Introduction: From Ivory Tower to Market Place: What Future for the University in South Africa?

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To reflect on the political and institutional conditions of academic work, a group of intellectuals came together at the University of South Africa in October 2005 for a Symposium, 'From Ivory Tower to Market Place. What Future for the University in South Africa?' Analyses, questions and visions—of present conditions, possible effects, and alternative paths—were explored in contributions to the Symposium. The papers compiled in this edition of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* reflect the issues and concerns debated during that encounter.

Among the voices and debates in higher education, this edition does not stand alone. It is part of the wealth of documentation testifying to the unprecedented transformation of the higher education sector throughout the world, including the rest of Africa. Changes in funding, research policies, university governance and the power of the professoriate, coupled with advances in digital communications technology and in the knowledge industry have inevitably led to debates expressing concern not only about academic freedom, but about the very *raison d'être* of the University (see Derrida 2004:129). Such is the magnitude of the current crisis, so radical the changes, and so deep the bewilderment experienced by academics, that intellectuals like Bill Readings, reflecting on the ruins of the University, asks how today, we speak of the university (see Readings 1996:5, 10, 19, 167). Derrida poses the question negatively and thereby more emphatically: Today, 'how can we not speak of the university?' (2004:129). Derrida poses this question in the negative for the following reasons:

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> On the one hand […] it is impossible, now more than ever, to dissociate the work we do, within one discipline or several, from a reflection of the political and institutional conditions of that work. Such a reflection is unavoidable. It is no longer an *external* complement to teaching and research; it must make its way through the very objects we work with, shaping them as it goes, along with our norms, procedures, and aims. We cannot not speak of such things (Derrida 2004:129).

We cannot not speak of the University. We cannot stand by, silently watching tendencies that threaten the unique nature of this institution. Moreover, we cannot ignore the vagaries of higher education policy in South Africa that Salim Vally outlines in this edition of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*:

> Higher education policy has failed, often on its own terms, as bureaucrats renege on the lofty ideals of numerous discussion papers and scramble to reconfigure the landscape – now suggesting a cap on student numbers, then revising this, then suggesting a "differentiated" university system.

University transformation, it turns out, is enmeshed in a complex web of inter-related processes that have long taken it out of the ambit of what the anti-apartheid struggle had once envisaged as a socially and politically transformative educational agenda. Instead, transformation has become aligned with the commercialisation of education, with restructuring and rationalisation and, in post-apartheid South Africa, with conflicting directives of Africanisation, employment equity, job creation and poverty alleviation. This marks one of the peculiarities of South African post-apartheid higher education. On the one hand, the state's policies have created openings for the play of market forces in tertiary education, creating conditions for corporate managerialism; on the other hand, they are advocating redress and curriculum development.

What renders South African policies for higher education peculiar and specific, at the same time renders them contradictory, as Grazia Weinberg points out in this volume. Two traditional models of the University underlie the present policy articulations: the University of (National) Culture and the University of Excellence (Readings 1996). The University of Culture, established in tandem with European nation-state formation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, extols the regulative idea of a unifying or unified national culture, and makes that the principle of the organisation of knowledge pursued in university study and intellectual culture. The University of Excellence emerges in the latter part of the twentieth century with the decline of the nation-state. Modelled on the corporation, it is emptied of cultural content, branding itself through a vacuous appeal to 'quality', which is constantly monitored by a corporate administration in terms of quality control and performance management. The

attempt to correlate the University of (National) Culture with the University of Excellence, as current higher education blueprints do, is thus fundamentally flawed because these two models of the University are incompatible with each other.

One arena in which this contradiction is played out is that of university admissions and exclusions. Corporate models of university governance have in effect intensified the struggles around exclusion of students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds from universities on financial grounds (see Brutus 2006:xi-xiv). In a collection of essays recently published under the telling title *Asinamali*, Andrew Nash explains this development in the broader context of the class re-alignment during the 'transition':

> The restructuring of higher education has been presented as a process of overcoming the legacy of apartheid. […] There is some truth to this account of the restructuring, but it is far from being the whole story. This account obscures the project of class re-alignment that was an essential part of the transition from apartheid to democracy. The transition included the demobilization of a liberation movement with radical aims and a mass base, at the same time as the ANC government committed itself to neoliberal economic policies and to building a new black elite strongly oriented towards global competitiveness. Although the rhetoric of non-racialism and democracy was used to explain and justify the restructuring of higher education, this class project had a more consistent role in deciding the form of the new higher education system (Nash 2006:1-2).

Policies of empowerment have proved uneven and equally contradictory, and in some cases counterproductive, Adam Habib and Sean Morrow argue in this volume, where it has been a matter of mechanistically enforcing quotas in response to gender and racial equity requirements. In their opinion, these policies have created barriers to research productivity in South Africa.

The concerns over the multifaceted connotations of 'transformation' have been echoed in critical analyses across some higher education institutions and departments. The Vice Chancellor of Wits University, Loyiso Nongxa initiated a series of lectures, entitled 'Facing Up to Race: Equity, Diversity and the Idea of the University', that took place at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) in April and May 2006. In a covering document, he states:

> [T]he project of "transformation" has often become attenuated, as a largely managerial, bureaucratic or quantitative exercise with the primary concern of ensuring that adequate numbers of female and black students and staff find places in the universities. This has generated controversy, anger and anxiety in many constituencies with an interest in the future of higher education (Nongxa 2006).

The new managerialism in higher education, which displaces an erstwhile cultural elite nourished by white privilege, provides the parameters of employment equity that became mandatory in academic appointments, as it did in all sectors of the economy and civil service, since 1996. It coincided with the re-orientation in development policies towards economic growth thought to be sponsored by the private sector, through foreign direct investment and through the increasing role of international financial institutions displacing the role of the state, coupled with cut-backs in social spending. It spawned a notion of 'globalism', associated with the idea of 'a single market for goods, capital, labour, services, skills, and technology' (Chachage 2001:3). The blueprints for 'poverty reduction' through this notion of economic growth held numerous implications for post-apartheid restructuring of higher education. Education policy came to extol the objectives of skills training in line with the job market and of the design, marketing, and delivery of 'knowledge products' to paying clients. As in the provision of other basic and social services, 'cost reduction' and 'cost recovery' became prime criteria for 'viability', 'sustainability' and 'efficiency'.

'Contrary to the hegemonic discourse', says Vally, '[the corporate model] is neither efficient nor effective and most importantly has little to do with sound pedagogical practices'. Critique, one of the hallmarks of intellectual engagement, has become a risky endeavour. Academics, particularly those among them who represent dissenting voices, are subjected to surveillance. It is a surveillance premised on distrust, individual advancement, and the devaluing of commitment to, and of the very notion of, education as a public good.

A market-orientation in the 'production', 'marketing', and 'delivery' of 'knowledge products' was upheld as a recipe for universities to 'pay for themselves'. A new stratum of financial planners has come to the fore, issuing directives that become frameworks for curriculum restructuring and research 'management', and displacing academic leadership as criterion for eligibility to academic office.

The corporate university has given rise to unbridled careerism in the corridors of learning. Remuneration levels for senior academic-administrative service have become decisive for aspirations and expectations of candidates above the satisfaction of academic work. The status that comes with a senior management post has displaced traditional cultural capital—i.e. the professor as academic leader—in defining social position. In other words, the professional-managerial 'class', living off the academy rather than for it, has acquired social and economic dominance over the traditional cultural elite. This would also explain the 'capital flight' from the humanities and the decline of their 'market value' in broader terms. The previous ideal of the 'dis-interested' nature of

critical academic inquiry, that made 'academic' an adjective or adverb signify-ing 'irrelevance' to instrumental reason and vested interests, has become a distant memory. The business world is sponsoring an 'intellectual' elite that now assumes authority in matters outside commerce. This is strikingly obvi-ous in newspapers like *The Weekender* and London *Financial Times* which have become culturally more acute (or hands-on) than the standard papers, while clearly serving the interests of that elite.

The intrusion of the state or big business into the University has stimulated a number of debates on academic freedom and university autonomy. In his essay on Apartheid's University, Premesh Lalu argues that today these two issues should be reconsidered in the light of what has happened in the past. In his view, challenges by mainly English-language universities to state interven-tion in the name of academic freedom under various apartheid regimes remained limited because of their partial nature. Universities did not reflect on their own implication in the racial policies of the state; they failed to acknowledge the existence of a prior contract that linked them with the state, and which compro-mised their opposition to apartheid.

Outlined above are some of the conditions which contribute to the ruination of the University as we know it. For South Africa, some alarming trends and findings are documented by Peter Stewart in this volume. Over a ten year pe-riod (between 1995 and 2006), the University of South Africa, for instance, has seen a near-doubling of student numbers, with a simultaneous decrease in aca-demic staff, and a deterioration of academic working conditions. In the same period of time, administrative workloads have increased drastically. Poor re-muneration, working conditions and support have taken their toll on research activity of academics. The paucity and poverty of research emanating from South Africa are noted by Habib and Morrow. National spending on research and development has declined in absolute and relative terms.

However, it would be misleading to conclude this overview on a note of 'the university in ruins', as Readings (1996) did in the mid-1990s, when judged by present conditions. The conditions outlined above certainly do contribute to the ruination of the University; but the topos of 'ruins' is less than appropriate, as it still presupposes an outline of a bounded space. While numerous hetero-geneous tertiary education institutions in South Africa have been merged in the last three years, the transmission of knowledge in core functions of teach-ing and research has become increasingly decentred. Institutions have diversi-fied, competing with each other as they are chasing 'market shares' of stu-dents, and seeking to secure external sources of funding through entering into partnerships with foundations, companies and other business ventures.

This development is positively noted by Piyushi Kotecha and subjected to vigorous critique by Vally. Kotecha's essay reflects, in the main, the line adopted by the new managerial class in the University. She puts forward an argument in favour of the diversification of higher education institutions as a way out of the dichotomies created by the coexistence of a University of (National) Culture and a University of Excellence. While the former is placed on the foundation of state funding and the idea of a public good, the latter is associated with private-corporate interest, and with specific programme, niche area and project-based funding.

A different notion of diversity and Africanisation is envisioned by Neville Alexander, that of diversification in language policy, leading to the enrichment and intellectualisation of African languages in South Africa, in line with principles of linguistic human rights. The author sees the adoption of this kind of language policy as a form of empowerment which he links with the eradication of poverty and economic inequality.

Equally concerned about present developments, the Wits Vice Chancellor's lecture series faces up to the contradictions of 'transformation' generated in South African higher education policy, while placing them within a framework of critical inquiry, human rights and social justice:

> The aim of this lecture series, workshop and roundtables, then, is to revisit the debate on "transformation" in three respects: (1) by anchoring it within a critical, even philosophical, reflection on issues of equity, social justice and redress; (2) by re-examining the idea of the university in a rapidly changing culture and a knowledge-based economy often driven by technological innovations, consumerism and instrumental reason; (3) and by situating these discussions in a comparative perspective, drawing on similar experiences elsewhere, including other parts of Africa. We want to examine to what extent the ethical project of non-racialism in South Africa shapes our ideas of a transformed university. What remains of the role of the university in a democracy at a time when global economic competition dictates most political, cultural and social choices? (Nongxa 2006)

Impelled by these and related questions, this edition of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* aims at taking this debate further, to provide specific case studies and diagnoses, and to indicate some paths towards re-shaping the academic terrain. Most importantly, however, in reclaiming an independent critical discourse on issues in higher education, it is our wish as editors, and on behalf of each contributor to this issue, to be part of a larger debate across the African continent.

Taking stock of conditions in academia in South Africa over the last ten years, comparing notes of their effects and searching for alternatives, Peter Stewart calls for a review of the core academic roles that are key to the actualisation of the strategic plans of universities. A renewal of core academic roles can only become fruitful for tuition and research if the initiative is taken by academics in what he calls a 'critical collegial movement'. This could extend to research collaboration across institutional boundaries, which Habib and Morrow advocate.

Drawing attention to the pivotal role and common ground of the humanities, specifically, John Higgins points to the fundamental social force of literacy that has become obliterated in higher education policy and restructuring and in research funding. Literacy forms the bedrock of reflexive communication, contextual understanding, and critical and creative thinking. 'Declining' critical literacy as social force, as he argues the National Research Foundation's funding policy and university restructuring do, means undermining the very goal of social development professed by education policy.

Similarly, Ulrike Kistner argues that the core relation between teaching and learning, that has been variously analysed in terms of charisma, tutelage, transference and sublimation, is deeply embedded as a social value in different forms and histories of societies, and is not about to go away by managerial or financial fiat.

The source of a 'critical collegial movement', however, cannot be entirely generated from within the institution of the University, and least of all in its present shape. Moreover, none of the contributors to this edition of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* supports a return to the ivory tower. We would agree with Derrida that thinking has to be vigilant and suspicious of that understanding of the role of the university that regulates it according to a technical ideal of competence and the demands of the market (Derrida 2004:151). Engaging with Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* ([1798] 1992)*, Derrida argues that it is precisely in a place *outside* of professional education and technical competence that truth can and has to be spoken with autonomy, and without concern for 'utility' (2004:152).

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