

Fees campaign is just the tip of the iceberg for our jobless youth

COMMENT

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THE #FEESMUSTFALL movement has done more than highlight the plight of thousands of students faced with the stress of increasing university fees.

Images of young, *doek*-clad unrelenting female leaders with their fists in the air while flanked by their male counterparts unified in a single cause have challenged us to ask ourselves some difficult questions.

Although the fee increments have been scrapped across the board, many working-class and poorer families still can't afford the fees.

It has made us ask what becomes of other young people who are sitting at home with

neither the funds to study nor the skills to secure employment. Are their voices being heard and recognised?

Despite policy efforts such as the Employment Tax Incentive, youth unemployment rates have steadily increased from 33 percent in 2008 to 37 percent this year.

Of concern is that discouragement among young work-seekers is also increasing and that one in every three people between the ages of 15 and 24 is not in employment, education or training. Young people are increasingly excluded from economic opportunities, fuelling the frustrations that drive movements such as #FeesMustFall.

While many assume they are lazy and unwilling to work, research shows young people

search for work in multiple ways, often with disappointing outcomes. Some also engage in survivalist businesses in the informal sector to make ends meet. Depression is a potential effect of repeated disappointments in their search for work.

So what can be done? The student movement highlights major challenges in the post-secondary education system that must be urgently addressed.

Similarly, there are challenges in the basic education system. But what do we do with the generation of young people completing matric and those who are out of work and not in any form of training?

The good news is that there are efforts afoot. Research highlights excellent work by civil society, business and state

actors. These organisations are rolling out various forms of training and work readiness programmes for young people who can't access formal post-secondary education and training.

For instance, recruitment company EOH has developed an extensive learnership programme that attracts over 1 000 learners each year. They complete an initial two-week work-readiness programme that focuses on basic workplace skills including punctuality, dress code and interpersonal communication. Thereafter they can choose to enrol in a particular qualification.

They are placed at an EOH branch and mentored by an allocated supervisor and learnership co-ordinator, and receive a stipend.

Another wonderful example is the Afrika Tikkun Services training programme – an eight-week programme that engages young people in intensive training in sectors where there is demand for entry-level employees such as call centres.

The advantage of such programmes is that they operate in local communities, have minimal entry requirements, do not require technical application processes, and the costs to participants are low. Such

offerings are important in the context of the lives of young people struggling to access formal post-secondary education and training.

While they enhance the supply of young people in the labour market, they don't necessarily increase demand for work-seekers. However, there are initiatives that do promote demand for youth. An approach to promoting demand for young work-seekers has been to shift employers' perceptions. Impact sourcing is a process by which employers intentionally employ people who are vulnerable to unemployment and who would not normally be seen as viable employees.

Successes have been seen in the business process outsourcing sector in which individuals,

and particularly young people, from poor areas in Africa and Asia are targeted for entry-level positions. Within this space, Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator is a programme that motivates employers to employ young work-seekers with a matric qualification who'd otherwise not be seen as "viable employees".

The current wave of protests has highlighted the multiple obstacles young people face on their path from leaving school to entering the labour market. Current policies and interventions remain unco-ordinated, often inaccessible and far removed from the lives of young people. However, there are beacons of hope that can serve as lessons.

As the #FeesMustFall students continue their studies,

graduate and move into the labour market, we must turn our attention to young people who can't access such training and for whom the natural progression is a continuous struggle to secure employment. Capitalising on the above projects and other promising initiatives is essential if we are to avoid a groundswell of discontent among youth in South Africa.

● *Lauren Graham is a senior researcher at the Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg. She is a contributor to this year's South African Child Gauge 2015, which focuses on youth and the intergenerational transmission of poverty, released this week by the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. The publication is available at www.ci.org.za.*

Protests highlight the multiple obstacles young people face