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BOOK TITLE:

Rebels and rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall



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ISBN:

978186428960 (softcover)

PUBLISHER:

Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg; ZAR275

PUBLISHED:

2018

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HOW TO CITE:

Saunders ST. Rebels and rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall – A review. *S Afr J Sci.* 2019;115(7/8), Art. #6234, 2 pages. <http://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2019/6234>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:

30 July 2019

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I understand the challenges faced by vice-chancellors as a consequence of student protests, whether they occur under an apartheid government – as was the case when I was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 1981 to 1996 – or during a democracy. The issues usually are different, but the tensions are the same.

Adam Habib, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) has made an important contribution to our understanding of the #FeesMustFall movement in *Rebels and Rage*. It is a frank account of the events at Wits during the protests. The payment of fees by students to universities has been a major inhibitor of access to higher education for thousands of poor (mainly black) students. Fees have steadily increased because of the government's annual lowering of its subsidies to universities. As Habib points out, the university system expanded from 420 000 students in 1994 to 1.1 million in 2014, without any concomitant increase in university subsidies. The increases in fees were higher at research-intensive universities as their running costs are higher.

Habib forcefully and correctly emphasises the importance of research universities in ensuring that South Africa's development does not become dependent on that from the developed world, and he recognises the tension between this imperative and ensuring access to those universities. There is no doubt that the lack of adequate university funding by government was responsible for the precipitation of this crisis. The student call for free education is a just one, but the methods used by the #FeesMustFall movement were frequently violent and unacceptable, and thus poses a serious threat. Habib claims that students and their supporters in the faculties were often problematic in the attitudes they adopted, and that the African National Congress and Economic Freedom Fighters were regularly involved. Political populism was often at play.

Habib was determined that Wits would not close, and a poll in this regard showed that he had the support of the vast majority of staff and students. Closing the university would have threatened the future careers of large numbers of students. In order to ensure that Wits remained open, Habib employed independent security services which were not allowed to carry guns or dangerous weaponry. When necessary, he called in the police, but he did so reluctantly, because although Wits was in control of the actions of the private security personnel, they had no control over the police. Habib was criticised for using private security companies, but he was absolutely correct in doing so, as Wits was able to remain open. Claims against the security services for initiating violence were usually false – the violence was initiated by the protestors who often acted unlawfully and irresponsibly and thus, regrettably, undermined their cause, which was a just one.

In addition, most universities had outsourced many of their non-academic staff duties, such as maintenance and catering, in order to save money. The campaign to insource these staff was soon linked to the #FeesMustFall protests. The Vice-Chancellors decided to try to act in concert on this issue, as many universities faced serious financial challenges in regard to insourcing. However, UCT broke ranks in the matter and all the universities had to follow. Those employees who were outsourced were often paid lower wages than those within and had no additional privileges such as medical aid and pension schemes. Moreover, outsourcing was difficult to defend on moral grounds. Problems of transformation and sexual harassment, including rape, were soon on the agenda. To exacerbate the situation, Wits had to contend with a media which was often sensationalist and frequently inaccurate. Habib deals with all these matters frankly in the book, sparing no one, including himself. It is refreshing.

In his account, Habib sets out eight possible initiatives to meet the challenges that confront South African universities regarding transformation. First, is a programme to diversify the academy; second, to expand existing curriculum reform activities; third, to initiate a change in student admission policy to strengthen diversity; fourth, to organise student residences to enhance diversity further; fifth, to create an inclusive climate in which all may feel comfortable; sixth, to rename buildings; seventh, to develop indigenous languages among staff and students; and, eighth, to create a partnership with civil society to lobby for resources. In an arena in which discussion and debate are often fuzzy, these are imaginative proposals.

In discussing strategy, Habib was often in contact with Max Price, then Vice-Chancellor of UCT. The situation on each campus was not identical and UCT chose not to bring in security personnel. In the *Daily Maverick* of 12 March 2019 Price challenged some of Habib's analysis of the events at UCT. He disagreed that the UCT executive was less united than its Wits counterpart and that this might have played a role in the decision not to use security. He also challenged the statement that UCT did not complete the 2016 academic year and that UCT faced protests at the end of 2017 while Wits did not. Price also disputed whether the presence or absence of security played a role in how the events on the two campuses played out in different ways.¹ However, it must be remembered – as Habib points out – that the UCT campus is a sprawling one with many access points while Wits is more contained and thus controllable. Price's own book, when published, will be equally important and complementary to Habib's. Those interested in what Habib has to say should also read Jonathan Jansen's *As by Fire: The End of the South African University* (Tafelberg; 2017).

Rebels and Rage has attracted considerable media attention. In an op-ed, entitled 'Resisting university capture: Adam Habib, Wits and Fallism', published in the *Daily Maverick* on 1 April 2019, Robert Morrell, writing in his personal capacity, stresses the dangers facing South African universities. He describes Habib's book as 'compelling and harrowing reading'. Relating how Habib identified a new kind of threat, 'ideologically cloaked' as the 'far left' – which Habib refers to as the 'Pol Pot brigade' – Morrell criticises UCT's ill-conceived Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Committee.² Their report is inadequate and superficial and should be rejected. It is difficult to accept that arsonists should be given amnesty. Education at a university goes beyond formal academic studies and should also prepare graduates to be good citizens; that goal is not achieved by such amnesties.

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Critique of *Rebels and Rage* has also come from a number of members of Wits in an open letter to the *Mail and Guardian* (1 April 2019). The authors question whether Habib had permission to publish certain names and designate people (perhaps unfairly) as the 'far left', and they claim factual errors in the book.³

Jacob Zuma, then President, and some of his Cabinet Ministers attended meetings with Vice-Chancellors and with students during the periods of protest. After declaring that the state would cover the fee increase in 2016, he unexpectedly announced that students from families earning less than ZAR350 000 p.a. would receive free higher education. The financial costs of this decision were met in part by an increase in VAT. More recently, the Higher Education Minister at the time, Naledi Pandor, allocated ZAR967 million to eliminate the debts of National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) students. The 'missing middle', i.e. those whose families earn in excess of the limit but that nonetheless are unable to afford university fees, remain a major concern. The Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training (the Heher Commission) recommended that these students' fees might be covered by an income-dependent loan scheme. In any event, students from families with means would have to pay full fees.⁴

It must be remembered that entering a university for the first time is an enormous challenge for any young person. This is especially the case for young black students who are generally from impoverished families and who face the tension of receiving financial aid for their studies which is in excess of the annual family income. The culture of most universities is alien to them. They realise that their schooling has usually been inadequate and has put them at a disadvantage to their white contemporaries. Into this mix must go the problems of finding accommodation, of debt to the institution, and of upfront payments which are required to secure registration. The last

two are now often waived, but the other challenges result in anger and frustration and must be dealt with by government and by the institutions. The government must recognise the vital autonomy of universities, while institutions need to take steps to deal with the difficulties that students face. One such action is the provision of an academic development programme to help students bridge the gap resulting from their poor schooling.

Protests at universities are a global phenomenon. It is to be hoped that Habib's contribution will be followed by others that cast light on the causes and dynamics of such protests in South Africa and suggest ways of remediation and address.

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