

# #FeesMustFall

*and the 2015/16 student movement  
in popular memory*

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An HSRC survey conducted a decade after the emergence of the Fallist movements shows that #FeesMustFall is the most widely recognised post-apartheid social movement in South Africa. Its call for free, decolonised higher education has firmly taken root in the public imagination; #FeesMustFall's abiding legacy is strikingly evident in the overwhelming 88% of South Africans who endorse some version of free access to university education.




## #FeesMustFall and the 2015/16 student movement in popular memory

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### **Abstract**

In 2015, the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) and #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movements challenged the enduring structures of colonialism at South African universities and the legacy of apartheid. Through student-led activism, they advocated for social justice, the removal of colonial and apartheid-era statues, and for free and inclusive education. Students argued that despite two decades of democracy, universities remained sites of inequality, mirroring broader societal tensions and divisions relating to access to higher education, language, epistemology, and cultures of universities. Relevant literature identifies the #MustFall movements as catalysts in advancing a transformation agenda aimed at the 'Africanisation' or decolonisation of the South African university, while also confronting structural marginalisation, including class and gender disparities, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and so forth.

With 2025 marking the tenth anniversary of the start of the #MustFall movements, this article assesses their legacy by examining public awareness and perceptions using data from the 2025 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Findings show that #FMF remains more recognised than any other movement, with 48% of South Africans aware of it, and 77% of this group at least somewhat knowledgeable. This articulates the lasting legacy that even prevails beyond the bounds of the university, driven by the principle of free education, and finds that the movement has been successful in achieving its goals. As a movement born out of student mobilisation and collective action to lay out the grievances of marginalised students, it still represents a living idea of what free decolonised African higher education is in the memories and expectations of South Africans.

**Keywords:** #MustFall movements; #FMF; #RMF; higher education; social justice; decolonisation; public attitudes; survey



## Introduction

In 2025, we commemorated the tenth anniversary of South African students' calls for free decolonised higher education in the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movements and campaigns. This historical milestone provides an opportunity to reflect on the impacts and enduring significance of the 2015-16 moment in South African higher education and beyond. The South African student movement provoked thinking and action around matters of transformation in higher education, fees, access for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, and many related issues. The movement highlighted youth agency and political power to address inequalities created by the enduring legacy of apartheid and colonialism in higher education (and society) and amplified the students' voice in demanding the decolonisation of higher education.

Decolonisation is a violent phenomenon that challenges and disrupts the power/knowledge structures of oppression (Morreiret al., 2020, p.2). As an act that includes the disruptions of classes and burning of statues in universities, it seeks to bring what is uncovered onto the global stage through violence and conflict and most of all disassociate these from the subjectivities of the coloniser (Chikane, 2024, p. 9).

South Africa is known for protests that allow people the freedom of expression, and the #MustFall-related protests marked the second biggest social movement (after the Treatment Action Campaign) since the end of apartheid (Bond, 2016; Heffernan, 2018). The movements' profound impact on higher education includes successfully challenging systemic inequalities, high tuition fees, institutional racism, and colonial legacies, while fostering equal access to education and conscientisation among students and workers (Mzileni, 2020; Pillay, 2016).

In this context, a group of researchers linked to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) set out to determine whether ten years since the start of #RMF and #FMF, the South African public was still aware of and familiar with #FMF and the demands the student generation of 2015-16 made. Using the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), they further sought to appraise the South African public's attitudes towards the key demands (especially free higher education); the removal of the enduring barriers to access higher education; and the lasting policy change in the sector (e.g. improvements for disadvantaged groups, the relevance of #FMF to the current generation, the scope of future demands). These questions were developed as contributions towards a better understanding of the place of



social movements in bringing about positive social change in South Africa, with specific reference to the ten-year anniversary of #FMF.

The fact that they continue to linger on in the memories of the majority of South Africans amplifies their magnitude as student-led collective action that arose from framing what the future should be like for those who have been marginalised and oppressed by the past for so long. Both #FMF and #RMF were not spur-of-the-moment social movements; they emerged from the experiences of students and their understanding of what decolonisation, access to education, and other goals within a South African university should achieve.

### **#MustFall movements in South African higher education**

Research on the South African student movement shows #FMF as a major campaign that originally started at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and drew inspiration from the #RMF movement that had started six months earlier at the University of Cape Town (UCT). #FMF started as a campaign centred in the Wits Students' Representative Council (SRC) to express student opposition to a double-digit fee increment for 2016 (Hodes, 2016). Conversely, #RMF was initiated at UCT in March 2015. As the name indicates, it focused on the removal (fall) of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes – which represented a white hegemonic and anti-black history and culture – and the demand for its removal as well as the need to decolonise the institution (Pillay, 2017; Luescher et al., 2022). #RMF not only challenged colonial iconographies but also strongly advocated for social justice, systematic transformation, and a decolonised South African university (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The #MustFall movements have a special place in South Africa's student struggles. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) notes that the past is linked to the present through a continuum from colonialism and apartheid to popular resistance and the shared decolonial struggles at the other end. During apartheid, students have recurrently played important roles in the struggle, most notably in the 1970s and culminating in the Soweto Uprising, and in their participation in the United Democratic Front in the 1980s (Badat, 1999). In the post-apartheid context, student activism's role in returning key issues and demands to the political agenda and seeking to transform and decolonise universities two decades into democracy is significant, with students having pushed for Africanised curricula, equitable access, and the dismantling of colonial legacies (Mzileni, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Thus, the legacy of these movements represents a critical reimagining of higher education as a site for social justice and participatory parity, challenging neoliberal and Eurocentric paradigms



(Fraser, 2000; Booysen, 2016). However, their temporality is marked by the transient nature of student populations, which often limits sustained impact (Altbach, 1991).

Despite these challenges, their legacy is significant as they have reshaped higher education policies, halted fee increases, and advocated for spaces that promote intellectual and political dialogue (Mzileni, 2020; Luescher et al., 2016). Student-led social movements represent a broader struggle for social justice and the reimagining of universities as sites for transformative change (Fraser, 2000; Booysen, 2016).

### **#FeesMustFall**

The #FMF campaign was initially sparked by proposed tuition fee increases at Wits and it quickly spread nation-wide as a social movement, under the influence of #RMF-related discourse, that expressed solidarity with university workers. It further evolved into a broader critique of systemic inequalities, institutional racism, the commodification of education, the outsourcing of university workers (especially cleaning, security, and catering staff), and the slow pace of transformation in universities. On the one hand, the movement achieved notable successes, such as blocking fee increases and halting and partly reversing the outsourcing of university workers; it also catalysed reforms in higher education funding and brought issues of decolonisation and social justice to the forefront of the national discourse (Booyesen, 2016; Habib, 2019). On the other hand, the movement also faced internal divisions (some caused by political party differences among students), leadership challenges, and the difficulty of sustaining the momentum, as well as increasing levels of violence, all of which limited its long-term impact (Hodes, 2016; Cini, 2019; Morwe, 2020).

Having grown into a nation-wide movement, #FMF presented an opportunity to reimagine higher education as a public good, accessible to all, and to challenge entrenched neoliberal and colonial paradigms, drawing on a Fanonian critique of post-colonial society and Freirean pedagogy to empower students and workers as agents of change (Mzileni, 2020). However, the crisis emerged as violent protests, fragmented leadership, and the inability to maintain public support led to the demobilisation of the movement and reinforced perceptions of universities as sites of instability rather than transformation (Morwe, 2020; Habib, 2022; Luescher, 2025). The movement's reliance on mass meetings and participatory governance, while initially democratic, often silenced pragmatic voices and exacerbated internal tensions (Habib, 2022). The legacy of #FMF is a complex and multifaceted step forward in the

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struggle for social justice and the decolonisation of higher education. The discourse around higher education highlights the need for structural reforms and inclusive policies.

## **Methodology**

The analysis in this article draws on data from the 2024/25 round of SASAS, which consists of a series of repeat cross-sectional surveys that have been undertaken annually by the HSRC since 2003. The survey is implemented using a probability-based, multi-stage stratified sampling design based on Statistics South Africa's (StatsSA's) 2011 Population Census and updated using official mid-year population estimates. The survey targets all individuals aged 16 years and older living in private households across the nine provinces. In the initial stage of sampling for each survey round, 500 Small Area Layers (SALs) were selected, stratified by province, type of geographic location, and majority population group, to ensure a representative population distribution. Within each SAL, seven dwelling units or occupied visiting points were randomly chosen. At each selected visiting point, a list of all individuals aged 16 or older residing at the premises for at least 15 days in the last month was generated, from which one person was randomly selected as a respondent using a programmed Kish Grid method.

For the 2024/25 survey round, fieldworkers visited a total of 3,500 randomly selected dwelling units, and the final realised sample was 3,119 people. All SASAS interviews were conducted face-to-face by fieldworkers using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) and, whenever possible, was carried out in the respondent's preferred language. Fieldwork was conducted by coordinated teams of provincial data collectors contracted by the HSRC. For data collection they used GPS-enabled devices for location verification and a suite of quality control measures, including back-checks, logic tests, and interview time validation. All study protocols, procedures, and instruments were reviewed and approved by the HSRC Research Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork commencement.

The 2024/25 SASAS questionnaire included both core and rotating modules, which were translated and administered in nine official languages (the exceptions being isiNdebele and siSwati) and supported by showcards and interviewer instructions. The survey included a specially designed module on social movements, which was selected as the winning entry in a youth-focused competition inviting young and emerging scholars to submit proposals for a funded SASAS module. The module explores public awareness and knowledge of key movements,

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particularly #FMF and #RMF, perceptions of their main goals, evaluations of their success in achieving these aims, and broader attitudes towards the principle of free university education.

The fieldwork was carried out between February and March 2025. Prior to starting any interview, participants were asked to provide written informed consent. In situations where the respondent was a minor (aged 16 or 17), consent was required from both the minor and their parent or guardian through a dual consent process. To ensure national representativity, sampling weights were applied by benchmarking the data to StatsSA mid-year population estimates and, unless otherwise noted, all data presented has been weighted accordingly. The margin of error for national-level estimates is  $\pm 2$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

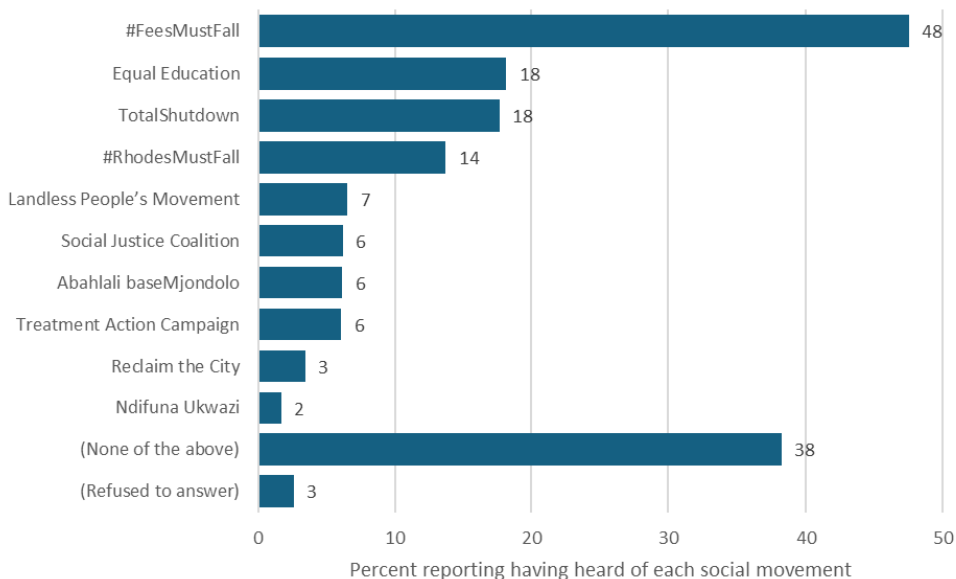
### **Familiarity with social movements in South Africa**

The survey began with a multiple response question designed to establish the public's general familiarity with ten different social movements. The specific phrasing of the question was: "A social movement is a group of people working together to create change or promote a shared goal. Which of the following social movements in South Africa have you heard of?" Survey respondents could select as many of the ten social movements that they were aware of.

As shown in Figure 1, the #FMF movement was the most widely recognised social movement of the examples provided, with 48% of the public aged 16 years and older reporting that they had heard of this movement previously. By contrast, only 14% of the public were familiar with the #RMF movement, less than a third of the recognition level of #FMF. Compared to these Fallist movements, Equal Education and Total Shutdown were recognised by marginally less than a fifth of the public (both 18%). Awareness of the six remaining social movements was far more limited, with fewer than one in ten South Africans indicating familiarity. It is striking that more than a third (38%) stated that they did not know any of the 10 social movements.



**Figure 1: Familiarity with different social movements in South Africa, 2025 (% mentioning each movement in descending rank order)**



Source: HSRC SASAS 2024/25 social movements module.

Just under half of South Africans (49%) reported having heard of one or both #FMF and #RMF movements (38% know one and 12% know both), while 51% indicated no awareness of either.

Moving beyond the national average, awareness of the Fallist movements was found to be highest among younger South Africans, especially those aged 16-34 as well as Gen Z (born 1996-2016) and Born-Free Millennial (born 1980-95) cohorts, where more than half reported familiarity with one or both movements. In contrast, awareness declined sharply among older age groups, with fewer than three in ten of those aged 65 or above recognising the movements. Men were significantly more likely than women to know of the Fallist campaigns, while racial variation showed Black African adults at about the national average, White adults reporting the highest awareness, and Coloured adults the lowest. Socio-economic status (SES, measured using asset index quintiles) and education emerged as strong differentiators: knowledge rose steadily with wealth and educational attainment, ranging from only 19% among those with primary or no schooling to 74% among degree-holders, and



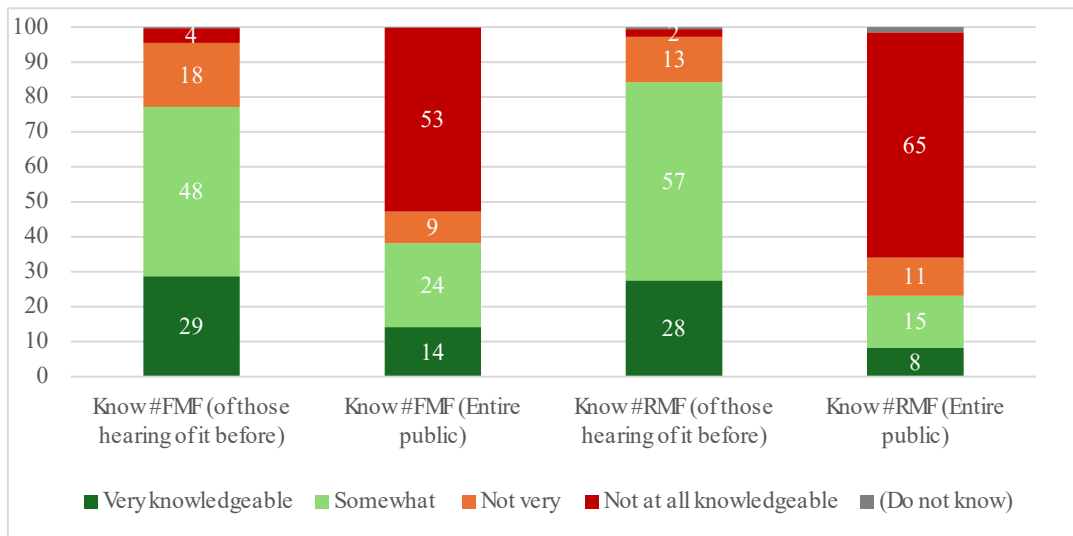
from about one-third (36%) in the poorest quintile to two-thirds (67%) in the wealthiest. Together, these results point to a generational, gendered, and class-based pattern underlying awareness, with the Fallist movements most strongly embedded in the consciousness of younger, better-educated, and more socio-economically advantaged South Africans.

To ascertain depth of familiarity with the two movements, survey respondents who knew of one or both the Fallist movements (i.e. 49% of the total respondents) were asked the question, “How knowledgeable are you about the #FeesMustFall student movement?”, followed by an identical question on the #RMF student movement. Responses were captured using a four-point scale, ranging from “very knowledgeable” to “not at all knowledgeable”. Among those who had heard of #FMF before, more than three-quarters (77%) described themselves as “very” or “somewhat” knowledgeable, while just 23% reported limited familiarity. However, when viewed across the entire public, this figure drops to 38%, with nearly two-thirds (62%) saying they are “not very” or “not at all” knowledgeable. A similar pattern holds for #RMF, with 84% of those aware of the movement reporting they were “very” or “somewhat” knowledgeable of it, but only 23% of the broader public did so, with 77% acknowledging little or no familiarity (see Figure 2). Regression analysis of these measures (results not shown) reveals that years of education is the predominant factor influencing depth of knowledge of the student movements, as well as being aged 25 to 34-years-old, the age cohort that would have most likely been exposed to the Fallist movements, either directly through campus-based exposure or indirectly through widespread student debates at the time.

***... deeper knowledge of the Fallist movements is linked to broader recognition of their decolonisation, fight against gender-based violence, and social justice aims.***



**Figure 2: Depth of awareness of Fallist student movements in South Africa, 2025 (%)**



Source: HSRC SASAS 2024/25 social movements module.

### Perceived goals of the #FMF and RMF movements

To better understand the social representations of #FMF and #RMF, survey participants who were aware of these movements were asked the following question: “What were the main goals that the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student movements wanted to achieve?” This was formulated and administered as a multiple responses question, with respondents able to select from a predefined list of seven possible goals they believed the movements sought to achieve. The options encompassed a wide range of transformative demands: labour justice in universities (insourcing workers), cultural and epistemic transformation (reflecting African identities and promoting African languages), structural and demographic change (expanding access and representation of Black African and female students and academics), addressing systemic inequalities (free higher education and tackling gender-based violence), as well as symbolic transformation (removing colonial and apartheid monuments). Respondents could select one or more of these goals, which are listed in Table 1.

The results show that ten years after their inception, the Fallist movements are most strongly associated with the demand for free university education, with 87% listing this as a key goal (Table 1). Beyond



this, the other six goals were mentioned by between only 19% and 27% of adults familiar with one or both movements. Slightly more than a quarter (27%) believed the purpose of these movements was to remove colonial and apartheid monuments, while 24% believed they aimed at ending gender-based violence. Around one in five linked the movements to promoting African languages in teaching and learning (22%), transforming the education system to reflect African identities (22%), increasing Black African and female representation in universities (21%), and insourcing workers (19%). Very few selected none of the above (2%) or refused to answer (0.5%). These findings underscore how the public primarily regards the Fallist movements as a struggle for free education, but also, as a secondary focus, as part of a broader project of decolonisation, inclusion, and social justice in higher education.



*Students watch the removal of a Rhodes statue from their campus.*

*Photo: Flickr*



**Table 1: Perceived goals of the Fallist student movements in South Africa overall and based on self-reported knowledge of the movements, 2025 (% mentioning each goal, ranked highest to lowest based on national average)**

	Views of those who have heard of #FeesMustFall and/or #RhodesMustFall before				
	National average	Knowledge of #FeesMustFall		Knowledge of #RhodesMustFall	
		Very or somewhat aware	Not very/ not at all (incl. Do not know -DK)	Very or somewhat aware	Not very/ not at all (incl. DK)
Free university education	87	88	85	85	89
Removing colonial and apartheid monuments, statues and symbols in universities	27	30	17	41	15
Ending gender-based violence at universities	24	26	14	37	12
Pushing for African languages to be used in teaching and learning at universities	22	26	7	34	11
Transforming the education system to better reflect African identities, histories, and cultures	22	25	10	35	10
Having more Black African and female students, lecturers and professors at universities.	21	25	7	33	10
Demanding universities hire their own gardeners, cleaners and security guards instead of using outside companies to do the job.	19	20	16	25	14
(None of the above)	2	1	3	0	3
(Refuse)	0	0	1	0	1
N	1,387	1,052	335	632	755

*Source: HSRC SASAS 2024/25 social movements module.*



Table 1 also examines the perceived goals and purposes of the student movements by self-reported knowledge levels. The results reaffirm free university education as the most recognised goal of the Fallist movements irrespective of the knowledge levels of respondents. This goal was mentioned by around 85-89% of adults regardless of whether they reported being “very” or “somewhat” knowledgeable, or “not very” or “not at all” knowledgeable of either #FMF or #RMF. Awareness levels did however influence recognition of the movements’ other goals. Those who reported higher levels of knowledge about #RMF were far more likely than the less knowledgeable to associate the movements with broader transformative and decolonial demands. For instance, 30% of those expressing deeper knowledge of #FMF and 41% of those reporting deeper knowledge of #RMF mentioned the removal of colonial and apartheid monuments, compared with only 17% and 15% of the less knowledgeable, respectively.

A similar pattern appears for ending gender-based violence, promoting African languages, transforming the education system, and improving Black African and female representation in universities. Even the more specific demand of insourcing university workers was more frequently recognised among the knowledgeable (20-25%) than among the less knowledgeable (14-16%). Therefore, while free higher education remains the more universally recognised objective, deeper knowledge of the Fallist movements is linked to broader recognition of their decolonisation, fight against gender-based violence, and social justice aims.



*Students protest outside Parliament in Cape Town.*

*Photo: Wikimedia*



### **Perceived effectiveness of the Fallist student movements**

Having established the level of awareness and perceived purpose of the student movements, the survey then addressed evaluations of the extent to which the movements were successful in their objectives. Specifically, those who were aware of one or both the Fallist movements were asked: “How successful or unsuccessful do you think the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student movements have been in achieving these main goals?” A five-point scale was used to capture these predispositions, with response categories ranging from “very successful” to “very unsuccessful”. Overall, evaluations of the Fallist movements’ achievements were mixed, but leaned modestly positive (Figure 3).

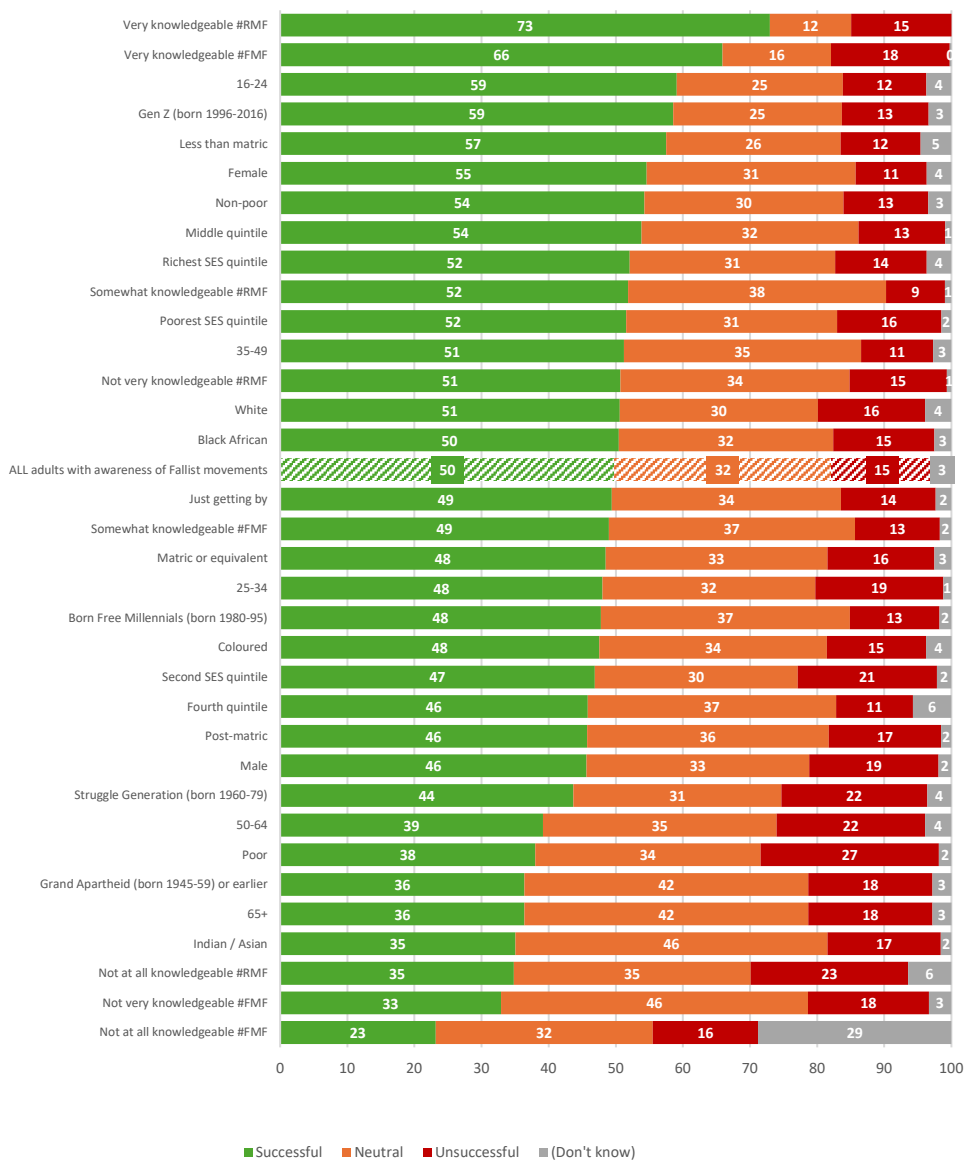


*Students demand an end to end to racism.*

*Photo: Shutterstock*



**Figure 3: Perceived effectiveness of Fallist student movements in South Africa by personal attributes, 2025 (% , ranked highest to lowest based on 'successful' category)**



Source: HSRC SASAS 2024/25 social movements module.



Half of adults with awareness of the #MustFall movements (50%) perceived them as successful (16% said they were “very successful” and 34% “quite successful”). A further 32% adopted a neutral stance, while 15% regarded the movements as “unsuccessful” (9% “somewhat unsuccessful” and 6% “very unsuccessful”), with a marginal share (3%) unable to provide an assessment. This distribution highlights that the public with familiarity of the student movements is divided on whether their objectives were meaningfully realised, with almost a third taking a neutral position and only one in six offering a strongly positive evaluation.

Subgroup analysis revealed clear divides exist among the public, based especially along knowledge, generational, and socio-economic lines. Higher levels of knowledge of both movements were strongly linked to more positive evaluations: two-thirds (66%) of those “very” knowledgeable about #FMF and nearly three-quarters (73%) of those “very” knowledgeable about #RMF regarded the movements as “successful”, compared to only 23% among those “not at all” knowledgeable about #FMF. Younger cohorts also stood out, with 59% of Gen Z and 16 to 24-year-olds reporting success, compared to 36% of those aged 65+. Socio-economic differences were more modest in character, with a majority of the self-rated non-poor (54%) regarding the movements as “successful”, compared to 38% among the poor. There was less consistency based on socio-economic status quintiles. Meanwhile, gender differences were evident, with 55% of women rating the movements as “successful” compared to 46% of men. Black African adults (50%) and White adults (51%) were more likely than Indian/Asian adults (35%) to give positive evaluations, while the views of Coloured adults (48%) approximated the overall average. Taken together, these findings suggest that perceptions of success are significantly shaped by depth of knowledge, age, and social position, with more informed and younger groups especially inclined to view the Fallist movements as having achieved their objectives.

### **The impact and legacy of #FMF and #RMF**

The final part of the survey module focused on a set of questions intended to establish how the public viewed the impact of the #FMF and #RMF movements on South African higher education. Respondents were asked to reflect on whether they agreed or not that the movements succeeded in transforming the education system to better reflect African identities and histories, in advancing the use of African languages in teaching and learning, in making university education more affordable or



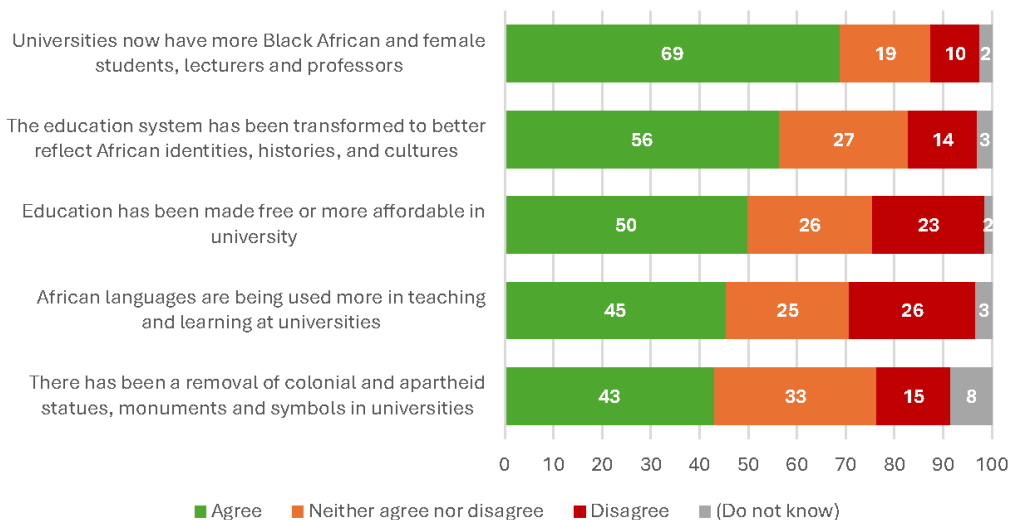
free, and in increasing the representation of Black African and female students, lecturers, and professors. The phrasing of these items mirrored the precoded options in the earlier goals question. Together, these items were designed to provide insight into how far people think the movements achieved their broader goals of decolonisation, inclusivity, and access within the higher education space.

Among those aware of the Fallist student movements, perceptions of their achievements vary considerably across different goals (Figure 4). The strongest agreement was found for the claim that universities now have more Black African and female students, lecturers, and professors, with 69% voicing agreement with this outcome and only 10% disagreeing. A majority also believed that the education system has been transformed to better reflect African identities, histories, and cultures (56% agreeing with 14% disagreeing), and half believed that education has been made free or more affordable (50% agreeing compared to 23% disagreeing). Views were more divided on cultural-symbolic and linguistic changes: 45% agreed that African languages are being used more in universities while 26% disagreed, and 43% felt colonial and apartheid statues and monuments had been removed, compared with 15% who disagreed and a notably high share of neutral responses (33%). These results suggest that the public most clearly associates the movements with expanded representation and transformation, while more ambivalent opinions are evident about progress on language use and the removal of colonial symbols.

***The results show that while there are differences over the basis on which it should be applied, there is near universal consensus in the country around the principle of free higher education, with a clear majority leaning towards a universal entitlement.***



**Figure 4: Perceived outcomes of the Fallist student movements in South Africa among those familiar with the movements, 2025 (% , ranked highest to lowest based on 'agree' category)**



Source: HSRC SASAS 2024/25 social movements module.

Perceptions of the Fallist movements' impact were found to vary appreciably by knowledge level, with those more familiar consistently more likely to view the movements as having achieved their goals (results not shown). The most striking differences in agreement were observed in relation to the removal of colonial and apartheid symbols (20 and 32 percentage point difference based on awareness of #FMF and #RMF respectively) and transforming the education system to reflect African identities (17 and 22 percentage point difference based on knowledge levels). These findings highlight that depth of knowledge about the movements strongly shapes perceptions of their success, particularly on issues of symbolic and cultural transformation.

The final question in the survey asked all respondents, irrespective of awareness of student movements, their opinion regarding the key demand of #FMF: "Do you think that university education in South Africa should be free?" The response options were "yes, but only for poor students", "yes, but only for restricting to Black, Coloured and Indian students", "yes, for all students", or "no, everyone should pay equally". This item was included to capture public attitudes toward the principle of free university education in South Africa (advocated by #FMF), probing both the extent of free access and the preferred basis on



which such free access should be provided. The response options enable differentiation between views grounded in poverty alleviation, race-based redress for historical injustice, universal right to higher education, in addition to individual liability.

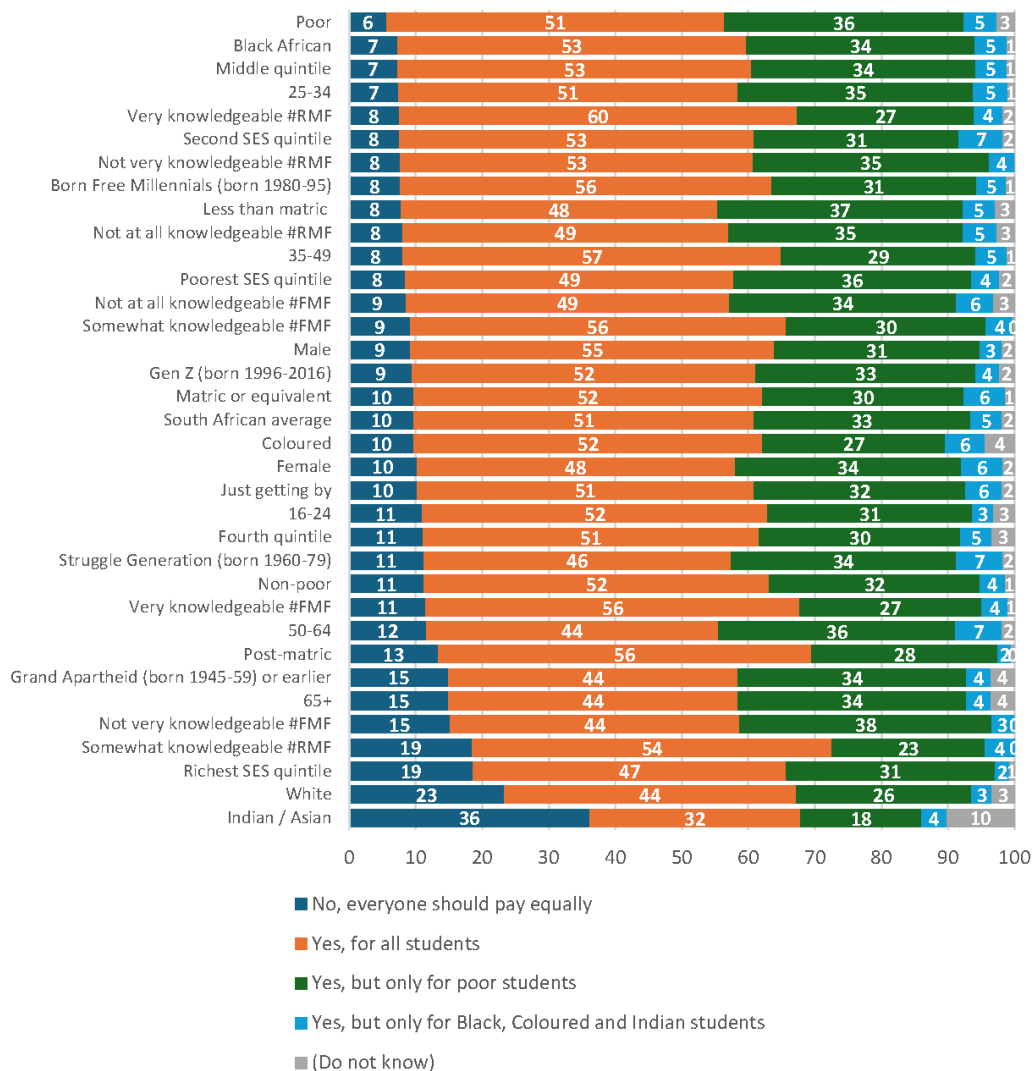
The national results show overwhelming public support for free university education, with a combined 88% of adults endorsing some form of free access. Just over half (51%) favour a universal model in which education is free for all students. Nearly a third (33%) prefer that university should only be free to poor students. A smaller share (5%) support limiting the benefit of free university education to students from historically disadvantaged population groups as a form of race-based redress. By contrast, 10% argue that everyone should pay equally, and just 2% were unsure. These results show that, while there are differences over the basis on which it should be applied, there is near universal consensus in the country around the principle of free higher education, with a clear majority leaning towards a universal entitlement.

The subgroup analysis of these preferences is presented in Figure 5 and shows strong overall endorsement of free university education across nearly all groups, even though preferences differ in degrees of emphasis. Support for universal free education is highest among those that are “very” knowledgeable about #RMF (60%) and #FMF (56%), born free millennials (56%), and those with a post-matric education (56%), and lowest among Indian/Asian adults (32%). By contrast, the option of targeting free education only to poor students was most commonly selected by those lacking knowledge of #FMF (38%), older cohorts (34-36% among those aged 50+), the self-rate poor (36%), and those with less than a matric education (37%). Very limited support was expressed for restricting free education only to those students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (ranging between 2% and 7%). Opposition to free education altogether (“everyone should pay equally”) was generally low (between 6% and 15%), except for Indian/Asian and White adults (36% and 23% respectively).

Overall, while the “free higher education for all” option received majority support across most groups, poverty-targeted provision had substantial support among disadvantaged groups and older cohorts. This again draws attention to generational, racial, and socio-economic divides in beliefs about how free higher education should be implemented a decade after the #MustFall student movements.



**Figure 5: Support for free university education in South Africa, 2025 (% , ranked highest to lowest based on 'no – everybody should pay equally' category)**



Source: HSRC SASAS 2024/25 social movements module.



*The legacy of the Fallist movements is most strikingly evident in public support for the principle of free higher education.*

**Concluding discussion**

A decade after the eruption of #FMF and #RMF, the findings of the 2024/25 SASAS survey demonstrate that these movements continue to occupy a prominent place in South Africa's popular memory. Despite the transient nature of the student movement, the survey shows that the demands and imaginaries forged by the Fallist generation remain alive, even beyond campus boundaries, and continue to shape public understandings of higher education.

Strikingly, #FMF is the most recognisable social movement in post-apartheid South Africa: nearly half of all South Africans are familiar with the movement, making it more recognised than any other recent social mobilisation. While #RMF is less widely known, those who are familiar with it also tend to demonstrate deeper awareness of its transformative and decolonial aims. This indicates that #FMF's framing around affordability of university education and access has resonated broadly, while #RMF's symbolic and epistemic critiques remain particularly salient within informed and younger publics. Such findings underscore Fraser's (2000) argument that struggles for redistribution (in this case, free university education) often carry wider popular appeal than struggles for recognition and representation (cultural, linguistic, and symbolic transformation), even though all these dimensions are intertwined.

Public opinions of the effectiveness of the Fallist student movements are more ambivalent. While nearly half of respondents (who were also familiar with the movements) judged them successful, many adopted a neutral stance, and only a minority considered them very successful. Younger, better-educated South Africans are most likely to affirm the transformative achievements of #FMF and #RMF, whereas older cohorts are more sceptical. This generational divide reflects the different experiential proximities to the protests and highlights how collective memory is unevenly distributed across social groups.



The legacy of the Fallist movements is most strikingly evident in public support for the principle of free higher education. An overwhelming 88% of South Africans endorse some version of free access to university education, with a majority favouring a universal entitlement. This aligns with #FMF's central demand and illustrates how what began as a student protest has crystallised into a normative expectation among the broader population. Variation in support for universal free access versus race- or class-based redress reflects ongoing contestations about how equity in higher education should be pursued with less than 10% support for race-based redress across all groups; as in previous questions, it reflects a divide following levels of education and generation. These findings are also consistent with other survey-based evidence suggesting that there is greater support for class-based than race-preferential redress measures in the country (Roberts 2014; 2019).

The tenth anniversary of the #MustFall movements is therefore marked by their enduring presence in South Africa's public consciousness, even if their institutional and policy outcomes may be contested. By embedding demands for redistribution, recognition, and representation into the popular imagination, the 2015-16 generation of Fallist student activists has changed how higher education is envisioned in South Africa – most strikingly with respect to popular majority support for free university education evident in the SASAS survey. The challenge for policymakers in a democracy is to give effect to popular will and find solutions to political demands. More broadly, the survey also prompts questions about how to bridge generational divides in South African society, address and redress persistent inequalities, and advance the broader project of building free, inclusive, and decolonised African universities.

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### **DECLARATION**

*Conflict of interest: The authors wish to confirm that there is no conflict of interest to declare.*

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