



Pursuing Excellence in a ‘World-Class African University’: The Mamdani Affair and the Politics of Global Higher Education

Isaac A. Kamola*

Abstract

Four years after the end of apartheid, the administrators of the University of Cape Town (UCT) suspended Mahmood Mamdani, then chair of the Centre of African Studies, from his teaching obligations because they deemed his course – ‘Problematizing Africa’ – too theoretically difficult for incoming students. The ensuing showdown between Mamdani and the university administration culminated in a spirited public debate over how to best ‘transform’ the historically segregated university to achieve racial integration. Less commented upon, however, is the fact that this debate coincided with UCT’s efforts to brand itself as a ‘World Class African University,’ attract greater funding from foreign institutions, privatise its campus services, and adopt National Qualifications Framework (NQF) standards. In other words, UCT – like many post-apartheid universities – was busy remaking itself into a ‘global’ university. Taken in this context, Mamdani’s argument for the importance of ‘teaching Africa in an African university’ takes on a new resonance. This article re-reads the 1998 curriculum debates as also a struggle for academic autonomy within a neoliberal university. Doing so offers the opportunity to think about the political strategies of pedagogy, while providing students and faculty a compelling model for how they might resist the neo-liberalisation of higher education within their own institutions.

Résumé

Quatre ans après la fin de l’apartheid, l’administration de l’Université de Cape Town (UCT) suspend temporairement le Professeur Mahmood Mamdani, de sa charge de cours intitulée ‘*Problematizing Africa*’, jugée théoriquement trop ardue pour des étudiants de première année. Une confrontation entre Mamdani et l’administration universitaire s’ensuivit et culmina par un débat public animé. Ce conflit a souvent été interprété comme un

* Johns Hopkins University. Email: ikamola1@jhu.edu

désaccord sur la meilleure manière de réhabiliter une université anciennement ségrégée. Toutefois, ce qui est passé sous silence est le fait que ce débat allait de pair avec la volonté de l'UCT de se proclamer « Université africaine de premier rang », de recevoir des subventions des institutions privées, de privatiser les services de son campus et d'adopter les normes du *National Qualification Framework*. Autrement dit, comme d'autres universités de la période post-apartheid, l'UCT était soucieuse de se métamorphoser en université « globale ». Dans ce contexte, l'argument de Mamdani concernant l'importance d'« enseigner l'Afrique dans une université africaine » prend une autre tournure. Cet article propose une relecture des débats de 1998 sur le contenu des cours sous un nouvel angle et de les comprendre, entre autres, comme une lutte pour l'autonomie académique au sein d'une université néo-libérale. Ceci offre l'opportunité de réfléchir sur les stratégies politiques, en donnant aux étudiants ainsi qu'aux universitaires un exemple de résistance face au néo-libéralisme au sein des institutions universitaires.

Today, most universities around the world are consciously remaking themselves into 'global' institutions. Downplaying their particular histories, they emphasise their 'global' qualities and position themselves for global leadership in research, teaching and active engagement in global issues.¹ These changes take many forms, including a greater focus on global studies departments and programmes, increasing study abroad opportunities, developing classes on global diversity, and changing school branding campaigns to reflect an interest in globalisation. Administrators emphasise a school's 'global presence' and organisations like the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) and Shanghai Jiao Tong University publish annual rankings of the world's top universities. Some universities even open overseas campuses to help forge their 'global' credentials, while receiving financial incentives from foreign governments and gaining access to larger pools of tuition-paying students (Ross 2008). The Rwandan government, for instance, recently promised a \$95 million package over 10 years to Pittsburgh-based Carnegie Mellon University to open a campus in Kigali (Wilhelm 2011). While the expanding international reach of universities was once tied to the colonial project, higher education has now become a wholesale export commodity. For example, since receiving protection from the World Trade Organisation, higher education has become the United States fifth largest exportable service (Ross 2008). In Australia, the money brought in by the massive influx of foreign students constitutes the country's third largest export (Wildavsky 2010:24).

This new 'global academic order' (Wildavsky 2010:3), however, is rife with inequality. The scramble to 'globalise' higher education strongly fa-

vours universities from the United States, Europe, and other English-speaking advanced industrial countries. The degree of inequality is made most visible in various attempts to rank 'global' universities. The THES ranking of the world's top universities in 2010, for example, identified 81 North American universities in the top 200 (and 16 in the top 20) but only two African universities – University of Cape Town (107th) and Alexandria University (147th).² On the one hand, such extreme asymmetries demarcate a profound inequality between the academic 'core' and a vast number of 'peripheral institutions,' many of them found in the previously colonised world (Altbach 2007). These historical and material asymmetries are further compounded by the fact that much of higher education around the world is conducted in English, academic migration flows, primarily from south to north, graduate training and academic publishing are centralised in 'core' universities, and curricular and research priorities are often shaped by universities within the historically industrialised nations (Altbach 2007).

This article examines the structural transformation, and resistances, of the post-apartheid South African academy in order to find models for how students, activists and scholars might confront existing regimes for valuing higher education. In particular, I focus on the controversial 1998 curriculum debate between Mahmood Mamdani and the mostly white faculty at the University of Cape Town (UCT). On the surface, this debate concerned questions of course content and suitable pedagogy in a post-apartheid university, and centred around Mamdani's argument that even UCT – an institution claiming to have undergone a successful transformation – continued to reproduce apartheid distinctions at the level of knowledge production. This article, however, re-reads this exchange as also a political argument about what it means to teach and study Africa in a university that is simultaneously trying to situate itself as a 'world class university,' defined by standards of excellence established by institutions outside South Africa. In short, Mamdani's 1998 public demand that a post-apartheid university define excellence in terms of how well it encourages students to critically engage South Africa's apartheid history directly conflicted with UCT's stated aspirations of presenting itself as a 'world-class' university; one that trains skilled workers in a 'global knowledge economy.' Mamdani's intervention offers an impassioned argument for why 'excellence' should be conceptualized within the immediate politics of the postcolonial university, and shaped by its constituency, rather than simply imported from external sources. Furthermore, Mamdani's 'strategic decisions', including forcing a public debate on this issue, offers a compelling strategy for how scholars might politically

intervene within their own particular institutions to advance alternative conceptions of higher education.

This article first gives an overview of the 'transformation' of South African higher education, looking specifically at changes taking place at UCT. It then examines the Mamdani debate, situating it within UCT's publically stated aspiration of becoming a 'world-class African university'. It concludes by showing how the Mamdani affair articulates a politics for redefining 'excellence' within a changing political economy of higher education.

Situating the Mamdani Affair within a Transformation of Higher Education

The 1998 UCT curriculum debate occurred during a volatile moment in South African history, as universities and other social institutions struggled to navigate competing political and economic demands. On the one hand, the election of the African National Congress (ANC) to power in 1994 required that the country's political, economic, social and cultural institutions – including universities – transform themselves into institutions capable of serving the long disenfranchised majority black population. On the other hand, the end of apartheid also meant that South Africa suddenly found itself thrust onto the world stage and, as a consequence of various economic changes, increasingly immersed within a neoliberal market economy (Bond 2005). At many points, the political demands for social redistribution conflicted with those of greater market efficiency. These political and economic contradictions played themselves out in many different venues, including the transformation of higher education, and UCT in particular.

Dating back to 1829, UCT is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities on the continent. Then, Cecil John Rhodes ceded portions of his Groote Schuur estate to the school in order to establish 'national, teaching university' where 'English and Dutch-speakers could mingle during their student years, thus laying a foundation for future co-operation' (Phillips 1993:2). While UCT and other English-speaking white universities generally prided themselves on being open to all students of merit, in reality few black students or faculty gained access to these 'liberal' enclaves. The 1959 Extension of University Education Act formalised this segregation by preventing historically white universities from admitting black students or hiring black faculty. The law also established racially and ethnically segregated universities for the education of the 'Bantu',³ coloured and Indian populations. The apartheid regime also determined that only white universities could offer postgraduate education as well as degrees in engineering, medicine, phar-

macy and dentistry – in other words, degrees necessary for the cultivation of a 'middle and high-level white personnel for the economy, civil service and other sectors' (Wolpe 1995:280). Black universities, graduating the vast majority of undergraduates (74% of total diplomas in 1990), offered undergraduate degrees in the humanities, liberal arts, law and education – subjects which did not 'undermine the existing racial division of labour' and helped fulfil 'the administrative and bureaucratic requirements' of the 'Bantustan project' (Wolpe 1995:282-279).

During this period, the four English-speaking white universities – Cape Town, Rhodes, Natal and Witwatersrand – forcefully argued against apartheid segregation, declaring themselves 'open universities' dedicated to academic freedom and 'liberal values' (Davies 1996:323). While not directly agitating against the government's ban on black students and faculty (Jansen 1991:25), the English-speaking South African academy harnessed its intellectual critique of apartheid to imagine itself as an extension of European civilisation and distance itself from the Afrikaner dominated Apartheid regime. The argument went that like England, with its towering institutions like Oxford and Cambridge, South Africa also possessed elite institutions of higher education dedicated to liberal values and free inquiry, but they all while remaining almost exclusively white. For example, during the 1980s, Professor Saunders, the vice-chancellor of UCT was quoted as saying that the university explored the possibility of 'Africanising' the institution – that is, embracing the 'entire gamut of African heritage' through 'analysis and pedagogy' (Goosen and Hall 1989:1). This inquiry, however, concluded that the non-Africanisation of UTC was in fact a positive development, since imposing Africanisation from above would have threatened departmental autonomy and violate academic freedom (Goosen and Hall 1989:85).

With the end of apartheid in 1994, academics, administrators, and policy makers launched an intense debate about how to change South Africa's higher education system to meet the needs of the black majority. 'Transformation' became the operational word for this goal and permeated the discursive terrain, thus equipping the university to confront the political, social, economic, and epistemic legacies of apartheid.⁴ Early articles and policy documents discussed transformation in terms of democratisation, social redistribution, and epistemic inclusion. For example, the ANC's first major policy statement on higher education, *A Policy Framework for Education and Training* (1995), clearly reflected the economic and political agenda embodied in the Freedom Charter.⁵ However, subsequent policies such as

A Framework for Transformation (1996) diverged from these ideals and, instead, prioritised the integration of South Africa into a ‘global’ economy. By the time the government passed the *National Plan for Higher Education* (the 2001 definitive overhaul of higher education), the ‘transformation’ of higher education was conceived less in terms of democratisation and social redistribution and more clearly in terms of adapting to ‘a knowledge-driven world’ defined in terms of ‘the phenomenon of globalisation’ (Ministry of Education 2001:5).

Thus, in the years since the end of apartheid, the University of Cape Town has committed itself to ‘transformation’ (Nuttall 1999:4). And, as earlier indicated, that term originally referred to the task of pluralising the demographic composition of the student body and academic faculty (File 1993:1994). However, by 1997 the term had come to mean any initiative taken by the administration towards addressing issues of campus life, budgetary concerns or institutional image. In a document that reads much like strategic positioning documents written in American universities, UCT’s 1997 *Strategic Planning Framework* opens with the declaration that the ‘UCT’s vision is to be a world-class African university’ and its primary goal is to ‘be responsive to South African society’ by becoming ‘globally’ competitive. These changes ‘are due to the globalisation of many significant aspects of life; in part they are related to the change from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy’ (UCT 1997:1).

The UCT Curriculum Debate

Not surprisingly, a black student who witnessed the public debate...understood the symbolism of the moment, the first time she saw ‘a black person kicking arse at UCT.’

— Jonathan Jansen (1998)

Jonathan Jansen argues that the real stakes of transforming South African higher education cannot be found in the official documents which are ‘at best political symbols’ but rather in the ‘critical incidents;’ that is, those moments of institutional crises when ‘someone throws the proverbial ‘spanner in the works’’ (Jansen 1998:106). The first of many institutional crises was the notorious ‘Makgoba affair’ at the prestigious, historically white University of Witwatersrand. An internationally renowned South African medical scholar recruited from the UK to serve as deputy vice-chancellor, William Makgoba started challenging what he saw as an ‘institution...riddled with

signs of white mediocrity' (Taylor and Taylor 2010:903). Decades of insulation and white rule had enabled the promotion of scholars lacking doctoral degrees, nepotism, administrative incompetence and a lack of any real commitment to Africanisation (Taylor and Taylor 2010:903). Angered by these accusations, a group of thirteen senior academics – all but one white – began campaigning for Makgoba's dismissal, including compiling a lengthy dossier questioning his academic credentials (Makgoba 1997). After a bitter political and legal dispute, Makgoba eventually left Wits, accepting a position at the South African Medical Research Council.

The most surprising 'proverbial spanner', however, was the 1998 'Mamdani affair' at University of Cape Town (UCT). This heated debate about first-year curriculum was particularly noteworthy because it occurred at an institution that 'displayed all the cosmetics of change', of transformation, including the appointment of a black, woman vice-chancellor, 'an over-used liberal claim' to having opposed apartheid admission policies, the recruitment of an internationally renowned scholar to head the Centre for African Studies, and a widespread advertising campaign presenting the school as a 'world-class African university' (Jansen 1998:107). Over the past decade and a half, the Mamdani affair remains the paradigmatic example of the 'systemic white racism' within South African higher education (Taylor and Taylor 2010), the precarious state of academic freedom (du Toit 2000), an entrenched apartheid 'knowledge/power regime' (Jansen 1998), and the institutional difficulties of changing apartheid curriculum (Ensor 1998). I argue that the Mamdani affair also serves as the paradigmatic example of what happens when aspirations of becoming a 'world class' or 'global' university crowd out the particular political demands – and political complexities – of an institution's more immediate constituency. Mamdani voiced an argument that provides a model for why conceptions of educational 'excellence' should primarily concern the political demands of a university's local constituency, rather than some generic aspiration of becoming a 'global' or 'world-class' university.

Background

In September 1996, Mahmood Mamdani was appointed to the A.C. Jordan Professorship of African Studies at the University of Cape Town.⁶ This prestigious hire signalled UCT's commitment to reinvigorating the Centre for African Studies and to diversify its faculty. In October 1997, Assistant Dean Charles Wanamaker asked Mamdani if we would design and teach a new course on Africa that would serve as the newly conceived Foundation

Seminar for students entering the social sciences. Because Mamdani wanted the course to rethink South Africa's historical relationship to the African continent, he accepted this assignment under the condition that he could hire Dr. Ibrahim Abdullah from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) as his assistant. It was necessary to hire a UWC professor because the history department at UCT 'had only one person [a specialist in Sudan] whose research focus was outside of southern Africa' (Mamdani 1998:2). The lack of faculty studying Africa north of the Limpopo River (South Africa's northern border) was an inheritance of UCT's longstanding intellectual tradition of distinguishing South, or 'White,' Africa from Black, or 'Bantu,' Africa. For example, while South African authors were taught in traditional disciplines like English and History along with their European counterparts, the study of Black, or sub-Saharan, Africa was relegated to the small and relatively marginalised Centre for African Studies.

Mamdani designed the course – 'Problematising Africa' – around major debates within the field of African Studies, including the role of ancient history in understanding contemporary politics, the existence of an African culture prior to contact with Europeans, debates about what constitutes 'Africa,' and an examination of the slave trade, as well as by more contemporary topics, including colonialism, economic dependence, and national liberation. On 14 November, the chair of the Working Group overseeing the class released the results of a faculty poll showing that most of Mamdani's colleagues considered the first four course areas of 'very little importance.' Based on these results, the Working Group asked Mamdani to revise the course. On 4 December – before he could present his updated syllabus – the deputy dean suspended Mamdani from teaching and offered him instead a year sabbatical. Another course was hastily designed by UCT faculty and eventually taught to a first-year class. For three months, Mamdani was unable to receive an audience to air his protest and decided to engage in a 'one-person strike.' He wrote the Board of African Studies saying: 'Faced with a complacent institutional response, and a disabling institutional environment...I have no choice but to suspend all institutional involvement until the subject of my protest has been effectively addressed' (Mamdani 1998:3).

This declaration led to a meeting between Wanamaker and Mamdani where Wanamaker explained that the aim of the course was primarily to 'teach students learning skills' necessary for college-level instruction and, in fact, 'the choice of Africa as subject matter' was 'purely arbitrary' (Mamdani 1998:3). A few days later, Mamdani circulated a written statement request-

ing apologies for infringing upon his sensibilities and academic freedom as well as an official apology to the students required to take the alternative course which, Mamdani contended, constituted a 'poisonous introduction for students entering a post-apartheid university,' a class which would damage a student body still 'wrestling with the legacy of racism' (Mamdani 1998:14-15).

Mamdani received two letters of apology from the dean and deputy dean and was reinstated into his teaching role. However, the alternative version of Mamdani's course was already being co-taught by a group of white faculty from archaeology, anthropology, and history. Though invited, Mamdani refused to join the group arguing that he 'could not with intellectual integrity join and share responsibility for a course I had argued was seriously flawed intellectually and morally' (Mamdani 1998:4). The Working Group asked if Mamdani could write his critique 'for full consideration.' Mamdani agreed under the condition that the presentation of the paper was taken 'out of the administrative domain and into the academic domain' (Mamdani 1998:4).

The Debate

Mamdani's position paper ('Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town'), responses by Professor Martin Hall (who helped design and co-teach the alternative course), Johann Graaff (an original Working Group member), and Nadia Hartman (Academic Development Programme coordinator for Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities), as well as Mamdani's response were presented to a packed lecture hall at UCT on 22 April 1998. One observer noted that the seminar 'had the tension of a dramatic performance and the raunchiness of a rock concert' (Pillay 1998). Later, these five essays and various primary documents were published, first in UCT's Centre for African Studies' journal *Social Dynamics* and later as an edited volume entitled *Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town*.

Mamdani's position paper focused on UCT's approach to the study of Africa as well as the institution's attitude towards its increasingly black student body. At the level of course design and content, Mamdani argued that the course eventually taught by UCT faculty presented a racialised periodisation of African-European interaction that implied 'disintegration' would occur if Europeans left the continent.⁷ In addition, when the class examined colonialism and post-colonialism, it focused exclusively on 'equatorial and Bantu Africa', thereby presenting South Africa as a non-colonised country (Mamdani 1998:6-7). Mamdani's fiercest criticism focused on the

decision to teach Martin Phyllis and Patrick O'Meara's *Africa*; a book written by 'North American students in 1976,' that reinforced the claim that Africa is 'equatorial Africa' and African studies is 'Bantu Studies' (Mamdani 1998:8). This book examined South Africa only 'in an add-on chapter' and only through the framework of 'debates in the North American academy' (Mamdani 1998:8). The choice of textbook exemplified the course's failure to engage with the 'key debates that took place in the equatorial African academy in the same period.'

The final concern Mamdani raised targeted the course's pedagogical approach. He criticised the Core Design Team and the Programme Implementation Committee for claiming that he was 'over-estimating the skills of the average South African first year student' who, it was claimed, was 'not prepared for the type of course I wished to design and teach'. He argued that, from his own experience, teaching African students also coming from sub-standard primary education, 'the worst one could do was to talk down to students' and 'to presume that there could be any situation where the learner is so 'disadvantaged' that pedagogical concerns should override those of content' (Mamdani 1998:9).

Mamdani's detractors argued that the creators of the alternative course had designed a programme that taught the skills necessary for students entering higher education. They also emphasised the need to design a course that promoted collaborative and interdisciplinary teaching, rather than simply reproducing traditional notions of professors as autonomous experts. Archaeology Professor Martin Hall, for example, argued that because 'many students entering South African universities...carry the burden of a secondary education of pitiful quality' professors should be realistic about what the course can accomplish (Hall 1998:28). Citing positive evaluations from students in his course, he refuted Mamdani's claim that the course was of dubious quality (Hall 1998:29). Furthermore, he criticised Mamdani's refusal to accept the Working Group's input – drawn from twenty scholars from 'across divisions of race, gender, and academic discipline' (Hall 1998:33) – as a testament to his 'intellectual hegemony and academic authority' and a failure to recognise that 'transformation of the curriculum' also requires rethinking the 'connection between the content of courses and the way in which they are taught' (Hall 1998:34-41). These concerns were echoed by Hartman who argued that Mamdani emphasised content at the expense of pedagogy and, in doing so, failed to recognise that, for the new demography of students at UCT, it was necessary to 'create space for mediating fundamental skill development' (Hartman 1998:50). She also points out that

Mamdani's refusal to work with the 'collaborative team design' violates South Africa's Academic Planning Framework standards for what constitutes a 'strong' academic programme (Hartman 1998:50).⁸

Mamdani responded to these arguments by pointing out that his appointment to the Centre of African Studies stemmed from UCT's lack of expertise in African Studies (a fact highlighted by his need to recruit a research assistant from UWC). As such, the arguments concerning the collaborative aspirations of the Working Group largely failed to account for the fact that the UCT faculty, as individuals and as a collective body, lacked the expertise needed to teach a Foundations Seminar on Africa, especially one that drew upon scholars and scholarly debates from across the continent. Scholars at UCT, 'for understandable historical reasons', treated African scholars as 'native informants' rather than as intellectuals whose arguments have to be taken seriously (Mamdani 1998:46). In his critique of Hall's claim that Cheikh Anta Diop was taught as a 'primary source,' Mamdani writes: 'The idea that natives can only be informants, and not intellectuals, is part of an old imperial tradition' that found fertile ground in apartheid South Africa with its project of Bantu education': 'But why should it flourish unchecked in a post-apartheid academy whose ambition it is to be a world-class African university?' (Mamdani 1998:44).

At the root of this debate, therefore, was a fundamental disagreement about whether, within a historically white university undergoing transformation, teaching Africa constituted an 'arbitrary' topic around which professors could develop pedagogy for skills training or, in contrast, whether teaching Africa amounted to a politically necessary opportunity to submit post-apartheid South Africa to academic interrogation. This disagreement took place within the context of UCT admitting larger numbers of black students, many educated in apartheid's sub-standard primary schools. Mamdani not only staked out an argument that teaching Africa was important in its own right, but argued that doing so was necessary for incoming, black students to begin the process of reconceptualising themselves as living on the African continent, itself a world with its own intellectuals, academic debates, and worthwhile contributions. He argued that, especially within a post-apartheid context, this vital intellectual project cannot be reduced to an opportunity to teach reading, writing and comprehension skills.

Thinking 'Excellence' From an African University

By the final salvos of the debate, both Mamdani and members of the Working Group were basing their positions on claims to 'conventional principles

of disciplinary expertise' (du Toit 2000:124-28; Ensor 1998). For example, Mamdani concluded his presentation by acknowledging that, while 'race is not absent from this issue,' the main issue was who has the 'right to decide what students will be taught, not just how they will be taught' (Mamdani 1998:46). This emphasis on individual academic freedom might lead some to read the Mamdani affair as merely a personal and pedagogical dispute between egotistical academics. The debate's public reception, however, attests to a deep-seated frustration over the post-apartheid transformation of higher education in South Africa, and at UCT in particular. At the centre of this debate is a disagreement about 'what a university should be'. Those who hoped that a post-apartheid university would become a site for political redistribution saw in Mamdani's intervention a vision of higher education as much more than training students – and future employees – for integration into a 'global' economy.

The Mamdani debate took place at a time when UCT was unveiling its self-marketing as a 'World Class African University'. The slogan not only captures a faith that UCT had already succeeded in Africanisation (and was therefore already an 'African University'), but also states an aspiration to successfully embed itself within a 'global' economy. This branding campaign corresponded with a shifting public discourse about higher education more generally. During the late 1990s, South African scholars and politicians gradually abandoned the language of higher education as a site of social redistribution and gravitated, instead, toward the language of the university as necessary for integrating the country into the 'global knowledge economy'.

One important marker of this shift was the way in which the Gibbons Thesis rapidly pervaded academic and policy circles, becoming the major metric for thinking about South African higher education (Ravjee 2002). Michael Gibbons argues that the changing relationship between the university and society, in particular the de-privileging of the university as the dominant source of research, means that universities should promote trans-disciplinary, socially relevant, reflexive and collaborative – 'Mode 2' – knowledge as opposed to traditional, hierarchical, homogenous, peer-reviewed and disciplinary forms ('Mode 1') (Gibbons et al., 1994). This theory of knowledge production became central to the World Bank's thinking about higher education in the mid-1990s. It arrived in South Africa via Johan Muller and Andre Kraak who each submitted papers on 'Mode 2' knowledge production to the newly formed National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in 1995 (Kraak 2000:iii). These papers introduced a number of the NCHE members to the Gibbons thesis, which soon 'pervaded the entirety of the

Commission's dialogue in 1995 and 1996' (Kraak 2000:iii). Its effects were clearly evident in the *Education White Paper 3* (1997) and the *Higher Education Act* (1997), both of which envisioned the university as primarily a site for training a workforce within a 'global knowledge economy.' These documents focused 'unequivocally on globalisation in articulating the challenges, vision and principles of higher education' (Subotzky 1997:108-9).

By the mid-1990s, many South African universities – including UCT – were redefining their missions in terms of training students for a 'global knowledge economy'. In 1998, South African universities adopted the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), a programme developed in New Zealand and promoted by the World Bank (WB 2002), to create a system of nationally and internationally recognised academic standards. The NQF standards measured how well South African universities trained students for a 'global' workforce.⁹ UCT prided itself on being at the forefront of these curricular reforms and closely adhered to the NQF's focus on 'inter-/trans-disciplinarity, the emphasis on foundations and core courses, and the vocabulary of generic skills and generic competencies' (Muller 1998:v). Mamdani's foundational first-year course was intended as part of UCT's compliance with these guidelines.

The embrace of international standards of academic 'excellence', however, did not affect institutions equally. Many South African institutions – most notably the historically black universities – found themselves 'at the whipping end' of efforts like NQF (Jansen 1998:112).¹⁰ In contrast, UCT's apartheid history meant it had sufficient infrastructure, prestige, and faculty to successfully brand itself as a 'world-class university'. The reasons for embracing international standards of excellence corresponded with an institutional embrace of the rhetoric of globalisation. For example, a few years later, UCT's planning document *Vision 2001 and Beyond* established ten 'strategic drives', the first being '[g]rowing a global profile', including 'benchmarking UCT against best practices at comparable universities internationally; providing a high-level, educational experience with an orientation towards problem solving in Africa; honing global competencies in a global environment; and, at the same time, maintaining local leadership in the higher education sector' (Ndebele 2001:2). The document concludes with a recognition that UCT's response to its apartheid legacy should become part of its brand: 'these [ten strategic] developments will require special attention to effective mechanisms for marketing... It will be necessary to continue... to evaluate UCT's brand' and to 'build on [UCT's] identity as an intellectually

vibrant, innovative and responsive institution that has come to terms with its history while embracing new visions of the future' (Ndebele 2001:7).

Some have pointed out that UCT's policies of transformation, and in particular its stated aspiration of becoming a 'world-class African university,' constitute little more than 'corporate branding' that draws upon 'marketing strategies' developed in 'top U.S. business schools' and serves primarily to obfuscate the lasting legacies of apartheid still present in the institution (Bertelsen 1998:142). This new commitment to international standards of excellence, therefore, enables institutions like UCT to hide the 'complicated existential questions' of how to address apartheid by 'recast[ing them] as problems of utility and marketability' still in a 'sublimated sense of lofty endeavour' (Bertelsen 1998:142-43). By envisioning itself as a 'world-class African university,' UCT effectively 'short-circuit[ed] debates' concerning the tension between 'the preservation of the highest international standards of scholarship' and the 'Africanisation of knowledge and institutions,' choosing instead to resolve the tension 'at a symbolic level' (Bertelsen 1998:143).

Mamdani effectively intervened at this symbolic level, demanding that UCT ground its claim to excellence on being an African – rather than 'world class' – institution. Stating that UCT's claims to excellence should stem from how well the school creates the conditions for thinking South Africa as African, and therefore aid in post-apartheid reconciliation, serves as a rejection that standards of academic 'excellence' originate from external sources. Rather, excellence needs to be determined through an engagement with the university itself as a historical, political and material apparatus. The university's long history of excluding black faculty and students shapes all aspects of the institution, including the academic practices, habits, desires and imaginaries. An excellent post-apartheid university – and post-colonial African university – would address these historic wrongs that continue to live on within the institutions themselves. Mamdani concludes his seminar paper with the provocative charge:

This paper is not simply a claim for representation. It is an attempt to persuade you that your innocence of the equatorial African academy is at the expense of what should be a cherished pursuit of any university: *the pursuit of excellence*. It is time to question an intellectual culture which encourages the inmates of this institution [i.e. students] to flourish as potted plants in green houses, expecting to be well-watered at regular intervals, and yet anxious, lest they be exposed to the open air and its elements by the winds of political change (Mamdani 1998:10; emphasis added).

In other words, 'the pursuit of excellence' within 'any university' is not only the ability to claim a racially diversified faculty and student body (although

this is important), or for that matter to point out UCT's 'global' ranking, but rather to foster an environment in which one's world can be swayed by the 'winds of political change.' In the case of UCT, Mamdani thinks excellence should be measured in terms of how well the school helps students embrace the radical political and intellectual potential of post-apartheid South Africa.

Aspiring to these standards of excellence depends upon continuing engagement with the sedimented layers of apartheid within the university itself, and rejecting the claim that simply changing the student and faculty populations will be enough to right this historic wrong. Jansen points out that Mamdani's interlocutors did not 'misunderstand' him but, rather, were 'unable to provide an intellectually honest response...because the issues he raises challenge at its very roots a knowledge/power regime' (Jansen 1998:107-8). This knowledge/power regime is defined in part by the institution's apartheid history, but also by its stated future aspirations to 'world class' standards of academic excellence. Mamdani had previously argued that African academics should be sceptical of outsourced definitions defining what constitutes 'world class' education. In 1994, he presented a paper at the 'Future Role of Universities in the South African Tertiary Education System' conference, drawing on examples from across equatorial Africa to argue that South African scholars should avoid adopting universal standards of academic excellence. Based on the experience of many post-independence African universities, he warned that adopting universal standards simply facilitates the transformation of education into a 'consumer good': 'In the name of maintaining standards, knowledge was transformed from something that a university produces to something whose consumption it facilitates' (Mamdani 1995:23). The adoption of standards 'stifled creativity and undermined independence of thought' as 'education was reduced to a training process' in the name of 'defending a universally-defined standard' (Mamdani 1995:23). He also argued that universities in Africa, including universities in South Africa, should recognise that 'there is no single universal definition of quality' and that they should instead value higher education based on how well it meets the particular needs of a post-colonial society (Mamdani 1995:27).

In this way, the Mamdani affair can be understood as a political insistence that excellence cannot be summed up in a brand or a motto or stated aspiration. Rather, academics and institutions should establish, and struggle over, their own particular standards of what constitutes academic excellence. While this means navigating away from academic standards and institutional forms established during decades of colonial and apartheid rule, it

also means avoiding a blind embrace of ‘global’ standards of what higher education should be. Just as many historically black universities provided the anti-apartheid struggle with emancipatory visions of the world,¹¹ Mamdani’s political engagement at UCT speaks to a continued faith that the post-apartheid university can continue to serve as a site of social and political revival, resistance and redistribution. Those who would reduce academic knowledge to skills training effectively treat the university as a greenhouse of ‘potted plants,’ all waiting for harvest and export on the global market.

Conclusion

The University of Cape Town – like universities around the world – is riddled with contradictions owing to the conflictual historical, social, cultural and economic factors that led to its present form. These contradictions cannot be ameliorated by appealing to an image of being a ‘world class’ or ‘global’ institution, or by adopting universal standards of excellence far removed from the difficult politics of their own existence. In the years since the Mamdani affair, South African universities continue down the bumpy road of institutional crises, many of which stem from a failure to live up to the South African people’s expectations of what the university ‘should be’. In 2001, Rhodes University, a prestigious historically white institution was gripped by ‘the Schell affair.’ Robert Schell, an American academic from Princeton and Director of the Population Research Unit at Rhodes, submitted a 400-page report detailing the ‘non-transformative management style at the East London campus’ of Rhodes. He accused the administration of engaging in politically motivated course closures, nepotistic hiring practices, seemingly race-based decisions concerning lay-offs, and generally a culture of ‘inbred white privilege, maladministration and mediocrity’ (Taylor and Taylor 2010:907). In response to these accusations, Schell was dismissed and a counter-report published attacking his legal standing to criticise the university. In 2000, students at University of Durban-Westville (now University of KwaZulu-Natal) protesting over raising fees and the retrenchment of workers were shot at by police, resulting in the death of student Michael Makhabane (Naidoo 2006; Khan 2006). In March 2010, students demanding lower tuition blocked the entrance to the University of Johannesburg and were eventually dispersed with water cannons (‘Police Use Force against Protesting S. Africa Students’ 2010). The same month students at Durban University of Technology rioted against expensive and poor-quality food and accommodations on campus (‘Student Hurt in DUT Protest’ 2010). These instances of institutional crisis continue to illustrate the

huge gulf between the political demand that 'the doors of learning and culture' be opened to all and the economic reality that South African universities, like many universities around the world, remain fairly elite, exclusive, and inaccessible to many.

Today, South African universities are emerging as important hubs in a worldwide flow of academic knowledge, resources and personnel. Mamdani's intervention, however, reminds us that universities should be more than nodes in a circulation of academic capital. As such, academics in South Africa and around the world can look to the Mamdani affair as a compelling argument that academic knowledge – including what is taught, by whom, to whom, and for what purpose – remains an important site of political contestation. However, when the answers to these questions are outsourced to external conceptions of academic excellence, the true political potential of higher education in South Africa and elsewhere is foreclosed.

The Mamdani affair is also instructive in offering an example of what an engaged politics of knowledge production looks like. Rather than disaggregating his academic writing from questions of administration, Mamdani insisted that conversations concerning what the university should teach, and how it measures 'excellence', are intellectual questions that should be aired in a public, intellectual debate. Bringing his disagreement into the public, however, would not have happened without a willingness to apply political force by engaging in his 'one-person strike'. Scholars around the world can learn from Mamdani's provocation. His engagement reminds us that the production of academic knowledge has serious political stakes, themselves structured by the political and material institutions of the university. This argument becomes increasingly important as, around the world, spaces of academic teaching and research become ever more subsumed within a highly asymmetrical 'global market place'. As such, it becomes even more necessary to 'force open' alternative forums, practices and standards of 'excellence' by publicly promoting a vision of the university as a site engaged in pursuing the values, desires, imaginations and demands of greater social redistribution.

In 2011, UCT's Centre for African Studies was once again in the news, this time because of the administration's plans to 'close' – or, in preferred parlance, 'disestablish' or 'merge' – the centre with the African Gender Institute and Departments of Linguistics and Anthropology, to form a 'new school for critical inquiry in Africa' (Macfarlane 2011). Some argue that the planning for this merger has silenced the 'students, stakeholders and indeed citizens of UCT' and, in an institution that retains a faculty of 70 per cent

white men, risks undermining the one place on campus that centralises ‘African voices – the voices of our intellectuals, politicians, artists and activists’ in a way that prepares students ‘for the hard work that the new South Africa requires’ (O’Connell and Himmelman 2011). Others point out that while UCT has thirty-six faculty members working on European, Middle Eastern and Asian languages and literature, it still only has three working on African languages and literature (Plessis 2011). As such, the discourse around this merger constitutes ‘the worst sort of jargon and bureaucratic bunk’ (Plessis 2011). Others responded by pointing out that the negotiations have been open, democratic and widely agreed upon, and that UCT has made great strides in its transformation process, and hence it is dishonest to portray the school as ‘all demonic’ and African Studies as ‘all victimised’ (Price 2011; London 2011; Bennett 2011).

Wherever one falls on this debate, it is important to remember that Mamdani’s argument was not limited to a particular Centre, a particular university, or even limited to South African higher education. Rather, Mamdani’s argument and example can serve as a model in different sites of academic knowledge production. As universities around the world struggle to navigate what ‘world-class’ means, what it means to ‘globalise’, what these changes constitute, and who they benefit, Mamdani’s particular argument serves as a template for engaging various aspects of this changing politics of higher education.

Notes

1. For my critique of how the world has come to be ‘imaged as global’, see (Kamola 2012).
2. See Times Higher Education Supplement’s ‘World University Rankings’ at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2010-2011/top-200.html> [accessed September 2011].
3. These institutions were themselves divided into different ethnic populations. The University College of the North was established for Sotho, Venda, and Tsonga-speaking Africans, University College of Zululand for Zulu speakers, and University of Fort Hare – once an international destination for students from across the continent – was limited to exclusively Xhosa students.
4. Transformation’ offered a useful compromise since both its alternatives – ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’ – failed to capture the post-1994 period reality. On the one hand, the apartheid regime had passed many so-called ‘reforms’ prior to 1994 making the term ‘distasteful’ while, on the other hand, the settled agreement did not have the potential for the same sweeping change as a revolution. (Jansen 2009, 283 fn. 27)
5. The Freedom Charter called for ‘open[ing] the doors of learning and culture to all’ such that the youth shall learn to ‘love their people and their culture, to honour human

brotherhood, liberty and peace'. To achieve these objectives the Charter declared that education shall be 'free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit'.

6. A.C. Jordan was a faculty member in Bantu languages and African studies at UCT until 1961 when he was released following the adoption of the 1959 Extension of University Education Act. The firing of A.C. Jordan offers a clear example of the political limits of UCT's 'liberal' tradition; under apartheid it defended academic freedom but failed to rebuff state law requiring it to fire black faculty.
7. For example, colonialism was taught as starting with the Atlantic slave trade meaning that the periodisation is actually about the arrival of the White Man: 'part I is not pre-colonial, but Africa pre the arrival of the White Man...part II is not colonial Africa, but the era of white control beginning with slavery and continuing to colonialism. The moral of this simple story seems to be part III: disintegration following the departure of the White Man. The periodisation is racialised', Mamdani 1998:4.
8. Graaff similarly criticised Mamdani for his emphasis on content over pedagogy (Graff 1998). Prior to the debate UCT's Vice-Chancellor Ramphela publically criticised Mamdani's "very hierarchical, archaic and patriarchal image of what a professor should be," insisting instead that UCT faculty are "people who are struggling with transformation as a general rule and are not as ignorant of Africa as he thinks", Duffy 1998.
9. The Ministry of Education's 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education*, for example, states that NQF is an effort to ensure that South African universities are "in line with best practice internationally"; that is, they foster the "skills that all graduates will require in the 21st century have been aptly summarised by Michael Gibbons as computer literacy, knowledge reconfiguration skills, information management, problem-solving in the context of application, team building, networking, negotiation/mediation competencies and social sensitivity", Ministry of Education 2001.
10. Institutions like the University of Durban Westville witnessed an increased "bureaucratization of higher education policy" brought about by "coercive instruments for implementation," such as linking "state funding to particular kinds of curriculum formatting i.e., the type which is programme-based, unit standardised, outcomes oriented (forget the process), economical relevant (read: 'science and technology' and financially feasible (exclude the Humanities)", Jansen 1998:112.
11. During the anti-apartheid struggle universities often served as sites for developing and circulating anti-nationalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-apartheid ideas and offered hubs of political mobilisation. During the period following the Sharpeville Massacre (1960), much of the radical political momentum shifted to university campuses, spearheaded by the primarily white National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and later by the more radical South African Student Organisation (SASO) led by Steve Biko. Large black universities such as University of the Western Cape (UWC), Fort Hare, and University of the North became centers of Black Consciousness radicalism. Student mobilisation at University of the Western Cape, for example, was so successful that the school appointed South Africa's first colored rector, Richard E. van der Ross, in 1975. In 1982 UWC changed its mission statement to reject the institution's apartheid mandate, declaring that "the admission of students and the appointment of lecturers and researchers to universities should in no way be restricted on the grounds of race, color, or ethnicity"

(quoted in: Anderson 2002). During this period, the school adopted an open admissions policy accepting all students who fit the “basic minimum, legally required qualifications” – a policy based on the radical belief that “the universities owed a duty to the excluded black majority to redress racial inequality in access by dramatically expanding intakes” (Wolpe 1995:284). In 1987 Rector Jakes Gerwel declared that UWC the “intellectual home of the left”.

References

- Altbach, P.G., 2007, ‘Globalization and the University: Realities in an Unequal World’, in Forest, J.J.F. and Altbach, P.G., Eds., *International Handbook of Higher Education*, Springer.
- Anderson, G.M., 2002, *Building a People’s University in South Africa: Race, Compensatory Education, and the Limits of Democratic Reform*, New York: Lang P.
- Bennett, J., 2011, ‘Another World? Let’s Talk’, *Mail and Guardian*, April 18.
- Bertelsen, E., 1998, ‘The Real Transformation: The Marketisation of Higher Education’, *Social Dynamics* 24 (2), pp. 130-58.
- Bond, P., 2005, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Davies, J., 1996, ‘The State and the South African University System under Apartheid’, *Comparative Education* 32 (3), pp. 319-32.
- Duffy, A., 1998, ‘Race-Charged Row at UCT’, *Mail and Guardian*, 17 April.
- Ensor, P., 1998, ‘Access, Coherence and Relevance: Debating Curriculum in Higher Education’, *Social Dynamics* 24 (2), pp. 93-105.
- File, J., 1993, *The Transformation of the University of Cape Town: The Pursuit of Equity, Excellence and Equal Opportunity*. Rondebosch: University of Cape Town.
- File, J., 1994, *The Transformation of the University of Cape Town, 1984-1994: A Decade of Change and Development*. Rondebosch: University of Cape Town.
- Gibbons, M., Camille L., Helga N., Simon S., and Scott, P., 1994, *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Social Science Research in Contemporary Societies*, London: Sage.
- Goosen, G. and Hall, M., 1989, ‘Africanisation and the University of Cape Town’, in Goosen, G.; Hall, M. and White, C., eds., *Rethinking UCT: The Debate Over Africanisation and the Position of Women*, Rondebosch: Centre for African Studies, UCT.
- Graff, J., 1998, ‘Pandering to Pedagogy or Consumed by Content: Brief Thoughts on Mahmood Mamdani’s ‘Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town’, in Mamdani, M., ed., *Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town: A Critical View of the ‘Introduction to Africa’ Course in the Social Science and Humanities Faculty Foundation Semester*, Rondebosch, SA: Centre for African Studies (UCT).
- Hall, M., 1998, ‘Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town: A Response’, in Mamdani, M., ed., *Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town: A Critical View of the ‘Introduction to Africa’ Course in the Social Science and Humanities Faculty Foundation Semester*, Rondebosch, SA: Centre for African Studies (UCT).

- Hartman, N., 1998, 'Discussion of Mamdani's Paper', in Mamdani, M., ed., *Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town: A Critical View of the 'Introduction to Africa' Course in the Social Science and Humanities Faculty Foundation Semester*, Rondebosch, SA: Centre for African Studies (UCT).
- Jansen, J., 1991, 'Knowledge and Power in the World System: The South African Case', in Jansen J.D., ed., *Knowledge and Power in South Africa: Critical Perspectives across the Disciplines*, Bloemfontein: Skotaville Publishers.
- Jansen, J.D., 1998, 'But Our Natives Are Different! Race, Knowledge and Power in the Academy', *Social Dynamics* 24 (2), pp. 106-16.
- Jansen, J.D., 2009, *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kamola, I., 2012, 'Reading "the Global" in the Absence of Africa' in Tickner, A. B. and Blaney, D.L., eds., *Thinking International Relations Differently*, London: Routledge.
- Khan, F., 2006, 'The Struggle for a Better Education for All-UDW, 1995-2003', in Pithouse, R., ed., *Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Trenton & Asmara: African World Press.
- Kraak, A., ed., 2000, *Changing Modes: New Knowledge Production and its Implications for Higher Education in South Africa*, Pretoria: Human Science Research Council.
- London, L., 2011, 'Taking Cheap Shots at UCT', *Mail and Guardian*, May 13.
- Macfarlane, D., 2011, 'UCT in War over "Bantu Education"', *Mail and Guardian*, 11 March.
- Makgoba, M.W., 1997, *Mokoko: The Makgoba Affair: A Reflection on Transformation*, Lea Glen, FL: Vivlia Publishers.
- Mamdani, M., 1995, 'A Reflection on Higher Education in Equatorial Africa: Some Lessons for South Africa', *South African Journal of Higher Education* (9), p. 2.
- Mamdani, M., ed., 1998, *Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town: A Critical View of the 'Introduction to Africa' Course in the Social Science and Humanities Faculty Foundation Semester*, Rondebosch, SA: Centre for African Studies (UCT).
- Ministry of Education, 2001, 'National Plan for Higher Education', Pretoria.
- Muller, J., 1998, 'Editorial Introduction', *Social Dynamics* 24 (2), pp. iii-vi.
- Naidoo, P., 2006, 'Constituting the Class: Neoliberalism and the Student Movement in South Africa', in Pithouse, R., ed., *Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Trenton & Asmara: Africa World Press.
- Ndebele, N.S., 2001, 'Vision 2001 and Beyond: The Way Forward for the University of Cape Town', University of Cape Town.
- Nuttall, J., 1999, 'Taking Stock of Transformation at the University of Cape Town: 1996-1999', Rondebosch: University of Cape Town.
- O'Connell, S., and Natasha, H., 2011, 'Lessons in Continued Oppression', *Mail and Guardian*, 29 April.
- Phillips, H., 1993, *The University of Cape Town 1918-1948: The Formative Years*, Cape Town: Creda Press.
- Pillay, S., 1998, 'Affirmation of Academic Colonialism', *Mail and Guardian*, 1 May.

- Plessis, M., 2011, 'Superschool Will Not Do Justice to African Languages', *Mail and Guardian*, 25 March.
- Reuters, 2010, 'Police Use Force Against Protesting S. Africa Students', *Reuters*.
- Price, M., 2011, 'No Threat to African Centre', *Mail and Guardian*, 18 March.
- Ravjee, N., 2002, 'Neither Ivory Towers nor Corporate Universities: Moving Public Universities Beyond the 'Mode 2' Logic', *South African Journal of Higher Education* 16 (3), pp.82-87.
- Ross, A., 2008, 'Global U', in Krause, M., Nolan, M., Palm, M. and Ross, A. eds., *The University against Itself: The NYU Strike and the Future of the Academic Workplace*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- News24, 2010, 'Student Hurt in DUT Protest', 23 March.
- Subotzky, G., 1997, 'Pursuing both Global Competitiveness and National Redistributive Development: Implications and Opportunities for South Africa's Historically Black Universities', *Social Dynamics* 23 (1), pp.102-38.
- Taylor, Y., and Taylor, R., 2010, 'Academic Freedom and Racial Injustice: South Africa's Former "Open Universities"', *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24 (6), pp. 897-913.
- Toit, A., 2000, 'From Autonomy to Accountability: Academic Freedom under Threat in South Africa?', *Social Dynamics* 26 (1), pp.76-133.
- UCT, 1997, 'Strategic Planning Framework 1997-2000', Rondebosh, Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- World Bank, 2002, *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- Wildavsky, B., 2010, *The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are Reshaping the World*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Wilhelm, I., 2011, 'Carnegie Mellon U. to Open Campus in Rwanda, a Milestone for Africa'. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 September.
- Wolpe, H., 1995, 'The Debate on University Transformation in South Africa', *Comparative Education* 31 (2), pp. 275-92.