 percent' (Hodes 2016, 140). As a result, the paradox was most severely experienced by poor students whose constrained ability to pay a portion of their cost of study could not be mitigated by institutional resources or funds from family and relatives. This situation generated tensions and discontent within South African universities (mostly in the HBUs), often transformed into sites of student protest and contestation.

Although not agreeing on all the reasons accompanying such a paradox, most of the South African higher education experts tended to see the conjunction of two factors underlying the above contradictory position. First, the action of the post-apartheid government was driven by a relatively conciliatory attitude towards the previous regime and its power structures (Booyesen 2016). Rather than truly questioning the previous system of higher education, the ANC government preferred to encourage a policy of inclusion of the black population in the existing HE institutions (Nyamnjoh 2016). Professor Gillespie, Head of the Anthropology Department at WITS, was very clear on this point when she confided to me that Mandela's main strategy when he took office was 'to include black people in the existing institutions of the country without changing them. In the economy and higher education. The assimilation of black people into formally white institutions. Everywhere.' In the same vein, Suren Pillay, Professor of Sociology at the University of Western Cape (UWC), highlighted that 'the ANC largely left intact the universities and their power structures in two respects: a) the institutional forms of the universities; b) the issues of financing and funding (the poor universities remained poor...)'.

Secondly, according to most of the South African policy experts I interviewed there was also an international reason that played a role in this policy orientation, namely, the need for the new-born democracy to be recognized by the global superpowers, especially the United States, as a reliable political and economic actor. Young democracies necessitate wide international recognition to cement their political legitimacy and improve their economic performance (Kapstein and Converse 2008). In other words, they aim at stabilizing their internal institutional structures by also seeking international support. In this sense, the higher education policy could not constitute an exception, but had to follow the broader political-economic framework of the new global order, namely, neoliberalism. The ANC embraced this framework ever since 1994 (Klemenčič et al. 2016). As Prof. Noor noted in his interview:

*“It is worthwhile to remember ANC implemented its policy of higher education the same time when it started embracing neoliberalism in economy and public policies [...]. So, what happened was that students became seen less as young people educated for critical thought but seen as clients. [...] My main criticism of ‘transformation’ [the ANC’s policy of higher education] is that it was carried out within the neoliberal framework, seeing students as clients and workers exploited by outsourcing. Plus, the government reduced the investment in higher education, always following this neoliberal principle”.*

The framework above heavily informed the guiding principles of the policy documents on higher education adopted by the ANC government. Among these principles was the belief that higher education should be the main policy area to promote social mobility and economic growth in post-apartheid South Africa (Cele et al. 2016). Such a principle appeared to be central in the goals of the main policy document released by the ANC government, entitled ‘Framework for Transformation’ (1996), which explicitly conceived of higher education as the privileged means to promote upward mobility and economic development. As one reads in the White Paper on Higher Education, which laid the foundation of the ‘transformation project’ (1997, 3): ‘Higher education equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment.’ As for the goal of economic development, ‘higher education must provide education and training to develop the skills and innovations necessary for national development and successful participation in the global economy’ (1997, 6).

By and large, higher education was a key policy field for the ANC government, which in turn considered students as a central stakeholder (Klemenčič et al. 2016). Additionally, university students, especially the black component, represented a significant constituency for the ANC (Luescher 2016). They were indeed believed to incarnate the ‘children of the ANC’s own revolution’ (Booyesen 2016, 42), namely, the first generation of black students massively and freely accessing South African universities regardless of the previous racial divisions. As Prof. Gillespie effectively pointed out, ‘these young people are precisely the ANC successful stories’.

Education was central also in the life of most of the South African people. Klemenčič et al. (2016) argue that the idea of higher education as a vector of economic advancement and of social status was relatively widespread among the black South Africans. For most of them, to get a university degree was considered the best way to escape misery and become part of the country’s elite. In short, higher education had a very powerful material and symbolic value for most South Africans (Nyamnjoh 2016). All the

policy experts I interviewed confirmed this interpretation. For instance, Prof. Gillespie claimed,

*Blacks considered higher education an important vector for social mobility. It is considered very important. And objectively people who attend universities are more likely to be employed, to get a job. And remember! To get a job is not only for that individual, but for his/her entire family. And this is what makes it so critical. This is a crucial point of the South African context. A member of a household of a black township, who gets to university and then gets a job, does not only provide an income to himself but to all his family.*

Similarly, Prof. Noor remarked on this point,

*[...] most of the young black students leave the townships to attend the suburban schools. This is why their parents believe in the importance of education. The further level of education you attend, the more it becomes important. Sometimes the community from which the kid comes provides a financial support to the family of the kid to bear the costs of higher education. Because higher education is considered the main way to get a good job. Therefore, the way in which education is seen is not about knowledge but economic advancement.*

In other words, higher education and its students have been considered central throughout the post-apartheid period, for both the new ruling elite and the broader South African society.

## **5. The nationalization of the WITS mobilization in 2015<sup>6</sup>**

As noted above, this article aims to provide an answer to the question of why a 2015 student protest to a hike in tuition fees at WITS university ultimately spurred a national wave of mobilizations. Student protests have been numerous in post-apartheid South Africa, especially in the HBUs, where the main problems experienced by the black student population were loans and fees, accommodation, and food costs. Rarely did these protests reach the South African public and gain media attention, however (Luescher

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<sup>6</sup> To simplify the presentation of the main findings of this study, I have divided both empirical sections of the article (this section and the next one) into subsections. Each subsection features a specific aspect of the processes under investigation that I aim to trace.

2016). Although facing an apparently common case of fees hike, there were several reasons, both structural and conjunctural, which made this issue so explosive in the autumn of 2015 and contributed to triggering the nationalization of the protest. As regards the structural reasons, one ought to consider the specific position of WITS within the hierarchy of universities in South Africa as well as the peculiar composition of its student body. As for the conjunctural reason, the protest at WITS in October 2015 was not the first and the only student mobilization of the year. To a certain extent, the #FeesMustFall mobilisation represented the 'natural' continuation of a prior wave of protests, triggered in March 2015 at the University of Cape Town and known under the banner of #RhodesMustFall. As illustrated in the remainder of the article, such structural and conjunctural features helped explain the process of 'nationalization' of the #FeesMustFall mobilization and its successful impact.

#### *The specificities of WITS*

As mentioned previously, the apartheid regime heavily shaped South African higher education by creating a socially and racially stratified university system. Specifically, three types of university, differentiated along racial lines, were created. The most powerful universities in terms of political and institutional linkages and the richest ones in terms of funding were those few enrolling the white population, the so-called historical white universities (HWUs). WITS was part of this group, in which the offspring of the white elite were educated to become the future ruling class of the country. With some changes, such divisions have persisted throughout the post-apartheid era. In this respect, the University of the Witwatersrand still retains a dominant position in the current hierarchy of South African universities, in terms of both public/political connections and economic/financial resources. What is more, WITS students constitute and are still deemed to constitute the incipient elite of the country. The main difference in the apartheid era is that blacks have gradually become the majority of the student population (Booyesen 2016).

As highlighted by the international literature (Altbach 1992), the political and economic centrality of a university and of its students within the sector of HE and, more broadly, across society explains why and how episodes of mobilization, which emerge in such institutions, gain a great deal of attention and concern. According to the HE policy experts I interviewed, student mobilizations at WITS (also at UCT) drew a lot of media coverage and political interest for two specific reasons. First, as a significant share of WITS students come from urban and middle-class backgrounds, they enjoyed privileged access to media and to powerful and/or knowledgeable people through their so-

cial and political networks. Second, and strictly related to this, such mobilizations were perceived as a kind of rebellion of the country's future elite, whose discontent needed to be taken into serious consideration<sup>7</sup>. In other words, these particular features of WITS in the system of South African universities played a relevant role in the high media coverage that the #FeesMustFall mobilization gained when it erupted in October 2015 and eventually made its nationalization possible.

However, this was not the full story. If, in 2015, South African students massively rose up against the government, this occurred also due to the exacerbation of other long-lasting problems. In that year, various cultural problems related to higher education that the ANC had failed to tackle in the previous two decades became unbearable. Besides the worsening of social and economic inequalities (see, for instance, the deepening of economic inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient since the end of apartheid), the main obstacle to a truly transformed higher education remained the institutional immutability of South African universities, especially of the HWUs, embedded in the pre-existing colonial and Eurocentric institutional cultures. In short, South African universities exemplified the failure of transformation and the legacy of institutional racism (Hodes 2016).

#### *The #RhodesMustFall: from UCT to WITS*

This came forcefully to light in March 2015, when the colonialist character of South African higher education became the target of a student mobilization at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The mobilization, called to bring down the statue of Cecil Rhodes, the British settler epitomizing the institutional racism still present in higher education, pointed at 'decolonizing the colonial structure, the curriculum and everything it st[ood] for' (Nyamnjoh 2016, 146). Over the duration of the protest, the dominance of the ANC youth structures was questioned, 'as many students turned to Black Consciousness,

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<sup>7</sup> To confirm this, even though mainly based on their perceptions and networks, all the interviewees pointed out how the role of black students with a middle-class background was central in the 2015 mobilizations taking place in the various HWUs. This feature made such mobilizations worthy of attention. By contrast, this was not the case when protests occurred in the HBUs or, even worse, in the townships. The reasons for such media silence are effectively expressed by Prof. Gillespie: 'for years and years protests have been in the townships. And the media never covered these protests. There is a sort of an implicit deal in the South African broadcast corporations. The argument is that if you show violence in the townships you multiply this violence in the townships. Still now these protests are there. You only come to know them in the transport reports (where you find that roads are blocked). There are so different public spheres in this country. A result of the apartheid.'

Pan-Africanism, and Black thought more generally in their grappling with the problems identified with the ANC' (von Holdt and Naidoo 2019, 178<sup>8</sup>).

In this sense, the protest at UCT, also known as #RhodesMustFall (#RMF), represented the first episode of contestation of Mandela's political legacy, blamed for having failed to truly clear away the colonial structures of South African universities, where an increasing number of black students (on average between 70% and 80% in the HWUs, see Cele et al. 2016) were now forced to experience a 'white' institution with its own norms, rules, and practices. The 'university itself remained a very white, middle-class, Eurocentric institution, even as the demographics of the student body changed quite dramatically' (Everatt 2016, 133).

All the black students I interviewed confided to me to have experienced a feeling of alienation when they first entered the academic and social life of the HWUs. For instance, Thabang, a student activist of #RMF at UCT, told me: 'When I came first to this institution, I could not find myself. White culture permeated all the aspects of the life at UCT. The feeling in the classroom was horrible. Sitting in a group with white people and I say something. Then the white person says the same thing and the professor says: hey good idea!' Similarly, Camalita, a student activist at Rhodes University in 2015, confessed: 'I felt uncomfortable joining white universities. It was my first time to be in a place with mostly white people. As in a foreign cultural place.' She continued:

*"Before I only went to black schools. I felt also the issue of class. I come from a working-class family. So, I was not familiar to be with white middle-class students. The kind of speaking that white students adopt during lectures is very distant from my cultural background. The way you speak to someone older than you is very respectful. You do not call professors by the first name. And you do not present your views in a sharp way like white students do. They question all the time the knowledge of professors. Especially white male students".*

Brian, one of the student leaders of the #RMF movement at UCT, expressed this feeling even more clearly: 'I felt a bit of alienation from the institution and students, as 80% at Engineering are whites. Competition is very hard. I even stopped attending classes because I felt uncomfortable there, since it is a place designed for somebody else'.

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<sup>8</sup> Not only students affiliated to black consciousness, but also to black radical feminism and queer movements. As noted again by von Holdt and Naidoo (2019, 178), 'students identifying as feminist and queer critiqued student organizations for reproducing masculinist, sexist, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, and other exclusionary and prejudicial forms of engagement and organization.'

However, in 2015, in Prof. Pillay's interpretation, many black 'students became to feel that they were not alone in experiencing the racism of these institutions. As their number grew, they started to feel the possibility of a collective resistance to these institutional forms and cultures of the elitist universities.' Personally confirming this process, Thabang highlighted that 'it was great when we [black students] realized that the individual problems we were experiencing were shared from all. Then we started to realize that the things could be modified together'. In this sense, it was not a coincidence—for Prof. Gillespie—that these protests first took place 'at UCT because it was the whitest institution in the whitest city'. The protesters 'destroyed the notion of reconciliation and those of non-racialism and negotiated settlement [...]. So, the idea of decolonisation was precisely a critique to all these existing assets.'

Confirming this view, Brian remarked effectively the limits of the ANC's transformation programme:

*"Transformation did not defeat the apartheid. The HE system here is still the result of the legacy of our colonization. The government has only a technocratic approach to HE that is to produce and educate highly skilled blacks as engineers, lawyers, and so on to create a political black elite, depoliticized. Colonialism produced apartheid not the other way around. That is why we have university institutions which are embedded in colonized cultural practices and norms. So, we cannot only return to the African project before the apartheid, because it was the result of colonization".*

Expressing a more nuanced critical view on the process of transformation, Natasha, a black student activist at WITS University in 2015, distinguished between a quantitative ('expansion of black student enrolments in the higher education sector') and a qualitative ('renewing the practices and institutions of higher education') character of the process by providing the example of her own personal story. In her words:

*"The reality is that I would have not been able to have a PhD 20 years ago. Like me, many others. Of course, transformation in this sense has worked. One important thing of 2015 was the critique of this conception of transformation. It is not only about to have a black chancellor, but also what we learn and how we learn. So, it was also an issue of transformation of the white institutional culture of historically white universities. Transforming also the way we teach".*

This new generation of black students, the first cohort which did not experience the apartheid regime (known as the 'born-free generation'), seemed to have lost trust in

the ANC leadership, seen as no longer on track to fulfil the liberation promises (Nyamnjoh 2016)<sup>9</sup>.

Most of the black student activists I interviewed confirmed this narrative. For instance, Ntsika, a student leader of the 2015 protests at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Bellville (CPUT Bellville), was very clear in depicting a negative ‘political turn’ in the ANC government’s higher education policy over the course of the last twenty years. For him, the government shifted from a conception based upon a system designed to deliver ‘free higher education for all’ to another one in which even the poorest students (and their families) were not granted financial support. In retracing the origin and the history of the ‘Transformation agenda’ designed by the ANC leadership, he highlighted in fact: ‘in ‘94 there was in the programme free qualitative education. But then they have forgotten over the course of these years. They did not implement it. The poor remained poor. So, the transformation agenda did not work well or at all. Not all the poor students have been able to access to the financial grants. The procedure to get it is even very complicated and bureaucratic.’

For some policy observers, ‘emancipation was not accompanied by rupture: business as usual appeared to be the order of the day’ (Everatt 2016, 133). In short, this generation ‘signalled its loss of patience, along with demands for immediate action’ (Booyesen 2016, 35). Leigh, a student activist at WITS during the 2015 mobilization, expressed very clearly this feeling in depicting the protesters as willing to destroy the ‘Mandela myth of the rainbow nation, the idea of a very placid, liberal view of non-racialism [...]!’

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<sup>9</sup> As most of the interviewees (both student activists and policy experts) highlighted, an event that played a big role in this feeling of disillusion towards the ANC government was identified in the ‘Marikana massacre’ in 2012. On that occasion, a strike by miners demanding better working conditions was violently repressed by the police forces, causing 34 deaths among the workers. Alexander (2013) depicted it as a turning point for the post-apartheid regime, an event which set in motion ‘sequences of occurrences that result in transformation’ (606) in several respects: party politics, trade unions, and movement politics. Various pillars of the post-apartheid regime emerged weakened out of this event. More notably, the ‘Marikana strikes inaugurated a series of ruptures in the movement landscape, throwing into question key industrial relations institutions, reducing the NUM, and weakening COSATU and the Congress constellation, producing a new labour federation and providing momentum for a small but robust left-wing political challenge to ANC domination in the form of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)’ (von Holdt and Naidoo 2019, 177). In short, Marikana established ‘the ANC’s separation from much of its voting base’ (Alexander 2013, 616). All the student activists I interviewed confirmed this interpretation. For Brian, for instance, ‘Marikana represented a sort of break of the illusion of the South African dream. From there people started to look for alternatives. Also, on campuses students started to organize in several critical groups, from pan-Africanists to black radical feminists, relatively independent from the extant political structures.’



*“But rainbow—she continued—is an illusion. The students in 2015 made precisely this; to show the illusion of that myth. Students brought the issue of decolonisation precisely to replace the connected (to rainbow nation) myth of transformation. You have still to deal with the issue of colonialism in our social institutions (such as universities) beyond the State, which left the institutions untouched”.*

The student protests that erupted at UCT in March 2015 spread throughout the other South African universities in the following months, creating groups of students, workers, and critical academics openly questioning aspects of the existing institutions and of their policies, ranging from the issues of language and curricula to those of outsourcing and tuition fees (Nyamnjoh 2016).

#### *The #FeesMustFall: from WITS to the rest of the country*

It was in this cultural and political climate, very critical towards the neoliberal and racist conception of HE (especially among the circles and groups of student activists and militants across the universities), that the Vice-Chancellor of WITS, Adam Habib, in implementing a decision taken by the University Council, announced in early October a 10.5% increase in tuition fees for 2016. The announcement triggered a strong reaction from the WITS Student Representative Council (SRC), which decided to shut down the university in firm opposition to the tuition fee increase. Although the initial protest was led by the WITS Students Representative Council dominated by ANC-aligned formations, it soon expanded beyond its origins. Indeed, it was immediately joined by those students, academics, and workers who, both in the previous years and in 2015, had been organizing and mobilizing in support of various outsourced workers, in a group called Workers Solidarity Committee<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> In 2001, WITS outsourced all support services at the University and retrenched over 600 employees in the process. This led to the formation of the WITS Workers Solidarity Committee, a committee which various students and academics had been involved in, aimed at campaigning for better treatment of workers by university management and outsourcing companies. As Prof. Gillespie noted: ‘It was group of workers supported by radical students and academics that was born in 2001 when the outsourcing issue came [...] to create a progressive students-workers alliance.’ More specifically, by May 2015, Habib, the WITS Vice-Chancellor, was publicly calling for a campaign involving civil society groups to lobby the State for more resources to end outsourcing. Partly in response, and given that outsourcing was continuing, and with the rising decolonising discourse emerging from #RhodesMustFall, the October 6 Movement was formed at WITS. More importantly, it also included academics and students from the University of Johannesburg (UJ) (see Satgar 2016).

More specifically, the Workers Solidarity Committee had scheduled to stage a protest in October 6 (for this reason it was called ‘the October 6 Movement’) to oppose the unfair dismissal of MJL Electrical workers early in the year, after months of not being paid. The protest was attended by many students and formed the prelude to the protests against the tuition fee increase. It also helped solidify the relationship between students and workers, an alliance that played a key role throughout the #Fees-Must-Fall mobilizations (Satgar 2016). Indeed, several workers supported students in their shutdown of the university by placing their bodies on the line and providing resources and numbers. More notably, the group behind the October 6 Movement operated to make the protests reach further than WITS (and UJ) by reaching out to organisations across universities. Also as a result of this effort, the protest rapidly escalated in terms of both scale and disruptiveness.

Soon after the WITS occupation, all the other universities were in fact shut down and occupied in solidarity with WITS students (and workers). The spread of university occupations and protests across the country thus officially gave rise to a national student movement whose breadth and radicalism had not been so significant since the era of the liberation movement (Cele et al. 2016). Although there were attempts by different party-political factions to control the movement, students were initially able to unite despite their differences and come together with workers in mass marches on the national government and in occupations and other forms of action at individual institutions. This massive mobilization produced a final agreement on no fee increases in 2016 and a commitment at some institutions (in addition to WITS) to work towards the end of outsourcing (von Holdt and Naidoo 2019).

## **6. Winning the zero-tuition fee increase for 2016<sup>11</sup>**

How and why did South African students gain the zero-increase tuition fee concession? Facing this wave of mobilizations, the ANC government led by Jacob Zuma intervened directly in the fee matter (which legally was under remit of the university councils) to halt the protests and thus prevent the involvement of other social actors, such as national trade unions and political parties in opposition (Booyesen 2016). Describing

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<sup>11</sup> In this section, I trace the process explaining how South African students obtained the zero-increase tuition fees for 2016. First, the government’s unprepared reaction to the rise of the October protests is presented. Then, the key role played by the South African public opinion in supporting such protests is illustrated. Finally, all these factors are discussed as being central in explaining the protests’ political success, also in contrast to explanations of similar movements to abolish or restrict fees in Europe.

these events, Dr. Luescher, the Research Director of the HE Unit at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of Cape Town, confided to me, 'Zuma panicked. He did not expect in such short time a so massive mobilization. [...] Under the pressure of these protests, he panicked. All the entire university campuses across the countries were shut down in those weeks. There were riots and a lot of disruption'. After less than two weeks of protests (between the second and third week of October), Zuma was thus forced to announce the zero increase of tuition fees for 2016. For Luescher, it was precisely the high level of 'disruption' which constituted 'the crucial element of student success. The government was afraid of it'. In short, the protests of October 2015 caught the South African government unprepared.

*A massive and disruptive mobilization*

One of the main protagonists of those weeks, Prof. Adam Habib, confirmed to me the interpretation above in his narration of the events by highlighting the crucial role played by the massive and disruptive protests ('the government got shaken up from the march in Parliament. I guess this was shocking for them') in conditioning the outcome. He provided me with a detailed account of the week in which students gained the 'zero increase' concession, as he was personally involved:

*"On Monday, the HE Minister met the students and proposed an increase of 6% (instead of 10%) of the fees. The students rejected it. The following day, they did the big demo in front of the Parliament. The same day in the afternoon I got a call from the President [Zuma] asking me what I would have recommended. I told him the zero percent, because students were not going to stop. I believed that at the point it was possible [...]. I really thought that it was possible. After the march on Parliament and its big size, I thought that something was changed. There was a move and the government will make this concession. So, the next Friday in the official meeting of all the parts (government, students and vice-chancellors) I was expected to speak first on the behalf of the vice-chancellors and I said that we supported the zero percent increase".*

Habib admitted that the protests played a crucial role in making him change his mind towards the increase of tuition fees, when he confided to me that the student 'movement forced to change our position'. He then added,

*"I still believe that it was the only option available at the time. When the social movement emerged, I believed, that the parameters were changed. Some people see*

*this thing as a contradiction. I do not! You respond to power. The first time you respond to the constraints of the institutional system, then when social struggles emerge, they open the space for new options and possibilities<sup>12</sup>”.*

In his interview, Rashad, a student activist at WITS in 2015, raised a similar point when he stressed, ‘a large part of that [the student success] was due to our disruption. The fact that the general shutdown would have blocked the graduation of students for the next year. [...] The pressure from society was so strong that the government was forced to do that concession. There were thousands of students besieging Union Building. The pressure made it’. As effectively put by Ntsika (CPUT) in his report of the ten days of protest in 2015: ‘We went to disrupt the airport. So, it could be a total block scaring for the government.’

In the same vein, Vuyo, a political activist and PhD candidate at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town at the time of the #FEM mobilizations, explicitly stressed the performative character of the ‘chaos’ generated by the student protests as a key factor capable of heavily conditioning President Zuma’s political orientation on the issue of student fees, scared by the disruptive escalation of the student action. For her, ‘the fear of chaos and disruption’ represented one of the main reasons prompting the direct intervention of the government. ‘Across countries there was chaos everywhere. All the universities were shut down. So, the government was fearing thinking that more it could happen. The fear of these massive protests. Government was going to lose the most on financial side, as students were damaging the infrastructure of several universities.’

#### The support of public opinion

Yet the disruptive and massive character of the protests was only half the story. They would not have been so effective if the students had not gained significant public support and, at the same time, had not been considered a central element of the ‘ANC’s successful liberation story’ (Nyamnjoh 2016). During the early period of the protests (October 2015), students in fact won massive public sympathy and support. ‘The combined pressure of protest and public opinion saw government blink and concede’

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<sup>12</sup> In this section, I trace the process explaining how South African students obtained the zero-increase tuition fees for 2016. First, the government’s unprepared reaction to the rise of the October protests is presented. Then, the key role played by the South African public opinion in supporting such protests is illustrated. Finally, all these factors are discussed as being central in explaining the protests’ political success, also in contrast to explanations of similar movements to abolish or restrict fees in Europe.

(Everatt 2016, 135). All the actors I interviewed confirmed this interpretation. For Prof. Pillay (UWC), even the mainstream media (newspapers and TV broadcasts) reported the protests 'in a very sympathetic way. [...] So, the public opinion supported them.' In his view, this support was decisive to persuade the government to announce the 'zero-increase' concession.

What is more, amassing positive attention from most of the South African people on such a contested issue (student fees) was a conscious strategy adopted by the student movement to exert greater political pressure on the government. This was the reason why the students took massively and disruptively to the streets of most South African cities during the 10 days of protests in October 2015. In the words of Ntsika (CPUT), 'we brought the protest outside the campuses, so the public could sympathize with us.'

The consideration that a supportive public opinion constituted a key political role in the pursuit of the 'zero increase tuition fees' for 2016 was indeed shared by most of the student activists I interviewed. Thabang (UCT) fully recognized it, when he remarked to me, 'we had a lot of sympathy from the public opinion. That is why the President called the student leaders to the Union Building to calm down the situation. That is why he proposed the zero increase. [...] The government was in a very weak position, so it could but capitulate.' However, this capitulation would not have been so rapid if the ANC government had not considered students, especially the blacks, as 'its children' and, therefore, as a key component of its constituency.

#### *A South African story*

The 2015 student protests were politically harmful for the government, as they revealed the end of the historical linkage between the ANC, along with its foundational myth, Nelson Mandela, and a segment of the South African population, the students, considered relevant for the country's future (see also Cini forthcoming). Echoing Altbach's views (1992) on the political proximity between the (new) ruling elite and university students in young democracies, several South African scholars closely observed the end of this relationship in 2015. It soon became known that 'much of the revolt originated from the children of the 1994 liberation, many of whom were specifically associated with the ANC's student structures. The ANC and its government had to [...] halt the political migration of its support base and contain anti-systemic action and the erosion of its hegemony' (Booyesen 2016, 24). This situation—Booyesen clarified—helped 'to get the ANC government to compromise on fee increases and student funding' (Booyesen 2016, 24). Confirming this interpretation, Prof. Gillespie (WITS) illustrated how the combination of these factors (i.e. student mobilization, public opinion support,

and the ANC's high consideration of students) played a key role in explaining the students' success:

*"There was a massive mobilization of young people which nobody expected. It was also about the support of the public opinion that the students got. These young people are precisely the ANC successful stories. This scared to death the ANC, because the ANC considered them their successful kids, not like the township people; these young people are a key ANC constituency. The ANC got very scared by the extension and orientation of the mobilization. It was shocking".*

Facing such a situation, and to prevent a further loss of public support especially from a significant (even symbolic) component of its electorate, such as the students, the ANC government felt forced to capitulate and offer the 'zero fee increase' concession to the protesters. Throughout the period of mobilization, the students became the spokespersons for a broader segment of the population. They succeeded in exhibiting authority beyond their small numbers by mobilizing larger societal sectors and therefore producing an impact on the government (Cini forthcoming).

Yet while students were relatively successful in opposing the hike in tuition fees for 2016, they failed to affect policies in the broader political arena, as the influence of party politics (especially of the ANC and the EFF) contributed to the ideological division within the student movement and therefore to its end. Significantly, the role of parties accelerated the split of the movement along two ideological positions, which reflected an existing cleavage. On the one hand, some students were satisfied with the outcome of zero-increase fees and argued for the return to classes (namely, the students close to the ANC youth organizations); on the other, there were those who aimed at pursuing the goal of free education and a more progressive agenda of public policies nationwide (the EFF). This split marked the end of the non-partisan and unitary period of the movement, which characterized the peak of protest in October 2015, by opening the way to the movement's radicalization and, in turn, to the institutional and political repression of 2016 (Holdt and Naidoo 2019). In this respect, the South African case confirms Altbach and Klemenčič's (2014) thesis on the variable impact of student movements depending on the policy issue for which they mobilize. Students are relatively powerful when mobilizing on educational issues but become weaker when they deal with broader political questions, as the influence of party politics heavily affects the outcomes.

### *Alternative explanations*

My explanation for the impact of the #FMF student movement can be usefully contrasted with international cases where other factors produced a similar impact or, on the contrary, some absent factors led to failure. The case of Germany, where tuition fees have recently been abolished in several federal states, provides an illuminating counterpoint to my explanation. In Germany tuition fees were abolished within a timeframe of 7 years during the early 2000s in all the 7 federal states in which they had been implemented. Unlike the South African case of the #FeesMustFall movement, no single episode of student protest played a decisive role in their abolition. Rather, in Germany other institutional and political factors mattered the most.

According to Hutter and Krucken (2014), there were three key factors that brought about the observed outcome: 'First, the strong orientation in Germany towards the welfare state which turns the subject of tuition fees into a highly-charged political question. Arguments of social justice are decisive in this context. Second, there was the issue of uncertainties about the effects of tuition fees, which the media repeatedly focused on. A third factor is the federal structure of the German higher education system. The combination of these factors leads to tuition fees not being viewed as legitimate in Germany' (Hutter and Krucken 2014, 86). In short, and unlike in South Africa, students did not represent the main agent in the German policy shift on tuition fees.

My explanation is also worth contrasting with the English case, where one key factor for the South African success was absent. In England, students massively mobilized against the increase of tuition fees in 2010. However, they failed and the hike in tuition fees was in fact implemented. English students were not perceived to be a credible political threat by the British government (Cini 2018). Overall, the German and the English cases are compatible with my analysis of the political relevance of student protests in young democracies. In the German case, abolition was obtained but without the decisive support of students, whereas in England students played a central role and failed.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

Unlike the 1968 mobilizations, recent student protests have not attracted significant scholarly attention (Brooks 2016). Little attention has been devoted to the investigation of their political effects (for a valuable exception, see Cini 2018). Very few studies explored the effects that these protests brought about in a non-European or non-American country (see, for instance, Luescher and Klemenčič 2016, von Holdt and Nai-

doo 2019)<sup>13</sup>. The present article aimed to fill these gaps by providing a context-driven explanation of the victory that the 2015 student mobilizations (#RMF and #FMF) obtained in opposing a fee increase in South Africa. I looked at these protests as the result of a long political process, rather than an episodic and isolated protest event. More importantly, I showed how the sedimentation and accumulation of changes in the field of higher education, as connected to the changes in the political-economic context of post-apartheid South Africa, have played a significant role in activating the student mobilizations of 2015. It was not by chance that in October of the same year South African students occupied and shut down most of the universities across the country. The immediate demand of students was to halt tuition fee increases and take up the government on its erstwhile promise to provide free education. After ten days of big protests, the South African government was forced to partly agree to the student demands by committing to a 0% fee increase for 2016.

Building on Altbach's idea of the political centrality of students in 'young' democracies, I showed that the 2015 student mobilizations were effective as they undermined the mainstream narrative of the post-apartheid liberation and of its 'most successful kids' (i.e. the students), a narrative which the ANC government had forged to build its political popularity. Facing a loss of consensus, the ANC government was forced to come to an agreement with the students ('zero increase tuition fees' for 2016) to avoid a further escalation of the protest and its transformation into a more politically serious issue.

### *Appendix*

List of the people interviewed and quoted in the article (in alphabetic order)<sup>14</sup>

#### Student activists:

Brian, University of Cape Town (UCT)

Camalita, Rhodes University (RU)

Leigh, University of the Witwatersrand of Johannesburg (WITS)

Natasha, University of the Witwatersrand of Johannesburg (WITS)

Ntsika, Cape Peninsula University of Technology of Bellville (CPUT)

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<sup>13</sup> Truth be told, there has been an increasing number of publications, mostly scholarly, on the 2015-16 student movement in South Africa in recent years.

<sup>14</sup> Truth be told, there has been an increasing number of publications, mostly scholarly, on the 2015-16 student movement in South Africa in recent years.



Rashad, University of the Witwatersrand of Johannesburg (WITS)

Thabang, University of Cape Town (UCT)

Vuyo, University of the Western Cape (UWC)

Policy experts:

Prof. Kelly Gillespie, University of the Witwatersrand of Johannesburg (WITS)

Dr. Thierry Luescher, Human Sciences Research Council of Cape Town (HSRC)

Prof. Nieftagodien Noor, University of the Witwatersrand of Johannesburg (WITS)

Prof. Suren Pillay, University of the Western Cape (UWC)

University leaders:

Vice-Chancellor Prof. Adam Habib, University of the Witwatersrand of Johannesburg (WITS)

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