Managing Higher Education Institutions in Contemporary South Africa: Advancing Progressive Agendas in a Neo-Liberal and Technicist World[1]

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Introduction

South Africa's university and higher education system has been the focus of widespread investigation and reflection in the last two decades. The impetus for this has been both global and domestic. At the international level, political elites across both the developed and developing world, driven in the main by the challenges of and the assumptions informing conservative macro-economic policy paradigms, have subjected the university systems to critical review with the goal of enhancing the relevance of graduates and increasing the output of universities. At the domestic level, South Africa's democratic transition has ushered new stakeholders and political elites into the societal mainstream who have their own aspirations and needs, and as a result have generated new challenges and priorities for the public higher education system. Both developments have resulted in an ongoing research, critique and transformation of the higher education system in South Africa.

Yet, despite this, almost all of this intellectual energy has been directed at the level of policy and, more recently, its impact. The Zuma administration, whose political priorities, in part informed by the ANC's Polokwane conference in 2007, has reinforced this focus on higher education policy by initiating a widespread policy review of different elements of the higher education system. Even academic critics of the higher education reforms have been focused on policy, critiquing its orientation and detailing the negative impact it has on the system. The only exception to this policy focus has been some of the mainstream media's assessments of universities' capacities and their rankings of these institutions. But even here, these reflections have returned to a policy focus, as opposition politicians used the relatively poor global rankings of South African universities as a basis for which to launch a critique of the government's higher education policies.

Missing in all of this debate is any reflection of higher education managerial practice. The only level at which there is some reflection in this regard is in the capacity development initiatives within the higher education system. But even here, the focus is largely on enhancing administrative skill sets, like broadening higher education managers' understanding and knowledge of financial or human resource protocols. But while these are important issues and technical skill sets to learn, they not really the core of what management is about. At its most basic level, management is about understanding the context within which one is located, reflecting on the options one has for achieving desired ends, and then galvanizing the support one requires for implementing the choice that has been made. The lack of reflection on this issue is tragic, for it creates the implicit impression that nothing progressive is possible as longer as we are subjected to the current political economy paradigm.

But this is just not true. The varied performance of universities in South Africa suggests that much can be learnt from comparative reflections on managerial practice. Moreover, even in the last two decades, there have been South African cases where impressive transformation, productivity and efficiency gains have been recorded. Perhaps, the two most well known institutional examples of this has been the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Human Science Research Council (HSRC). Can anything be learnt from these and other experiences and be applied by higher education executives in other universities and research institutions?

This then is the focus of this article. Methodologically, it essentially constitutes the reflections of a bureaucrat in a South African university who is interested in advancing a social agenda. Perhaps, some may interpret this merely as the justifications of one who has become a mere cog in the wheel of the higher education system. But the article is written in the hope that some may see the value of engaging higher education executives who are at least critically reflecting on their managerial experiences in the hope that lessons can be learnt for advancing a socially progressive higher education agenda in a less than perfect world.

South Africa's Transforming Higher Education System

As has been suggested earlier, universities are the product of the political and socioeconomic systems they embedded in. South Africa's political and socioeconomic system has undergone significant transformation as a result of the country's democratic transition. This transition has been a double-edged one. On the one hand, we have a political transition which involved enabling the access of South Africa's black population to the institutions of governance and the state. On the other, we had an economic transformation in which the South African economy has been increasingly integrated into the global economy with significant consequences for private and public enterprises.

The political transition has had a number of positive consequences for the higher education system. It has increased the pressure on universities to become more accountable. It has massified and diversified access to the nation's universities. While it has not yet non-racialised the academy, it has made it much more diversified than it was 15 years ago. It is true that one of the downsides has been that the state has become much more interventionist in the higher education system which has resulted in some erosion of the autonomy of the universities. But on balance, the net effect on the universities from the political transition is, I believe, positive.

The economic transition has also had significant impacts on the higher education system. But this time, the impact, on balance, has been negative. As a result of the impact of a very conservative macro-economic agenda, especially in the first decade of the transition, state institutions, and through them other public entities like universities, have become increasingly corporatized. Managerial practices and accountability mechanisms from the corporate sector have unthinkingly been imported into public institutions and universities. Universities and their divisions are increasingly treated as business entities, and power has shifted decisively from structures like Senate (where academics predominate) to Finance and Council (where administrators and external stakeholders are in the majority).

The net impact on South Africa's universities has been dramatic. Profitability, rather than sustainability, seems to be the driving ethos of universities. Academic departments have had their budgets slashed dramatically in real terms. The administrative workload on academics has significantly increased. There is a greater push for third stream income, and qualitative indicators of performance have begun to proliferate in these institutions. The net effect of some of these developments is that the academy is no longer an attractive career prospect. The brightest students stay away from the universities. We have an aging cohort of academics and researchers with the result that alarm bells have begun to ring loudly in important quarters of the higher education system.

What is to be done? Four distinct responses have emerged to this state of affairs. The first is from those on the right and in business circles who have celebrated this corporatization of the higher education environment. These stakeholders view this development as a maturing of the sector and are ignorant of the negative effects that these developments are having on the academy. There is of course sufficient research that has demonstrated the fallacy of the assumptions of this response, and there is no need to reiterate these arguments once again.

The second response is mainly from progressive quarters, many from within the academy but some from elsewhere, including the state and university executives. This response has been largely one of wringing one's hands and bemoaning the current state of affairs. Sometimes, there is a romanticisation of the past higher education system where universities were defined by a sense of collegiality. The problem with this response is that it is simply confined to critique. It does not involve any active attempt to do something about the current state of affairs. The past is also misrepresented in a serious way. The apartheid higher education system was not a friendly, collegiate place, either in the historically black universities (HBUs), or in their historically white counterparts, especially for young black academics who were never part of the power brokers (both ruling and oppositional) within the universities.

The third response is a more active and nuanced version of the second. Essentially, it bemoans the current state of affairs, but tries to fight back by attempting to keep at bay the worse consequences of corporatization dynamics. It is a response manifested in most universities in the country but is perhaps most successfully practised in small towns where corporatization dynamics are least intense. This third response is seen as the typical progressive one. However, it is a response that is failing and is unlikely to be successful in the long term. For a while, it may seem as if a successful strategy is being waged, particularly in small towns, but it is going to be impossible to create islands of collegiality in a market oriented higher education system. This is especially so since universities are funded through the state in accordance with a funding formula that is itself market oriented.

The fourth response, of which I see myself a part, is a proactive engagement with the context one finds oneself in with a view to subverting it in the long term. It is akin to a strategy suggested by John Saul in the early 1990s entitled 'structural reform'. This is a response which involves an engagement with a view to initiating reforms that have the effect of enabling further reforms, all of which in the long term create a new structured balance of power that enables the transformation of the very system itself. This is a response that tries to advance a progressive agenda within the context in which one finds oneself. It is a response that recognizes that there are negative consequences to the engagement, but nevertheless argues that it is better to advance a progressive agenda with some negative consequences than do nothing at all.

It is a response that recognizes that there is a difference between a corporate culture and a managerial agenda. There is a difference between profitability and sustainability. There is a difference between corporate behaviour and entrepreneurial leadership. It is a response that attempts to engage in ways that pluralize power in the higher education system because as long as power is dispersed, checks and balances can emerge in a system that contains authoritarian tendencies and enables progressive change. But it is also a response that recognizes that there will be costs, and while it tries to mitigate the costs, it does not use it as an excuse for non-engagement.

What then are examples of this fourth response? The examples detailed below are not initiatives of my own. Rather, they are a part of collective experiences I was or am a part of in different organizations over the past decade. It is also worth noting that these organizations may have initiated other experiences that are more negative and that do not comfortably lie within the framework of this response. These institutions must not be imagined as homogenous entities whose experiences coherently demonstrate one response or the other.

In any case, one significant feature of this fourth response is a recognition that any serious restructuring of an academic institution is going to require excellent academics who have a relative autonomy to focus on their work, are provided with an enabling environment to do so, and are rewarded for their initiatives. Restructuring also requires resources and if they are not immediately available, then they have to be mobilized, sometimes through hard choices, having to be made about what gets sacrificed so that more crucial and core initiatives are adequately resourced. So, in the institutions that have been successful in restructuring and enhancing academic and research efficiencies – the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) being two such cases in the last decade – there has been the hunt for successful academic talents who are sometimes paid beyond the scales of the mainstream academy.

In the institution where I currently work – the University of Johannesburg – we have created an environment of incentives where productive researchers are rewarded. There is a small core of excellent research and teaching staff who are rewarded in their remuneration beyond the normal scales through a special non-pensionable allowance. In addition, we have an annual Vice Chancellor's award where the top researcher gets R500,000 and the top new researcher gets R250,000. Three top teachers also annually get a reward of R150,000. The institution has also established a research incentive system where a minimum between R22,000 and R33,000 of the research subsidy is invested in individual researcher's research accounts to support the continuation of their research. Finally, the university has more than quadrupled its internal investment in research activities.

The downside of this development is that it creates a much more unequal academic environment. But there are a number of upsides as well. First, the systemic message for younger academics is one that suggests that one does not have to leave the academy and become a bureaucrat if one wants to earn higher salaries. This is after all the message that became prevalent in the higher education system in the post-apartheid era where managers were increasingly better rewarded than the academics who undertook the core business of the universities. Now, younger staff can identify role models within the academy – A and B rated researchers for instance – who could also earn generous packages. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the effect of this incentivized academic environment is the pluralization of power within the academy because of the creation of a new group of privileged and empowered stakeholders like top researchers. Suddenly, the Vice Chancellor and the senior executives within the institution are not the only power brokers within the university. A and B rated researchers have also become institutional power brokers in their own right.

A second example of this fourth response is a New Generation Scholars Programme adopted at the institution. One of the biggest contemporary challenges South Africa's higher education system confronts is an aging professoriate and there is an urgent need to reproduce the academy. The problem is that South African students are no longer interested in post-graduate studies. Scholarships for such studies are not attractive because they are structured on the assumption that the students are middle class. Yet most South African students in the higher education system are first generation working class students who are under enormous pressure to earn a salary. The University of Johannesburg, therefore, developed a New Generation Scholarship programme – in partnership with Petro South Africa, Nedbank, Ford Foundation, Murray & Roberts – which offers Masters candidates a scholarship of R80,000 per annum for two years. On completion of their Masters, the top 50 per cent of the graduates are offered a doctoral scholarship of R150,0000 per annum for three years, and are automatically offered a job on successfully graduating. This final element is absolutely essential, otherwise, there is no incentive to continue studying. The programme is founded on the realization that South Africans have to take direct responsibility for the training of their new generation and cannot rely on American or European Foundations or Official Development Assistance to do it for them.

A third example of this fourth response relates to third stream income. This has become a major focus of South African universities, either driven by the necessity of declining public subsidies or by perceptions by university executives that this represents modern global managerial practice. Most universities around the world look to American institutions for leadership in this regard. But there is much misunderstanding about this state of affairs in the United States. Many assume that American universities are driven by private money. But this is just not true. Their research and innovation platform is completely dependent on public investment, not private resources. Take for example the National Health Institute. Its annual budget is in the region of $38 billion, of which at least $30 billion is targeted for deployment in the nation's universities. Compare this single institute's budget to South Africa's system investment in research through the NRF. The latter has a budget in the region of R1 billion ($150 million). Is it any wonder that we have such differentials in the research and innovation outcomes of the two societies?

It is true that student fees do constitute a substantive portion of American university budgets, but these are mainly the private ones. South Africa is trying to do this in a public university system with a student base that is much more impoverished. In similar circumstances, the European societies established a model of higher education that was entirely free. A warning must be sounded that South Africa should avoid the African path in this regard which follows the European precedent and declared higher education free, but refused to make any additional investment in this sector. The net effect was the complete collapse of substantive higher education in Africa.

But all is not doom and gloom. In South Africa, we have a third stream funding possibility – Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) – that is not available elsewhere. BEE is an important driver of South Africa's post-apartheid political economy and, increasingly, it has become mandatory that each BEE deal have a developmental/broad based component. How is it that university executives have not mobilized for this? After all, there could be no more developmental or broad based impact than investing in universities and in the education of South Africa's next generations. If universities had mobilized only ten per cent of BEE deals which it is estimated had a total value of R500 billion in the last decade, they would have in 2010 had an additional independent asset base of R50 billion. On a ten percent return, these institutions could have had an additional R5 billion to invest in scholarships, programmes and infrastructure – twice the size of the state's annual infrastructure grant of the last few years.

A fourth example of this kind of response would pertain to the procurement of academic and research journals for university libraries. The essential dilemma in this regard is that there are huge profits to be made in the international academic journals publication industry. Reed Elsevier, a UK-based international academic publication corporate, for instance, made £1,379 million, while its competitors, Informa (housing the popular Taylor & Francis group) and Springer made smaller, but similarly obscene profits of £305.8 million and •285 million, respectively. There are of course huge social costs to these profits. Most academic libraries cannot afford to get all of these journals, so hard choices must be made. The more well-endowed universities do manage to get the best of the journals, but the poorest do not. This effectively means that

the least well-endowed universities, those that service the poorest of our citizens, do not have access to a quality academic journal base which is an absolute necessity for quality higher education to be delivered. The better of universities are also impacted upon. Their budgets are being stretched, and every rand that gets handed to multinationals as their profits is a rand taken away from a scholarship for a poor South African student with the potential to succeed.

South Africa's higher education is confronted with three major priorities: produce a highly qualified human resource base which is needed for development, develop a new generation of academics to sustain our higher education system, and produce high quality research and innovation that can enhance our global competitiveness. All three priorities are dependent on access to widely used publication outlets – academic journals and books – that enable the dissemination of research results, but, just as importantly, access to the papers published by other scholars in leading journals. Yet, this is precisely what we do not have because an international commercial industry of academic publishing has been allowed to undermine the public good of higher education for massive profits.

There is already some movement on the part of the state to address some of these problems. The Department of Science and Technology commissioned the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) to search for solutions. The Academy has recently proposed a set of measures to encourage and facilitate the publication of academic books in and from South Africa. It has also proposed the development of a cost-effective, high-quality indigenous journals platform to serve as an outlet for the free online dissemination of research results worldwide. The platform is called SciELO South Africa, and is embedded in the growing multi-country SciELO system originally created in Brazil.

The main problem standing in the way of a real improvement in the scholarly performance of our researchers, however, is access to the high-impact 'international literature' emanating from North America and Europe. These are published by multi-national companies on highly profitable commercial platforms, and represent most of the more important scientific journals on the planet. Access to these is necessary if our postgraduate students, researchers and academics are to get to the cutting edge of global knowledge in their respective fields. To develop cost-effective access to these journals, DST has requested ASSAf to investigate how other countries have been able to do this, with a view to making recommendations for a suitable local approach. Consideration is currently being given to what Brazil, Pakistan and Chile have done in this regard. In Brazil, one of its science institutions, CAPES, is mandated with the responsibility of buying access to international journal platforms for most of the public universities with strong postgraduate degree programmes. Pakistan and Chile have a variant of this model which is much cheaper, and provides public universities with access to a smaller range of journals. The implementation of either model would benefit South African universities, for not only would it be highly cost-effective for our higher education system in comparison with the present 'individual library budget' system, but it would also provide more equitable access, enabling students in Venda and UCT to have access to the same range of scientific journals.

Despite the progress, however, is ASSAf not being too timid in the reforms it has proposed? Should it not direct public support for only one or two consolidated academic publishing houses in South Africa? Instead of proposing that indigenous journals should be supported by author fees paid by academic institutions, as if there are enough research resources circulating within these institutions, should it not be recommending that such a platform be subsidized directly by the DST?

More importantly, however, it has to be asked: why is it that sixteen years after South Africa's democratic transition, we still have not implemented a system-wide procurement of academic and research journals when it would be cheaper and would enable equitable access for all students in the country's public university system? Is it not because of the competitive logic that has emerged among South Africa's universities? Is this not an example of institutional autonomy run amok? And does it not point to a lack of entrepreneurial imagination by South African universities' executive and managerial layers who have become so immersed and preoccupied with international benchmarking exercises and protecting their institutional turf from the state, that they have not been able to come together as a collective to develop custom-made solutions to the contextual challenges this country's higher education system confronts? It needs to be borne in mind that if university executives fail in their singular duty to enable quality education by providing their students with access to the latest high quality research and knowledge, then it would become necessary for the Ministers of Higher Education and Training and/or Science & Technology to pass legislation, making it mandatory for South African universities to make scientific articles published by their academics available free online within six months to a year of appearing in international journals. After all, it is the money of South African taxpayers that enabled the research for, and the writing of, the article in the first place.

These are just some examples of what a progressive entrepreneurial higher education managerial practice would entail. Obviously, this does not exhaust the full list of reforms and/or practices. Many of these practices should be determined by the context of individual institutions. Larger institutions in urban settings may be able to use shifts in expenditure to drive reforms that enhance efficiencies. Universities in attractive geographic settings can use this to attract higher quality staff. Universities in small rural towns may be able to play on the safe and collegial atmosphere to attract other staff. Historically black universities in rural contexts would need to constitute themselves as core elements in a broader regional development agenda, without which the best funding formulae in the world would not lead to the development of these universities. The singular lesson to be learnt is that the focus must be on the local, and university executives need to develop a custom-made strategy for the specific conditions their institutions are located in.

Transformative Change?

But what makes these reforms transformative or structural? What suggests that they are not simply accommodative within the parameters of the existing political economy?

The examples of the reforms and practices detailed above, despite some negative consequences like the increasing inequality in the remuneration of the academy, has nevertheless had some positive

outcomes for both the higher education system and for the University of Johannesburg. The hunt for academic talents by the University of Johannesburg has broken the ethnic logic of academic recruitment in the Gauteng region. Until recently, English-speaking academics and a few Afrikaner academic dissidents, gravitated towards the University of the Witwatersrand. Afrikaner academics, with a smattering of English-speaking dissidents who fell out with the academic mainstream at Wits, tended to locate themselves at the Universities of Johannesburg and Pretoria. The University of Johannesburg's active recruitment across the ethnic divide broke this logic, and created an open academic market which has enhanced the leverage of academics vis-à-vis their respective executive managements.

The infusion of new academics and the activation and empowerment of existing staff at UJ has significantly enhanced the research productivity of the institution. In 2009, its output was 40 per cent higher than what it was three years earlier. Yet, all of this is occurring in an institution that is increasingly racially and ethnically integrating and that continues to service primarily a working and middle class student base. The University of Johannesburg's student fees still run at a significant discount to those of its regional and national peers, and it consciously acts to ensure that none of its campuses become *de facto* racial enclaves.

Similar progressive outcomes define the other three reforms and/or practices recommended above. The New Generation Scholars programme would enable the development of a new generation of academics. BEE resources would enable poorer students to study at universities and allow these institutions to provide better infrastructure, instructional and human resources. System buying of information resources in libraries would enable more cost efficient purchase of, and enhance equitable access to, academic journals across the system. But it is not these positive ends – however important they may be – that define these reforms and practices as structural or transformative. What makes them so is that they begin, however timidly, to pluralize power and change its balance among stakeholders to enable further reforms down the line. If the prevailing state of affairs in higher education is a product of the existing balance of power, then any agenda of change has to speak to the immediate context and be directed to changing this structured balance of power in the medium- to long-term.

The four reforms and practices suggested above are intended to achieve this. The new practices of remuneration and drive to incentivize efficiency and productivity, while undermining the relatively egalitarian character of the academy, nevertheless change the balance of power between academics and institutional executives. Younger academics do not only have to cast a gaze at senior managers as role models of better remuneration, and better remunerated A and B rated scholars constitute an alternative configuration of power within the institutional settings. The New Generation Scholars programmes, by creating a more diversified new generation of academics, would in the long term enhance the legitimacy of higher education among the society. This, together with independent BEE resources, would greatly enhance the power of internal institutional stakeholders, including academics and executive management vis-à-vis external stakeholders like system bureaucrats in government and corporate executives. System buying of information resources would similarly enhance the leverage of both government bureaucrats and institutional executives vis-à-vis the academic publishing industry. These changes in the structured balance of power within both institutions and the higher education system create the conditions for further reforms down the line.

There are some within higher education who argue that these reforms cannot be transformative because they engage the market and permit increased inequalities in remuneration. For these critics, the universities must be institutional imaginaries of a more progressive and egalitarian future. But not only do these critics not speak to the realities of the moment, assuming it is possible to create islands of equality in an unequal world, but they also confuse means and ends. For them, transformative means an outcome which agrees with their vision of a progressive future. As a result, they forever try to keep out unwelcome system pressures, and run the risk of a slow incremental capitulation to these very system effects.

Given this, does it not make more strategic sense to not solely focus on ends? Ends are important, and progressive outcomes should be attempted by higher education executives as the reforms and practices detailed above demonstrate. But perhaps even more important than ends is the means for change. Higher education executives need to recognize that sustainable progressive change is a product of an engagement that is directed to changing the existing structured balance of power. Reforms and practices must be explicitly embarked upon because they deliberately alter the relations of power among stakeholders within universities and in the higher education system. In a sense, the agenda must be to create structural conditions, meaning a balance of power, to enable further battles in the future.

Conclusion

As of now, higher education executives in South Africa, as elsewhere, fall into two camps. There are those on the conservative fringe who explicitly or implicitly see universities as business entities which should be treated as such. Other higher education executives are hostile to this idea, recognizing that universities can never be simply treated as corporate organizations with students as clients and academics as workers. Were this to happen, they realize that the nobility of the higher education project itself will be compromised. I count myself among this progressive group of executives. But until now, the mainstream of this progressive group has fought a rearguard battle to hold at bay corporate systemic pressures bearing down on the universities. The recommendation here is to engage the system with a view to advancing reforms that focus on the methodologies of change, that transform the balance of power among stakeholders within the universities and the higher education system as a whole. Only then, would we be able to change the tide in favour of progressive social and educational ends.

Note

1. A version of this article was first presented at a seminar at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, on 'First Thoughts at the Higher Education Roundtable', 27-29 October 2010.