

Education

Student funding scheme changes lives; it's too important to fail



EDUCATION MATTERS
Bongekile Macupe

Last week, the minister of higher education, science and innovation, Blade Nzimande, published a notice in the *Government Gazette* calling for people to be nominated to serve on the board of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

By law Nzimande has to appoint 13 members to serve on the board, and the nominations being called for are for four members to make up the 18-member board that is to serve for four years.

Just like many black South African's who came from poor and working class families who did not

have the means to pay for their tertiary education, I too, I am a beneficiary of NSFAS.

My mother worked as a cleaner and would have not been able to pay for my university studies even if she wanted to.

I was able to go to university because my father, a teacher, stretched his salary between me and my siblings and managed to see me through university for the first semester of my first year. In the second semester I got funding from the NSFAS, which continued until I completed my studies. Had it not been the intervention of NSFAS I doubt my father would have managed to see me through my studies.

My story is not unique. Many black South Africans have a similar story to mine — and worse. But we were

fortunate to have had a lifeline from NSFAS.

It is through the funding that some, like myself, were able to build homes for our families and move out of backrooms and shacks. People have been able to change the living conditions of their younger siblings and provide them with better opportunities than they had. That is the effect NSFAS has had on many lives.

It is with this background in my mind that I say NSFAS deserves solid leaders who will see it continue to change the lives of millions of South Africans who were not born into privilege and without NSFAS would have never seen the doors of higher education institutions.

For years the scheme has been marred with controversy. Some previous chief executives left the scheme

under a cloud. Three years ago the scheme announced the sudden resignation of Msulwa Daka. This meant that the chairperson of the board, Sizwe Nxasana, had to run the whole show. But Nxasana also resigned and Steven Zwane was appointed as chief executive. But he was suspended after just 10 months in the job.

Naledi Pandor, then the minister of higher education, appointed an administrator, Randall Carolissen, to bring stability to NSFAS because the scheme was falling in its mandate. For example, students were going for months without receiving their allowances. NSFAS is now in the process of appointing a new chief executive and a board.

It is my wish — as a NSFAS beneficiary — that the scheme is led by selfless women and men who will

not lose sight of the crucial role the scheme plays in this country.

We need a NSFAS that is run effectively and efficiently to serve the poor and working class young people who want to change their lives through education.

Whoever gets to serve in these critical positions, whoever gets to put up their hand to serve on the board, must never lose sight of how important an institution NSFAS is. We need people who are going to lead a NSFAS that is not going to be in the spotlight for maladministration, fraud and incompetence, which overshadows the good that the scheme does. We really need and deserve a NSFAS that works.

Again, NSFAS is too much of an important institution to be left in the hands of people whose heart is not it.

Children will learn under lockdown

Just what they'll learn or be taught will be outside the curriculum, which may have to happen later

COMMENT

Elizabeth Henning

If a student in any programme, at whatever level, does not work on the curriculum, it is a given that there will be a loss of learning. In the long summer holidays in the United States, this is known colloquially as the "summer slump". It is inevitable that, around the world, there will be a pandemic slump. It is not easy to make peace with that.

What all the partners in the education project worldwide have learned is still to be established. My guess is that we have learned a lot.

Yes, it is hard to search for hopeful signs that the children and youth have not lost out on learning during the lockdowns necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is as hard not to fall into a state of depression and cynicism about the state of learning today. Yet, recent research has shown that one way of addressing this scary reality, is to get facts. Timeous research is crucial.

An example of such timeous action during the past four months has been the rapid response of the group of researchers led by Nic Spaull, of the Research on Socioeconomic Policy group at Stellenbosch University. At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, they immediately started an inquiry. They wanted to find out what has been happening in the daily lives of a sample of 7 000 households.

As a researcher who is used to small scale studies and extended

In the era of open science, that is what we should seek to do.

In one of their future rounds of telephonic interviews with the sample of participants, I hope they will ask families how much time has been spent on the children's schoolwork at home. I assume that little may have been done at homes where there has not been enough food on the table. I find it hard to imagine how children who are hungry, with other family members who may also be hungry, would find the strength to attend to schoolwork. The curriculum has probably not been on the table.

So, I started asking my postgraduate students about this issue during our many Zoom and WhatsApp video chats. (This is the way dissertation and thesis supervision are conducted these days.) Most of my students are teachers. They all say that they don't expect families to have coped with the brief of continuing with the school curriculum at home — not even a semblance of it, some said.

I assume that learning loss will be real. Of course, middle class families with adequate internet connection and with tech devices, along with adult supervision, plus enough food on the table, do not fall in the same category of learning loss. Some such privileged young learners may even have benefited from being self-regulating and being personally responsible for their online progress.

Some online tutoring is truly excellent. I see this with primary

more than enough food on their family tables.

The learning loss for children who are not connected, and who may go hungry on some days, is a different matter. The rising curve of their loss is real and steep. For families with no additional learning material, except the worksheets and other teacher artefacts that schools may have sent home with children in March, learning according to the curriculum is unlikely to have progressed much.

The schools I know sent material, prepared rather hurriedly, home with their learners. The teachers were hopeful that it would mitigate the learning loss.

Still, there is no way of knowing what transpired in the minds of millions of schoolgoers until we eventually see what they have retained and what they have added to their knowledge when we get to post-pandemic times. Certainly when there are more than

ing drive to learn and to solve problems and to withstand challenges. That is why we evolved in the way we did. Yuval Harari, the author of *Sapiens, Homo Deus* and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, wrote about how we, the *Homo sapiens*, became the thinking species. Being the thinkers on the planet, we are also strongly inclined to teach.

According to a leading cognitive neuroscientist, Stanislas Dehaene, we are the irrepressible teaching species — the *Homo docens*. Humans have a drive to teach, whether we are professional teachers, a grandfather with children around him in a village or a grandmother standing in as a locum at a daycare centre in town.

In families and communities, curriculum-based teaching itself may have come to a halt, but who knows what everyday learning may have taken place. Just learning about how to conduct ourselves during the pandemic is a continuous learning experience; in households, family members teach one another

Those are skills that machines cannot yet give us. In his new book, *How We Learn: Why Brains Learn Better than any Machine ... for Now*, Dehaene makes the case for understanding the miracle of the human brain for education purposes. He emphasises the plasticity of the brain, especially in children. The capacity for cerebral adaptation is unlimited. But human brains consist of more than the cerebral cortex.

In some way then, children may be able to catch up what they have lost in curriculum learning over time and with good planning by their teachers and school management teams. I bet that what they have learned about living in harmony in hard times, will be one of their prized learning outcomes when they look back on their childhood and youth.

The flattening of the learning loss curve will happen at some point, but with this may come a rise in the curve about how to be a good human.

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