

## **Urban property relations on higher education and student accommodation**

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Increased access to higher education in South Africa post-1994 has created an infrastructure crisis in the former white minority institutions. In particular, there has been an evident demand for student accommodation across all the institutions of higher learning in the country. While on-campus housing accommodation is limited, there has been a massive growth of the off-campus student accommodation component in universities. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) reveals that the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in South African universities reside in off-campus residences, which are spread across the cities of South Africa (DHET 2010; DHET 2011).

The historical property relations of the cities impact the structure of each institution's higher education system. The property relations of the city determine where a particular student will stay in the city and the quality of life of that student during his or her university career (Mhlonyane 2016). The property relations of the city determine the fees structure of the university; they impact its budgetary framework, its key priorities and the overall political economy of the institution. Universities are built in the urban centre of the city where land is rated highly expensive by market forces. Universities as physical buildings and the education they offer are a service that takes place in close proximity to the market economy of the city (Mzileni 2018). Universities are also employers of the labour power that is settled in the city.

It is evident, therefore, that fees charged by student residences that are privately owned and closer to the university will be more expensive than any other type of accommodation located somewhere else in the city (Mzileni 2018). In the case of Port Elizabeth, the Summerstrand area offers exorbitant fees that students must pay to be in close proximity to the Nelson Mandela University campuses, which are based in the mentioned suburb (Mhlonyane 2016). Students from privileged families are able to afford fees charged in the Summerstrand area; they are closer to the university campus and spend less time travelling across the university to arrive for their classes and social activities (Wallace 2012). These students become academically and socially integrated into the university more easily and they have a fulfilling living and learning experience as students (Tinto 1993; Tinto 2010). They can walk to the university campus and they have access to its resources. In addition, they have access to a

quality service that the local government has to offer, such as good infrastructure, security and close proximity to food outlets and entertainment areas (Mzileni 2018).

On the other hand, government bursaries and scholarships cannot afford to pay fees in private properties that are at close proximity to the university where the value of land and rent is costly. Instead, government funding would rather pay low monthly rates of rent for student accommodation that is further from the university in an area that has a cheap value of land and rent in order to cushion a larger quantity of students (NSFAS 2015). In the case of Port Elizabeth, over 500 poor black students, funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) stay in a single and large property that was formerly used as a factory, which is situated in Korsten Township. This property is approximately 20km from the Summerstrand campuses of Nelson Mandela University and students spend over 30 minutes on transport twice a day travelling to and from the university using the ascribed bus shuttle daily that is procured from a private company, which offers the service at a profit (Muthwa 2015).

This student accommodation conundrum also envelops the government apparatus and its key priorities. A municipality at a local government level relies on generating municipal rates from student residences for its financial sustainability from the portion of the rent charged by the property owners. This rent is expected to be financed by student bursaries and loans controlled by the national government. As a result, due to the high rentals charged in the municipal jurisdiction, the national government is compelled to maximise the stretch of its resources to as many students as possible who are in need by providing financial aid to those students who will be staying in cheap areas of the city that are far from the university, such as North End and Korsten. This practice comes at the detriment of the quality of living and learning for these students, particularly the poor, who are a government priority in terms of graduation throughput and a university priority as far as student retention is concerned (Tinto 1993; Van Der Merwe and Van Reenen 2016).

Since off-campus residences are stationed at a distance from the university campus and are characterised by limited safety and security measures, such shortfalls invite the university and government to attempt availing their limited resources to cushion the social capital of students in the form of transport, meals and bursaries, to name a few (DHET 2011). Initially, universities are not conceptualised as housing entities, instead, they are mainly concerned with the learning

project. Thus, the provision of student housing tends to be a neglected issue that seems to catch South African universities and government unprepared (DHET 2011, 22).

This article has established that the land question does affect the system of higher education. It remains uncertain as to whether or not the #FeesMustFall campaign conceptualised the fact that the property relations of a city resemble the fees structure of a university, shape the overall political economy of higher education and affect the living and learning experiences of students. Universities cannot be moved from the urban centre where land is deemed expensive by market forces. However, what can be done by the state is to have an equitable intervention on property values that are in university suburbs to have them re-zoned for a public purpose. Higher education is a social justice instrument for the health of South Africa's democratic project (National Planning Commission 2011) and available mechanisms for the state to transform urban land property relations for the benefit of the poor and the students for the greater good of the country must be used, even if it would mean that such urban land must be expropriated.

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