

Public Administration **CHALLENGES:** Cases from Africa

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juta

First published 2021

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Claremont, 7708

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ISBN: 978 1 48513 861 7

Production Specialist: Valencia Wyngaard-Arenz
Editors: John Linnegar and Ken McGillivray
Proofreader: Waldo Müller
Cover Designer: Drag and Drop (Jacques Nel)
Indexer: Lexinfo (Adami Geldenhuys)
Typeset in 11.5/14.5 pt Bembo Std
Typesetting: Wouter Reinders

Printed and bound:



school of government
Department:
National School of Government
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



**Funded by
the European Union**

A RAPID CHANGE IN PUBLIC POLICY: THE CASE OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Jacobus S Wessels

INTRODUCTION

The right to education has become globally indisputable, especially since its inclusion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (UN General Assembly 1948: art 26(1)). The only issues of dispute might have been the practical implementation of this right, specifically to make it simultaneously available, accessible and meritorious (UN General Assembly 1948: art 26(1)). The right to education eventually also found its way to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, with an outlined distinction between basic and further education (RSA 1996: s 29(1)). The Constitution appears equally aware of the practical implications of the second tier of this right, namely, the right to further education, by obligating the state to make further education ‘through reasonable measures, ... progressively available and accessible’ (RSA 1996: s 29(1)).

After just more than two decades since this universal right became a constitutional obligation in South Africa, and after a longitudinal rational process of improving policy instruments to give effect to that obligation, the state evidently struggled with those reasonable measures to make further education progressively available and accessible, especially to poor students. The announcement of a fee-free funding policy for students from poor households (Zuma 2017) is regarded by many analysts as being unreasonable and ‘disastrous for a country that’s already burdened by significant debt’ (Gossel & Mutize 2018: 2). The vexing question that drives the study on which this chapter reports is: How can one make sense of the rapid change of a complex public policy?

To answer this question, the announcement of change in the South African government’s policy on the funding of the ‘post schooling education and training sector’ (Zuma 2017: 6) on 16 December 2017 was selected as a case for this study. This policy announcement was chosen as an instance of rapid policy change. To

make sense of this case, the multiple-streams approach to public policy change was used as a theoretical framework asking those questions that would reveal the hidden, non-obvious dimensions of this complex phenomenon and inform the sense-making process. Accordingly, this chapter starts with the justification and discussion of the selection of an adapted multiple theoretical framework for this study, an explanation of the usefulness of the selected research design and methodology and the research ethics considerations. This is followed by a chronological narrative in which the various components of this phenomenon (a policy process) are identified and described. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the sense-making findings of, and an integrated conclusion on, the value of the theoretical approach in obtaining a deepened understanding of the phenomenon, but also on the value of the case study for enriching the theoretical approach used in this study.

MULTIPLE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNPACKING A COMPLEX PUBLIC-POLICY CASE

It is commonly accepted that theoretical frameworks are thinking instruments in the process of making sense of, in the words of Howlett, McConnell and Perl (2016: 274), ‘the complexities, ambiguities and driving forces of multi-faceted phenomena such as public policy-making and policy processes’. A wide and rich variety of theoretical lenses have been developed and used over the years in an attempt to make sense of public policies. These theoretical lenses have been shown to have different purposes, such as explaining specific policy events in a narrowly demarcated context or serving as analytical frameworks for making sense of complex policy processes (Howlett et al 2016: 274). Several theoretical perspectives were considered for the purpose of this case study: the policy regime perspective (Jochim & May 2010; May & Jochim 2013; Schlager & Weible 2013), the critical junctures theory (Donnelly & Hogan 2012) and the multiple-streams approach (John 2003; Scott & Warren 2010; Cairney & Jones 2016; Winkel & Leipold 2016; Howlett 2019).

The policy regime lens focuses on the interplay between policy and politics, with a specific focus on the political aspects of the success or failure of policy implementation (May 2015: 278). The implication of this theory is that strong regimes

reinforce political commitments by advancing a shared sense of purpose, establishing institutional arrangements that focus attention on relevant policy goals, and engaging a supportive constituency (May 2015: 281).

With the research question of this study in mind, this theoretical lens was applied to obtain a deepened understanding of the interplay between politics and policy as a response to a societal problem as articulated by the constitutional obligation discussed earlier.

The critical junctures theory in particular has received attention in the literature on urban planning (Choi et al 2019), administrative reforms (Awortwi 2011; Kickert 2011) and policy change (Donnelly & Hogan 2012; Howlett et al 2016). An analysis of the respective literature reveals several commonalities in the various perspectives on this theory, of which the focus on pivotal moments or events in time is probably the most common. These events of critical junctures appear characterised by external shocks or pressures, key actors and definitive consequences (Kickert 2011: 802). The consequences of critical junctures include, first, major and radically changed ideas and policies (Kickert 2011: 802; Donnelly & Hogan 2012: 324; Howlett et al 2016: 287) and, second, the opening of administrations to radical reforms (Kickert 2011: 814). In this theory, an ideational change is a necessary condition for policy change (Donnelly & Hogan 2012: 325). Furthermore, Awortwi (2011: 352) points to the progressive irreversibility of a policy change following a critical juncture. In the current study, this theoretical lens was used in search of a deepened understanding of radical policy change as a consequence of a critical juncture in the policy process.

The development of the multiple-streams approach probably started with Kingdon's award-winning book on public policy in 1984 (1984, 1995). The essence of his contribution was an enhancement of the understanding of the traditional public policy process (agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation) through the multiple-streams approach as a theoretical lens. This theoretical model consists of three relatively independent streams: problems, the 'policy primeval soup' and the political stream (Kingdon 1995). A core aspect of Kingdon's model is the postulation of each stream's independence (1995: 227–229). The three streams have been supplemented by other theorists by two additional streams: the policy process stream and the policy programme stream (Howlett 2019: 418, 420). This hypothesis of relatively independent streams also implies the intersection or coupling of the streams and a subsequent opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to influence the policy agenda towards a possible critical juncture (Howlett 2019: 415, 421). As the current study was directed by an urge to understand the rapid change of a complex public policy, the sense-making process focused predominantly on the interplay between the distinct streams of the policy problem, policy solution and politics, and the subsequent critical junctures of those interplays. The policy process and

policy programme streams were integrated with the description of the policy solution narrative.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THIS STUDY

The methodological approach to this study was informed by several research traditions, of which the sense-making approach of Weick (1993, 1995) was considered the most influential. This approach has proven to be especially helpful in unravelling complex and ambiguous policy processes (Howlett et al 2016: 274). Multiple theoretical approaches to inform this study were selected since one or two theoretical lenses might have been inadequate in providing a deepened understanding of the selected case of rapid policy change. The literature shows that sense-making, as a methodological approach, is fuelled by a 'desire or need to understand' (Audette-Chapdelaine 2016: 2).

A limitation of this study might be the fact that the research did not involve key role-players in this process through direct or indirect research interventions to obtain their lived experiences of the process. The empirical work for this study was therefore confined to reading primary policy documents, the reports authored by key role-players such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), committees, commissions and task teams. As this project constituted no risk of harming any human participants (see Van Heerden, Visagie & Wessels 2016; Wessels & Visagie 2017), it was not necessary to apply for research ethics clearance.

While the policy agenda for an appropriate public policy to make further education progressively available and accessible through reasonable measures was set in 1996 by the Constitution, the focus of this study was narrowed to the announcement of the rapid policy change by the president and the period preceding and following the announcement (2016 to 2018). The material used to obtain a deeper understanding of this instance of rapid policy change consists of documents in the public domain. The following categories of material were used to construct a chronological narrative of the policy process towards increased access to, and availability of, higher education in South Africa:

- the Constitution of 1996;
- national legislation, regulations and policy documents;
- annual and focused reports of the Department Higher Education and Training (under various names);
- annual and focused reports of the NSFAS;
- reports of various other government departments;
- reports of various committees, commissions and tasks teams;

- submissions by stakeholders to committees, commissions and task teams;
- speeches of political office-bearers;
- various newspaper reports related to this case;
- various webpages related to this case;
- scholarly books; and
- scholarly articles.

Guided by a curiosity to understand what was transpiring here, the present authors read and re-read these documents to construct a chronological narrative on this instance of rapid policy change for the period starting in the early 1990s and ending in 2017. The building blocks for the construction of a deepened understanding of this instance of the phenomenon ‘rapid policy change’ consist of the exploration of the multiple streams and their intersections, the interplay of policy and politics as a response to a troublesome societal problem and the influence of a critical juncture in the policy process.

TOWARDS INCREASED ACCESS TO AND AVAILABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A CHRONOLOGY

This section departs from the assumption that an understanding of any phenomenon which involves human behaviour is determined by the context of both the phenomenon and the reflexive narrator. While the case for this study entailed the process towards rapid change in the South African government’s policy towards generally available and equally accessible higher education, its context is not only wide but also complex. This is followed by a brief outline of the most determining elements of this context before the chronology of this specific case is presented.

The South African policy process towards the increased availability of and access to higher education was developed in a broad context of fundamental assumptions about the basic rights of people and the subsequent obligation of states. A determining articulation of these rights is, without doubt, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948), adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. Article 26(1) of this declaration specifically attends to the right to education by proclaiming that everyone has the right to at least compulsory free elementary education. With regard to higher education, the declaration specifies that it should be ‘equally accessible to all on the basis of merit’ (UN General Assembly 1948: art 26(1)).

Fifty years later, the World Conference on Higher Education adopted a ‘World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision

and Action' which, among other proposals, provides additional clarity on equity of access to higher education with a special emphasis on the reinforcement of its links with, in particular, secondary education and the imperative of 'the merit of the individual' (UNESCO 1998: 22). Furthermore, the Dakar Framework for Action not only emphasises the key role of universities in ensuring a strong intellectual and scientific environment, but also sets goals to increase student enrolments as well as the quality of education (World Education Forum 2000).

Notwithstanding efforts worldwide to increase participation in higher education, demographic imbalances characterise the student populations of most nations (James 2007: 2). The persistent and most widespread cause of differentiation was determined to be socio-economic status or class (Cloete & Wangenge-Ouma 2008: 917; Bitzer 2010: 302; Gale & Tranter 2011: 29) as 'the single most reliable predictor of the likelihood that individuals will participate in higher education at some stage in their lives' (James 2007: 2–3).

In South Africa, the Constitution provides a determining context for any intervention related to higher education, proclaiming that everyone

has the right ... to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible (RSA 1996: s 29(1)).

Availability, access, fairness, equality and equity are key contextual values to be considered in understanding this specific case of rapid policy change (Gamede 2005; James 2007; Hull 2016). A chronology of this case is therefore provided in the next section.

MULTIPLE-STREAMS PERSPECTIVE ON PUBLIC-POLICY DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS AVAILABLE AND ACCESSIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

This section provides a chronology of the development of the public funding policy towards available and accessible higher education in South Africa. This narrative is structured according to an adaptation of the multiple-streams approach, as suggested by Howlett (2019) and other authors (Béland & Howlett 2016; Howlett et al 2016). The policy's development towards available and accessible higher education in South Africa is subsequently narrated through the lenses of the core policy problems, the policy solutions and programmes, the related politics and the critical junctures between these streams, resulting in radical policy change.

POLICY PROBLEM STREAM: AVAILABILITY OF AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The problem stream of any policy narrative starts with policy problems requiring government interventions to resolve them (Cairney & Jones 2016: 40; Howlett et al 2016: 278). The literature has shown that ‘problems usually reach the awareness of policymakers because of dramatic events ... that attract public attention’ (Béland & Howlett 2016: 222). In this specific case, the dramatic event was the adoption of the Constitution in 1996 with the subsequent radical change in the nature of the South African state and its value context, as described in the previous section. For the purposes of this case study, the policy problem for the state has been articulated by section 29(1) of the Constitution as an obligation to make higher education ‘through reasonable measures ... progressively available and accessible’ (RSA 1996: s 29(1)). While this constitutional right serves as a beacon for the official commencement of this narrative, it is worthwhile taking notice of efforts to refine the definition or at least the implications of this problem as a universal, not a specifically South African, problem.

The deliberations at and the Declaration of the World Conference on Higher Education in 1998 provided some direction for a context-specific refinement of this universal problem (UNESCO 1998). This implies that the policy problem for the South African context includes an understanding of those factors, other than ‘merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance and devotion, showed by those seeking access’ (UNESCO 1998: 22) obstructing access to higher education.

A review of the material on the development of a higher education funding policy reveals at least two dominant attributes of this specific South African policy problem, namely demography and socio-economic status. The Education White Paper 3, published in 1997, articulated this problem as an ‘inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for students and staff along lines of race, gender, class and geography’ (DoE 1997: para 1.4) due to ‘... severe limits to the capacity of many students and their families to pay, particularly first generation students from poor families’ (DoE 1997: para 4.39). It is specifically the latter attribute of this problem, and the subsequent attempts to arrive at policy solutions, that constituted the core focus of this case study. However, the policy problem has been expressed with different emphases since the publication of the Constitution of 1996 and the White Paper of 1997.

The policy problem in the pre-1994 period was articulated to find a fair and objective way for the state to fund public higher education institutions (Steyn & De Villiers 2005: 12). It was only after 1994 that the policy problem was re-articulated as finding a way to prevent capable students’ exclusion from higher education due to poverty (CHE 2004: 193). The next phase of policy problem

articulation was a problem related to the refinement of the policy instrument: finding a mechanism for identifying eligible (poor and from the working-class) recipients for loans and grants (DHET 2010: xxi). This policy problem was expressed in 2010 by the ministerial review committee in the development of a comprehensive policy framework for this purpose (DHET 2010: xxvii). Soon after the publication of the ministerial review committee's report, the eligibility policy problem became more focused, namely on the funding exclusion of the so-called 'missing-middle', resulting in the appointment of a ministerial task team to investigate this problem (DHET 2016). The last version of the same policy problem emerged in the president of the country's brief to the Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training in 2016, namely, the 'feasibility of making higher education and training (higher education) fee-free in South Africa' (CEHET 2017b: 26). Whereas the policy problem of this case study started at a philosophical human rights level, it has been refined over time to include technical articulations for solving the philosophical one. The next section provides an overview of the policy solution stream related to this specific case.

Policy solution stream for availability and access

The policy solution stream provides a chronological narrative of the various attempts to arrive at a policy solution to the problem as identified in the previous section. This stream focuses on the various events, actors and options 'conjoining to generate a flow of policy activity' (Howlett et al 2016: 277). This flow of policy activities includes the agenda-setting process, the policy formulation stage, the policy consultation stage and the eventual selection of the most suitable policy solution for addressing the identified policy problem (Howlett et al 2016: 281). In this stream, various actors may be active, such as influential policy entrepreneurs playing a critical role in the promotion of specific policy options (Sætren 2015: 115). Policy entrepreneurs may include technical experts in the specific area of the policy, public officials and specific stakeholders in the specific policy domain (Barzelay & Füchtner 2003: 11). Stakeholders, such as higher education institutions, may become active in the policy process that will affect their institutions by making specific proposals to refine policy tools and provide information that will help policymakers to design the mechanisms of policy tools (Howlett 2019: 419). In addition to these actors in a policy stream, a crucial element of a policy stream is the policy output, that is, specific policy proposals or alternatives which can be assessed, rejected, accepted or refined as a possible feasible policy option or solution (Béland & Howlett 2016: 222). The policy solution stream of this specific case consists of constant policy activities

involving numerous role-players and a variety of policies and policy instruments over a period of more than two decades.

Although this study focuses on the announcement of rapid policy change on 16 December 2017, it is necessary to understand the context of this announcement. Consequently, a brief summary of the development of funding-policy solutions is provided in the next few paragraphs. This chronology is structured in two parts: the pre-1994 university funding policy regimes and the post-1994 university funding regimes.

Various pre-1994 university funding policies

For a comprehensive understanding of this chronology, it is necessary to revert even further back in history than the current policy solution stream. This is because the problem of the progressive availability and accessibility of higher education to poor students is embedded in the South African history of higher education funding formulae.

The historical funding problem to be solved was distinctly different from the problem addressed on 16 December 2017, resulting in policy solutions that focused on the fair allocation of state funding to higher education institutions. Without embarking in a discussion of these formulae, it is sufficient for the purposes of this study to mention the different regimes:

- the Holloway formula, used during the period 1953–1976 (Steyn & De Villiers 2005: 12);
- the Van Wyk de Vries formula (1977–1983) (Steyn & De Villiers 2005: 15; CHE 2007: 14–15); and
- the South African Post-Secondary Education Information System (SAPSE), introduced in 1984 and applied unchanged until 1993 (CHE 2004: 189).

Various post-1994 university funding policies

A revised SAPSE subsidy formula for both universities and technikons was implemented in 1993 and was used until the 2003/2004 financial year (CHE 2007: 19), when it was replaced by the New Funding Framework (NFF). The NFF was introduced in 2003, was officially established in the 2004/2005 financial year (Ministry of Education 2003; DHET 2004; Styger, Van Vuuren & Heymans 2015: 269) but become fully operational only in 2007 (CHE 2016: 321). This framework was the culmination of a policy development process that started with the funding proposals of the NCHE (1996) and included the refined proposals of the Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997) and also the public comments received on the first draft of the NFF of 2001 (Styger 2014: 37). This funding framework became the core of the South African government's higher

education funding policy until the announcement of 16 December 2017. The constitutional obligation to make further education progressively available and accessible became fundamental to the NFF with the inclusion of the NSFAS as an integral part of state-funding policy for higher education.

The above policy solutions were implemented by a variety of key actors, mainly public and administrative officials through specific policy instruments – the NSFAS as instituted by the NSFAS Act of 1999 and the NFF as instituted by the policy Funding of Public Higher Education of 2003 (Ministry of Education 2003). The interpretation and implementation of these programmes became the foci of several incremental programme review processes, as completed by the ministerial review committee on NSFAS in 2010 (DHET 2010), the ministerial committee for the review of the funding of universities in 2004 (DHET 2014a), the ministerial task team to develop a support and funding model for poor and missing-middle students (DHET 2016) and the Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training (CEHET 2017b). All of these reports focused on identified gaps between the policy problem with the subsequent policy intent, on the one hand, and the policy programme aimed at meeting the policy intent, on the other. The core implementation challenges of the two policy instruments are analysed in the following sections.

New Funding Framework

The NFF was introduced to

give full effect to the planning model for the transformation of the higher education system ... [to be] affordable, sustainable and contributes to the skills, human resource and knowledge needs of South Africa (Ministry of Education 2003: 6).

The implementation of the NFF commenced in the 2004/2005 financial year (CHE 2016: 321) and was the current framework at the announcement of the policy change in December 2017.

In terms of this framework, the annual quantum of government funding to higher education was to be determined by the availability of funds as well as the government's expectations of the 'teaching and research-related services, as well as other objectives' to be delivered by higher education institutions (Ministry of Education 2003: 6). These expectations (as articulated by the national development plan) relate directly to the size and shape of higher education as reflected by student enrolments and programme offerings (DoE 2005). The size and shape of the higher education sector has a direct influence not only on the annual quantum

of government funds allocated to the sector, but also on the appropriateness of spending according to national priorities. The CEHET confirms that the current size and shape of the South African Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sector does not reflect the required pyramid structure within which technical and vocational education constitute the bulk of students at the bottom, while theoretical (university) education constitutes the smaller group of students at the top. The commission subsequently emphasised the need to reverse the current pyramid to 'reflect the priority of the college system' (CEHET 2017b: 68) and recommended surplus money in the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) be ring-fenced for infrastructure funding at Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges (CEHET 2017b: 561).

Evidence submitted to the CEHET revealed a gradual decline in the block funding to this sector, with government subsidies in the 2016/2017 financial year equal to about 0,6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country (CEHET 2017b: 148, 261, 263). The CEHET subsequently recommended that government funding of universities, in the short term, be increased to 1% of the GDP (CEHET 2017b: 543, 559, 560). These funds were to be calculated and transferred to higher education institutions as structured in two broad categories of grant: block grants and earmarked grants (Ministry of Education 2003: 6). The earmarked grants provided for the NSFAS, teaching, research and community development, loan repayments, institutional restructuring and a quality assurance framework (Ministry of Education 2003: 12). One can therefore deduce that the funding for NSFAS was a restricted factor in the context of available government funds for higher education.

The block grants consisted of the following categories: research output grants, teaching output grants, teaching input grants and institutional factor grants (Ministry of Education 2003: 7). The policy provided criteria for the calculation of distinct grant categories. With these criteria in mind, the framework furthermore provided for an annual ministerial statement on government funding for higher education on, inter alia, the availability of funds for allocation, the expected outputs of student inputs, technical detail on the required data and weightings for the calculation of grants and an overview of the progress in the implementation of this framework with the stabilisation of the system in mind (Ministry of Education 2003: 13–14).

National Student Financial Aid Scheme

The NSFAS constituted a core element of the rapidly changed student-funding policy on which this study focused. The history of NSFAS is integrated with that of the Tertiary Education Fund of South Africa (TEFSA), which was founded

in 1991 as a not-for-profit company administering a national scheme of student bursaries and loans (CHE 2007: 24). TEFSA, funded by the European Union, was the primary provider of loans to historically disadvantaged students (Bhorat & Pillay 2017: 4). In the early days of the post-1994 dispensation, the Department of Education decided to use the NSFAS as ‘a mechanism for ensuring that capable students are not excluded by poverty from participating in higher education’ (CHE 2004: 193) and asked TEFSA to administer it. When the NSFAS was formally established by an Act of Parliament (RSA 1999), the TEFSA ceased to exist and was reconstituted as the NSFAS in 2000 (CHE 2004: 194).

The NSFAS was established primarily for the purpose of ‘granting of loans and bursaries to eligible students at public colleges and public higher education institutions and for the administration of such loans and bursaries’ (RSA 1999). A key concept in this purpose statement is that of ‘eligible students’, which has been articulated by the CHE as ‘the poorest of the most academically able students’ (CHE 2004: 194). The legislation did not provide specific eligibility criteria (eg a means test), which led to subsequent diverse views being expressed on the most appropriate identification of eligible beneficiaries for funding (DHET 2010; World Bank 2019). However, the NSFAS was part of the government’s long-term commitment to ‘progressively introducing free education for the poor in South African universities as resources become available’ (DHET 2013c: xiv).

Financial aid provided by NSFAS to eligible students consisted of bursaries for specific (also scarce) fields of study (eg veterinarians or education) and income-contingent loans (DHET 2013b: 391; De Villiers 2017: 983). The implication of income-contingent loans is that the repayment of these loans starts only once the beneficiaries of these loans ‘are in employment and earning above a threshold level of income’ (CHE 2004: 194). The scheme subsequently provided financial aid to students through a network of about 41 financial aid offices on approximately 29 campuses of higher education institutions in the country (CHE 2004: 194). The NSFAS seemed to rely on a variety of funding sources: foreign donors, the South African private sector, higher education institutions, recovered funds, the state and others. Of these, the state contributed the lion’s share of 69% in the 2002/2003 financial year (CHE 2004: 197). The urgent need to source funding to assist very poor, poor and missing-middle students was also considered by the ministerial task team appointed to develop a support and funding model (DHET 2016). In this regard, the CEHET recommended that ‘long unclaimed pension benefits’ be used to provide stability to the income-contingent loan scheme of NSFAS (CEHET 2017b: 560).

The eligibility criteria of the NSFAS model have been shown to pose implementation challenges. In fact, in 2010 the ministerial review committee of the NSFAS already reported their observations that the formula applied by NSFAS appeared to use race as a proxy for poverty, resulting in historically advantaged institutions with affluent black students receiving the same allocation as historically disadvantaged institutions with poor black students (DHET 2010: xiv). The committee subsequently identified the need to apply a suitable means test to identify 'poor students and those from working class backgrounds' (DHET 2010: xxi) as eligible recipients of loans or bursaries. The expected family contribution was suggested as a proxy for poverty. Furthermore, the committee recommended a new funding model consisting of three components, differentiating between poor students and lower-middle-income students (the so-called 'missing-middle' who do not qualify for free education but cannot afford university fees) and two funding aid mechanisms (state subsidisation and an income-contingent loan) (DHET 2010: xxi).

Almost six years after this report by the ministerial review committee, on 13 April 2016 the Minister of Higher Education and Training appointed a ministerial task team to develop a support and funding model for poor and missing-middle students (DHET 2016). While the comprehensive proposals by this task team were also submitted to the CEHET, their proposed blueprint for a new funding model (DHET 2016: 11) did not have an immediate effect on the day-to-day functioning of NSFAS.

A review of the 2017 NSFAS handbook reveals that the recommendations of the ministerial review committee were included in the implementation practices of NSFAS (cf NSFAS 2017). The handbook provides for various eligibility criteria, but this analysis focuses only on the financial eligibility for funding. First-time entering students from the so-called no-fee schools, or recipients of child support grants or disability grants, received full funding with no expected family contribution. For first-time entering students who did not meet these criteria, the financial means test (FMT) was used for assessing their financial eligibility for funding. For this purpose, it is obligatory for parents of students to provide proof of income.

The NSFAS uses two funding instruments: bursaries and loans. A bursary is regarded as financial support to a student that they do not have to repay but may be expected to work back (NSFAS 2017: 8). The second funding instrument is loans, which have to be repaid once a student has exited the university. The student becomes a debtor to NSFAS and has to repay the loan when meeting a pre-determined income threshold. NSFAS loans are therefore income-contingent as repayments are calculated according to the income earned by the

debtor (NSFAS 2017: 8). With regard to students who have graduated but still have debt, the CEHET recommended that income-contingent loans be offered to them (CEHET 2017b: 557).

Furthermore, the CEHET recommended that the role of NSFAS in the funding of university students be replaced by an income-contingency loan, while its funding and support role at TVET colleges be retained (CEHET 2017b: 557). The commission recommended a well-structured and -implemented income-contingent loan system for university students as a model which 'can provide a lasting solution to the funding of higher education tuition fees' (CEHET 2017a: 526) and that the collection and recovery of loans be performed by the South African Revenue Service (SARS) 'in the ordinary course of its duties' (CEHET 2017a: 537). The implication of this proposal was that it was expected of a student to register as a taxpayer on approval of the loan (CEHET 2017a: 554). The proposed model not only took 'the student's circumstances into account', but also ensured the 'sustainability of the system in the long-term' (CEHET 2017a: 551). Furthermore, it 'will result in totally free education for some students who do not, in the course of their careers, reach an income threshold appropriate to a repayment obligation' (CEHET 2017b: 552).

Revised funding policy announced by the President of the Republic of South Africa on 16 December 2017

The president responded on 16 December 2017 to the CEHET report by making a formal announcement of changes in the existing funding policy (Zuma 2017). This announcement of a change in official government policy was made at the 54th national conference of the African National Congress (ANC), therefore a party-political event. An analysis of his statement reveals that some of the changes were in line with the recommendations of the CEHET (2017b), while others were directly opposed to some of the key recommendations. The president accepted the commission's recommendations with regard to the following (Zuma 2017):

- An increase in the subsidy to universities from 0,68% to 1% of the GDP for the years 2018–2022. This increase did not constitute a policy change, but an intention to strengthen the existing NFF policy instrument.
- The definition of 'study costs' to include tuition fee, prescribed study material, meals, accommodation and/or transport. This also did not constitute a policy change but only a re-articulation of the defining attributes of the concept 'study cost' in this specific context.
- Fully subsidised free education and training (through grants and not loans) to all poor and working-class South African students at all public TVET colleges to be phased in from 2018 to 2022. This part of the announcement constituted

a radical change in the existing policy's eligibility criteria with regard to its application in a specific sub-sector of the PSET sector.

- Immediate conversion of already allocated NSFAS packages from loans to 100% grants. This was a logical implication of the above decision.
- The NSFAS would continue to manage and administer student grants at TVET colleges through their student-centred model. This did not constitute a change in the existing policy.
- Prioritisation of the building of new student accommodation and the refurbishment of old accommodation at both universities and TVET colleges, especially at the historically disadvantaged institutions. This constituted a reprioritisation of funding within the existing policy.

Aspects in the president's announcement that were not supported by the commission's recommendations and constituted radical and rapid changes in the existing policy were the following (Zuma 2017):

- No tuition fee increments during the 2018 academic year for university students from households earning up to ZAR600 000. This decision was taken as a consequence of the decision to increase subsidies to universities.
- A new definition of 'poor and working-class students' to include all 2018 enrolled PSET students from South African households with a combined annual income cap of ZAR350 000. This announcement constituted a rapid change in the funding implications of the existing policy instruments, with the financial implication of an additional ZAR57 billion per annum, equal to 4,3% of the government's expenditure (Habib 2019: 181).
- Fully subsidised (grants and not loans) public university education for poor and working-class South African undergraduate students (to be phased in from 2018 with first-year students). This part of the announcement implied free education to poor and working-class students and therefore a rapid change in the existing policies. With regard to this part of the announcement, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand held the view that the country did not have 'sufficient resources in state coffers to implement comprehensive, free higher education for both universities and TVET colleges' (Habib 2019: 181).
- NSFAS would continue to manage and administer student grants at universities through their student-centred model. This decision constituted a continuation of the status quo.

The president did not respond to the commission's recommendations regarding an income-contingent loan scheme with the possibility of SARS being responsible

for the loan's recovery. However, considering that the core of the president's policy announcement is free higher education (through NSFAS grants) to students meeting the adapted eligibility criteria, income-contingent loans as policy instruments have, by implication, been discontinued.

The policy solution stream of this specific case developed systematically, gradually, rationally and incrementally over a period of more than 20 years. Both the NFF and the NSFAS policy instruments were applied during most of this period, with only minor changes in the variables of their constituent formulae and implementation procedures. Even though these two instruments have been evaluated and scrutinised by several bodies (committees, task teams, and commissions), they have remained relatively intact. However, the announcement of the policy changes on 16 December 2017 has proven to cause a rapid change in the existing policy solution streams. In the political stream – a relatively separate and independent stream – the developments were perhaps less rational and evidently much more intense.

Political stream towards availability and access

The political stream consists of the power actors and stakeholders inside and outside the traditional political and bureaucratic environments, competing to get their frame of the policy problem on the policy agenda, but also competing to get their choice of policy solution accepted in a policy statement and decision (Howlett 2019: 419). It can be assumed that political actors in this stream each have their own distinct motives for competing for the attention of policy agendas and for turning their proposed solution into official policy (Cairney & Jones 2016: 40). The political stream of this case is explored briefly for the few years preceding the rapid policy change which was announced on 16 December 2017. This exploration was an attempt to understand the rapid change in a long-term rational policy process. The political stream consisted of more than the traditional party-political role-players; it also included actors and events such as student bodies and student protests who were not allied to any political party.

Student protests appeared to start at the University of Cape Town early in 2015. They were not explicitly linked to the fees issue, but they were part of a 'student, staff and worker movement mobilising against institutional white supremacist capitalist patriarchy for the complete decolonization of UCT' (Prinsloo 2016: 164). These activities inspired similar groups at historically white universities such as the University of Stellenbosch, Rhodes University and the University of the Witwatersrand. Most of this unrest was instigated by issues related to fees and access to NSFAS funding (therefore eligibility problems) (CEHET 2017b: 9); they were therefore about 'access to equal and quality education' and 'to those

opportunities through which we can improve our lives and those of our loved ones' (Disemelo 2015: 2).

These protests were interpreted by some scholars as instances of 'a very specific social responsibility', namely, 'the creation of a critical and democratic citizen' with the implication of 'holding the state accountable for its action or non-action and making political choices that advance social justice' (Kotze 2015: 2). It has been reported that internal competition for so-called victories within these movements emerged (Duncan 2016: 3). These protest movements were therefore political, but not party-political movements 'that brought students together regardless of political party affiliations' (Kotze 2015 :2). Research conducted during this period revealed students' distrust of formal political mechanisms (Graham 2017: 2), which accounts for their participation in these protest movements. This specific dimension of a political stream has been described as 'a new historical vector for mass power and democratisation from below' (Satgar 2016: 4).

The influence of these protests on the realisation of the urgent need for a change in policy cannot be underestimated. In fact, the Universities South Africa (USAf) and the University Council Chairs Forum (UCCF) were deeply concerned about the disruptive effect of the unrest, specifically as it became evident that a large number of qualifying students had not received their NSFAS funding because of the NSFAS shortfall (CEHET 2017b: 10). In addition to the student protests, their representative bodies, being the South African Union of Students (SAUS) and the South African Students' Congress (SASCO), made formal submissions and presentations to the CEHET (2017b: 16, 19).

With regard to the mainstream political process, the president, the Minister of Higher Education and Training and several other ministers and deputy-ministers met with representatives of USAf and the UCCF on 6 October 2015 (CEHET 2017b: 10), indicating high-level political involvement. However, the protesting students joined forces with the labour movement for a protest at parliament in Cape Town on 21 October 2015. This was organised to coincide with another political event, namely, the medium-term budget speech of the Minister of Finance (CEHET 2017b: 12–13). These protests were supported in parliament by the Economic Freedom Front (EFF) whose members delayed the minister's speech with a demand that the fee issue and increases should be debated first. Moreover, students called for the resignation of the Minister of Higher Education and Training (CEHET 2017b: 12–13). As articulated by the CEHET, these events confirmed that 'all funding decisions are political in nature' (CEHET 2017b: 541). The actual announcement of the policy change on 16 December 2017 was a strong political event as the announcement was made at the ANC conference,

and was made by the departing leader of that party just before the highly contested election of his successor.

RETROSPECTIVE SENSE-MAKING

The multiple-streams approach applied in this study in the main revealed three perspectives of this instance of rapid policy change: problem, solution and politics. In an attempt to make sense of the rapid and radical change in the South African government's higher education funding policy, as described in this article, the critical juncture theoretical lens was applied. The questions posed as part of this process of retrospective sense-making were informed by the work of Kickert (2011: 802), who identified the defining attributes of critical junctures as critical pressures, key actors and definitive consequences. For the purposes of this study, the announcement of the rapid and radical policy change on 16 December 2017 was selected as a critical juncture in this narrative.

Within the problem stream, the change in government and the adoption of the new Constitution in 1996 represents a definite first critical juncture. This event followed growing internal and external pressure, involved key actors inside and outside the negotiation processes and had definite consequences. The consequence for the higher education sector and for South African society at large was the articulation of a policy problem: how to make higher education 'through reasonable measures ... progressively available and accessible' (RSA 1996: s 29(1)). During that time, this constitutional problem statement appeared to be directly aligned to international views, namely, that those measures should focus on factors obstructing availability and access other than 'merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance and devotion, showed by those seeking access' (UNESCO 1998: 22). In the South African context, the core obstructing factor was identified as a lack of funding. This obstacle to the government's commitment to free higher education for the poor was emphasised in the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training in 2013 (DHET 2013c: xiv). However, a commitment to removing this obstacle has been the guiding principle of all rational and incremental interventions in higher education policy, which led to the announcement of the policy change on 16 December 2017. The announcement constituted a change from a progressive or incremental approach to an immediate approach. In this way it became the second critical juncture, and the core focus of this study. Because this study was confined to documentary sources and did not involve interviews with key role-players in the runup to the 16 December 2017 policy change, it is still not clear what the considerations leading to the announcement were.

The literature (Kickert 2011: 802, 814–815; Howlett 2019: 415, 421) revealed that critical junctures result from external pressures or shocks. The build-up of these pressures may be slow, incremental and cumulative, involving a series of causal chains leading to the threshold of radical change being surpassed at a specific moment (Kickert 2011: 804). To make sense of this case, it is necessary to understand this build-up process and the roles of specific actors. In this particular case, instances of increased pressures on the policy solution stream included student protests about fees, especially access of the missing-middle to NSFAS funding, that commenced in 2015. While the funding problem of the missing-middle was identified earlier in NSFAS annual reports (NSFAS 2013, 2014) and by several commissions, committees or task teams (DHET 2010, 2013a, 2014b), the student protests increased the pressure for an urgent solution. This was evident from the president's meeting with key higher education role-players in October 2015, his subsequent appointment of the CEHET (2017b) in January 2016 and the appointment of the ministerial task team in April 2016 to develop a support and funding model for poor and missing-middle students (DHET 2016). The reports of the last two investigations revealed yet again the complexity of the problem – maximum access in the context of limited funding. In fact, the political pressure showed that the time for introducing progressive availability and access had lapsed and that the expectation was for immediate availability and accessibility.

It is also evident from the literature that a critical juncture constitutes a major or radical ideational change preceding the actual policy change (Kickert 2011: 802; Donnelly & Hogan 2012: 324; Howlett et al 2016: 287); it is therefore necessary to understand the essence of the ideational change and its subsequent influence on the policy change. In this case, the ideational change relates directly to three issues, that is, the reasonableness of free higher education, the nature of the funding interventions and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for determining beneficiaries. While the constitutional obligation has a clear requirement with regard to the reasonability of measures, and since all the policy-solution processes up to 2017 were focused on finding reasonable solutions to the availability and access problem, the policy decision preceding the announcement of 16 December 2017 implies an ideational change from reasonable measures as unpacked by the various submissions to and reports by the ministerial task team (DHET 2016) and the Commission of Enquiry (CEHET 2017b). This ideational change relates specifically to the reasonableness and affordability of the revised policy instruments.

The literature furthermore reveals that a critical juncture is also progressively irreversible in nature (Awortwi 2011: 352). This irreversibility of the policy change led to the opening up of opportunities for radical reform (Kickert 2011:

814). It is therefore necessary to determine whether this policy change could be regarded as irreversible and whether it in fact resulted in radical reforms of NSFAS. The irreversibility of this announcement is evident from the statement by Minister Naledi Pandor, the new Minister of Higher Education and Training, that although the timing of the former president's announcement was a surprise, it was not a mistake, as an inter-ministerial task team had discussed its content at an earlier stage (Habib 2019: 174–175). The minister continued by describing the subsequently revised 2018 budget as 'a decisive response to calls for free education' (Pandor 2018: 3) with a 30% increase in university subsidies, a 100% increase in NSFAS funding and a 45% increase in the funding of TVET colleges. Therefore, the 16 December 2017 announcement became official government policy and was implemented with immediate effect.

This announcement indeed constituted a critical juncture in the problem, solution and politics streams of higher education funding in South Africa, a juncture that irreversibly changed the direction of this policy. This instance of a complex public policy makes sense when the multiple-streams approach and the included critical junctures theory are applied. It confirms that although complex public policy processes may be guided by strong, over-arching problem goals and informed by diverse rational policy actors, political power and dynamics ultimately determine the direction of policy renewal and policy implementation.

Whereas the South African constitutional obligation (RSA 1996: s 27(1)(b)) is closely aligned to a similar meritorious right included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (UN General Assembly 1948: art 26(1)), it also shares the same practical implementation challenges of making that right simultaneously available, accessible and meritorious (UN General Assembly 1948: art 26(1)). This case study is an example of a government's continuing struggle with the practical implications of a constitutional obligation. This narrative illustrates the complexity and difficulty of introducing and implementing viable policy instruments to make further education 'through reasonable measures, ... progressively available and accessible' (RSA 1996: s 29(1)), especially in the South African context.

This case study of an instance of a rapidly changed public policy contributes a South African perspective to the literature related to the multiple-streams approach. It also contributes to the discourse on the critical junctures theory of public policy and public-policy change by applying these theoretical approaches to making sense of a South African and therefore an African instance of policy change. This study does not provide final answers to the complex nature of this specific instance of the policy process. Further studies, involving some of the key role-players in this process as research participants, will shed more light on this intriguing case.

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Chapter 8

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Chapter 9

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