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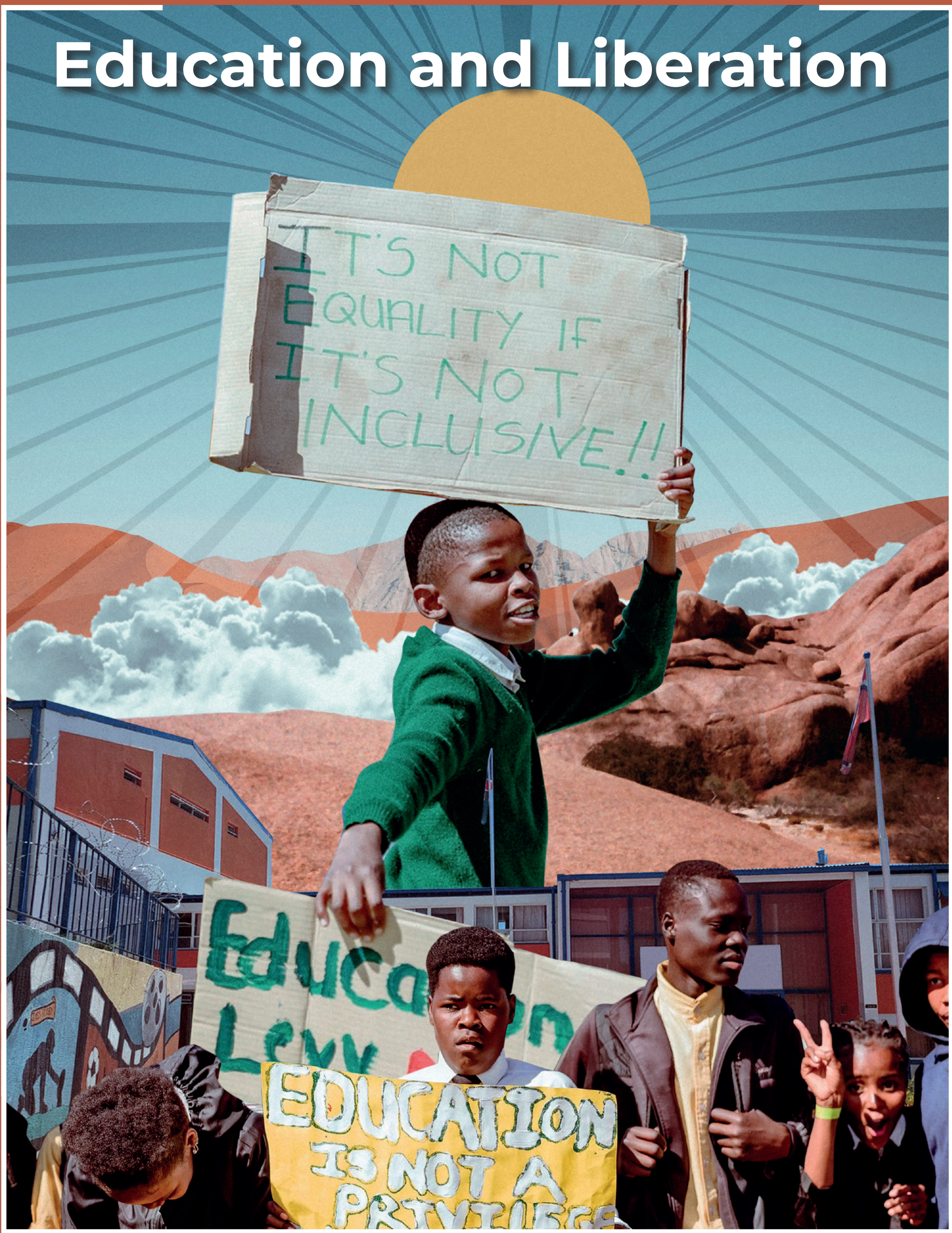

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Dissecting the Subsidised Funding Model in Namibia 2026: Free Registration and the Question of Sustainable Access to Higher Education

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Introduction

The introduction of a subsidised funding model in Namibia's higher education, particularly the abolition of registration fees for qualifying students, marks a significant policy intervention aimed at enhancing access to tertiary education. While the policy resonates with Namibia's constitutional and political commitment to education as a public good, its implementation raises complex financial, institutional, and regulatory questions. This article critically examines the concept of subsidised funding, focussing particularly on free registration, interrogates emerging implementation predicaments, and situates Namibia's approach within comparative international experiences as a partner in a global village.

Access to education as a national ideal

Access to education has long been central to Namibia's post-independence developmental vision. Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution enshrines education as a fundamental right, and successive political leaders have reinforced this principle. Founding President Sam Nujoma asserted that "education is the cornerstone of national development and the most powerful weapon to liberate our people from poverty and ignorance" (Nujoma, 2001). Similarly, former President Hifikepunye Pohamba emphasised that higher education should not become "the privilege of the few, but a right accessible to all capable Namibians" (Pohamba, 2014). Following independence, student bodies played a crucial role in policy dialogue and reforms pertaining to education in Namibia. The slogan in 1989 of the Namibian National Students Organisation (NANSO), for example, was "Education a right, not a privilege". In 2019 the Students Union of Namibia (SUN) was officially launched, with one of its core commitments being to advocate for access to quality education in Namibia.

Against this ideological backdrop, the recent policy decision that public and private universities and colleges should no longer charge registration fees to qualifying students is a bold attempt to dismantle financial barriers at the point of entry into higher education.

The Subsidised Funding Model and Free Registration

In practice, Namibian higher education institutions have ceased charging registration fees to students who meet admission requirements for their primary qualifications at TVET (technical and vocational education and training) institutions, and tertiary education institutions that offer level 6 to 8 qualifications. The state has now committed to covering these costs through direct subsidies. This approach reflects a broader subsidised funding model, where the government assumes part of the financial burden that includes registration and tuition fees traditionally borne by students and households.

However, institutions have simultaneously introduced indemnity forms requiring students and their parents or guardians to acknowledge liability should the government fail to honour future registration payments. This development exposes uncertainty surrounding the sustainability and predictability of state funding, potentially undermining the policy's stated objective of easing financial anxiety among students.

Funding mechanisms: Standardisation or market-based reimbursement?

A central unresolved question concerns how the government will determine the value of registration fees payable to institutions. If reimbursement is based on the actual registration fees charged by each institution, disparities will inevitably arise. Institutions charging higher fees would receive greater subsidies, while those charging lower fees would receive commensurately lower transfers. Such a model may inadvertently incentivise institutions to increase registration fees, resulting in an opportunity cost that contradicts the access-driven rationale of subsidisation.

Alternatively, the government may opt for a standardised registration fee applicable across all institutions. While administratively simpler, this approach would introduce new dilemmas. Institutions whose historic fees exceed the standardised amount may require students to "top up" to cover the difference. Such cost-sharing would effectively reintroduce financial barriers and defeat the philosophical core of subsidised access.

Public institutions and internal variations

Even within the public sector, complexity persists. Namibia's two largest public universities charge different registration fees, reflecting divergent operational costs, strategic priorities, and academic offerings. Should the government benchmark its standardised subsidy against one institution, the other may experience structural underfunding. This highlights the tension between equity, efficiency, and institutional autonomy within subsidised funding frameworks.

Private institutions: Inclusion or marginalisation

The position of private higher education institutions remains equally ambiguous. Now that they are included in the subsidy scheme, critical questions emerge:

- Are private institutions permitted to charge additional registration fees over and above the government subsidy?
- Should their funding be needs-based, performance-based, or aligned with public institutional benchmarks?

International experience suggests that excluding private institutions can limit system-wide access, while including them without regulation risks public funds subsidising profit-driven models (Johnstone, 2018).

Comparative approaches from other countries

Namibia's experiment is not unprecedented. Germany abolished tuition fees in public universities, financing higher education through general taxation, while maintaining strict institutional cost controls (Marginson, 2016). In South Africa, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme covers registration and tuition for qualifying students, but ongoing challenges around delayed payments and institutional debt mirror Namibia's emerging concerns (Badat, 2020). Similarly, Brazil's subsidised public university model emphasises free access but limits enrolment capacity, raising a new set of equity questions.

These cases demonstrate that subsidised funding improves access, but demands robust governance, transparency, and long-term fiscal commitment. These cases demonstrate that while subsidised funding plays a critical role in expanding access to education, particularly for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, it is not a sufficient solution. The effectiveness of such funding is heavily dependent on the presence of robust governance systems that ensure that funds are allocated efficiently, equitably, and for their intended purposes. Without strong oversight mechanisms, subsidised schemes are vulnerable to mismanagement, delays, and corruption, which ultimately undermine their impact on student welfare.

In addition, subsidised funding requires sustained long-term fiscal commitment from the state or relevant authorities. This fiscal commitment entails the consistent allocation of adequate budgetary resources to student support programmes over multiple financial years, rather than reliance on ad hoc or politically contingent funding decisions. It includes ensuring that funding institutions are sufficiently capitalised to meet both tuition and non-tuition obligations, adjusting allocations in line with inflation and rising education costs, and embedding student funding within national development and expenditure frameworks. Furthermore, it involves forward planning, such as multi-year budgeting and contingency provisions, to guarantee continuity of support even in times of economic constraint.

Conversely, inconsistent funding cycles result in irregular, delayed, or unpredictable disbursement of funds to beneficiaries. This may manifest in late payments of allowances, partial disbursements, or sudden interruptions in funding due to administrative inefficiencies, budget shortfalls, or policy shifts. Such inconsistencies create uncertainty for students, as they are unable to reliably plan for essential academic and living expenses throughout the academic year.

These disruptions often exacerbate financial insecurity among students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds who are heavily dependent on such support. Financial insecurity in this context entails the inability to pay for basic needs such as accommodation, food, transportation, learning materials, and digital resources. As a result, students may face heightened stress, resulting in poor academic performance and increased absenteeism, and may risk dropping out altogether. In severe cases, students may resort to precarious coping mechanisms, including taking on unsustainable debt or engaging in informal work that detracts from their studies. Therefore, stability, predictability, and adequacy of funding are crucial to ensuring that subsidised programmes are genuinely supporting student success, rather than inadvertently compounding existing vulnerabilities.

Conclusion and Policy Reflections

This article argues that Namibia's subsidised funding model, particularly free registration, represents a progressive step toward educational justice. However, without a clearly articulated funding formula, the policy risks creating perverse incentives, institutional instability, and hidden costs for students.

A fixed, reasonable per-student registration subsidy, adjusted periodically and linked to enrolment numbers, may offer a balanced solution. Such a model would allow the state to promote access while compelling institutions to reflect critically on whether their fee structures serve educational access or market-oriented objectives. Nevertheless, the realities of a free-market environment cannot be entirely ignored.

Ultimately, the success of Namibia's subsidised funding model will depend not only on political will, but also on sustained public debate, empirical evaluation, and scholarly engagement. The policy must remain open to refinement if it is to fulfil the nation's long-standing promise that access to higher education "is a right, not a privilege".

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