



Developing Contradictions: Diversity and the Future of the South African University

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Abstract

The manner in which the contemporary university is represented evokes an ‘either/or’ conceptualisation of the university as either staying loyal to the fundamentals of teaching, research and outreach, or a wholehearted participation in the neoliberalisation of higher education. This paper begins by questioning whether this dichotomy is as clear-cut as is suggested. It proceeds to examine the idea of a market-driven university as an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) construct in an attempt to highlight the very different context and challenges faced by a developing country like South Africa. At the most obvious level, the objectives of the White Paper (1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) pointed to achieving both equity and efficiency simultaneously by increasing access to address apartheid’s legacy and increasing cost savings and streamlined functioning. This dual imperative placed on the South African university has the benefit of opening up the institution to a range of possibilities that are neither exclusively ivory tower nor entrepreneurial. The remainder of the paper intends to unpack what these roles, functions and identities could be for the future South African university.

Résumé

La façon dont l’université contemporaine est représentée évoque une «double» conceptualisation de celle-ci, soit en tant qu’entité restant fidèle aux principes de base de l’enseignement, de la recherche et de l’animation soit en tant qu’entité participant pleinement à la néo-libéralisation de l’enseignement supérieur. Dans

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cette étude, on commence par s'interroger pour savoir si cette dichotomie est aussi nette qu'elle est suggérée. On examine ensuite l'idée d'une université tournée vers le marché comme une pratique de l'Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques (OCDE) dans une tentative visant à mettre en relief le contexte très différent et les défis auxquels est confronté un pays en développement comme l'Afrique du Sud. Les objectifs du Livre Blanc (1997) et du Plan National sur l'Enseignement Supérieur (2001) visaient à atteindre à la fois l'équité et l'efficacité par l'accroissement de l'accès afin de faire face à l'héritage de l'apartheid, par l'augmentation des économies et par la rationalisation du fonctionnement. Ce double impératif auquel est soumise l'université Sud Africaine a l'avantage d'ouvrir l'institution à un éventail de possibilités qui ne sont ni exclusivement une tour d'ivoire ni entrepreneuriales. Le reste de l'étude montre ce que pourraient être ces rôles, fonctions et identités pour la future université Sud Africaine.

The debates that repeatedly swirl around South African universities cover a wide range of topics but have, I would like to argue, a common driver or more precisely a discursive reflex. Whether the burning issue is institutional autonomy, the university as a public good, enrolment capping, higher education governance, policy overload or graduate throughput, there are specific ways in which the debate is couched that warrant further examination.

Take the public good argument for example. Is South African higher education a public or private good? If government sees it as a public good, then the state should be prepared to fund it. If, on the other hand, it is felt that the value generated by a degree pertains to the individual that obtains the degree then it is fair to argue that the individual should pay, and thus, it becomes a private good. The argument makes use of the private/public dichotomy in order to highlight the contradiction within a state that argues that higher education is essential for the building of our nation and then introduces a funding framework that effectively reduces funding to institutions. Much of the same conundrum occurs in the enrolment capping argument. The massification of the system is necessary if we are to build up the high level skills that we require in this country, but the state cannot afford to fund unconstrained growth. It is also necessary to note that this tension is not always only between the state's strategic objectives and higher education. By way of another example, the Department of Science and Technology (DST) needs an additional 6,000 researchers in our system by 2008 if it is to meet its target of one percent of GDP spent on Research and Development (R&D), while the Department of Education (DoE) is trying to control the numbers who access the higher education system from the input side.

The common element in these debates is not surprisingly an oppositional mode of argument that inevitably breaks down into an 'either/or' statement. However, a developmental context, like South Africa, requires so many interventions at all levels that we find ourselves in a perpetual contradiction. While the debates may look like either/or, the reality is that we need solutions for an 'and/and' scenario. To return to the tension between the objectives of DST and DoE, we need more researchers and yet if we continue to prioritise growth in this sector, as we have been doing over the past five years, our universities will simply run out of infrastructural resources like physical space and sufficient lecturing staff, not to mention the additional funding that will be required.

The either/or conceptualisation of the world presumes that claims for truth should be mutually exclusive. The inherent contradiction of capitalism lies in the fact that the huge technological advances generated by capitalists' ownership of the means of production exist in tandem with, and feeds off, mass poverty and inequality. For many Marxists, it was felt that the contradiction would become so great that it would lead to the poor understanding themselves as an oppressed class, uniting and claiming for themselves the means of production, whether through violence or other means. Thus the contradiction would be resolved in the creation of a new social order. However, in reality, the inherent contradiction has grown apace and has even become global in nature. As the lukewarm outcome of the G8 Summit testifies, Africa remains the proletarian continent, dwelling in the midst of this contradiction.

For all the attempts at logical consistency in the policies that direct our country, the contradiction of what President Mbeki calls the two economies permeates all our attempts at nation building. For those involved in higher education, the most enduring and arresting instance of this lies in the Green Paper (1996), the White Paper (1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001). Three words resonate throughout these texts, usually within the same sentence, and are repeated so often that they recede from view: equity, redress and efficiency. These terms form the corner-stones of higher education policy making, they are built into its discursive field. And yet, they indicate a plethora of contradictions that have dogged our debates on higher education policy.

A broad-brush picture of the state's—and DoE's—assumptions and pressures could read as follows:

- *Valuing equality, non-racism, non-sexism:* As articulated in the Constitution, South African democracy is based upon equality, non-racism and non-sexism. These values show a commitment to social upliftment and ensuring personal rights for all. However, after the Washington Con-

sensus, the state's economic policies are steadfastly neoliberal, based on an ethos that entails the privatisation of its assets and the opening up of the country to international markets and increased competition.

- *Looking backward and forward:* The DoE's gaze from 1997 onwards was necessarily backward looking in order to redress the continued legacy of apartheid. But to sustain higher education requires that the DoE addresses pressing future challenges like globalisation, SADC access, GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) and the like.
- *Pursuing equality and redress:* The pursuit of equity and redress requires a substantial investment and reconfiguration of the sector while the purpose of efficiency (in a neoliberal context) is towards a lean, value-driven system where only the economically profitable institutions would survive.
- *Servicing national and African education:* Higher education must service the idea of a 'national and African education' which holds that graduates, sensitised to African issues, are essential in order to ensure the continuation and future success of the nation. In other words, graduates need to foster and guarantee democracy in South African society, while also being able to compete at highly competitive international levels.
- *Meeting Employment Equity targets:* To ensure that Employment Equity targets are met at the level of staffing, young black academics are brought into the system at the inevitable cost of experienced white academics—the graying professoriate—who are leaving or taking retirement. This has profound consequences both for research output and teaching experience. In addition, these young, black academics are also being cannibalised by the massive resource needs of the state and business, both of which are under pressure to achieve equity targets.
- *Participating in a knowledge economy:* The multiple outputs required from a sector participating in a knowledge economy are undercut by a funding framework that unintentionally rewards the homogenisation of the sector, and all universities and universities of technology are equally rewarded for conducting research irrespective of whether they have the expertise or available resources.

These resultant tensions and contradictory objectives mean that the state in general, and the DoE in particular, are battling with their own ideological contradictions. They are pursuing neoliberal objectives in a broadly socialist frame of reference while speaking the language of redress to the disenfranchised

majority, and while protecting institutions (mostly historically advantaged) that are economically sustainable.

Two points are worth highlighting here. Firstly, it seems that our birthright from the moment of democracy was the need to deal with ongoing tensions, paradoxes, inconsistencies and competing needs. And this situation will not change for some considerable time. Secondly, it is perhaps naïve of us to entertain the belief that higher education policy, since the White Paper (1997), has been logical. The brutal absurdity of apartheid has created systems that require equally involved measures by way of rectifying the situation. Moreover, as Haddad incisively points out: '[E]ducational planning is actually a series of untidy and overlapping episodes in which a variety of people and organizations with diversified perspectives are actively involved - technically and politically' (1995:17).

So if the rational either/or model of policy formation cannot be used to understand the intricate, developmental, politically contested space of South African higher education, it is further dismantled as an investigative mechanism by the new demands that attend globalisation. If our sector has, over the past seven years, been involved in policy introspection and implementation, the pace of change in higher education internationally has been rapid, to say the least. Suddenly we are confronted with virtual, franchised, and corporate in-house universities, institutions that bear no resemblance to our traditional understanding of the university.

We also find that education has miraculously transformed itself into a service. Countries like Canada, Australia and the U.S. are already at the GATS door, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to set up university shop in the southern African region. And this is not, just simply, another instance of the way that borderless globalisation is impinging on another aspect of our lives. The university's relation to globalisation is predetermined by the fact that the phenomenon of globalisation is made possible by the role of knowledge and knowledge production. The university then is valorised because it generates the same knowledge upon which globalisation depends.

Knowledge plus ICT channels and a common interacting platform that the internet provides make it possible to respond speedily to global market opportunities. It is these developments, in large part, that have made countries like India and China able to leap-frog many OECD countries. The ravenous hunger that defines global capitalism creates an urgency (some may say panic) within all sectors. There is simply not enough time for higher education to take time off to adjust to the tumultuous transformation agenda of the past seven years.

This sense of urgency for higher education is clearly conveyed in a remarkable discussion paper released by President Mbeki in June 2005. The document raises a sustained critique of the sector, accusing its leadership of being 'too close to the coalface' to understand the critical role that the university needs to play in society. The document puts forward Princeton University as an example of the kind of mission, output and quality that is needed in South African universities. In a recent survey Princeton is rated as the ninth best university in the world, but the gist of the critique offered on our universities is that we are collectively and individually under-performing, that we may well not be focussing on the right areas and that the sector lacks self-confidence. It is, in the words of the document, 'timid', and the role of academics as too much of trainers rather than that of innovators (Mbeki 2005). The sector presently awaits a promised second paper that will put forward proposed interventions, but the implications are immense. After this period of restructuring in the name of transformation, are we getting a message from President Mbeki that higher education needs to reconfigure itself once more in order to meet global challenges for excellence in higher education?

If indeed another bout of change is coming, I would like to use this opportunity to flesh out what this change may bring, and how it might be used as a space for realising different kinds of blueprints for higher education, neither strictly traditional nor voraciously entrepreneurial.

We need a new way of thinking about the sector that can accommodate and embrace the and/or demands placed upon us. And by way of introducing an and/or reading of higher education, I would like to propose the four following—and hopefully contentious—assumptions about the future identity of the sector.

One, in South Africa (and internationally) there no longer exists, in Lyotard's (1984) phrase, 'a grand narrative' of the university. The image of the university with elaborate Gothic architecture that is removed from society, where time-honoured traditions continue undisturbed, where students go through a hallowed rite of passage to emerge as critical citizens possessing all they need for future success; this image no longer exists. Or more precisely, it exists as a branding idea that is consciously or unconsciously sold to parents, students, donors and the public. You may, of course, point out the examples of Oxford and Yale, or even Princeton, to prove me wrong, but it is my contention that these august institutions have sufficient third stream revenue in order to ward off a post-modern reality and to put forward a deliberately constructed image of the university as steeped in tradition.

Two, it is likely that our university system will become increasingly diverse and fragmented. One of the shortcomings of the present funding framework is that it unintentionally promotes homogeneity in our institutions. It rewards institutions for the same things. However, President Mbeki's (2005) document makes it very clear that the higher education sector must become a lead sector that produces a much wider range of outputs. At present, higher education, including the Further Education and Training (FET) band, is not meeting the human resource development needs of the country; interventions are underway to ensure the required alignment.

Three, we need a hypertextual logic for the university. In extending the second assumption, it becomes clear that the flourishing of the higher education sector will depend on our ability, and agility, to maximise opportunities as they arise, and not purely for profit purposes, but also for our long-term sustainability in the face of dwindling state funding. How does this relate to the notion of a hypertextual university? The experience of reading on the internet is radically different to reading a hard copy. In cyberspace, hypertext, with its proliferation of links, constantly discourages a linear approach to reading. Instead, one is continually invited to leave the text under scrutiny in order to explore related issues. The university, with its myriad of disciplines, should be ideally suited to linking within itself and externally to produce new forms, innovative collaborations, patents and spin-off companies.

To offer a few examples: 150,000 FET students are an anomaly when compared to other countries. A nearly 1:5 ratio between FET and our universities should be the other way around. The recapitalisation of the FET sector will not, in the short term, provide the sufficient work-ready medium and the required high-level skills. The Social Enterprise Training and Support (SETAs) mechanisms are also, in the main, not achieving their potential. These two problems may appear tangential to higher education, but if we read these challenges from a hypertextual point of view, we could well see the Universities of Technology assisting in solving both of these issues. Educating diplomats ready for immediate induction into work and running refresher courses for lifelong learners while accessing the substantial revenues of the SETAs are possibilities of addressing the multiple and/or challenges in South Africa.

In universities with little research capacity, there is a perpetual concern about building capacity in this regard. These universities work on the traditional idea that the university needs to be balanced between teaching, research, community outreach and information storage. But what if a university specialised in attracting the best lecturers and dedicated itself, as does the college system in the U.S., solely to providing undergraduate teaching excellence?

Or, what if universities re-conceptualised themselves around a consolidating idea? Imagine, a university organising itself around the idea of the ‘environment’ and specialising in all related activities from the study of grasslands and viniculture to environmental impact studies and the anthropology of place.

Four; more institutions, not less. It may sound ludicrous after the mergers, but it is my strong sense that we will see more higher education institutions emerging. However, these new institutions will not be more of the same, but could be niche-focussed universities directed to research, built with the vision of becoming leaders in specific areas (like nanotechnology) and funded by discretionary funding from the state.

In summary, I do not foresee an either/or proposition for the South African university. It will not remain either a cloistered ivory tower or become a callous entrepreneurial establishment. Our institutions, in responding to our developmental status, may well splinter around compelling projects and programmes; and, they may cohere around transdisciplinary ideas to spawn new niche universities that are born out of academic expertise across universities, both in South Africa and throughout the SADC region.

We in higher education are immensely privileged. We have the chance of being able to contribute to many of the diverse needs of a developing country. What is crucial is that all of us—from academics to administration to leadership—realise the opportunities, not only for financial gain, but also for the ethical, intellectual and innovative contributions that we can and must make to our society.

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