

Higher Education, Transformation and Africanisation - a Paradigm Shift?

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South Africa's higher education policy, as we well know by now, was predicated on an assiduous transformation imperative. This imperative was driven as much by the need to undo the iniquitous legacy of apartheid and years of white minority hegemony over the academe, as it was by a duty to re-establish higher education institutions in the post-apartheid reform milieu in ways that advanced the values and principles set out in the Constitution, that promote the development of a critically educated citizenry, and fulfil the human resource development needs of a developing economy.

The first trenches of change were structural reforms, the opening up of academic spaces, setting out of new policy objectives, rethinking the role of higher education in a developmental context, and the creation of an enabling environment for the free pursuit of academic excellence. These changes happened between 1995-1997 – guided first by the National Commission on Higher Education, followed by the White Paper No 3 on Higher Education, and the Higher Education Act, 1997. Then there followed a period of intense policy discourse fuelled by the CHE's proposals: 'Towards a New Higher Education Landscape' (2000), the 'National Plan for Higher Education' (2001); The National Working Group's proposals: 'Restructuring the Higher Education System in South Africa' (2001); and culminating in the Ministry's 2002 policy statement on the restructuring of higher education – 'Transformation and Restructuring: A New Institutional Landscape for Higher Education'. Permeating this discourse was the issue of transformation, and at key moments, that of Africanisation.

The NPHE and the restructuring proposals sought to take the reform process further by restructuring higher education through a process of mergers and incorporations, the closure of Vista University, and the establishment of Universities of Technology and Comprehensive Universities.

The NPHE process purported to reduce South Africa's higher education institutions from the original 36 to 22 (11 universities, 5 universities of technology and 6 comprehensives).

While the restructuring process has left its mark indelibly on the higher education system, it is questionable whether we have got to the heart of the challenges that higher education faced within post-apartheid South Africa. Notwithstanding the extensive legislative developments and other policy initiatives, South Africa's higher education institutions continue in large measure to reflect their apartheid past. The historically black and disadvantaged institutions continue to reflect their historic disadvantage; those that benefited from the largesse of apartheid continue to glory in that benefit. While more black students have been admitted to previously white universities, it remains true, however, that social and academic life at these universities remains far from integrated. Black universities continue to admit overwhelmingly black students because such institutions, their culture and ethos of disadvantage offer no attraction to the previously advantaged. No less significantly, where a growing number of black students are being admitted, the academic staff remains overwhelmingly white. The prevailing culture in these institutions is alienating and may be inhibiting to unrestrained academic and intellectual activity.

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Features

Ten years since the Higher Education Act came into force, the South African academe remains barely reformed in the areas that matter most, the soul of the university: its academic structures, curriculum and the modes of academic pursuits.

By and large, our higher education institutions have embraced the neo-liberal and modernist logic that is long on aspirations of excellence, and that seeks to mirror the Anglo-Saxon models of universities and their traditions, which have been elevated to a value and standard that constitutes the sole benchmark of excellence, but which are short on relevance and critical consciousness.

In order to address some aspects of this phenomenon, many universities have begun to establish links with universities elsewhere in Africa, and academics from various African states are a regular feature in South African academic conferences. South African universities have also increased their intake of students from various Sub-Saharan African states to the current figure of 53 000. Many South African universities also have collaboration agreements with African tertiary institutions, and more and more academics are being recruited from across Africa. Indeed, if one peruses the strategic statements of many South African universities, the expressions “world-class” and “African” always appear side-by-side. But, remarkably, none of this appears to have induced South African higher education institutions to embrace or to explore to its ultimate logic the implications of an African character and identity for our academic enterprise, or to seek an expression of an African ethos in their life and environment. This, I suggest, should be the basis of a third wave of higher education reform that could be so far reaching and endogenous as to be considered revolutionary.

A tentative effort was undertaken by Malegapuru Makgoba and Siphon Seepe with the support of then Minister of Education Kader Asmal as a result of prodding by former President, Thabo Mbeki (2004:13-57). One says “tentative” because one finds statements in their essay, *Towards an African Identity of Higher Education*, which raise more questions than answers; **such as the following:**

The cornerstone of an African university must be intellectual humility, the celebration of doubt, the acknowledgement that what we know is but an approximation of what is or could be, that everything before us is nothing but an unfinished story that can still be changed, shaped and authored (15).

It is hard to understand what indeed is African about such a quintessentially post-modernist philosophical method of enquiry. We begin, however, to sense something of the direction we could be taking where [on p.41] the essay draws from Ramose some conceptualisation of Africanisation as essentially a thought-world enveloped in African idiom and symbols, the recognition of a diversity of ways of knowing and alternative epistemologies, and a variety of ways of learning and understanding the world of experience and of constructing a future. Quoting African American scholar Molefi Asante the authors then explain the predicament that we have got ourselves into: “this vicious virus that erodes the

very nature of our seeing, our explanations, our methods of inquiry, and our conclusions” (p.43).

As it turns out, the efforts of Magoba and Seepe on the character and identity of an African university are drawn from a contemporary discourse on the universities of the future. This arises from the enormous diversity in the purposes and services of the university, to such an extent that the Newmanian idea of a university and the Humboldtian ideal no longer appeal, nor do they express fully, the complex nature of the modern ideas on the university.

In fact, the university has become such a diverse concept that one can no longer speak authoritatively of any single or unique organising principle for a university (Thorne: 29).

Therefore, while abiding by some broad universal principles of what constitutes a university, it is possible for an African university to develop its own identity and aspirations that signify its evolving culture(s), intellectual traditions, and knowledge systems (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988). Armed with such tools, it provides a means of leveraging and interrogating all other forms of knowledge; to learn from, to allow oneself to be influenced by and in turn, to influence, knowledge in diverse environments.

What is proposed for an African system of knowledge production and generation of ideas is one that intentionally engages its basis African epistemology: experiential rather than abstract, communal, i.e. learning from others, dialogical and exploratory, applied and relevant. Learning from experience is often discerned from stories, symbols, language, ritual, myths and tradition. **Sir Graham Hills summarises this vision in the context of the debate about the universities of the future when he says:**

It is the holistic world of reality and of human experience where subjective values may be just as important as their related objective considerations. This is the world of sentiments, of ethics, of morality and politics. Every citizen needs to be aware of how it works and how important it is (Thorne: 225).

Drawing from the Aboriginal experiences, Paul Widman discovers that the classic ways of knowledge formation (techne; scientia; praxis) need to be supplemented with what he terms gnosis - the ability to understand symbolically with our hearts and heads. Elaborated further, it is insight or metaphoric knowledge; and relatio - the way we learn to relate, to communicate through belonging, through love. Widman is of the view that it should be just as legitimate to draw knowledge from one’s inner senses and intuition in that it directs one to a way of exploration, rather than to a search for the elusive “truth”, the sole and single way of being and knowing. I would say that this rhymes well with what Peter Crossman has to say in his essay on endogenisation of knowledge means at African universities and for African scholars. Adebayo Olukoshi and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza in their introduction to their symposium: *African Universities in the Twenty-First Century:*



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Volume 1 summarise Crossman as follows:

... the need for African universities and their processes of knowledge production to be consistent with the cultural orientation and material contexts, themselves in constant change, of groups of people to whom they belong or whom they serve, which entails the appropriation and transformation of 'external' factors and influences to 'internal' principles and priorities that define orientation, values and practices (12).

These ideas also find powerful expression in a contribution by Hans Van Ginkel of the United Nations University in the GUNI (Global University Network for Innovation) series on the Social Commitment of Universities (Higher Education in the World 2006: The Financing of Universities). Van Ginkel states that a university of the future will of necessity have to contend with some shifts in research, education and knowledge management, which he sees as the primary role of the university.

The classical and future role of the university is to bring cohesion to scholarship and to stimulate creativity by preserving existing knowledge and passing it on within a broad interpretation of academia's role: testing and improving the quality of knowledge; developing knowledge further, using combinations and confrontation as tools.

A question must therefore be asked as to whether this alienating philosophical paradigm is not at least in part, an explanation for the extent to which Africa is battling to increase its participation rate in higher education?

At 5%, on average, Africa is by far outstripped by all other continents where participation rates are as low as 16% in East Asia and the Pacific and as high as 50% in Europe and Central Asia. South Africa at 17% performs marginally better, but we are put to the chase by our partners in Brazil, China and India.

In conclusion, therefore, the panorama of the South African higher education system can never be complete without resorting to what Van Ginkel refers to as the 'Copernican Revolution' – demanding a paradigm shift as revolutionary as the shift away from the Ptolemaic belief that the earth was at the centre of the universe. We dare to assert that there cannot be one centre of the knowledge universe but many, and that Africa has as much a claim to that centre as any other. What this entails is that endogenous ways of knowing should become the primary means and tools of knowledge development, learning and understanding. This suggests to me a new African pedagogy and epistemology. One wants to avoid reliance upon what has become known as Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) because this tends to have the effect of characterising IKS as an exotic subject or discipline, rather like Anthropology. We seek to locate an African method of knowledge exploration and to inform the entire knowledge system, rather than to rigidify as belonging to a part of the knowledge structure. The proposal is that endogenous knowledge and diverse

ways of knowing and learning must be embraced. This will then compel universities to design Afrocentric and innovative methods of assessment of knowledge and examination, determine how information and data are assessed and valued, and how it gets translated to knowledge and helps to determine excellence. This is just as "classic" as the Western models of knowledge generation and intellectual development.

The second challenge that flows from this, is that we can no longer perceive knowledge simply in terms of discrete disciplines. A new matrix of knowledge formation and organisations of systems will take account of the extent to which boundaries between knowledge are porous and fluid. And as such, the traditional faculty organisation must give way to programmes and interest groups in multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary engagements and collaborations.

Finally, the university will have to be more deeply embedded in its social context, learning and discovering from that environment, responsive to the challenges the environment throws up for solutions, raising questions and proffering solutions to problems identified, and guiding the future of that context, towards a relationship with its neighbours and with its past and present.

In my view this is by far a more exciting and progressive agenda for a South African university of the 21st Century to engage and develop, than the rather staid aspirations to Western models that we have so uncritically embraced in South Africa. However defined differentiation might be, universities that wish to experiment with such a thorough model of an African university should be encouraged and resourced appropriately.

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