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Reconnecting the University to Society: The Role of Knowledge as Public Good in South African Higher Education

Michael Cross* and Amasa Ndofirepi**

Abstract

This article discusses the nature of university–society relations in response to the calls on South African universities for greater social and economic responsiveness driven by external stakeholders. The adoption of constitutional democracy and the provision of institutional autonomy have provided them with considerable freedom to pursue their goals in society. However, they have also left them under considerable pressure from competing interest groups, intensifying the levels of internal and external determination, very often in a conflicting manner. The article argues that current forms of determination (e.g. Constitutional framework, policy and stakeholder demands) on university operations cannot per se provide adequate options for university–society relations. Critical to effective university–society relations is the structure of production and distribution of knowledge. The problem in this regard stems from the failure to recognize the encroachment of the profit motive into the academy (the shift from a public good knowledge/learning regime to a neoliberal knowledge/learning regime). Under such circumstances, progressive virtues (self-development, positive human relations and informed citizenship), democratic principles (equity and social justice) and the commitment to social transformation guided by altruism and common good encapsulated in the South African higher education vision are under serious threat.

* Research Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. E-mail: mcross@uj.ac.za

** Postdoctoral Fellow, Faculty of Education University of Johannesburg, South Africa. E-mail: andofirepi@uj.ac.za

Résumé

Cet article traite de la nature des relations entre l'université et la société en réponse aux appels lancés aux universités sud-africaines pour une plus grande réactivité sociale et économique conduite par les parties prenantes externes. L'adoption de la démocratie constitutionnelle et l'octroi de l'autonomie institutionnelle ont donné aux universités une liberté considérable pour l'atteinte de leurs objectifs dans la société. Cependant, cette situation a également mis ces dernières sous la pression considérable des groupes d'intérêts concurrents, intensifiant ainsi les niveaux de domination interne et externe, d'une manière très souvent conflictuelle. L'article soutient que les formes actuelles de détermination (par exemple les cadres constitutionnels, les exigences politiques et celles des parties prenantes) du fonctionnement de l'université ne peuvent pas en soi fournir des options adéquates pour les relations entre l'université et la société. La structure de la production et de la distribution de la connaissance est essentielle pour avoir des relations efficaces entre l'université et la société. Le problème à cet égard découle de l'incapacité à reconnaître l'empiétement de la recherche du profit dans le milieu universitaire (le passage d'un régime public de connaissance/d'apprentissage à un régime néolibéral de connaissance/d'apprentissage). Dans de telles circonstances, les vertus progressistes (l'auto-développement, les relations humaines positives et la citoyenneté consciente), les principes démocratiques (l'équité et la justice sociale) et l'engagement de transformation sociale guidée par l'altruisme et le bien commun ancrés dans la vision de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud sont gravement menacés.

Introduction

This article discusses the nature of university–society relations in response to the calls for greater social and economic responsiveness driven by the increasing and conflicting demands made by external stakeholders on South African universities. The adoption of constitutional democracy and the provision of institutional autonomy have provided South African universities with considerable freedom to pursue their goals in society. However, they have also left them under considerable pressure from competing interest groups, intensifying the levels of internal and external determination, very often in a conflicting manner. This article argues that current forms of determination (e.g. Constitutional framework, policy and stakeholder demands) on university operations cannot per se provide adequate options for university–society relations. Critical to effective university–society relations is the structure of production and distribution of knowledge. The problem at this level stems largely from the failure to recognize the encroachment of the profit motive

into the academy (Slaughter and Leslie 1997: 210), and 'a shift from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic neo-liberal knowledge/learning regime' (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004: 8), which Torres (2012) coined 'neo-liberal common sense'. Commodification and commercialization of knowledge, with consequent changing professional values, norms and beliefs dictated by market ethics, dominate university practices. Under such circumstances, progressive virtues (self-development, positive human relations and informed citizenship), democratic principles (equity and social justice) and the commitment to social transformation guided by altruism and common good encapsulated in the South African higher education vision are under serious threat.

Our point of departure is that in the context in which South African universities are situated of neoliberalism with its emphasis on the *economic* and market function of the university rather than on the *social* function, higher education and its articulation in society have become destabilized particularly in the domain of knowledge. Today, academic work as well as institutional output are driven by the global markets and narrow economic concerns (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Contento 1998), making universities increasingly unresponsive to local social and cultural needs (e.g. social cohesion). The paper proposes the concept of socially embedded knowledge within a socially embedded university. This is premised on four main considerations. First, socially embedded knowledge is a socially engaged mode of knowledge advancement founded on the assumption that knowledge is a public good and based on dialogue, reciprocity and inter-dependence between the university and society, without compromising its institutional integrity. Second, it is embedded in local contextual complexities to account for the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Third, it embodies the peculiarity of the African experience through which it finds its place within the context of global knowledge. Fourth, it integrates theory (the context of production of knowledge) and practice (the context of applicability), and engagement with a community of practitioners.

To this end we project the necessity of an epistemological break of a particular kind by focusing special attention on knowledge as a public good as one way of linking university to society. We acknowledge the diverse nature of universities especially in South Africa in the same way as it is misleading to assume that South Africa consists of a homogenous society. However our case is that universities in South Africa are characterized by some common strands that thread them together in the challenges they confront in society.

Understanding the Insertion of the University in Society: Context, Concepts and Assumptions

The question of knowledge and university–society relations requires contextualization. Critical to this aspect is the central role of knowledge in university engagement with the developing world, its historicity in the South African context, the position of the university as an institution, its positionality in relation to internal and external stakeholders, and the normative space provided by the National Constitution and subsequent legislative frameworks. We discuss these aspects in the following sub-sections.

From the Rubbles of the 'Ivory Tower': The Centrality of Knowledge in Institutional Responsiveness

The university as an 'ivory tower' refers to an institution above the social order. The notion draws from the Eurocentric conception of knowledge as the *enculturation of the mind* (Sanderson 1993), *disinterested pursuit of knowledge or knowledge as an end in itself* (Muller 2000), *discipline-based knowledge* (Sanderson 1993), *citizenship education* (Enslin 2003), and *critical thinking and personal autonomy* (Tsui 2002). This is captured by Oakeshott (quoted by Fish 2009) in his distinction between 'learning which is concerned with the degree of understanding necessary to practice a skill, and learning which is expressly focused upon an enterprise of understanding and explaining'. Such a conception entails 'understanding and explaining anything as long as the exercise is not performed with the purpose of intervening in the social and political crises of the moment, as long, that is, as the activity is not regarded as instrumental – valued for its contribution to something more important than itself' (Fish 2009: 1). Having dominated conceptions of the role of the university in society for over a century, Oakeshott's approach to the pursuit of knowledge has come under fierce attack for its perceived inutility and irrelevance in the face of the challenges facing contemporary societies, particularly those in the developing world.

Ramirez (2004) has recently shown that the major universities in the world have changed. In the process, global economies replace national economies; highly skilled innovative workers replace production line workers. Current literature has explained these changes with reference to globalization discourses – technological revolution, global competitiveness and knowledge innovation (Castells 2001). Many analysts have also referred to the rise of a postmodern socio-economic and political order, regarded as fundamentally different from the previous 'modern' era, as being behind these changes (see Abercrombie and Turner 1978). However, these changes cannot solely be explained with reference to global pressures. While globalization and concerns

with economic competitiveness have deeply impacted on South African higher education, they fall short of explaining the range of current pressures around forms of institutional responsiveness centred on equity, nation-building and human rights, inspired by and entrenched in the ideology of a mass democratic movement. In this regard, Ramirez (2004) warns against the tendency to explain higher educational institutional changes almost exclusively with reference to globalization discourses. He points out that some of these changes were driven by specific contextual challenges rooted in national histories and institutional cultures. It is a fundamental part of our analytical pillars to expose what Brumlick has referred to as 'the normative orienting energy' of such discourses, which have become somewhat universalizing and unproblematically accepted in current studies.

There are also drivers related to the structure of knowledge within and across the disciplines. It is now widely accepted that increased focus on responsiveness has led in many instances to a shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge approaches (Gibbons et al. 1994), from academic/theoretical to 'professional' programmes that prioritize skills, application and problem solving, with profound implications for research, teaching and learning in the university. Donoghue (2008) in particular argues categorically that 'an ethic of productivity' and efficiency – the ultimate expression of utilitarianism – has already won the day; those academic fields deemed impractical in social and economic domains run the risk of being deemed unnecessary; and academic specialists in these fields may 'come to be seen by everyone (not just those outside the academy) as unaffordable anomalies'. In support, Frank and Grabler (2006: 20) suggest that the content of higher education has also been driven by intrinsic factors related to the changing conceptions of what constitutes valid knowledge in society.

Our question then is: if the world has changed and with it higher education and its conceptions of knowledge, knowledge production and utilization, can the Oakeshottian ideal be justified in today's South African academic context? Most universities in the world have been compelled to abandon their 'ivory tower', 'insular', distant and abstract form for one that is more responsive to the direct needs of society, whether economic, social or cultural. South African universities are no exception.

Thinning Boundaries: State, Ruling Party, Government and University Relations

Jonathan (2006) suggests that the distinction between the concepts of 'ruling party', 'state' and 'government' and their practices in a society in transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy is blurring. Institutions tend to

be conditioned by the layers of ideas emanating from these fields of power. The same could be said about those bodies and groupings which make up civil society and cultural life (Jonathan 2006: 6). In our view, this is also true about the interface between state and civil society. As Jonathan puts it, the relationship between these different layers of power and the university is particularly complex in cases like South Africa where the formal establishment of democracy was 'not through revolution (regime overthrow), not through "replacement" (regime substitution) but through "*transplacement*": the negotiated transfer of power from the old regime to the forces of opposition' (Jonathan 2006: 6). While apartheid state power gave way to democracy, the particular formula agreed through negotiations, based on compromises from contending parties, guaranteed the safeguarding of fundamental continuities across established organs of state and existing social structures that would require systematic transformation later. Under such circumstances, 'compromise' became a principle that would inform all relationships in the political domain, including university–society relations, which, as will be shown, have been structured on the basis of compromises. This principle has shaped the transformation ethos in the country, whereby institutions cannot only follow the logic of things around their own internal determination. How a university structures its relations with society will always be about compromise and object of contestation.

A Declaratory Rather than Normative Constitution: Is the Absence of Specification an Asset or Liability?

While South Africa can claim its uniqueness in having a formal Constitution with a democratic project at the centre of its agenda, its provisions are *declaratory rather than normative*, which, in our view, is desirable (Cross 2015). On the positive side, it opens space for contestation, negotiation, dialogue and consensus building. On the downside, it leaves considerable room for ambiguity and manipulation. While the Constitution set a framework for democratic participation in a democratic state, the substantive dimensions of this state and the nature of democratic participation were to be built through legislation and through appropriate performance of other organs of state under severe constraints imposed by its legacies and continuities. Further, they are open to diverse and very often conflicting interpretations leading to contradictory choices and practices. This can be illustrated by the different discourses emanating from the constitutional provision regarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom. How institutions navigate through this ambiguity depends on their own institutional agency. This has some bearing on current university–society relations. Against this background, we ask the

question as to whether the Constitution is enhancing or constraining current university–society relations in the country.

A Convoluted Environment: The Prevalence of 'Liberal Common Sense'

Martinez and Garcia (2000) identify the following defining features of neoliberalism: (i) reduction of public expenditure where less government spending is devoted to social services such as health and education; (ii) deregulation by government of private enterprise including everything that could diminish profits; (iii) privatization, as state-owned assets, goods and services are sold to private investors; and (iv) elimination of the concept of 'public good' or 'community' and its replacement with individual responsibility, whilst the underprivileged in society have to find their own solutions to social problems such as healthcare and education. Nationally, neoliberalism gained expression through the government's macro-economic framework – Growth, Expansion and Redistribution (GEAR) – which places emphasis on fiscal controls, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. In higher education, it represents the integration of the university into the new economy (global economy), and more specifically, how faculty, students, administrators and academic professionals use 'a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy' (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004: 1). Neoliberalism reflects the encroachment of the profit motive into the academy (Slaughter and Leslie 1997: 210). This new trend is reflected in recent literature through descriptors such as: 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Munch 2014); the 'entrepreneurial university'; the 'exchange university' and 'corporatization of academic culture' (Chan and Fisher 2008); 'the morphing of academic practice' (MacFarlane 2011); and transition from 'Homo Academicus to Homo Oeconomicus'. Even more extreme are those apocalyptic images such as 'the university in ruins' (Readings 2006); 'the last professors' (Donoghue 2008); 'the academic dean: an imperilled species' (Gmelch 1994), inspired by nostalgia for the old days where knowledge concerns prevailed over profiteering. But in this scenario, is university knowledge production and dissemination a public good?

Knowledge as a Public Good

The way university education and research are provided, produced and financed brings to the fore the concept of public good. From an economist's perspective (see Samuelson 1954; also Musgrave 1959) public goods are those that are *non-excludable* meaning goods that cannot be provided exclusively to some individuals or that some people cannot be excluded from consuming them, and

are *non-rivalrous*, i.e. their consumption by some does not affect other people negatively (see Tilak 2008a). In addition to these two central tenets, public goods generate a large quantum of externalities, basically known as social or public benefits. An important implication of public goods is that they have to be financed by the state out of general revenues, without necessarily relying on prices or any user charges like student fees (Tilak 2008b). Their consumption is generally made accessible to all and they are not subject to competition. However, while we acknowledge that the distinction between public and private goods tends to assume a 'technical' and 'ideological' orientation and that classification of public goods is not absolute, we hold that stakeholders including government policies, market conditions, level of development and political realities are quite central in decisions concerning public goods. After all, public goods have been provided since the Middle Ages, and hence they need to be redefined time and again in consideration of changing political realities (Desai 2003).

Narrow Utilitarianism Centred on Economic Benefits and Narrow Conceptions of Knowledge Driven by Workplace Demands

We refer here to entrenchment of narrow utilitarianism/instrumentalism that emphasizes the economic (with emphasis on profiteering and meeting the demands of the markets) rather than the social function of the university. Utilitarian discourses advocate direct benefits of higher education to the individual and society beyond the cultivation of the mind. As an instrumentalist discourse, utilitarianism vacillates from narrow emphasis on economic benefits through utility-based knowledge related to the world of work and pragmatic skills-based approaches (Kraak 2000: 14) to the emphasis on wider societal benefits in terms of inculcation and promotion of social values such as human rights, social justice, equality and equity. As a result, universities are turning to skills development and professionalization of the curriculum for workplace readiness at the expense of the general and knowledge perceived as theoretical or academic (Gibbons et al. 1994; Ensor 2002). The emphasis is placed on inter- and multi-displinary knowledge, applied knowledge (or Mode I vis-à-vis Mode II forms of knowledge), problem solving skills and responsiveness to the job markets.

Encroachment of an Accumulation Capitalist Rationality

An important point of contention that has been overlooked by institutional managers is the subtle replacement of the idea of knowledge as public good with that of profit. Munch (2014: 93) argues that academic capitalism is driven by the belief that academic success in today's competitive global environment

is on the one hand decided by the availability of two forms of capital. First, material capital, money, when investment in scientific undertakings can be measured with reference to the material benefits they bring to the institution. Second, its transformation into symbolic capital, prestige or reputation, when investments in projects are linked to the expected symbolic revenues, for example publications in high impact journals or top national or international institutional rankings (Munch 2014: 114). For Munch, the accumulated symbolic capital helps to repel or deal with competitors while the accumulated monetary capital can be used to attract reputed human assets. South African institutional managers tend to believe that managerialism, university rankings and academic ratings are here to stay; they have become *a global fact.* While this may be true, it should not go without convincing problematization.

Constitutive Technology: Managerialism

The rise of managerialism in South African universities has eroded the autonomy of academic work and reconfigured both institutional and academic staff identities (Henkel 2005: 155). Institutionally, it has imposed new agendas (university enterprises, income generation programmes, public and private partnerships for business, etc.) and new decision making mechanisms (Senior Management Teams, etc.). Four aspects are worth highlighting. First, managerialism imposes a centralized and somewhat autocratic management style based on the assumption that the logic of things in industry can trigger better performance and outcomes in the university. Metz (2014) argues that this has engendered undesirable consequences in areas such as promotion criteria, research incentives, teaching oversight, equity assessment, performance review and decision making. Second, new layers of managers are added to the university bureaucracy to strengthen compliance with institutional strategies (Johnson and Cross 2006), particularly those that align research, knowledge and courses with national and institutional goals dictated by cost, efficiency and the markets. Third, managerialism has a constitutive role in that it promotes new academic identities largely by constraining critical engagement. Fourth, it elevates measurement in academic practice (numbers of publications, publications in high impact journals, citations, etc.) to enhance institutional and faculty rankings and ratings. The logic is as follows: more publications, more publications in high impact journals, more citations = higher rankings and ratings = reputation (simplicity capital) and more money (material capital). These practices are increasingly becoming *institutional facts* (hence common sense), i.e. are becoming assumed as aspects of institutional life against which we conduct our academic practice (Searle 1995). Overall, this development has affected the traditional role of academics (Kletz and Pallez 2002: 9) by

undermining the academic and intellectual project and relocating power from academics to administrators.

In sum, in the context of neoliberalism, the university and its academic project have become destabilized. The university tends to be aligned to the global economy whilst becoming unresponsive to local needs. Consequently, the progressive virtues (self-development, positive human relations, social engagement and informed citizenship) and social transformation, which were associated with a particular kind of academic who advocated public good (and not capital or profit) and was guided by altruism and common good, are fast disappearing.

Responsiveness: Multifaceted Function of the University

In this section, we discuss university–society relations with reference to stakeholder internal and external determination. By determination we mean the power that interest groups or stakeholders (e.g. government and its agencies – Council on Higher Education (CHE), National Research Foundation (NFR), South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Science Councils, business, professional bodies, etc.) exert on university governance and management. A university enjoys internal self-determination when it possesses institutional autonomy, independence and freedom to pursue its own agenda (Pretorius 2003: 16). This may be evidenced in individualized, self-centred, self-indulgent and insular academic pursuits that have little relevance to the society wherein it is located (*ibid.*). Thus knowledge production tends to be seen as an end in itself and not beholden to society for solving social problems (Pretorius 2003: 17). Theoretically, this is the type of institutional predisposition set by the current constitutional provision in South Africa which guarantees institutional autonomy, academic freedom, freedom of expression and related liberties stipulated in the Bill of Rights. This is in contrast to many other African countries, where universities remain under direct government control. In our view, internal determination has been constrained by external stakeholder pressures (some of them misguided) in university governance structures, which reframe or leave little space for genuine institutional academic agency. Academic integrity and autonomy come into question here when the profit motive is used as an incentive to speed things up and compete bypassing values, standards and beliefs associated with traditional research. Under these conditions research innovation means a proliferation of products released as a sign of technological progress but that may not actually have any socially justifiable purpose.

In the case of external determination, the university answers to an external social group that controls decisions as to its mission and practices, creating

a relationship of domination and subordination (Pretorius 2003: 17). The reconstitution of South African universities as stakeholder universities has opened considerable space for the encroachment of external stakeholder pressures through their governance structures and external funding arrangements, which sometimes have led them to pursue narrow academic projects or to privilege economic responsiveness (often reduced to commodification and commercialization of knowledge as a primary function) at the expense of wider social and cultural responsiveness. The shifting modes of state coordination of higher education can be interpreted as attempts to force the university to exercise internal determination more responsibly. In several cases, internal crises, driven by misguided management or Council decisions, have led the Minister of Education to place universities under administration, to subject all universities to strict auditing procedures, and to establish a Transformation Oversight Committee to monitor transformation in higher education, beyond its funding steering mechanisms. Thus, while the South African university is personified as self-determining and independent, we have seen an increasing (often self-created) vulnerability with regard to its engagement with stakeholders. It is against this background that some analysts have argued that the provision of institutional autonomy should best be interpreted as conditional autonomy.

We concur with Pretorius that both internal and external determination are inadequate for repositioning the university in its knowledge relations to society. Pretorius (2003: 13) proposes a socially engaged knowledge generation, which is accomplished by integrating teaching, research and service so that each site provides an opportunity for the diversification of knowledge. He builds his argument on the premise that in a developing society, the university has an obligation to produce knowledge that contributes to development, an assumption we have also endorsed in this paper but not in a narrow economic sense. We use Pretorius's notion of a socially engaged knowledge generation to conceptualize our particular form of articulation of the university–society nexus, which we label as the socially embedded university.

Socially Engaged or Socially Embedded University?

Our first epistemological point of departure in conceptualizing the socially embedded university is the notion of *social embodiment.* Besides responding to higher education demand in context, social embodiment commits the institutions to strive to equip their graduates with appropriate intellectual attitudes and pre-dispositions to operate in a complex world riddled by poverty, social injustice, conflict, bad governments, civil wars, economic collapse, catastrophic epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola, and the mass exodus of skilled tal-

ents (Wilson-Tagoe 2007: 238), and thus be equipped with a strong sense of moral responsibility. Metaphorically, one could refer to social embodiment as *habitus in habitat*, or institutional habitualization, in that institutions can open themselves to face both the opportunities and challenges offered within the socio-cultural environment in which they operate (*habit*) (Fourcade 2010). This means that institutions can be more or less *context-bound* or *context-independent (disembodied)* in their discourses, policies and academic practices, as the people and institutions surrounding them mediate what universities do.

Our second point concerns the *social embeddedness* of its programmes, interventions and strategies, which requires an appreciation of the institutional and social diversity, and deep understanding of national historical roots and the world context at large. Worth mentioning is also the widening of *social responsibility*, posed by the changing and complex national and global worlds. Having emerged from countries such as the USA, India and South Africa, the socially embedded university was appropriated, redefined and institutionalized within the European Union by the Bologna Declaration of a university that is 'broadly accessible', 'socially useful' and 'organisationally flexible'. For Williams (1997: 103), accessibility is about giving access to information, guidance, funding and financial support, admission procedures, credit for existing skills and knowledge, relevant knowledge and curricula, buildings (facilities), a variety of courses and modes of study, differing learning processes, a supportive environment, a variety of certification and accreditation mechanisms, and a range of vocational and occupational outcomes. Social usefulness ties the university to social progress, i.e. universities should function as motors of progress in a globally competitive environment. A good system is highly diversified, inclusive, performing, relevant and working for all. This concept is also becoming popular beyond the European Union boundaries, including in the African continent. For example, the 1972 Association of African Universities workshop in Accra endorsed the importance of universities in newly independent African countries as *development universities* (Yesufu 1973). In Sawyerr's view, the development university is 'a new institution (that can) help African nations build up their capacity to develop and manage their resources, alleviate poverty of the majority of their people, and close the gap between them and the developed world' (Sawyerr 2005: 2). We propose in the following section that given its peculiar history, for a South African university (or any other African university) to fulfill its mission, a paradigm shift is required that emphasizes epistemological, ethical and political responsibility in research-based knowledge production and utilization.

Repositioning the African University: The Need for an Epistemological and Ethical Break

In this section, we argue that at the core of effective university–society relations is the nature of the knowledge contribution that the university makes to society. In the case of a university in South Africa, the production of such knowledge necessitates a great deal of epistemological, ethical and political responsibility to ensure that it engages with and reflects the identity of the society it is supposed to serve, and that the knowledge it generates is relevant and responsive to the needs of the people. This means that the university in South Africa should be primarily a site for the production and distribution of new knowledge in the context of African experience alongside the global experience. We build this argument on three important premises. First, we suggest that the *responsibility of being a South African and an African university* requires that in so far as knowledge production is concerned it must be rooted in its historical-cultural milieu (its comparative advantage), grounded in African experience (its epistemological basis) without being an insular or parochial entity (ghettoization from the global world). This is grounded in Kwame Nkrumah's affirmation that 'We must in the development of our universities bear in mind that once it has been planted in the African soil it must take root amidst African traditions and cultures' (Nkrumah 1956). The African experience is not only the 'foundation' of all forms of knowledge, but also the 'source' for the construction of that knowledge (Ramose 2003). It draws its inspiration from its environment, as an indigenous tree growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in African soil (Magkoba 2005: 14). It is from its insertion in its context – its embeddedness – and its translation of the experience of that context into locally and globally relevant knowledge – its embodiment and engagement – that strengths to its own competitive advantage on the international stage are derived, and from which international reputation and recognition, so much desired, should be achieved.

Second, African universities can only play a strong and sustainable role on the global stage if their international reputation is achieved through local excellence or, in other words, if their *world-classness* becomes an expression of their *Africanness*. A university is truly a world class university when it has a strong sense of itself, plays a transformational role in the development of the society in which it operates in ways that stretches local knowledge horizons into the global arena 'without losing its soul' and thus makes a meaningful contribution to global knowledge. In this sense, as Makgoba (2005: 24) puts it, 'our universities should be unmistakably African, in the same sense that Harvard, Yale and Stanford are unmistakably American; and in the same way that Oxford, Manchester and London are English; and in the same way that

Edinburgh, St Andrews and Dundee are Scottish' (Magkoba 2005: 14). A professor referring to Wits University recently reinforced this claim as follows:

> [ext] The University [Wits University] as it is thought of is an African University cut off historically from the continent... It must engage with the rest of Africa. If it is going to have the pretension . . . that it is a world-class university, it is not going to be a world-class university by trying to replicate . . . Harvard or Oxford or the orientation northward . . . The way this University will be a world-class university is if it's perceived by the rest of the world as the place to go to for expertise. On what? 'Africa'. (Quoted in Cross 1992: 86) [ends]Like any other African universities, South African universities in their traditional role, just as universities elsewhere around the globe, have 'an obligation to their social milieu for the preservation, the imparting and the generation of knowledge (Makgoba 1997: 179). Makgoba (*ibid.*) warns however that 'it is important to recognise…that the imparting of inappropriate or irrelevant education, even of the highest calibre, would . . . lead to a poor and ineffective product'. Thus university education has to be relevant not only to the people, but also to the culture and environment in which it is being imparted. Such universities will fulfil Ali Mazrui's conception of an African university; which repositions itself by moving 'from being a multinational corporation to a multicultural corporation'. For Mazrui:

> [ext] African university systems have grown up with structural or other links with metropolitan universities in Europe and North America, the African university has continued to be heavily unicultural: it has been more a manifestation of western culture in an African situation than an outgrowth of African culture itself (Mazrui 2003: 152). [ends]

Third, different foundations exist for the construction of pyramids of knowledge depending on the social, economic, political and historical conditions of the people they serve and the environment in which they operate. Each pyramid is unique by its very nature and should enter into genuine and *critical dialogical encounter with other pyramids of knowledge* as an equal partner, facilitate a critical emancipatory approach to solve the problems of their people and produce the material and capacities for Africans to determine their own future(s), which requires the production of knowledge which is relevant, effective and empowering (Letsekha 2013: 7). Worth mentioning is the promise made by postmodernism in the late 1980s with its discourse of recognition and legiti-

mation of subjugated knowledges or silenced voices, i.e. the post-structuralist understanding 'that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and to have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate' (Harvey 1989: 48). It created spaces for marginalized voices to speak their own knowledges, and drew attention *to other worlds and to other voices* that had for too long been silenced (Harvey 1989: 48), a novel idea we seem to have forgotten. We provide a critical argument for a movement towards a reorganized and reconstituted space, where epistemologies acknowledge the diversity of both local and exotic human ideas, and knowledge thus becomes a tool with which individuals negotiate the complexities of everyday life (Barnett 2009). This is an area that has become extremely vulnerable under the neoliberal utilitarian economism, which privileges the global in knowledge hierarchies.

Fourth, related to the previous point is the *politics of knowledge* at both national and international scales, currently exacerbated by the neoliberal rationality brought about by the global discourse of rankings and ratings, which has increasingly sidelined the local (knowledge, publications, etc.) and the contextual responsiveness that is needed. There is an element of *hierarchy* of authority and unequal distribution of power in current hierarchies of knowledge. Knowledge is produced within political structures and when created and disseminated it charts the lines and patterns of power that exist in society (Wills 2014). Weiler draws our attention to at least four facets of the knowledge–power dynamic, namely: (i) the paramount importance of hierarchies in the existing knowledge order (e.g. global knowledge vis-à-vis local knowledge); (ii) the relationship of reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power; (iii) the transnational division of labour in the contemporary knowledge order; and (iv) the political economy of the commercialization of knowledge (Weiler 2011: 2). In such scenarios, a knowledge system has a centre and peripheries in terms of the production and distribution of knowledge. Africa, as a continent, finds itself on the very edge of the knowledge periphery (Altbach 1987) and appears to be increasingly isolated from the centre (Teferra and Altbach 2004).

In our own institutions, knowledge disseminated through local publishers or scholarly journals is rated second class and deserving of less rewards than knowledge disseminated internationally. Today most of the so-called high-impact journals in social sciences and humanities hardly consider particular studies on a specific African country, and give preference to articles that sweep over the entire continent or regions – products of helicopter research. Many African universities are frequently linked by their participation in an international system of knowledge distribution. For these universities, the evaluation of the scholarly work of their faculty members and students, their

research proposals, manuscripts, and publications that verify the key incentives of their intellectual life, are all controlled from Europe and America as the centre. This raises the question of the place of university knowledge as a local public good. In other words, what benefits do South Africans get from these research exports?

Fifth, as universities on the African continent have not been saved from the baggage of irrelevance bequeathed by colonialism and apartheid, we regard *epistemological emancipation of university education* from the hegemony of western-imposed knowledge systems as the central instrument for true knowledge production relevant to Africa. Contemporary epistemologies in African universities suffer from Eurocentrism characterized by a biased and skewed mainstream scholarship rooted in western scientism that coerces faculty and students to 'adhere to the paradigms that do not reflect their knowledge or experience of the world' (Lowy 1995: 728). Universities in Africa have been criticized for being mirror images of western epistemology and for operating in rather imitative and replicating fashion (Makgoba 1997: 174). Recent literature has been flooded by an abundance of epithets and descriptors of this problem: 'epistemological imperialism' (Osha 2011: 152), 'epistemicide' (Ramose 2003), 'epistemological authoritarianism' (Kaphagawani 1998), 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker 2009) and 'paradigmatic tyranny' (Rahnema 2001). Against this background, universities in South Africa must be seen to be both *acting to change* borrowed or imposed epistemologies, and *acting to change themselves* and their priorities in response to the social imperatives that press themselves upon them, such as catering for the complex challenges in the continent.

We therefore argue for the need to *re-contextualize and transform university epistemologies* as a prerequisite for an authentic postcolonial African university. *R*e-contextualization is a way 'to reinvent the African university' by producing knowledge and creating institutions that can translate that knowledge effectively in African communities (Wilson-Tagoe 2007). The rationale for Africanization and the transformation of epistemologies in the African university is not a simple issue of structure, but rather it is about how the knowledge systems therein reflect African ownership and democratic participation. In this regard, Nabudere calls for endogenization of epistemologies that will save African universities from becoming 'satellite universities of other universities outside the African continent serving outside interests and agendas instead of serving the African people' (Nabudere 2003: 6). We borrow from Bourdieu the concept of 'epistemological break' not just to refer to this critical moment where a new theoretical consciousness is emerging, but also to refer to the modes of vigilance required for achieving epistemological

emancipation and truthful outcomes in knowledge generation. Such an exercise will require scholars in African universities to be reflexive about their own epistemic positioning.

In line with the concept of responsiveness attached to the socially embedded university, a route towards epistemological emancipation may also entail a shift from closed knowledge systems (controlled and driven by canonical norms of traditional disciplines and by collegially-recognized authority) to more open knowledge systems (in dynamic interaction with external social interests, 'consumer' or 'client' demand, and other processes of knowledge generation). This is an idea already embraced by the South African National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996: 4). Such interaction would lead to the incorporation of the perspectives and values of previously silenced groups into the educational and cognitive culture of institutions.

Conclusion

We have acknowledged that universities assist with the creation, advancement, absorption and dissemination of knowledge through research and teaching; hence that they are nurseries of ideas, innovation, development and tanks of knowledge. But to fulfil this mandate, they embrace social and market values differently, depending on surrounding contextual complexities that confront them, the type of institutions they choose to be, and the discourses that mediate their academic projects and practices, that is, the dialectical interplay of internal and external determination that may enhance or constrain their institutional agency. Currently institutional agency cannot be understood separately from the dominance of neoliberalism promoted by global economic networks, the interplay of global competitiveness and knowledge innovation discourses with context-based popular democratic discourses rooted in social justice. The impact of these factors can be seen in the choices around entrepreneurial practices manifested through commodification, commercialization and marketization of knowledge, which is no longer perceived as a public good. This trend has reconstituted academic identities, changed conceptions and practices of knowledge, and reconfigured university–society relations. As a result, South African universities are increasingly leaning towards the markets, with concomitant detrimental effects on earlier efforts to promote race, gender and class equity as envisaged in the South African higher education vision. Earlier efforts to restructure universities to respond to popular demand and the public good, including expansion of access and the adoption of affirmative action strategies, have been met with considerable resistance.

Although institutional 'agency' is always critical in the ways universities respond to external determination (e.g. national policy, competition, oppor-

tunities and constraints), we have suggested that the particular form of institutional articulation between universities and their stakeholders lies behind the peculiarity of institutional responses. These responses have resulted in unintended synchronies and synergies between institutional academic projects and the ideology of neoliberalism, which privileges economic rather than social responsiveness, profiteering rather than public good. Under the ideology of 'excellence' and concerns with becoming world-class universities, many institutions are increasingly turning their attention to global rankings and ratings, which very often divert their attention towards global competitiveness at the expense of local responsiveness. As elsewhere in Africa, South African universities have a moral and political responsibility to generate and disseminate knowledge for the common good, which implies a close relationship between the university, knowledge and society.

Having placed the concept of the socially embedded university at the centre of our vision of South African university–society relations, the challenge for higher education scholars is to explore ways of reconciling the tension separating the two competing knowledge projects under the dominance of neoliberalism: market-oriented economic responsiveness vis-à-vis social responsiveness rooted in social justice. This tension cannot be resolved without genuine epistemological emancipation from the hegemony of disempowering western discourses. From the above exposé, it is hoped that researchers and scholars on Africa as well as policy makers will be provoked to confront these unresolved tensions head-on if knowledge production and dissemination in South African universities are to take their central position as a public good.

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