



# Factors that Influence Changes in State Funding and Their Implications for Student Access: The Case of the University of the Western Cape

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**Abstract:** This study examines factors influencing the changes in public funding and their implications for student access under fluctuations in public funding at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. Underpinned by resource dependence theory, the study uses a qualitative methodology via in-depth interviewing of eleven participants and documentary analysis to gather data to explore the study's objective. Higher education funding has been a challenge in South Africa. Between 2015 and 2016, widespread protests brought national attention to issues surrounding declining public funding and high student fees. The #FeesMustFall movement, which advocated for free higher education, resulted in the temporary shutdown of numerous universities, a suspension of fee increases, and the establishment of a Presidential Commission in 2016 tasked with proposing future funding strategies for students. This study explores factors influencing the changes in public funding and their implications for student access at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). These factors include the state of the national economy, competing needs of the various sectors of the economy, low prioritization of higher education, and overspending in election years, which have had some implications for student access.

**Keywords:** public funding, accessibility, factors, changes, public university, South Africa.  
**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by examining factors that influence changes in state funding and their implications for student access at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. It offers new insights into higher education funding and enhances understanding of student access.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

University education is indispensable for training a skilled workforce, promoting innovation, driving national economic growth, and fostering social mobility by expanding access to knowledge and opportunities for personal and professional advancement (Latif, 2025). Thus, the pivotal role of university education in national development has compelled governments in both developed and developing countries to invest in higher education (Ali, 2025). For example, in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, as of the 2024/25 financial year, the government spent approximately £4.5 billion on higher education, a significant decline from the £7.2 billion allocated in the previous year (Clark, 2025).

In Africa, governments, in their quest to make their university education financially viable, also allocate part of their national budget to higher education. For example, in 2025, the Ghanaian parliament allocated approximately GH¢31 billion to the education sector, which includes universities (Appiah-Osei, 2025). These investments appear to be strategically aimed at expanding higher education access as a catalyst for national development. Consequently, public higher education institutions have traditionally relied on financial support from national governments to expand student access to university education (Appiah-Osei, 2025). Thus, public funding for higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping the capacity of higher education institutions and student access sustainability (Kwasi-Agyeman, 2025).

In South Africa, where historical inequalities continue to influence access to higher education, changes in government funding policies have profound implications for institutional capacity and student

inclusion (Mabizela & Mthembu, 2025). Public funding for higher education in South Africa is in a state of real-term decline, with serious implications for institutional sustainability, student access, and national development goals (Mabizela & Mthembu, 2025). In the 2025\26 fiscal year, the South African government allocated approximately R116.4 billion to university education (National Treasury, 2025). Meanwhile, as of 2025, South Africa has approximately 1.7 million students enrolled in higher education institutions (Monzon, 2025).

This study examines the factors that influence fluctuations in public funding and their effects on student access at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Adequate financial resources are essential for expanding opportunities for students from low-income backgrounds to access education. Therefore, it is important to explore the factors that drive changes in financial resources to understand the reasons behind these shifts and how they affect variations in student access. I analyze these factors using resource dependence theory's argument that both internal and external factors influence changes in organizational resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recent analyses emphasize that adequate funding is a prerequisite for equitable access to higher education, as financial constraints disproportionately affect disadvantaged students (Ayam, 2024). Research on student access highlights multiple barriers that impede entry into higher education from secondary school and continue to affect students throughout their academic journey (Pace, 2025). The concept of 'barrier' is frequently defined in terms of students' inability to afford tuition fees, a constraint that disproportionately affects those from low-income backgrounds and limits equitable access to higher education (Pace, 2025). In practice, barriers to higher education extend beyond financial constraints, encompassing factors such as students' limited academic preparedness, inadequate information about the benefits of higher education, low educational expectations and aspirations, insufficient support for educational planning, competing family responsibilities, and personal uncertainties—all of which have been shown to restrict access and progression (Venit, 2025). The literature underscores that these challenges are closely tied to students' socio-economic backgrounds, as limited financial resources not only constrain their preparedness but also restrict access to information about application procedures and the fulfilment of enrolment requirements (Venit, 2025).

In a related argument, defining student access primarily through financial trends highlights persistent inequalities in higher education, particularly for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Ayam, 2024). Financial barriers extend beyond tuition fees to include costs associated with entrance examinations, which are often administered at university faculties and impose additional expenses for transportation and accommodation—burdens that disproportionately affect students from rural areas (Gupta et al., 2025). Furthermore, when student access is examined through the lens of retention, financial difficulties such as the introduction or escalation of tuition fees frequently contribute to dropout rates (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2024). In contrast, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are better positioned to absorb these costs and compete for limited spaces, thereby reinforcing structural inequities in access (Gupta et al., 2025).

Using the analysis of the financial barriers in another dimension, scholars argue that one of the most pressing obstacles to student access in low-income countries is the limited capacity of public universities, coupled with rising instructional costs (Ministry of Finance, 2025). Addressing these constraints requires adequate financial resources to expand institutional space and sustain student access. The literature further emphasizes that the financial challenge confronting higher education is global in scope: even flagship universities struggle to remain viable as the sector experiences persistent annual increases in operational and instructional costs, thereby intensifying inequalities in access and retention (Gupta et al., 2025).

The rising costs of higher education are largely attributed to increases in academic staff wages and salaries, which constitute a significant portion of instructional expenditure (Asamoah & Ansong, 2025). Sustaining student access, therefore, necessitates corresponding growth in institutional budgets, yet such financial commitments are often unmet or delayed (Asamoah & Ansong, 2025). The literature further notes that, in response to fiscal constraints, universities frequently adopt management measures such as staff downsizing and capping enrolments (OECD, 2025). While intended to preserve

institutional viability, these strategies disproportionately disadvantage students from low-income families (OECD, 2025). Those most affected by exclusion include rural populations, ethnically marginalized groups, and the poor, thereby reinforcing existing socio-economic inequalities in access to higher education (Venit, 2025).

Globally, access to higher education and the chances of completing it are heavily affected by socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and race. Evidence shows that even before tuition fees became widespread, students from low-income families faced disproportionate challenges with living expenses and additional study costs such as books and materials, compared to their higher-income peers (OECD, 2025). In contrast, students from wealthy families are better able to use higher education opportunities to further their studies, often securing spots at flagship and prestigious universities (Gupta, Yadav & Dadhich, 2025). Comparative studies across fifteen countries further confirm that people from wealthy households have significant advantages in accessing higher education, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds are often excluded systematically (UNESCO, 2025). Additionally, inequalities tied to socio-economic status are worsened by increases in tuition fees, with funding options strategically favoring elite families who can more easily absorb rising costs (Asamoah & Ansong, 2025; Venit, 2025).

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Jeffrey Pfeffer, the American business theorist, and Gerald R. Salancik, the American organizational theorist, developed resource dependence theory in the year of 1978 at Stanford University (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). The contribution of Gerry Salancik in the field of organizational studies helped to develop the theory further. The first significant work concerning resource dependence theory was a book published by Pfeffer and Salancik in 1978. The title of the book is “The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective”. The first principle is that there is a need for organizations to acquire resources to survive. Resource dependence theory postulates that the behaviors of organizations (for example, universities) are influenced by the existence of external resources upon which the organization depends for survival (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). To ascertain the resources that an organization needs, one must look for the essential resources in the organization’s environment. South African universities, such as the University of the Western Cape, depend on external resources (public funding) for survival. The literature on organizational theory highlights that reliance on essential resources significantly shapes institutional actions, with particular dependency situations often explaining strategic and managerial decisions. Resource dependence theory (RDT) posits that organizations are not autonomous but are constrained by the external environment, and their survival depends on securing and maintaining access to critical resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). To understand organizational behavior, therefore, it is necessary to identify which resources are most vital—whether financial, human, or informational—as these determine patterns of adaptation, negotiation, and power relations (Hillman, Withers & Collins, 2009).

A particular resource may only represent a tiny part of total resource needs, but it is vital or essential if the missing or the lack of that resource endangers or threatens the ability of the organization to function or survive (Hillman, Withers & Collins, 2009). For example, without public funding, can the University of the Western Cape perform its teaching and learning, research, and community engagement functions, and sustain student access? The criticality, magnitude, or amount of a resource defines its importance and significance to a particular organization’s survival (Etomaru et al., 2016). For instance, changes in resources available to the University of the Western Cape may determine changes in the number of students to be enrolled.

In short, the University of the Western Cape requires substantial resources to expand student access. Effective provision of access depends on the availability of lecture halls, residential facilities, qualified lecturers, laboratories, and, most critically, financial resources. Financial capacity is the essential resource, as it enables universities to acquire and maintain all other forms of infrastructure and support; without it, institutional survival is jeopardized. Although public universities such as UWC already possess these resources, the persistent challenge lies in their inadequacy relative to growing demand. Public funding has therefore remained the most crucial form of support, yet allocations have consistently proven insufficient to sustain expansion and ensure equitable student access (DHET, 2024).

The theory postulates that Organizations cannot continue to exist if they are not attentive to the changing environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). This implies that resource dependence theory is mainly premised on relations with the external surroundings. It presumes there is an environmental influence. As such, the best way to manage an organization is contingent on the nature of the environment to which the organization relates. Scholars in strategic management and organization theory have long documented the vital role that organizational environment plays in influencing changes in resources (Cannon & St John, 2007). The environment includes forces, entities, economic conditions, societal pressure, associations, customer-supplier relationships, competitive relationships, social, legal apparatus, and institutions surrounding an organization that influence the performance, operations, choices, and resources, which decide its prospects and define the threats of an organization (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). In many African countries, national governments have been the single source of the external environment, financing public higher education (Wangenge-Ouma, 2007).

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this article, the research employs the use of qualitative research methodology. Bryman (2016) posits that qualitative research is a research strategy that emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection of data. To that effect, a combination of in-depth interviews and document reviews was undertaken at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (Department of Higher Education and Training is one of the departments of the South African government, which oversees universities and other post-secondary institutions). In all, nine participants were interviewed from the University of the Western Cape, and two participants from the Department of Higher Education and Training were also interviewed, making in total of eleven participants. These participants were carefully chosen as interviewees for this study. These interviewees were purposively selected because the researcher needed participants who had in-depth knowledge and information about higher education funding and student access at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Rubin and Rubin (2005), for example, underscore that to secure the reliability of research, the researcher should interview people who understand and have deeper information on the issue. Rubin and Rubin (2005) believe that the credibility of interviews depends on the knowledgeability of the interviewees or participants of the study. This means having an interviewee with different perspectives is an added advantage to the richness and quality of information collected.

The following participants were interviewed: Rector and Vice Chancellor; Deputy Vice Chancellor Student Support and Administration; Deputy Registrar Academic and Administration; Executive Director of Finance and Services; Director of Quality Assurance and Management of Information; Manager 1 Student Enrolment Management Unit; Manager 2 Student Enrolment Management Unit; Head of Student Credit Management Unit; President of Student Representative Council (SRC); Chief Director University Planning and Institutional Funding-DHET; Chief Director Institutional Governance and Management Support-DHET.

Purposefully, the researcher identified and interviewed these participants based on the following criteria:

- a. These participants have actively been involved in the funding and access decision-making processes at the University of the Western Cape.
- b. Participants know the challenges facing the University of the Western Cape, and especially problems associated with funding and student access.

The purpose of this was to gather rich information that illuminates the research questions for the study. As noted by Patton (2017), the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for the study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry.

Document analysis is seen as one of the essential approaches to getting information in the framework of a qualitative study. The review of documents covered a wide range of topics, including the cost of accessing university education, organizational behavior, reform aims, funding challenges, financial sustainability, factors affecting public funding, and key actors involved in higher education funding and student access. This study exploited countless documents, reports, and information relating to the financing of higher education in South Africa. Documents collected for this study include official

government publications, educational policy reports; annual reports, and strategic plans of the university; budget statements; Ministerial Statement on University Funding; Ministerial Statement on student enrolment planning. Having access to and understanding documents on the research topic expands the richness of information for qualitative study, and learning to use, study, and understand documents and files is part of the stock of skills needed for qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002).

## **5. UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE (UWC)**

The University of the Western Cape (UWC), with its legacy of resistance and transformation, offers a compelling case study for examining factors that influence changes in public funding and their implication for student access. UWC was established as a university for Colored students during apartheid, but became a center of resistance. Its mission has long focused on social justice, inclusion, and redress, making it a symbolic and practical site for studying access-related policies. UWC is classified as a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI), facing persistent underfunding, which makes it a critical lens for evaluating the adequacy and impact of public funding mechanisms. From 2018\19 to 2024\25, UWC has shown steady student enrolment growth, despite funding constraints (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024). This allows for analysis of how funding levels affect capacity, quality, and access (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024).

## **6. FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION**

This section examines factors affecting changes in public funding at UWC. According to resource dependence theory, the key to the organization's continued existence is the ability to obtain and maintain resources, but environmental conditions can change the trend of resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Slaughter and Leslie (1997) studied resource allocations to universities and examined factors responsible for fluctuations in the allocations. In what follows, the specific issues of factors influencing changes in public funding and their implications for student access at the University of the Western Cape are discussed in turn with data from the study.

### **6.1. Factors that Influence Changes in Public Funding and Their Implications for Student Access at the University of the Western Cape**

As the researcher reviewed the trend in public funding at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa, six elements emerged as the main contributing factors for the changes in public funding. These factors included the state of the national economy; competing needs of various sectors of the economy; low prioritization of the higher education sector; a systematic funding formula; a link between sectoral planning and budgeting; and overspending in election years.

#### **6.2. State of the National Economy**

Analysis of recent developments in the South African national economy presents a gloomy picture. As discussed by Statistics South Africa (2018; 2022;2023;2024), Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at 0.3 percent in 2019, a decrease from 0.8 percent in 2018. GDP further plummeted to negative 6.2 percent in 2020. In 2021, the economy grew at 4.9 percent, which was an increase from the previous year. However, this increase was short-lived as the GDP decreased to 2.1 percent in 2022. 2023 saw a GDP growth rate of 0.7 percent, which is a reduction from the previous year of 2.1 percent. In 2024, the economy further declined to a GDP growth of 0.6 percent. The economy is estimated to grow at 1.5 percent in 2025 (Trading Economics, 2025). According to OECD (2025), economic growth has averaged only 0.7 percent per year over the past decade, below that of the population, resulting in declining GDP per capita. The fiscal deficit stayed high at negative 4.9 percent in 2024, and rose from negative 4.55 percent in 2023, as the country continued to face revenue shortfalls due to slow economic growth (National Treasury, 2025).

From the analysis above, South Africa is suffering from low economic growth, which places a constraint on tax revenue growth. On the other hand, reflecting on the relationship between the

state of the economy and public funding of higher education, a participant noted the following during an in-depth interview:

The economic conditions of the country do not allow the government to be consistent in funding higher education institutions. The fluctuations in public funding over the years have been mainly due to the fragile economic situation in the country. The economy is unable to support all the sectors equally. The government must adjust here and there, and the higher education sector seems to be most affected. Therefore, the study concludes that fluctuations in public funding to UWC are responsive to structural changes in the economy. This is in line with resource dependence theory’s argument that state funding of public universities is a function of the economic environment of countries, and any changes in the economy may affect government allocations to the universities (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

**6.3. Competing Needs of Various Sectors of the Economy**

The decreases in public funding and the difficulty in keeping up with the increasing costs of higher education generally are due to competing needs of the various sectors of the economy, both within the education sector (primary and secondary education) and outside the sector (infrastructure, public health, housing, social welfare, and other government functions) (Johnstone, 2009). This is consistent with what is happening in South Africa, as the government is unable to meet all the expenditure demands of the universities, including the University of the Western Cape, due to the competing needs of about ten main sectors. That said, public resources are limited, and higher education is but one sector for government consideration in South Africa. Given limited government revenue, the state remains financially constrained and cannot readily increase funding to higher education institutions to adequately meet their expenditure needs (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024). This phenomenon was captured in the following response:

Managing the government's various needs involves setting priorities and allocating resources accordingly. Resources are often scarce, while goals are large, and the government can meet only a few of the corresponding needs. Higher education is one sector competing with others in the South African economy.

The government contends that higher education funding must be weighed against other sectoral priorities, notably social justice initiatives such as the planned National Health Insurance System and the Reconstruction and Development Housing Program, both of which carry significant social implications and remain central political commitments (National Treasury, 2025). Table 1 below shows the competing sectors of the South African economy.

**Table 1.** *Public Expenditures by Sector, 2016/17*

<b>SECTOR</b>	<b>EXPENDITURE (ZAR)</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
Basic Education	228.8bn	15.6%
Economic Affairs	212.0bn	14.5%
Human Settlement and Municipal Infrastructure	182.6bn	12.5%
Defense, Public Order and Safety	181.5bn	12.4%
Health	168.4bn	11.5%
Debt Service Cost	147.7 bn	10.1%
General Public Services	73.7bn	5.0%
Post-School Education and Training	68.7bn	4.7%
Agriculture, Rural Dev and Land Reform	26.4bn	1.8%

Source: University of the Witwatersrand, 2016

Table 1 shows public allocations to the various sectors of the economy. As it is shown, the South African government has to divide the inadequate financial resources available among the different sectors of the economy. This means that higher education institutions, including UWC, cannot be allocated a constant flow of financial resources. From Table 1, Basic Education received the highest funding from the government with ZAR 228.8bn, constituting 15.6 percent. The last but one position was taken by Post-School Education and Training, which includes universities with ZAR 68.7bn, and 4.7 percent. The study finds that the fluctuations in public funding of higher education (including UWC) are a reflection of the government’s consideration of other sectors of the economy.

UNESCO (2025) argues that globally, with few exceptions, inter-sectoral competition for government resources results in fluctuating public funding, which often falls short of covering the full costs of higher education provision and limits institutions' capacity to expand student access. In summary, the study finds that the changes in public funding at UWC are partly due to the competing needs of various sectors of the South African economy, limiting the government's ability to meet all the yearly expenditure needs of the institution. This is in line with the resource dependence theory's argument that government funding of public universities suffers from allocations to other sectors of the economy (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

#### **6.4. Low Prioritization of the Higher Education Sector**

The study finds that, in South Africa, the government does not fully appreciate the immense contribution of the universities in terms of economic growth and development; hence, less public funds are allocated to the universities, including the University of the Western Cape. Other sectors, such as health, infrastructure, security, social grants, and secondary schools, receive more attention in terms of funding than higher education institutions. For example, Table 2 below shows the different sectors of the South African economy and government spending.

**Table 2.** *Public Spending by Sector, 2016/17*

<b>SECTOR</b>	<b>EXPENDITURE (ZAR)</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
Basic Education	228.8bn	15.6%
Economic Affairs	212.0bn	14.5%
Human Settlement and Municipal Infrastructure	182.6bn	12.5%
Defense, Public Order and Safety	181.5bn	12.4%
Health	168.4bn	11.5%
Social Protection	167.5bn	11.4%
Debt Service Cost	147.7 bn	10.1%
General Public Services	73.7bn	5.0%
Post-School Education and Training	68.7bn	4.7%
Agriculture, Rural Dev and Land Reform	26.4bn	1.8%

Source: University of the Witwatersrand, 2016

Table 2 shows the ten main sectors of the South African economy and how much each of the sectors received and their percentages in 2016/17. Looking at the allocations, several deductions can be drawn. The most important deduction is that not all the sectors received equal government financial support, and post-school education and training is part of the two sectors that received the least allocation. For example, the most disfavored sectors were Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Reform with ZAR 26.4bn, and 1.8 percent, followed by Post-School Education and Training (including universities) with ZAR 68.7bn, and 4.7 percent. It is also important to know that the sectors that received the highest allocations were Basic Education with ZAR 228.8bn and 15.6 percent, followed by Economic Affairs with ZAR 212.0bn and 14.5 percent. This tells where the government's priorities are, and the government's highest priorities are Basic Education and Economic Affairs. The analysis above confirms the assertion that most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have prioritized pre-tertiary education at the expense of higher education due to the rate of return argument that pre-tertiary education poses more benefits than higher education, thus necessitating the need to invest more in pre-tertiary education than higher education. An interviewee opined on the relationship between the low prioritization of the higher education sector and changes in public funding as follows:

If you go through national budgets, you will see that higher education is one of the sectors that receive less funding from the government. Even Basic Education receives more funding than higher education.

It tells you that higher education is not one of the prioritized sectors of the government, hence downward fluctuations in public funding.

In summary, Pillay (2013:159) argues that:

The case for increased higher education financing has not been helped by the low prioritization of the higher education sector by many African governments. The value of higher education for economic growth and broader social and sustainable development has not yet been fully recognized by African governments.

This assertion agrees with the resource dependence theory's argument that public universities receive low attention from the government when it comes to the allocation of public resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

### **6.5. Overspending in Election Years**

The government of South Africa, along with some African governments, faces tough decisions regarding public spending in election years. The study finds that overspending by the government in election years has contributed to downward changes in public funding at the University of the Western Cape. The following views of a participant illustrate the crux of the matter confronting the UWC because of the government's overspending in election years:

Public expenditure on general elections is also a factor for fluctuations in public funding because government budgets for elections are not yearly expenditure items of the government. Elections are held every five years, and during those years, the government has to allocate money from the consolidated fund to finance the elections. This may reduce total government revenue and subsequently decrease the allocations to universities.

South Africa has suffered some deficits in election years as government spending increases, sometimes causing the government to miss its deficit targets. For example, in 2009, which was an election year, the budget deficit increased from 1 percent of GDP in 2008 to a deficit of 7.6 percent in 2009 (National Treasury, 2010a) against the deficit target of 7.3 percent (National Treasury, 2010b). In the same year, public funding to UWC declined from 17.4 percent in 2008 to 8.8 percent in 2009; however, the decline did not affect student enrolment much, as enrolment increased from 0.98 percent in 2008 to 7.5 percent in 2009 (Kwasi-Agyeman, 2021).

In 2014, another election year, the budget deficit target was 4.0 percent (National Treasury, 2014); however, the actual deficit reached 5.8 percent of GDP (National Treasury, 2015a). At the same time, public funding to UWC reduced from 9.9 percent in 2012 to 8.0 percent in 2014, and student enrolment also decreased substantially from 4.4 percent in 2012 to 0.98 percent in 2014 (Kwasi-Agyeman, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that government overspending in election years reduces public funding, which subsequently affects student enrollment at UWC.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Globally, discussions are ongoing about the system of funding higher education because state funding of higher education institutions has generally been limited. Looking at the data from the University of the Western Cape (UWC), it is clear that there have been changes to public funding. Several factors accounted for the changes. These factors include the state of the national economy, competing needs of the various sectors of the economy, low prioritization of higher education, and overspending in election years, which have had some implications for student access.

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