

Abstract

This research set out to investigate the ideological contributions of the various actors during the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015 and 2016 at the University of the Witwatersrand. The research identified the ideological actors as the student activists, academic staff, University management and the South African government. The research identified the ideological contributors as key towards understanding the social movement ideologies emanating from the movement in a bid to map out the demands, the different approaches to free education and existing contestations within the movement. This highlights the significance of this study as it situates discussions that occurred during the protests on social media under the hashtag #FeesMustFall and interviews with the ideological actors to understand their ideological positions and their desired paths towards social change in higher education in South Africa. The research utilised a case study approach to narrow down the research site to the University of the Witwatersrand. Thematic analysis was conducted on data collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives from the four groups of actors. Additionally, a discourse analysis of tweets from the @WitsFMF Twitter page was conducted. Document analysis was further conducted to understand government positions on free education before, during and after the protests, as well as to understand the student proposal on how to achieve social change in higher education. The research found that there were ideological contestations based on the different interpretations of free education and the position that each actor occupied, which in turn influenced the different solutions that each actor proposed. The study also established that decolonial education played a critical role in achieving social change in higher education and the broader South African society. Furthermore, the study found that there were political contestations within the protests which led to splits in the actor groups, as well as the politicisation of free education. In line with the utilisation of social media by the students, the study found contesting narratives and representations of protests that mirrored existing tensions between protesters, government and broadcasters.