

Education: a human right or a privilege?

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South African Citizens have a right to “a basic education, including adult basic education and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measure, must make progressively available and accessible.

- Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)

Whilst the right to education is enshrined in the South African constitution, many South Africans remain undereducated. The 2011 census results, for instance, indicated that less than a third of South Africans have completed matric and that only 12.1 per cent have completed a post-matric qualification (Statistics South Africa, 2011). In addition, South Africa's expenditure on higher education, in particular, is below the African continental average, sitting at 1.4 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (SABC News, 2015). These figures are cause of concern given the high unemployment and poverty rates in South Africa (Africa's second largest economy). Studies have shown that there is a high correlation between levels of education, employment and poverty. Generally, the more educated and skilled a society is, the less likely it is to experience high levels of unemployment and consequently, poverty. Given South Africa's history of oppression during apartheid, there are currently significant disparities between rich and poor. Arguably, apartheid policies such as the 'reservation of jobs for whites' and 'bantus education' further entrenched the marginalisation of the majority of the South African populace. Unfortunately, very little seems to be improving for the poor even today, notwithstanding government efforts to provide basic services to people whom the apartheid regime gave little consideration.

We note that among the fundamental aspects of building and promoting an equal society, given the materialistic nature of contemporary economic systems, is the issue of access to education. Therefore, in order to overcome the many socioeconomic challenges that bedevil this country; South Africa needs to urgently address the issue of education. We will argue and attempt to demonstrate in this discussion that if South Africa is to have any hope of taking significant strides in achieving economic freedom, firstly; the government needs to lead decisively in the provision of quality education at all levels. Secondly; ensure that access to higher education, in particular, is guaranteed as a right to all who qualify on merit regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds. We contend that it is unconstitutional and regressive for South African's to be turned away from higher education institutions based on their inability to pay for their studies. While Government efforts to fund students through the NSFAS system are acknowledged, we propose that this is insufficient and necessitates the exploration of different strategies in order to ensure that education becomes a right that is accessible to all who seek and desire it.