

**I**N A chapter that appears in Linda Cooper and Shirley Walters' recent book *Learning/Work: Turning Work and Lifelong Learning Inside Out*, I argue that the issue of students dropping out is disquieting because it is perceived to reflect inadequacies in the education system with regard to quality and quantity.

Considering our country's legacy of exclusions and inequalities, the drop-out rate among university students conjures up feelings that "not much has changed".

When former education minister Naledi Pandor tabled the departmental budget vote in May 2007 she likened dropping out to the "perpetuation of past exclusions and inequalities and an unjust subversion of the historic promise of freedom and democracy".

Excluded students become drop-outs. In the post-apartheid period in which we are bombarded with the rhetoric of transformation, widening access, retaining good students, improving throughput rates and delivering social justice to previously disadvantaged individuals, it's easy to forget that universities continue to subtly exclude students. Exclusions can be financial, academic or cultural (using language).

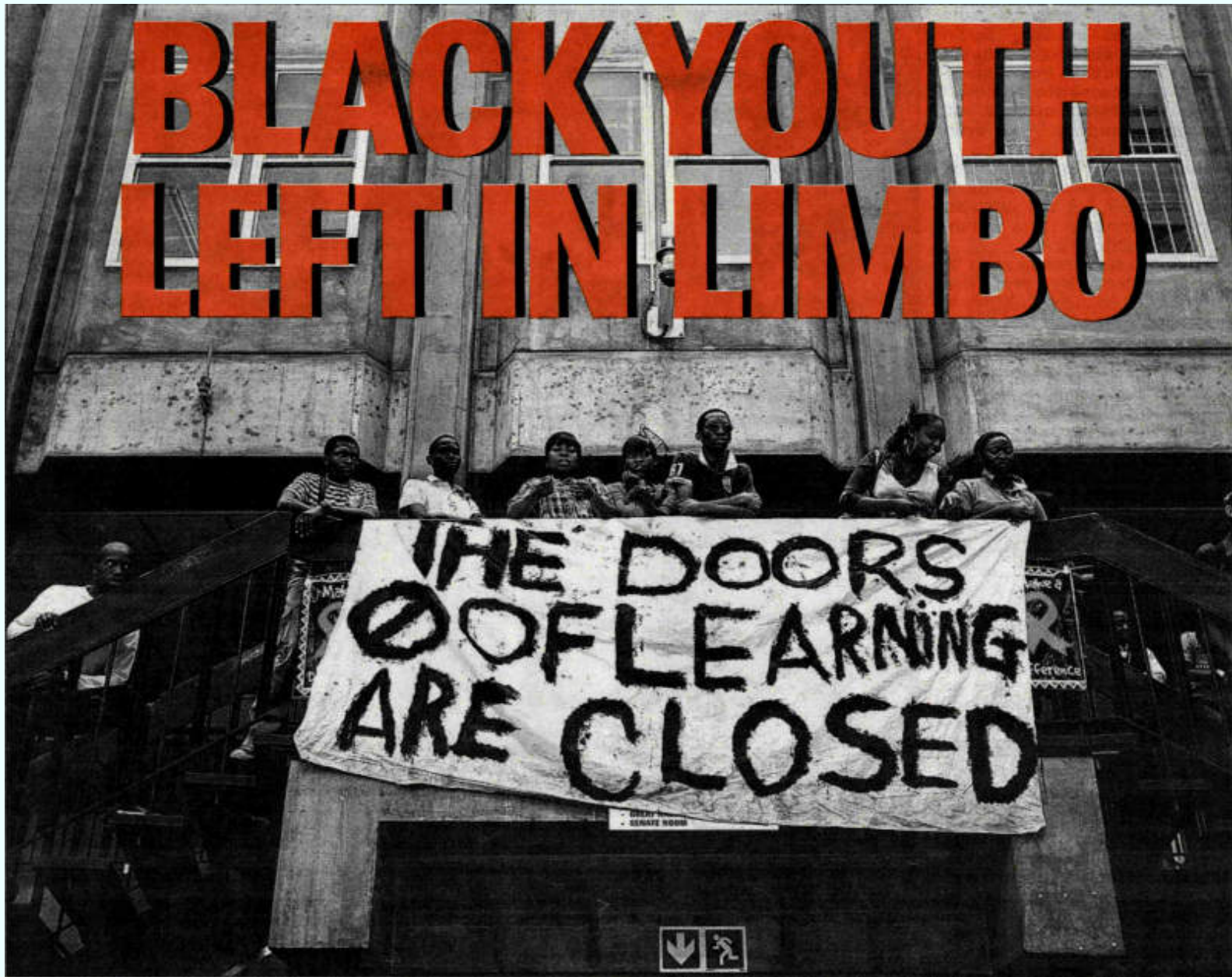
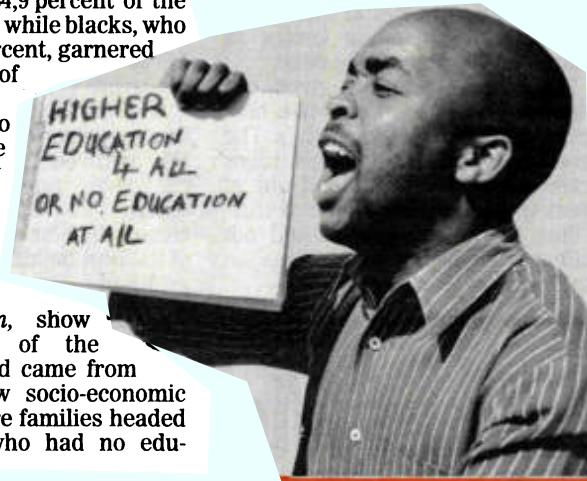
The looming clash between universities and students over tuition and residential fee hikes is like déjà vu. At the beginning of every year universities announce fee hikes and students threaten to strike.

What's worrying is that it appears that decisions to hike fees are made without consultation with students, which smacks of a lack of transparency.

Last Wednesday Tim Modise asked me on SAfm's *AM Live* whether the students have a case in contesting fee hikes. My response was an unequivocal yes. Numerous studies show that the majority of black students enrolled in the country's universities come from families that are in dire financial straits and struggle to make ends meet.

In their 1989 book, *Uprooting Poverty*, Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele noted that whites, who constituted 15 percent of the population, had 64,9 percent of the country's income, while blacks, who constituted 73 percent, garnered only 24,9 percent of the income.

Fast forward to 21 years later. The findings of my 2010 co-edited HSRC research monograph, *Student Retention and Graduate Destination*, show that 70 percent of the students surveyed came from families with low socio-economic status. These were families headed by individuals who had no edu-



**GIVE US A BREAK:** Students at University of the Witwatersrand protest about fee hikes.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALON SKUY

## Economic inequality continues to exclude students

cation, had some primary education or some secondary education.

They had "no regular monthly income", or earned between R1 to R400 or between R801 to R1 600 monthly. When universities require

students from such families to provide upfront payments ranging between R4 500 and R6 000 during registration, they are simply excluding them, period.

The exclusion policy of one of the country's premier universities reads as follows: "The senate may refuse students permission to renew registration in any faculty if they are deemed to be unable to profit from further study."

Now rewind 56 years back to June 1954. Hendrik Verwoerd addressed the senate about government policy on black education and stated: "What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?" Coincidence?

Most black schools can at best be described as dysfunctional. Stellenbosch University economist Servaas van der Berg notes that pass rates in more affluent white schools are uniformly high, while most

black schools perform abysmally, with pass rates of 20 to 60 percent or even lower.

In contrast, few white schools have pass rates below 80 percent. It's therefore disappointing that some universities pay scant attention to students' academic support and retention services but are resolute on academic exclusions.

I had the depressing experience of sitting in a meeting with members of senior management at one university during one of my Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study report-back seminars, where I listened to professors trying to justify why their university was not obliged to use English as a medium of instruction.

Students who chose the university did so willingly and cognisant of the university's language policy.

That may be so, given that the university's right to language is

enshrined in the Constitution. However, exercise of that right should not be inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights, for to do so violates the very constitutional right the professors proclaimed.

Higher education is an asset for both the individual and the nation. The skills developed by higher education are critical for sustainable job creation and prosperity.

On average, graduates get better jobs and earn more than non-graduates.

When students are excluded their aspirations, dreams, goals and hopes for a better future go up in smoke, which can have disempowering implications.

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