

# FOCUS

## THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY

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PHAAHLA | PREMID | STEWART | **REVIEWS** | R DE KADT | SIMKINS

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Alison Parkinson

**Photographs**

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**Email:** [joshua@hsf.org.za](mailto:joshua@hsf.org.za)

**Website:** [www.hsf.org.za](http://www.hsf.org.za)

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**Contributors**

Belinda Bozzoli  
Elizabeth De Kadt  
Raphael De Kadt (Review)  
Cheryl de le Rey  
Adam Habib  
John Laband  
Anwar Mall  
Elias Phaahla  
Kameel Premhid  
Charles Simkins (Review)  
Peter Stewart

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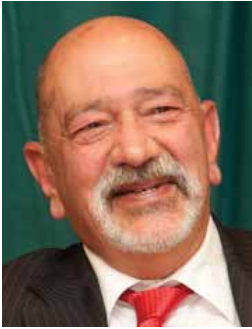
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# The idea of a University



**FRANCIS ANTONIE** is the Director of the Helen Suzman Foundation. He is a graduate of Wits, Leicester and Exeter Universities. He was awarded the Helen Suzman Chevening Fellowship by the UK foreign Office in 1994. From 1996 to 2006 he was senior economist at Standard Bank; thereafter he was director of the Graduate School of Public and Development Management at Wits University. He is the founding managing director of Strauss & Co.

*This edition of **Focus** explores issues which currently confront Universities in South Africa. Our starting point is the great tract **The Idea of a University** by John Henry Newman. With his background at Oxford and, later, with his involvement in the establishment of the University of Ireland, he was keenly aware of issues of marginalisation and religious and ethnic differences. Issues which we also face in contemporary South Africa. Nor did questions of finance escape him.*

We begin with **Cheryl de la Rey's** article which addresses the changing idea of a university. She draws on both Newman's work and Wilhelm von Humboldt's principles, and she self-consciously follows the 2000 report by Boulton and Lucas when she poses the question, What are Universities for? She points out that Universities have been shaped by adaptability and flexibility and that 'at pivotal historical moments the very idea of a university is subject to change.'

**Adam Habib** is especially concerned with the problem of accelerating transformation. Wits University is obviously the focus of his concern, and he spells out in some detail the strategy which Wits has developed in order to accelerate transformation, thus ensuring an inclusive and competitive institution. Eight specific initiatives are identified which no doubt will be contested by different constituencies.

**John Laband** is concerned with the Humanities within South African Universities. This concern is backgrounded by the problem of toppling statues and book-burnings. Laband is especially concerned about the implications for the Humanities in our Universities with their avowed commitment to multiculturalism, and he raises the question that attacks on one group's cultural patrimony cannot be overlooked. He cautions that this may very well turn the former oppressed into the new oppressors.

**Peter Stewart** is also concerned with the problem of the Humanities in South Africa's Universities. He extends his concern to consider the problem of censorship and academic freedom. He traces the history of censorship from Apartheid South Africa to the present time and he sketches out why he believes that the ANC government has an appetite for censorship. His critique brings into sharp perspective the amendments to the Film and Publications Board Act and the Protection of State Information Bill. How will these developments impact on Academic Freedom?

**Kameel Premhid** reflects on the state of the Humanities and Sciences at Universities. He brings a comparative dimension to our discussion and to the

problem of the 'disfiguring of higher education.' He raises the question of assessing the quality of academic research and he urges that an accommodation be forged in which Universities maintain their academic character, while at the same time they be subjected to the positive aspects of market forces.

**Elizabeth de Kadt** focuses on the challenges of undergraduate education. It is both retrospective and prospective. The challenges which she identifies range from teaching and learning, the high levels of drop-out rates for students, the tension between research and teaching and learning and, crucially, the problem of inadequate funding. She puts forward three recommendations which concern the need to explore the new educational technologies, which will take in distance learning or at least in a distance learning component. She also urges that private higher education institutions could be allocated a greater role. Finally, improving graduate output with a concomitant education in the number of years that the majority of students spend in undergraduate education would thus allow more students to be accommodated.

**Belinda Bozzoli** argues that that the original design of the quality control system of the curricula of Universities was a guarantor of autonomy as it operated at a distance, thereby protecting the Universities from direct government interference. It is that guarantor of autonomy which has gone and which is worrying, leading government to ever greater interference in the academic life of Universities.

**Elias Phaahla** who is concerned about transforming the socio-academic space in the University, recounts personal experiences at two former white universities with starkly contrasting cultural heritages.

**Anwar Mall** provides us with a personal narrative of an educational journey. His focus is also on transformation, but of a particular type. For Mall, education must be transformative for it to have any true value. What he seeks is a revolution of the mind – a fundamental change in consciousness which empowers our learners to function as citizens and not subjects, and which repudiates any claims to ownership of knowledge by any group, be it African or European. John Henry Newman, I suspect, would have been much taken by this observation.

We end with reviews by **Charles Simkins** of Herbst and Mills' *How South Africa Works*, and by **Raphael de Kadt** of RW Johnson's *How Long Will South Africa Survive?*

# The Changing Idea of a University



**PROF CHERYL DE LA REY** is the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Pretoria. She is a registered Psychologist and is Chairperson of the National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI), Vice Chairperson of the Talloires Network and the African co-Chairperson of the Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN) as well as a member of a number of national and international boards and committees, e.g. the Executive Board of the International Council for Science (ICSU), the national Human Resource Development Council and the Council of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU).

## Introduction

*Transformation at South Africa's universities has been an issue featuring in the news lately. The calls for the removal of statues and changing of names have been said to be reflective of a deeper seated set of issues that should be addressed by curriculum and other changes.*

Universities constitute one of the oldest surviving types of social institutions in the world today. They have been described as fundamental to the modern world and yet universities are criticised frequently for being slow to change and even resistant to change. Indeed, the transformation of universities, or lack thereof, is now a headline debate in South Africa.

But, if we look back at their historical evolution, the university as we know it today has come a long way from the types of institutions that were seen as akin to ivory towers— isolated from the ‘business’ of industrial and economic life so that nothing would disturb the purity of immersion in the world of ideas. Universities have survived not because they have remained the same but because they have been responsive to changing times and contexts.

## History

Although the university was primarily conceptualised around a core notion of the cultivation of the intellect and initiation into ways of thinking and understanding the world, the activities that constitute the ‘core’ business of a university have evolved with changing times. In the pre-industrialization era, the major form of teaching was through reading and ‘conversations’ which took place between the ‘generations of mankind’. With the rise of industrialization, however, this idea of a university came into contestation as is evident in John Stuart Mill’s inaugural address as Rector of St Andrews University in Scotland in which he argued that ‘[T]he proper function of an University in national education is tolerably well understood.... It is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood.’<sup>1</sup>

Much has changed since then. In the twentieth century as the linkage between high level skills and economic development became increasingly evident, governments took a keen interest in expanding access to higher education. Hence, from the 1950s and 1960s onwards in many countries there was an expansion in the number of universities. For governments, universities were expected to produce the scientists, engineers and professionals needed to advance economic development.

Expansion occurred through the creation of new institutions and through the transformation of technical and technological colleges into universities. With the

increase in the number of universities there was a dramatic growth in the proportion of students enrolled in higher education. By the year 2000, 100 million students were enrolled in higher education globally whereas at the turn of the 20th century it was only 500 000. Much of the expansion was in the form of increased enrolments in vocational and professional programmes which were viewed as having direct relevance to the individual's ability to be employed and also to national economic growth.

It is worth noting that in many parts of the world, universities were mostly teaching-focussed institutions with research as we know it today becoming a major focus of the academic mission in the twentieth century only. It was the twentieth century that really brought to the fore the notion of the research university. What is often referred to as the *Von Humbolt model* was based on the principle of unity of research and teaching as opposed to research being conducted in separate institutes that do not have the responsibility of educating young scholars.

By the late 1990s, being an excellent teaching and research university was no longer deemed sufficient. New conceptualizations of the role of universities were under debate. It was no longer a matter of universities just producing the right number of professionals for the economy: the debate had moved to arguments about the wider societal contribution of universities and the relevance of university teaching and research. This debate gave rise to concepts such as the 'entrepreneurial university', the 'engaged university' and the idea of universities being part of a triple helix relationship with industry and government. In the UK there was *the Dearing Report*<sup>2</sup> that referred to '... a new compact involving institutions and their staff, students, government, employers and society in general'. *The Dearing Report* spelled out a very different idea of higher education – one in which 'relevance', 'utility', 'social inclusion' and 'accountability to a wider public' seemed to predominate.

*The Dearing Report spelled out a very different idea of higher education – one in which 'relevance', 'utility', 'social inclusion' and 'accountability to a wider public' seemed to predominate.*

The changes in the core mission of universities - initially teaching, then teaching and research and, more recently, community engagement, entrepreneurship and innovation - show that there is no universal and timeless essence in the nature of universities. Instead universities' missions change with changing times and context. As Richard Pring noted, universities are 'part of a wider network of social and educational institutions and this network will constantly be changing in recognition of or in response to changing economic and social factors'<sup>3</sup>. The contemporary international higher education landscape is shaped by a diversity of institutions named as universities. Some are dedicated almost entirely to professional and vocational education and training; others continue the tradition of intellectual pursuit organised by disciplines. In many universities old traditions based on the pursuit of truth and critical inquiry sit alongside the new, which are shaped by professional bodies that focus on competencies, customer relations and client services.

## Universities in South Africa

The debate about transformation in South African universities can be viewed as part of a long trajectory of debate about the nature of universities as social institutions. Whilst much of the focus is on race and the symbolic legacies of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past, there is a deeper issue about the identity and role of a university in South Africa today and in the future.

*What are universities for?* is the title of a 2008 report by Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas in which they point out that almost universally the world has adopted a model of universities based on John Newman's and Wilhelm von Humbolt's principles and that this model has been a key factor in the development of the modern Western world.<sup>4</sup>

*It is unequivocal in linking the purpose of universities to national development and it points to three main functions for universities: high level skills, knowledge production and application, and providing opportunities for social mobility and strengthening equity, social justice and democracy.*

The question asked by Boulton and Lucas, 'What are universities for?' is one that is pertinent to the role of universities in a transforming South African society. The National Development Plan (NDP) envisions by 2030 'an expanding higher education sector that can contribute to rising incomes, higher productivity and the shift to a more knowledge- intensive economy'<sup>5</sup>. It is unequivocal in linking the purpose of universities to national development and it points to three main functions for universities: high level skills, knowledge production and application, and providing opportunities for social mobility and strengthening equity, social justice and democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Internationally there is a growing literature that poses questions about the future of universities with some suggesting that there is a fundamental change or revolutionary change ahead of us. Four features are prominent in these debates:

- the impact of globalisation;
- cross-institutional collaboration and networks;
- the changing nature of the academic job;
- and the impact of technology, specifically Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

What we must acknowledge is that the idea of a university is not uniform; instead it is becoming more diverse. Decades ago Clark Kerr used the term multiversity to describe what universities in the US had become: pluralistic institutions combining various functions and playing multiple roles.<sup>7</sup> Kerr referred not only to a diverse university system but also to single institutions performing various roles. 'The university is so many things to so many people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself', said Kerr.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to the multiple roles of universities, Manuel Castells in a seminar series in South Africa noted that universities also produce and reproduce values, and select and socialise elites in a society.<sup>9</sup> This could be said to be an implicit role of universities, conveyed in curricula: the how and what we teach, the how and what we choose to research and the sum of what makes up an institutional culture.

Boulton and Lucas have pointed out that the 'western' university as evolved from Newman and Humbolt's principles has been so successful that it is a model that is applied almost universally.<sup>10</sup> In a society like South Africa, still in the process of transitioning from an apartheid past with universities predominantly modelled on the 'western university' it is perhaps unsurprising that universities have become sites of contestation over values and ideologies. The idea of an African university transformed from its colonial and, in the case of South Africa, its apartheid past, is being debated widely, including at events such as the recent African Summit on Higher Education in Dakar.



It is a debate that happens at a time when a new model of a university seems to be on the ascendancy, with the notion of Global Research Universities or GRUs gaining currency. For universities, globalization means increasing mobility of ideas, technologies and people, both students and academic staff. Off-shore campuses, virtual networks and online delivery of academic programmes have challenged notions of national universities. The rise of ranking systems both contribute to and reflect this notion of a university through focussing mostly on research performance and then giving considerable attention to measures of internationalization. High level skills development, teaching and learning generally and community engagement as envisaged in the NDP are given scant, if any attention at all.

## Conclusion

What we are seeing then is a version of what Clarke Kerr referred to as 'on-going tensions' between different aspects of universities seeking simultaneously to be distinctively national or regional and global.<sup>11</sup> The challenge for universities is to do what Simon Marginson says: 'continue to work in these dimensions' to be closely shaped by national policy but also closely shaped by global flows.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth reminding ourselves that the history of universities has been shaped by adaptability and flexibility and at pivotal historical moments the very idea of a university is subject to change. Universities can be sites of excellence in a myriad of ways including being a space that fosters both public and social good. Barnett<sup>13</sup> distinguishes social good as that which refers to the capacity of human beings to acknowledge and take account of each other and in the process show respect and sometimes understanding. This is perhaps, at the heart of the challenge for SA universities: that we become spaces where diverse and discordant views can be exchanged, debated and co-exist together respectfully.

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### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Mill J.S. Inaugural Address delivered to the University of St Andrews. London, Longmans. 1867, p. 5.
- 2 Dearing R. Higher Education in the Learning Society. Report of the National Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education. London, HMSO. 1997.
- 3 Pring R. The Changing Nature of Universities: economic relevance, social inclusion or personal excellence? Institute for the Advancement of University Learning, University of Oxford. 2001, p. 1. [www.learning.ox.ac.uk/iaul/ProfPring.pdf](http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/iaul/ProfPring.pdf)
- 4 Boulton G. & Lucas C. What are universities for? League of European Research Universities publications. 2008, p. 3.
- 5 National Development Plan 2030. Our future – make it work. National Planning Commission. 2012, p. 48.
- 6 Ibid p. 318.
- 7 Kerr C. The Great Transformation in Higher Education 1960 – 1980. Albany, SUNY Press. 1991.
- 8 Kerr C. The Uses of the University, 5th ed. Cambridge (1st ed. 1963). Harvard University Press. 2001, p. 7.
- 9 Castells M. 'Universities as dynamic systems of contradictory functions' in Muller J., Cloete N., and Badat S. (eds) Challenges of Globalisation: South African Debates with Manuel Castells. Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman. 2001, pp. 206-223; Castells M. The Role of Universities in Development, the Economy and Society. Transcript of a lecture given at the University of the Western Cape, August 2009.
- 10 Note 4 above, p. 3.
- 11 Note 7 above, p. 11.
- 12 Marginson S. Global, multiple and engaged: Has the 'Idea of a University' changed in the era of the global knowledge economy? Paper delivered at 5th International Workshop on Higher Education Reforms: The Internationalization of Higher Education and Higher Education Reforms. East China Normal University (ECNU), Shanghai, China. November 2008, p.1. [www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/people/marginson\\_docs.pdf](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/people/marginson_docs.pdf)
- 13 Barnett R. (ed) The Future University: Ideas and Possibilities. Routledge, New York. 2012.

# Accelerating Transformation for an Inclusive and Competitive Wits



**PROFESSOR ADAM HABIB** is the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand and the Chairperson of Universities South Africa.

## Context

*What does transformation mean for universities in South Africa in 2015? Two views are evident in the public discourse. On the one hand, there is a call for a more holistic definition of transformation that involves amongst others:*

- a diverse and cosmopolitan student cohort;
- enhanced access for talented students from poor and marginalised communities;
- a dramatically increased African and Coloured representation in the academy;
- an evolution of the institutional culture where Black staff and students feel comfortable within Wits;
- a reorganisation of the curriculum to incorporate African theorists and contextual challenges;
- and an end to the exploitation of workers through the insourcing of all outsourced services.

On the other hand, there are those who suggest that transformation at Wits is really about the lack of African and Coloured representation in the academy. There is a fear that a focus on broader issues would merely detract attention from this Achilles heel of the higher education system in South Africa.

Two additional considerations have become obvious. The first is that ‘transformation lethargy’ is most keenly experienced ‘at the level of the corridor’. Yet in almost all of these cases, managers confirm that they are open to and supportive of transformation. The problem lies not in the professed commitment, but in the ordinary interactions with colleagues. There are cases of overt racism and where these occur, they must be condemned and dealt with firmly and expeditiously. But the deeper problem lies in the ‘colour blind’ interactions, for although many may see them as proof of institutional progress, others view them as insufficiently appreciative of the burdens of our history. They would argue that you cannot switch from a racialised past to a colour blind present without continuous racialised outcomes.

The second consideration involves interrogating the thinking of the advocates of transformation. Many transformation advocates draw their intellectual inspiration from Steve Biko and Franz Fanon – but they tend to have an ossified and simplistic reading of these activist intellectuals. In many of the engagements of the past few months, I heard colleagues justify non-engagement by quoting Biko’s refusal to immerse himself in the official and oppositional structures of power in the apartheid era. But can one truly draw lessons of praxis from the apartheid



era to the contemporary one without critically interrogating the possibilities and limitations of the new context? Abstracting from institutional power allows one to avoid confronting these difficult questions, without which we are unlikely to make significant transformative progress.

Similarly, Fanon has been read in problematic ways, especially by student and scholar activists involved in the struggles around symbols and naming. Participants often suggest getting rid of statues and memorials celebrating British colonialism and apartheid's heroes, and replacing them with those of the liberation movement. But Fanon was as critical of the nationalist political elite that followed colonialism as he was of the white settlers themselves. This suggests that besides a few cases like Mandela, Sisulu, Tambo, Biko, Sobukwe and the like, one should be careful of simply replacing 'White' symbols and names with Black ones. It is worth bearing in mind that if we are meant to follow indigenous African traditions in this regard, then we should probably be naming after symbolic events and/or convey evocative descriptions. We should use a plurality of philosophies to under girth the naming and establishment of symbols.

There is also a racial and ethnic essentialism that has come to define a strand of thinking within the transformation movement. Legitimate criticisms of the colour blind approach of mainstream liberalism have sometimes morphed into an illegitimate racism. This is most easily recognisable in the loose language about all 'Whites being racists' and 'Jewish donors controlling Wits'. The racial essentialism is also manifest in the implicit assumption of some advocates of transformation that all claims of prejudice by Black staff and students are legitimate. This has sometimes enabled them blindly to defend blatant racism to advance their own aspirations.

*Legitimate criticisms of the colour blind approach of mainstream liberalism have sometimes morphed into an illegitimate racism. This is most easily recognisable in the loose language about all 'Whites being racists' and 'Jewish donors controlling Wits'.*

An advance on transformation cannot be premised on the philosophical impulses of a racial and ethnic essentialism, nor can it be premised on colour blindness. We have to recognise that we come from a racialised history with consequences that translate into our present. Responsiveness to transformation has to proactively confront our racial legacies and affirm the victims of apartheid. This is the real stuff of contemporary transformation. But it need not, and should not, translate into a racism and racial chauvinism.

*Any initiative must be compatible with the University's fundamental mandate to be a globally competitive, research intensive institution that is responsive to local development imperatives.*

## Transformation at Wits

Wits recognises the need to accelerate transformation. Despite the University's policies and professed institutional and individual commitments, the pace of transformation has been slow. Following a series of conversations with stakeholder groups on the slow pace of transformation at Wits and in the higher education sector, Wits has developed a strategic plan based on three important premises.

First, a broad definition of transformation is necessary at Wits. It must include, amongst other factors:

- dramatically increased African and Coloured representation in the academy;
- curriculum reform to include African contexts and theorists;
- a diverse and cosmopolitan student cohort across campuses and residences;
- enhanced access for talented students from poor and marginalised communities;
- an institutional culture that makes Black staff and students feel comfortable;
- an institutional naming policy that reflects the diversity of our traditions;
- a language policy that enhances our understanding of one another and prepares students for the workplace;
- and an end to the exploitative practice of outsourcing.

Secondly, as described above, an advance on transformation cannot be premised on the philosophical impulses of a racial and ethnic essentialism.

Thirdly, it is necessary to remain cognisant of the constraints and trade-offs involved in driving a transformation agenda. Any initiative must be compatible with the University's fundamental mandate to be a globally competitive, research intensive institution that is responsive to local development imperatives. It must also be cognisant of the University's finances and should not jeopardise the fiscal health of the institution.

## Strategy

Wits has developed a strategic plan to accelerate transformation to ensure an inclusive and competitive institution.

### *Diversifying the Wits Academy*

The key transformative issue at Wits is the need to increase the African and Coloured representation in the academy and professoriate. There are initiatives underway to address this issue, including government programmes, but they are not significant enough to impact on the racial diversity of the Wits academy.

Wits will thus mobilise a minimum of R45 million from our own resources to underwrite two initiatives. About R35 million will be dedicated to underwriting

the costs of appointing between 25 and 35 new African and Coloured academics, taking into account gender diversity. These will be tenure track positions and may require a mandatory period of service for a limited time. A further R10 million will be dedicated to a special programme to advance 30 to 35 African and Coloured academics who are currently within the Wits system towards promotion to the professoriate level over two to five years. It must be stressed that the promotion criteria for the candidates will not change but an enabling environment will be developed for them to achieve the existing promotion requirements. This will involve smaller teaching and marking loads, research support and mentorships, etc.

All senior academics will be required to mentor at least one African or Coloured South African and representation on the Staffing and Promotions Committees will be expanded to include a member of the Transformation Committee.

In addition, Wits will aim to mobilise a further R45 million from international foundations and local sources to expand the programme, to keep it sustainable and to increase the number of scholars that is supported.

*There will be no moratorium on the appointment of White academic staff – as we transform, we must still continue to attract the best academic and research talent from South Africa and abroad.*

There will be no moratorium on the appointment of White academic staff – as we transform, we must still continue to attract the best academic and research talent from South Africa and abroad. These are not mutually exclusive goals and can be pursued simultaneously.

### ***Curriculum Reform***

A proactive strategy is required to address curriculum reform and will take different forms in different disciplines. In some cases, it may require the inclusion of new subject matter and reference material, while in others it may require rethinking the teaching pedagogy by contextualising the subject matter with the use of relevant local examples and/or using alternative technological instruments to transmit knowledge and enhance understanding. In relevant disciplines, this would be subject to the requirements of and engagements with industry players and appropriate professional and accrediting bodies.

Curriculum reform does not mean a retreat into the local and a focus on the teaching of Africa and its problems. While this is important and needs to be incorporated, we must continue to focus on the rest of the world, and learn from their academic and scientific communities. We must become an equal constituent part of a global scientific academy of commons. How to structure the balance between local responsiveness and global competitiveness in the curriculum will be determined at the School and Departmental level, stewarded by institution-wide oversight. We will also consider the possibility of a mandatory course for all students that emphasises South Africa's history, citizenship, civic service and a broader sense of ethics.

### ***Student Admissions***

The current demographic profile of the Wits student body is about 75% Black and 25% White. From the perspective of achieving a balance between demographic diversity and cosmopolitanism, this demographic profile is appropriate, although

we are open to increasing the proportion of white students to about 28%, which constitutes their current proportion of the Gauteng student pool. This balance is not only important for historical redress but also for generating the soft skill sets – intercultural personal skills and cultural tolerance across racial, ethnic and religious boundaries – that are required for 21st Century citizens and professionals who need to operate optimally in multicultural South African and global workplaces.

*Over 97% of our students in our residences are Black (this includes 4.78% Indian and 1.80% Coloured), with only 2.26% White students in residences. This violates our goal to promote a diverse and cosmopolitan environment.*

This demographic and cosmopolitan success is not equally spread across the institution. There are programmes that are still largely dominated by White and Indian or African students. This is problematic in terms of our institutional and pedagogical goals and is being addressed. In a similar vein, our attempt to increase the number of talented students from rural schools and quintile one and two urban schools in our MBCh programme has recorded some significant progress, although we have not achieved all our targets. We have identified the challenges in

this regard and are developing solutions.

### ***Promoting Diverse and Cosmopolitan Residence Life Experience***

Over 97% of our students in our residences are Black (this includes 4.78% Indian and 1.80% Coloured), with only 2.26% White students in residences. This violates our goal to promote a diverse and cosmopolitan environment. Attempts to address this situation were met with opposition from some students who claim that poor students would be disadvantaged and that White students would receive special attention. The former criticism is valid and a strategy needs to be developed to mitigate this. The latter criticism needs to be challenged. While special attention cannot be accorded to White students, increasing their representation in our residences should be a strategic priority on the grounds of both our pedagogical and institutional goals. Moreover, we should not allow our deliberative engagement on this strategy to be compromised by opportunistic racialised labelling of any kind. But cosmopolitanism means more than an enhanced representation of White students. It must also involve establishing an environment in which persons from multiple religious backgrounds – Christian, Hindu, Muslim, traditional African, Jewish, atheist – and cultural experiences have significant presence within our residences.

### ***Institutional Culture***

Many Black students continue to feel marginalised even though they constitute the majority of students. Equally important are the many allegations of racism that are continuously received from both staff and students. It goes without saying that racism has no place at Wits and needs to be decisively dealt with whenever it rears its head, lest it destroys our ability to achieve the goal of establishing a diverse and cosmopolitan university.

Transforming our institutional culture requires the effort of every single person at Wits. As scholars of social inclusion have so often argued, it requires a sensitivity from White staff that they do not act or operate in ways that can be read as alienating or discriminatory. But it also requires from Black staff and students a consciousness not to read every act as racist and exclusionary. Building a new, inclusive institutional culture requires everyone to proactively participate in

developing new forms of engagement that enhance social interaction, teaching, research and service. We must all feel that we own the corridors and spaces of Wits University.

### *Institutional Naming*

While Wits does not have any statutes that could create political controversy, it does need a proactive strategy on the naming of buildings and other sites. Some of this has been undertaken in recent years, but we need to be more proactive in this regard. Two considerations require reflection. First, we need to strike a balance between names derived from sponsorships and donations and those that emanate from strategic considerations such as the establishment of an institutional identity. Secondly, our naming strategy should be informed by both Western and Indigenous traditions. The former follows the convention of naming after individuals while the latter tends to do so through evocative descriptions. This is often not understood by many politicians and activists engaged in naming who erroneously think that they are following indigenous traditions by replacing the names of White apartheid politicians with those of Black politicians and liberation heroes.

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We should guard against this becoming a widespread practice for not only is it important in an educational institution to name after scholars, artists, poets and students, but it is also too soon to determine the legacy of most contemporary politicians. This does not mean that we should not name buildings after noted celebrated figures of our liberation, including Biko, Mandela, Sisulu, Sobukwe and Tambo, amongst others. We should definitely do so. But we should also remember to name beyond celebrated politicians and heroes to also include other categories relevant to our mandate. Moreover, we must be consistent with our indigenous tradition and also name through evocative descriptions. We should also consider commissioning a statue or piece of work that reflects our vision of transformation and commemorates our commitment to it.

### *Language*

Learning multiple languages, in particular the indigenous languages of South Africa, is an important means of enhancing our mutual understanding and appreciation. Multilingual graduates are also more capacitated and effective in the workplace. In this context, multilingualism is particularly important for Wits given that we strive to be a cosmopolitan institution situated in the economic heartland of the sub-continent. However, we must also recognise the primacy of English in global economic and political interactions. This is why it is important to keep English as a primary language of instruction. However, we will create the resources and instruments to enable staff and students to develop competence in one of at least two African languages located within the two major language clusters of Nguni and Sotho. In addition, our language policy suggests that we adopt South African Sign Language as part of our linguistic repertoire. One way to do this would be to develop online courses for these languages so that undergraduate and postgraduate students can complete them at any point during their course of study.

### *Insourcing*

There have been calls by students, staff, unions and external stakeholders for all services that were outsourced over the past two decades to be insourced by the current management. This has been motivated on the grounds that the workers who service Wits from these outsourced companies tend to be grossly exploited. It is hard to argue against this advocacy when the salaries of workers are considered and their stories are heard. However, Wits does not have the resources required to insource these services and to put the workers directly onto our payroll. If we were to do this without throwing the institution into financial crisis, we would be required to increase student fees by an additional 15% above the normal annual increase, or get an equivalent increase in subsidy from the state. The former is difficult given the current economic plight of our students and their families, and the latter is unlikely to happen in the near future.

We have established stopgap measures by writing into our existing contracts clauses that require companies to abide by certain minimum salary thresholds and observe labour relations requirements. If they fail to do this, we are entitled to cancel our contracts. But the dilemma of activating this leverage is that it effectively leads to workers losing their jobs. We will improve on our existing provisions by hosting regular meetings with employers and relevant unions so that we do not find out about abuses at a crisis point. We will also assist workers to establish cooperatives so that they can bid competitively for contracts.

Wits will look at partnering with civil society organisations, unions and other universities to launch a national campaign, the goal of which will be to increase subsidies to universities with a view to insourcing all outsourced services that involve vulnerable workers. Until we are successful in realising this outcome, we are going to have to manage the challenge using the stopgap measures identified above.

### **Conclusion**

While it must be recognised that there have been significant transformative gains since 1994, these can no longer be deemed sufficient 21 years into the democratic transition. Increasingly, universities have become delegitimised in the eyes of incoming generations of students and academics. This has been evident for some years, although it took the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement to bring the crisis to a head across the higher education system. Wits is thus committed to urgently addressing transformation and we look to all our partners for support along this journey.



# Toppling Statues, Burning Books and the Humanities in South African Universities



**JOHN LABAND** is Professor Emeritus at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada; a Life Member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge; a Fellow of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and a Research Associate at Stellenbosch University. His latest book is *Zulu Warriors: The Battle for the South African Frontier* (Yale University Press, 2014).

## Introduction

*Reflecting on Human Rights Month, Ahmed Kathrada and Kayum Ahmed conceded that while our Bill of Rights presents the framework for the development of a human rights culture in South Africa, the wounds of apartheid remain so deep that it will be generations before its principles take hold.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, when on 9 March 2015 Chumani Maxwele, a fourth-year Political Science student at the University of Cape Town (UCT), smeared the statue of Cecil Rhodes on campus with human excrement, a grotesquely vulgar gesture he says was intended to question still-entrenched ‘white power’,<sup>2</sup> did he for a moment take into account Article 31 of the Bill of Rights which assures persons belonging to all cultural groups that they may not be denied their right to enjoy their culture?<sup>3</sup> Or did he consider that the reason why statues of the colonial era are still standing untoppled is because of the peaceful, negotiated transition to democracy in South Africa, a crucial aspect of which was Nelson Mandela’s and the Government of National Unity’s determination to allay the fears of the formerly dominant group that their culture would not be assailed?*

Many commentators are in agreement that the crisis over the statue of Rhodes is only a highly visible but preliminary skirmish in a more fundamental struggle to ‘decolonise’ and ‘transform’ – or, more accurately, to Africanise – the governance of universities, their teaching staff and their curricula. Undoubtedly, as Zubeida Jaffer reminds us, many African students ‘struggle to connect university teaching to their own reality’, and need to be affirmed through studying African intellectuals<sup>4</sup> and artists. The issue is complicated, however, by a tendency among those prioritizing political agendas to confound the successful pursuit of academic excellence by world-class universities such as UCT with ingrained ‘anti-transformation’.<sup>5</sup> That said, the transformation project, in the words of Professor Vuyisile Msila, the head of UNISA’s Institute for African Renaissance, would require breaking down the ‘intransigent’, ‘ingrained’ and ‘subtle’ colonial culture ‘that marginalises emerging black talent and wants to maintain the status quo’.<sup>6</sup> It consequently can be argued that it is irrelevant that more than 80 per cent of the total student body (which

has doubled since 1994 to close to a million) is now African when, according to Dr Jeffrey Mabelebele, the Chief Executive Higher Education South Africa, institutional transformation has been 'disappointingly slow in some areas.'<sup>7</sup>

*Traditionally, they include classics, languages, literature, philosophy, religion, and both the visual and performing arts. The picture is complicated because certain disciplines which have been regarded as falling within the Humanities are sometimes considered to comprise the Social Sciences because of their greater empirical content.*

## Transforming the Humanities?

Dr Harry Garuba of the Centre for African Studies at UCT believes that the curriculum is 'a particularly good place to plant the seeds for transformation' since it 'helps to create people who think in a particular way' and express themselves accordingly.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the transformation of higher education is nothing less than a culture war, hardly surprising, perhaps, in a society previously divided by apartheid along racial and cultural lines. The Humanities, by their very nature, must be in the forefront of this conflict because they encompass academic disciplines that study human culture, or what it means to be human. Traditionally, they include classics, languages, literature, philosophy,

religion, and both the visual and performing arts. The picture is complicated because certain disciplines which have been regarded as falling within the Humanities are sometimes considered to comprise the Social Sciences because of their greater empirical content. These might include anthropology, archaeology, communication studies, environmental studies, geography, history, law, linguistic studies, political science, and sociology itself.

Nowadays, where the Humanities are situated in a university structure seems to be a matter more of administrative convenience than pedagogical coherence. A glance at the academic calendars of the five most highly rated South African universities internationally (in order of excellence UCT, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Stellenbosch University, the University of Pretoria and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)),<sup>9</sup> shows Faculties of Humanities in four of them, a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch, and a hold-all College of Humanities at UKZN with Schools of Applied Human Sciences, Arts, Built Environment and Development Studies, Education, Religion and Social Sciences.

What all these multifarious disciplines have in common is that they are not the natural sciences which are based on experimental methodology and rigorous training in acquiring the necessary and internationally accepted fundamentals of scientific knowledge. Or, to put it another way, they are 'soft' subjects and consequently far more easily subject to transformation or Africanisation than are the 'hard' sciences. When Dr Max Price, the Vice-Chancellor of UCT, advocates transformation in the sciences at his university, he means making the sciences more attractive to black people, particularly women, and training more black science graduates. Both he and Professor Wim de Villiers, Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, are eager to foster collaboration with international researchers to present an African perspective on scientific problems in fields such as health and the environment.<sup>10</sup> Neither is suggesting that the basics of scientific training be changed. What can be transformed is the effectiveness with which the sciences are taught. Professor Suellen Shay, Dean of the Centre for Higher Education Development at UCT, points out that the completion rates in Bachelor of Science degrees 'are most worrying and where the needs of the country are most pressing.' For her, the remedy lies in improved foundation courses and standard required entry 'gateway' courses in



the sciences that better take into account the all-too-often low levels of academic preparedness, particularly among black students.<sup>11</sup>

But what about purged and transformed South African literature, history or philosophy syllabi? They could certainly be adopted without any risk that they would cause a bridge to collapse, an epidemic to take fatal hold or an aeroplane to fall out of the sky. Immediately after the Second World War the newly-established Communist governments in East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia fully understood this when from 1948 they launched systematic attacks on the disciplines in the Humanities, all of which were 'transformed into vehicles for the transmission of [Marxist] ideology, just as they were in the Soviet Union'. The Communist authorities were delighted when 'reactionary' scholars in the Humanities fled to the West; but they were dismayed when physicians, mathematicians and scientists also decamped since the new society badly needed their skills which could not be readily replaced. In the Humanities, on the other hand, it was easy enough to recruit new Communist, working-class professors to take over from the discredited bourgeois intelligentsia.<sup>12</sup>

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### The Rhodes Must Fall Movement

It is in that light that one should consider the activities of the so-called 'born-frees', young black South African students whose 'youthful energies' Imraan Buccus (Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at UKZN) lauds for having shaken 'the most reactionary of the liberal universities'. As he put it, 'the question

of race and the colonial legacy has been central to this re-emergence of students as an important political force' because they 'have made it quite clear that they are no longer willing to accept the normalisation of colonial symbols and practices.'<sup>13</sup> Ntombizikhona Valela, Masters student in History at Rhodes University and a member of the Black Student Movement, was even more blunt, referring to a 'new kind of student in a different political moment in which young people nationwide are challenging the notion of the rainbow nation and [questioning] whether we can truly say we are in a post-apartheid era.'<sup>14</sup>

*However, anyone with the stomach to trawl the social media will be appalled to read the intolerant, racist vitriol hurled at whites who dare participate in the debate about 'decolonising' the universities and that aggressively denies them any legitimate voice.*

Such rhetoric unambiguously represents a deliberate move away from the principles of reconciliation and cultural tolerance enshrined in the constitution. Certainly, Chumani Maxwele and his Rhodes Must Fall movement at UCT have unleashed the racist demon. Maxwele has complained that in the course of the 'heated debates' their actions have elicited – many of them taking place on social media – he and 'many other black students have experienced direct racist attacks'.<sup>15</sup> He insists this is because the 'white people are scared' and it is them 'fighting back'.<sup>16</sup> That well may be, and Maxwele and his supporters have

undoubtedly experienced considerable personal abuse. However, anyone with the stomach to trawl the social media will be appalled to read the intolerant, racist vitriol hurled at whites who dare participate in the debate about 'decolonising' the universities and that aggressively denies them any legitimate voice. This is an aspect of the controversy which is sedulously ignored by two UCT Psychology lecturers, Dr Shose Kessi and Professor Floretta Boonzaier, when they laud the 'shift in power relations' at the their university.<sup>17</sup> But it is pivotal in Maxwele's two-month suspension on 17 June 2015 from UCT for 'intimidating, harassing, threatening and racially abusing' a female lecturer on 1 May 2015. The lecturer claims that in the course of their confrontation Maxwele said that 'white people should be removed from UCT and killed'.<sup>18</sup> Maxwele has laid a counter-complaint asserting that he has been 'victimised and racially profiled' by the authorities for daring to question the 'white power that dominates the University of Cape Town'.<sup>19</sup>

All this inflamed and ugly racist animosity on campus poses a direct challenge to the Humanities which, as taught nowadays in progressive tertiary institutions worldwide – including South Africa's liberal and apparently 'reactionary' universities – champion the principles of multicultural education. This pedagogical approach emerged some forty years ago in the United States as a response to the accelerating diversification of the student body that called for improved ways of preparing students to take their places in a pluralistic, multicultural world. It addressed the challenge through deliberately inculcating in students an informed and empathetic engagement with others which enables them to operate as responsible 'world citizens' in a democratic society. Inherent in this programme is the validation of previously excluded groups along with the acceptance of the culture of minorities.<sup>20</sup> Wits unambiguously spells out these same goals in its Humanities Outcomes which include an exiting student's ability to 'recognise and value diversity' and to 'respect and value the complexity of multiple perspectives of people' along with the competence to 'apply knowledge and understanding to the complexity of contexts and the existence of multiple perspectives.'<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, students agitating for wholesale (if amorphous) transformation are not abiding by these multicultural principles,<sup>22</sup> even if many of them are students in the Humanities which espouse them. Indeed, those who whipped Rhodes's toppled statue as it was being carted off were indulging in all the anthropomorphic notions of power embodied in an image which has characterised fundamentalist Islam when it has defaced and otherwise humiliated figurative works of art. Certainly, as Robert Bevan has pointed out, the cosmopolitan concept of 'living companionably with the artefacts of another culture, even a long dead one,' is something neither al-Qaeda, the Taliban nor Islamic State (IS) can tolerate.<sup>23</sup> When deploring IS's recent and heinous destruction of the archaeological site of Assyrian Nimrud, Said Habib Afram of the Syriac League of Lebanon saw clearly enough that the thugs with hammers and bulldozers were determined 'to erase our culture, past and civilization.'<sup>24</sup> Unhappily, in that unfortunate region IS is not alone in committing cultural terrorism. Since Saudi-led bombing began in Yemen in March 2015 twenty-five historical sites and monuments have been destroyed including the old city of Sana'a, a UNESCO heritage site.<sup>25</sup>

Truly, when the artefacts of a group's cultural heritage are deliberately destroyed or removed, it can leave no doubt that the group as a whole is under attack. Stalin's famine-genocide (the Holodomor) launched in 1932 against the independently-minded Ukraine began with the destruction of its historic monuments; while the Cultural Revolution unleashed in China in May 1966 saw the systematic demolition of almost all monuments associated with pre-Communist China and its elites. These precedents were surely in the mind of Kallie Kriel, the Chief Executive of the Afrikaner lobby group, AfriForum, when he reacted on 17 April 2015 to the resolution of the government's consultative meeting on transformation in the heritage sector that statues representing the colonial past be moved safely out of the way to a memorial park. Mr Kriel uncompromisingly declared: 'We are against the creation of concentration camps for monuments.'<sup>26</sup> It would not have been lost on the meeting that he was deliberately making the connection to the British internment camps of the South African War of 1899–1902 which have become a symbol of the martyrdom of the Afrikaner people.<sup>27</sup>

*There is a certain irony that this requirement should be voiced by a holder of higher degrees in Fine Art, World Heritage and Museum Studies.*

From this perspective, we can see that the removal of Rhodes's statue – and the copycat desecration of other colonial monuments across the country – are intimately intertwined with calls for university transformation into a focused assault on the culture and heritage of a particular group in our society. This is made plain enough by Gcobani Qambela, lecturer in Social Anthropology in the School of Social and Government Studies at North-West University in Potchefstroom, who castigates universities as 'custodians of borrowed traditions' and laments 'the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum'.<sup>28</sup> Qambela is vehemently echoed by Wandile Gozen Kasibe, a doctoral candidate in Sociology at UCT who is an ardent apologist for Maxwele's actions. His programme for the 'decolonization and transformation' of UCT kicks off with the demand that the university 'remove all statues and plaques on campus celebrating white supremacists'.<sup>29</sup> There is a certain irony that this requirement should be voiced by a holder of higher degrees in Fine Art, World Heritage and Museum Studies. It is certainly not a view endorsed by Nithaya Chetty, Professor of Physics at the University of Pretoria, published on the same page of the Cape Times as Kasibe. He believes rather forlornly that 'it is time that we embraced our

collective history as our own' because 'we are all responsible for moving into the future together.'<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

What are the implications of all of this for the Humanities in our universities with their avowed commitment to multiculturalism? Hitler required a united Nazi intellectual establishment, so when Josef Goebbels headed up the new Nazi Ministry of Propaganda and Popular Entertainment he proclaimed that all intellectual life in Germany should be 'put into the same gear', and that there should be 'no dissonance...between cultural expression and the political-ideological propaganda of the state'. To regulate this, in September 1933 he created a national Chamber of Culture to which all 'makers of culture' had to belong, and initiated many 'actions' against designated 'enemies of the German spirit'. These took various forms such as the purging of museums and galleries, the black-listing of dissident intellectuals and the dismissal of all Jews on racist grounds. In 1933 the

German Student Union (thoroughly meshed into gear) organised the spectacular book-burnings in thirty-four university towns of some 25,000 volumes of political, historical, philosophical and literary works deemed 'un-German'.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, when Dr Kessi and Professor Boonzaier deplore the 'cultural hegemonies' that currently 'hold sway' at UCT,<sup>32</sup> they implicitly favour their replacement by dominant new ones more to their taste. It is reasonable to enquire whether their reformed university culture would exclude existing elements in the national narrative deemed illegitimate or inconvenient to the prevailing dogma,<sup>33</sup> and to wonder just how far they believe we should go in crashing the Humanities in South Africa into ideologically

acceptable gear? Considering that so many of the disciplines in the Humanities lack obvious utility beyond personal intellectual enrichment, perhaps the most sensible strategy for lecturers would be to follow the advice of Professor Msila and focus on producing Humanities graduates 'who are ready for the workplace immediately after completing their studies.'<sup>34</sup> And certainly, in their exit level outcomes statements the Humanities are valiantly asserting that qualifying learners are being taught to 'make connections between university knowledge and skills, in the world of work.'<sup>35</sup>

That being said, whether in the future lecturers in the Humanities concentrate increasingly on narrow vocational training, or continue to reflect – though in suitably transformed mode – on humanity's experiences, human culture in its widest sense must remain their core concern. And they will know from their studies that if you intend to eradicate a human group it is not necessary to go so far as to actually kill it. It will serve as effectively to erase its historical memory, topple its monuments and burn its books. True, the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide confines its definition of genocide in Article II to the physical annihilation of a group.<sup>36</sup> That means that the destruction of a group's collective culture, including its monuments, is not technically a measure by which a genocidal action can be judged. Yet, as Robert Bevan persuasively argues,

*Considering that so many of the disciplines in the Humanities lack obvious utility beyond personal intellectual enrichment, perhaps the most sensible strategy for lecturers would be to follow the advice of Professor Msila and focus on producing Humanities graduates 'who are ready for the workplace immediately after completing their studies.'*

to overlook attacks on a group's cultural patrimony is to fail to understand how it is linked to a people's cultural survival, to the very things that make for group identity.<sup>37</sup> That is why the jubilant overthrow of Rhodes's statue is no small thing. It turns the formerly oppressed into the new oppressors.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sunday Times, 22 March 2015.
- 2 Cape Times, 12 May 2015.
- 3 Chapter 2 of the Constitution of South Africa, Article 31 (1).
- 4 Cape Times, 9 July 2015.
- 5 See the commentary by Nithaya Chetty, Professor of Physics at the University of Pretoria (Cape Times, 23 June 2015).
- 6 Mail & Guardian, 17 to 23 April 2015.
- 7 Mail & Guardian, 27 March to 1 April 2015.
- 8 Mail & Guardian, 17 to 23 April 2015.
- 9 See the 2014-2015 edition of QS World University Rankings and the 2014 edition of Centre for World University Rankings. The 2010 Centre for Higher Education Transformation report differed in that it put Rhodes University in the Red Cluster of top research-intensive universities in place of UKZN.
- 10 Cape Argus, 28 May and 4 June 2015.
- 11 Mail & Guardian, 19 to 25 June 2015.
- 12 Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–1956* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 307.
- 13 Mail & Guardian, 10 to 16 April 2015.
- 14 Mail & Guardian, 27 March to 1 April 2015.
- 15 Cape Times, 12 May 2015.
- 16 Cape Times, 15 May 2015.
- 17 Mail & Guardian, 22 to 28 May 2015.
- 18 Cape Times, 12 May 2015. UCT provisionally suspended Maxwele on 7 May and a two-month suspension order was made final on 14 May. However, on 11 June an independent disciplinary tribunal set aside the suspension on the 'technical grounds' that Maxwele had not been given a hearing within 72 hours as required. UCT issued a new provisional suspension order on 15 June followed by a hearing on 17 June within the required 72 hours that handed down a new two-month suspension order. (See Cape Times, 12 and 18 June 2015.)
- 19 Cape Times, 15 May 2015.
- 20 For a full definition of multicultural education, see *The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 3rd edit. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).
- 21 University of the Witwatersrand Humanities Rules and Syllabuses 2015, p. 83; Humanities Outcomes: Degree of Bachelor of Arts, 6.1 and 6.2.
- 22 It is to be seen to what extent Associate Professor Elewani Ramugondo, who was appointed on 18 June 2015 as special adviser on transformation to the Vice-Chancellor of UCT and who – among other tasks – will head up 'task teams being established to review names of buildings and artworks' (Cape Argus, 16 June 2015), will be sensitive to multicultural principles..
- 23 Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 126.
- 24 Guardian, 6 March 2015.
- 25 Cape Argus, 8 July 2015.
- 26 Sunday Times, 19 April 2015.
- 27 For the legacy of the camps, see Elizabeth van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2013), pp. 309-323.
- 28 Mail & Guardian, 10 to 16 April 2015.
- 29 Cape Times, 23 June 2015.
- 30 Cape Times, 23 June 2015.
- 31 Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 645-646, 649.
- 32 Mail & Guardian, 22 to 28 May 2015.
- 33 See Jared McDonald's perceptive article on the nature and purpose of South African history in the supplement to the Mail & Guardian, 22 to 28 May 2015.
- 34 Mail & Guardian, 17 to 23 April 2015.
- 35 University of the Witwatersrand Humanities Rules and Syllabuses 2015, p. 83; Humanities Outcomes: Degree of Bachelor of Arts, 5.3.
- 36 For the text, see Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff (eds), *Documents of the Laws of War*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press (2005), p. 181.
- 37 Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory*, p. 27.

# Whither the Humanities? Censorship, Academic Freedom and South African Universities



**PETER STEWART** is a graduate of the University of Natal. He lectured in Political Studies at UNP between 1988 and 1996. He was a committee member of Peter Brown's Liberal Democratic Association. His play *The Jacky-Handman Three* was performed at the Hilton Arts Festival 2004.

## Introduction

*The recent removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the University of Cape Town campus, the student protests that preceded it, and related developments at other universities,<sup>1</sup> have caused some observers to question the viability of the humanities at the 'traditionally liberal' South African universities.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the recent events, the most noted student protest on a traditionally liberal university campus was probably the flag burning at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in 1981. Students gathered to protest against the orchestrated nation-wide 'celebration' of the 20th anniversary of the Republic of South Africa, as there was 'nothing to celebrate' given the prevailing social order.*

... at Wits...the most dramatic developments occurred when taunts by right wingers led to the flag-burning incident, so adeptly exploited by the SABC and its talented propogandist-in-chief, Cliff Saunders. Campus conflict escalated, bringing the riot police of Brig. Theuns 'Rooi Rus' Swanepoel onto campus.<sup>2</sup>

Student leaders, including Nusas (National Union of South African Students) President Andrew Borraine, who was not involved in the flag incident, were detained without trial for months.<sup>3</sup>

'[That] Sunday night the regular television newscast was extended to nearly twice its normal length for a special report in which campus activism, flag burning and terrorism were presented as different aspects of a single menacing phenomenon. To illustrate the thesis the television reporter read quotations from past presidents of the student movement now headed by Andrew Borraine.<sup>4</sup>'

In 2015 a student took umbrage at the pride of place given to the imposing statue of Cecil John Rhodes on the University of Cape Town campus to the extent that he flung human faeces at it. Within weeks, pressure from the *Rhodes must fall* movement led to the UCT council voting to remove the offensive statue. Besides the dramatic difference in the immediate results of the 1981 and the 2015 protests – the Republic stood, Rhodes fell – what's the big deal? There have been many protests on South African University campuses and there will be more. Is it the symbolism? The flag was a symbol of the Republic, whereas Rhodes, for all his sins,



imperial attitudes, and pale skin, was the founding father of UCT. Could it be that observers fear that, having disposed of its founding father, the UCT council is in the process of blinding itself to the requirements of a traditional 'liberal education'? One suggestion is that 'transformation' and the attendant culture clashes have been, and will be, destructive of academic freedom in a context in which the African National Congress (ANC) government has shown itself to be authoritarian, defensive, cronyist, prone to corruption, and inclined to regard legislation, including the Constitution, as malleable to its needs, be they real, pragmatic, or imagined.

Other contributors to this issue will discuss 'transformation', the attendant culture clashes, and the autonomy of South African universities. This contribution will, first, locate the present crisis of academic freedom at the traditionally liberal universities in South Africa within the international context, and second, explore South Africa's specific threats to academic freedom (other than the immediate issues surrounding transformation etc.).

The most important of these threats is legislated state censorship in that it imposes formal limits on intellectual freedom and carries the threat of punishment by law.

*However, one might value the humanities, either in theory or with regard to any particular university, an unprecedented international crisis of the humanities is unfolding.*

## The Humanities in the twenty-first century

The association of the humanities with a 'liberal education' and 'academic freedom' is not absolute. It was not the case in 1873 when John Henry Newman published his seminal work on the subject, *The Idea of a University*.

Historically [liberal education] was connected to the seven liberal arts of the Middle Ages: astronomy, geometry, logic, mathematics, music, and rhetoric. Today a liberal education might omit any of these disciplines and substitute others. Whatever the specifics of liberal education might be, there is a broad consensus that it is concerned with the pursuit of truth. But what constitutes 'truth' has varied with time and place. From its origins in the Greek philosophical tradition, which assumes truth is universal, all the way through to the postmodern era, which questions the very possibility of truth, the project of liberal education has gone many challenges and revisions.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, there is a rich tradition of questioning the extent to which the humanities can, or even ought to, provide a 'liberal education'.<sup>6</sup> And it goes without saying that academic freedom issues in modern universities are not confined to the humanities, though it has been suggested that in the absence of flourishing humanities departments, universities cannot be 'academies' as traditionally conceived.<sup>7</sup>

However, one might value the humanities, either in theory or with regard to any particular university, an unprecedented international crisis of the humanities is unfolding. In his forward to Professor John Hughes's *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa*, JM Coetzee posits:

'But South African universities are by no means in a unique position. All over the world, as governments retreat from their traditional duty to foster the common good and reconceive of themselves as mere managers of national economies, universities have been coming under pressure to turn themselves into training schools equipping young people with the skills required by a modern economy. ...

There are two main reasons for my pessimism. The first is that you somewhat underestimate, in my opinion, the ideological force driving the assault on the independence of universities in the (broadly conceived) West. This assault commenced in the 1980s as a reaction to what universities were doing in the 1960s and 1970s, namely, encouraging masses of young people in the view that there was something badly wrong with the way the world was being run and supplying them with the intellectual fodder for a critique of Western civilisation as a whole. ... The fact is that the record of universities, over the past 30 years, in defending themselves against pressure from the state has not been a proud one. ...

*Universities, in turn, have come to value especially those programmes that can generate revenue through alumni donations, external grants, or tuition. Under this new business model, humanities programmes suffer in general and small departments, like classics and philosophy, find themselves perpetually under threat, no matter what their historical significance to higher learning.*

[the] second reason why I fail to share your optimistic faith that the tide may yet be turned. A certain phase in the history of the university, a phase taking its inspiration from the German Romantic revival of humanism, is now, I believe, pretty much at its end. It has come to an end not just because the neoliberal enemies of the university have succeeded in their aims, but because there are too few people left who really believe in the humanities and in the university built on humanistic grounds, with philosophical, historical and philological studies as its pillars.<sup>8</sup>

South Africans might suspect that JM Coetzee, having relocated to Australia and writing the introduction to a book on academic freedom in South Africa, might be a little jaundiced. Here are American academics Gordon Hutner and Feisal G. Mohamed:

‘Public universities have undergone a sea change in the past quarter century, as state funding has been steadily, and at times precipitously, withdrawn. Universities, in turn, have come to value especially those programmes that can generate revenue through alumni donations, external grants, or tuition. Under this new business model, humanities programmes suffer in general and small departments, like classics and philosophy, find themselves perpetually under threat, no matter what their historical significance to higher learning. Indeed several campuses have closed the doors on entire programmes. In 2010, SUNY Albany threatened to end programmes in French, Italian, Russian, classics, and theater, though later retreated from the plan. Two years later, the University of Pittsburgh suspended graduate admissions to German, classics, and religious studies. These are two prominent examples of a national trend stealthily proceeding apace. The crisis is also international: U.K. universities have faced steep funding cuts leading, for example, to the closure of Middlesex University’s philosophy department; and just this year Canada’s University of Alberta suspended admission to 20 humanities programmes.

At present, university bureaucracies don’t have mechanisms for valuing the humanities.<sup>9</sup>

It goes without saying that South African universities, even the traditionally liberal institutions, are more vulnerable than the foreign institutions discussed above. South Africa is a (struggling) emerging economy, the society is in transition, and a narrow African Nationalism is ascendant. South African society and South African

universities also face the prospect of state censorship exceeding the standards of a contemporary constitutional democracy.

## Censorship in South Africa

The persistence of state censorship as a threat to academic freedom is unfortunate. In the early 1980s, when a liberalisation of censorship under Publications Appeal Board Chairman Prof JCW van Rooyen was noted by observers as credible as Professor John Dugard,<sup>10</sup> a number of commentators, including Nadine Gordimer, asserted the radical position:

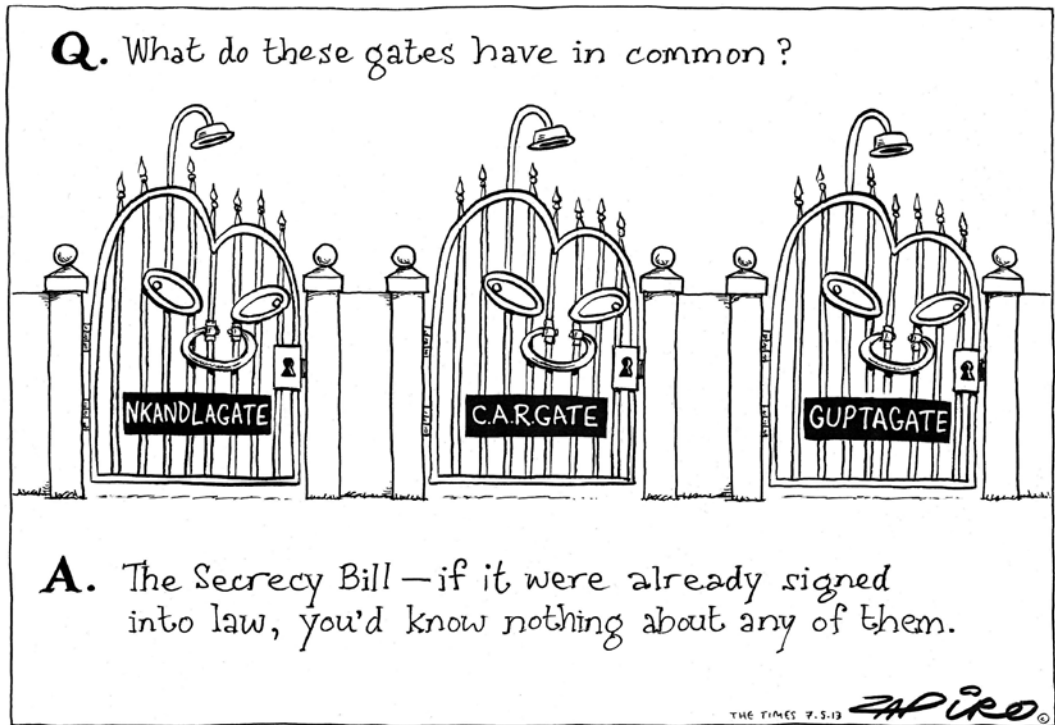
'I am one who has always believed and still believes we shall never be rid of censorship until we are rid of apartheid. Personally, I find it necessary to preface with this blunt statement any comment I have about the effects of censorship, the possible changes in its scope, degree, and methodology. ... Today as always, the invisible banner is behind me, the decisive chalked text on the blackboard, against whose background I say what I have to say. *We shall not be rid of censorship until we are rid of apartheid.* Censorship is the arm of mind-control and as necessary to maintain a racist regime as that other arm of internal repression, the secret police. Over every apparent victory we may gain against the censorship powers hangs the question of whether that victory is in fact contained by apartheid, or can be claimed to erode it from within.<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added)

This begs the question: 'apartheid' has gone, why do we still have censorship? The answer may have more to do with what the radical position reveals about the ANC in the 1980s than about censorship in South Africa. The 'radical' position was a speaking position adopted by academics inclined towards the policies of the ANC. The insistence on censorship being an intrinsic aspect of the 'system' of apartheid corresponded to pragmatic decisions by the ANC to a) allow for the killing of civilians going about their daily business ('soft targets' for propaganda purposes), and b) the intensification of the economic, sport, academic and cultural boycotts. If censorship was easing, if the control of the state was not all encompassing, such illiberal measures might have lost their veneer of apparent morality. For there to be 'no normal', South Africa had to remain abnormal.<sup>12</sup> As many theorists, including the ANC-aligned Harold Wolpe have argued,<sup>13</sup> the theoretical position that the state was a whole (necessitating attack from without) was dependent on a reductionist Leninist view of the State and society in South Africa. Be that as may, in 1988, Nadine Gordimer, after regular articles to the contrary, conceded that censorship had eased substantially.<sup>14</sup>

*If censorship was easing, if the control of the state was not all encompassing, such illiberal measures might have lost their veneer of apparent morality. For there to be 'no normal', South Africa had to remain abnormal.*

Such was the respect that Prof. Van Rooyen earned by the end of his two terms as head of the Publications Appeal Board (1980-1990), that he presided over the task group that drafted the new Film and Publications Act of 1996.<sup>15</sup> This draft was progressive and lucid, and was passed into law with only one change. As summarised by Van Rooyen, the report stated:

'We have reached the conclusion that a new Publications Act is necessary. The present Act intrudes upon the freedom of choice of adults in an unreasonable manner by making bans widely possible; employs vague terminology ('offensive,



indecent, obscene, harmful to morals’); generally regulates the private domain of an adult too strenuously; gives preference to the Christian religion, which is in conflict with the equal protection clause; provides for political intervention by the minister in certain instances; and does not place sufficient emphasis on the freedoms of artistic expression and of scientific research which are guaranteed by the Constitution.

The ideal was to employ language which would be as clear as possible. ... By exempting art, drama, the products of scientific research and documentaries from the Act we would ensure that such works would not, once again, be banned and have to be unbanned by a progressive Appeal Board as in the past ... [my emphasis].

However, art could not save child pornography. The Home Affairs Portfolio Committee was not prepared to exempt art which depicted what was defined as prohibited child sex or nudity at the time. In all other respects the report was accepted by the Portfolio Committee. ... [the] Constitutional Court has, commendably, held in 2003 that the art exemption was applicable in this case as well and that works of art would not be subject to a ban.

There would be no pre-censorship on publications. In the case of films the distributors agreed to pre-classification for practical reasons. The words ‘judged within context’ were dominant in the definition section. The isolated-passage approach would amount to an irregular form of consideration of a publication or film. ... Only hard pornography (XX) would be prohibited for distribution and, in that category, only child pornography would be prohibited for possession. Child pornography was the only material that was also subjected to an automatic ban on importation, production and possession. Other forms of XX and X18

material could be possessed and even be imported. ... Of course, if [Hard pornography (XX)] elements were justified by drama, scientific research or art, they would ... be subjected only to an age restriction and classification; the latter informing viewers of the possible risqué content of the film.<sup>16,17</sup>

Acts of Parliament are not cast in stone, nor should they be. Nonetheless the amendments to the 1996 Act in 1999, 2004 and in 2009 are ham-fisted. Again in the words of Van Rooyen:

‘... the Act runs a real risk of constitutional challenge insofar as the amendments returned to vague language in the definition section and insofar as pre-classification of some publications has been introduced. Although the basic principles protecting drama, and the products of science and art are still included in the Act, it is profoundly sad for me to see how the Act has been amended in the past eleven years.

The Act, which was a product of the freedom-seeking 1994 government, has now been stacked with all kinds of limiting provisions. The worst ones are probably a duty to pre-clear certain materials, the extension of the Act to South Africans who are in a foreign country, the inclusion of the written word when it applies to child pornography and the ban on the possession of such works even if they are justified by art, products of science, drama and documentaries. These provisions are clearly unconstitutional. I am, however, not arguing that the production of films and photographs featuring or showing children should ever be placed beyond the reach of the law. Children under 18 should be and are still protected ...<sup>18,19</sup>

*The Viscera exhibition by Mark Hipper at the Festival was held by the Board and Review Board to have not amounted to child pornography when judged in context. The exhibition – restricted to adults – illustrated the perversity of child sexual abuse.*

Surely the minutiae of the censorship with regard to child pornography have no bearing on academic freedom? The first amendment to the Act (1999) was a direct response to an art exhibition of charcoal portraits of a baby’s face and line studies of nude children by Rhodes University lecturer Mark Hipper in the Rhodes University art gallery. The exhibition had previously traveled to Germany, Poland and France.

The new Films and Publications Act had hardly been put into operation in 1998 when the Grahamstown Arts Festival tested the new Board and controversy followed. The *Viscera* exhibition by Mark Hipper at the Festival was held by the Board and Review Board to have not amounted to child pornography when judged in context. The exhibition – restricted to adults – illustrated the perversity of child sexual abuse. The Deputy Minister of Home Affairs disagreed and her view was reported in the media. The Deputy Minister, in obvious reaction to the Board’s decision, appointed a Task Team.

The Task Team advised that the original section 27 ... was not comprehensive enough to counter child pornography. ... the Task Team argued that the reference to context provided a ‘loophole’ for child pornographers, as happened at the *Viscera* exhibition. Accordingly, the original definition was repealed by Parliament and substituted by what may only be regarded as a too wide and in other words it included areas that were not in need of regulation by law, e.g. art and scientific publications.<sup>20</sup>



*The Act also makes provision for the home affairs minister to appoint the Film and Publications Board and review board members whose task it will be to determine what is an offence under the Act. ...*

The Amendment, 'which passed virtually unnoticed'<sup>21</sup> through Parliament and the National Council of Provinces on March 25 1999, re-introduced features from the (pre-democracy) Publications Act. In addition to the constitutional issues listed by Van Rooyen, above, the Act also interfered with the principles underlying the autonomy of both the Film and Publications Board (FPB) and the appeal body.

It paves the way for complaints to be lodged by the minister of home affairs or the public ... Now, as in the dark days of apartheid, any person who is offended by a work of art can ask the state to censor it. The Act also makes provision for the home affairs minister to appoint the Film and Publications Board and review board members whose task it will be to determine what is an offence under the Act. ... this provision - which takes the appointments away from the president and his advisory panel - together with new requirements that the board members be judged 'fit and proper' and 'of good character', puts greater power in the hands of the minister to set the tone for government censorship policy...<sup>22</sup>

Jumping to the present, the protection of children is again the pretext for extending censorship in South Africa. In this instance, it is the the FPB's new Draft Online Regulation Policy which has been published for public response. This document is badly drafted (despite plagiarising the Australian Law Reform Commission's 2012 report in the section 'Guiding principles for an online content regulation policy').<sup>23</sup>

It is vague, unclear, and contains internal contradictions.

In its present form the Draft proposes a complex process of pre-publications censorship managed by the FPB for what appears to be anything (it is unclear) published by anyone online or digitally. Moreover, it appears that any such publication could be subject to an age restriction if the FPB is of the opinion that it might be perceived to adversely influence children in any way – we're not talking pornography here, the examples given by the FPB include news reports containing violence or reporting on eccentric behaviour.

The draft is unlikely to be accepted in its present form, and if it is, it is unlikely to satisfy the Constitutional Court if challenged. Nonetheless, the Draft, taken together with the amendments to the 1996 Film and Publications Act, confirms that the ANC government has an appetite for censorship. Even more alarmingly, the Draft shows that the FPB, a regulatory body under the Film and Publications Act, is presuming to extend its mandate. As Julie Reid explains:

'According to lawyers the FPB Act (which is the current law) allows the FPB to offer guidelines but not to legislate. The draft policy however does try to legislate because it imposes sanctions, and demands certain behaviour rather than offering mere guidelines. Additionally, the FPB does not have the authority to draft policies which effectively serve to legislate, meaning that the online policy is ultra vires and accordingly invalid: only Parliament can make laws.

[Lawyer Justine] Limpitlaw asked Risiba [Sipho, CEO of the FPB] whether the current document is in fact a regulation or a policy, since both terms are contained in its title. 'It's a policy', Risiba replied. Limpitlaw then pointed out that since it is only a policy, if we were to delete each and every provision within it which a policy cannot legally contain without running into trouble with the law, then only about four provisions within the 19 page document would remain.<sup>24</sup>

The extension of censorship under the Film and Publications Act is not the only form of legislated censorship confronting South Africa. The Protection of State Information Bill, which was referred back to the National Assembly by President Zuma in September 2013 has not been resolved. As it stands, the Bill is

'...vague, irrational, overbroad, opens the path to inconsistency, opens a wide opportunity to classify material that could be politically embarrassing to the government of the day and even to classify that which is false and, ultimately, to withhold facts from the public which it is entitled to have access to.'<sup>25</sup>

This is Nadine Gordimer on the subject, shortly before for her death at the age of 90.

The reintroduction of censorship is unthinkable when you think how people suffered to get rid of censorship in all its forms. ... And the fact that it's called the Protection of State Information Bill is very disquieting. State information belongs to all of us - this is our right under the constitution. This has got nothing to do with betraying the safety of the country.<sup>26</sup>

*'...vague, irrational, overbroad, opens the path to inconsistency, opens a wide opportunity to classify material that could be politically embarrassing to the government of the day and even to classify that which is false and, ultimately, to withhold facts from the public which it is entitled to have access to.'*

Clearly censorship in South Africa has not faded away in the 'new' South Africa and remains a threat to academic freedom. The defense of civil liberties remains an imperative under the African National Congress government.

### Other issues

The brevity with which a few other issues relating to academic freedom in South Africa will be dispatched in no way reflects on their importance.

1. Lack of security on campus and in general, and the consequent erosion of public life and general freedom.<sup>27</sup>
2. Lack of depth of quality in academic staff.<sup>28</sup> South African universities have

*Since the early 1980s, administrative staff have outnumbered academics to an ever greater extent – despite the parallel withdrawal of support at the department level. Nonetheless, this trend has been particularly cruel in South Africa where university bureaucracies can be an unusual combination of spectacularly incompetent, ludicrously arcane, and zealously overreaching.*

outlasted Afrikaner Nationalism, survived the cultural boycott, endure a continuing 'brain drain',<sup>29</sup> and persist in circumstances which have never been optimal for their flourishing. Consequently, the international trend away from the history of ideas towards modules on theory and an identity studies<sup>30</sup> has not been kind. In many instances a post-graduate degree in the humanities has become an exercise in deploying 'theory', where theory is quoting from any three, four, or five articles by 'theorists'. At best these theorists might include McLuhan, Fanon, Kristeva, Althusser, Castells, Lacan, Manovitch, Foucault, Weber, Derrida, etc, and seemingly always poor old Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.<sup>31</sup> Genuine learning and research are consequently marginalized.<sup>32</sup>

3. The bureaucratization of universities is a global trend.<sup>33</sup> Since the early 1980s, administrative staff have outnumbered academics to an ever greater extent – despite the parallel withdrawal of support at the department level. Nonetheless, this trend has been particularly cruel in South Africa where university bureaucracies can be an unusual combination of spectacularly incompetent, ludicrously arcane, and zealously overreaching. Just don't call it Kafkaesque – no lesser person than a dean (since promoted) has taken this for an old-fashioned racial insult. The consequences are destructive.

The above, taken together with the issues around 'transformation' might suggest that it may be time to put the humanities in South Africa, and possibly the universities, out of their misery, if only out of respect for Walter Benjamin. Young people might find more fruitful ways of exploring intellectual life in the twenty-first century. Conversely, the next issue suggests an ongoing need for points of access to modernity.

The capacity of traditional leaders to exercise authority over students and lecturers from rural areas or from a particular background in violation of democratic norms.

### Conclusion

I have concentrated on the humanities at the traditionally liberal universities in South Africa for ease of exposition. Many of the issues I have raised apply to all universities and faculties in South Africa.<sup>34</sup> Yet, for all their faults, and however less than optimal, the traditionally liberal universities in South Africa have a rare history of championing non-racism and academic freedom in this country. And while they



may have had their share of schmucks, charlatans, and refugees from justice<sup>35</sup>, they have, on occasion, provided refuge for genuine scholars and intellectuals. In this context I present the following extract from an email from Vivienne Rowland 'on behalf of VCO News', May 20, 2015:

'Professor Adam Habib, the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Wits University invites all White and Indian academic staff to a meeting to discuss transformation at Wits. This gathering follows meetings which he has already held in the Faculty of Humanities and with African and Coloured staff across the University regarding transformation'.

We're talking about Wits here. Wits, with its particularly proud history of non-racism. Does no one remember the flag burning? Does no one remember the size, significance, or impact of the Free Peoples' Concerts? NUSAS? The 'Quota Bill protests.' Anything? On this note, the first words of the afterward of eminent South African historian Charles van Onselen's most recent book, *Showdown at the Red Lion*:

'Since my liberation, in 1999 ...'<sup>36</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Nowadays, the Humanities tend to be the subjects taught in 'Art' and Social Science faculties. The traditionally liberal universities are Cape Town, Wits, Rhodes, and the University of Natal. Now that UN has incorporated the University of Durban Westville (and become UKZN), its inclusion in the list is debatable.
- 2 National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) pamphlet, 1981-12-00 accessed at [http://psimg.jstor.org/fsi/img/pdf/10.10.5555/al.sff.document.pam19811200.026.009.580\\_final.pdf](http://psimg.jstor.org/fsi/img/pdf/10.10.5555/al.sff.document.pam19811200.026.009.580_final.pdf).
- 3 'Son's jailing racks South African M.P.' JOSEPH LELVELD, The New York Times, June 10, 1981. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/10/world/son-s-jailing-racks-south-african-mp.html>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Jones, S. 'The University a Bibliographic Essay'. Hedgehog Review Fall 00, pg 148. Accessed at <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/University/2.3L.Bibliography.pdf>
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 'JM Coetzee: Universities head for extinction' Mail and Guardian, 01 November 2013. <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-11-01-universities-head-for-extinction>.
- 9 Huther, G and Mohamed, FG. 'The real Humanities crisis is happening at public universities.' <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114616/public-universities-hurt-humanities-crisis>. See also <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/29/war-against-humanities-at-britains-universities>.
- 10 Dugard, J. Human Rights and the South African Order, Chapter Six. (Princeton, 1978)
- 11 Gordimer, N. 'New forms of strategy - no change of heart'. Critical Arts, Vol. 1 No. 2
- 12 Paraphrase of 'sport' boycott slogan: 'no normal sport in an abnormal society'
- 13 Wolpe, H. 'Towards and analysis of the South African State'. International Journal of the Sociology of Law, No. 8. 1980.
- 14 Gordimer, N. 'Censorship and the artist', Staffrider, Vol. 7 No. 2, 1988, Page 15.
- 15 Van Rooyen was not re-appointed chairman of the Publications Appeal Board in 1990. This was as a result of the fall-out from the PAB allowing the screening of Cry Freedom during the state of emergency, causing a conflict between the police and censorship boards.
- 16 Van Rooyen, J.C.W., A South African Censors' Tale. Protea Boekhuis, South Africa, March 15, 2012. Page 145.
- 17 In passing, two observations: The act would be clearer if it explicitly stated that the 'art' exemption must logically include 'bad' etc. This might be a matter for the constitutional Court. Second, 'religion' remains a tricky issue. For instance, Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses can only be found at University Libraries.
- 18 Van Rooyen, op cit. Page 149.
- 19 It bears emphasizing that the constitutional court has re-instated the exclusion of art etc from child pornography (De Reuck v Director of Public Prosecution CCT 5/03). Moreover, this reading has been endorsed by the Prof K Govender Appeal Body in the the matter of 'Of Good Report', 2013.
- 20 Van Rooyen, op cit. Page 151.
- 21 Back to the dark days of state Mail and Guardian, 16 April 1999. <http://mg.co.za/article/1999-04-16-back-to-the-dark-days-of-state>
- 22 Ibid. (An interview with Laura Polecut of The Freedom of Expression Institute).
- 23 Reid, J. 'Africa's worst new Internet Censorship Law: Everything you don't want to know - but need to.' Daily Maverick, 10 June 2015. <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-06-10-africas-worst-new-internet-censorship-law-everything-you-dont-want-to-know-but-need-to/>
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Van Rooyen, J.C.W 'Info bill concessions not enough says lawyer'. The Times 30 June 2011. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2011/06/30/info-bill-concessions-not-enough-lawyer>
- 26 'In one of her last interviews Nadine Gordimer lets loose at the secrecy bill'. The Times, 14 July, 2014. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2014/07/14/in-one-of-her-last-interviews-nadine-gordimer-lets-loose-at-the-secrecy-bill>
- 27 Hobbes, T. The Leviathan.
- 28 This is a recurring theme in RW Johnson's The critical case of South Africa and the tragedy at the UKZN (Tafelberg Short, 2012).
- 29 Both through emigration and salary competition.
- 30 This trend has been well documented in the wake of Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind (1987)
- 31 Benjamin had an unhappy experience of Universities. Moreover, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', is atypical of Benjamin's work in that it is the most orthodoxly Marxist. In some respects, it is best read as a coded love letter to Asja Lacia, the pretty Marxist who drove a one-way street through his heart.
- 32 The current post-graduate proposal process tend to require a student to decide on their theoretical approach before conducting a study. Such studies consequently predispose to what Michel Foucault has called the 'descending-type analysis', which is essentially an exercise in rhetoric.
- 33 'The corridors of our universities are stalked by soft-footed technocrats who draw down six-figure salaries in exchange for implementing 'right-sizing' exercises and 'internationalisation programmes', while harried academics are forced to deal with a wall of bureaucracy that is being constructed, form-by-form, between them and their students. Research is centrally mandated and programmatic; time - once the academic's greatest resource - must be accounted for in meticulous detail; and everywhere, and at all times, the onus is on academics to 'monetise' their activities, to establish financial values for their 'outputs,' and to justify their existence according to the remorseless and nightmarish logic of the markets.' Preston, J. The war against humanities at britains universities.
34. Merely for having survived the mad science of the Mbeki years (and the associated pressures), I owe anyone associated with science and medicine an explicit apology for having deployed this rhetorical device.
35. For example, James Kilgore.
36. Van Onselen, a Wits Professor of international repute, joined the University of Pretoria in 1999 following a 'transformation'-related dispute at Wits. For more background: <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/to-wit-a-culture-clash/92445.article> taken together with <http://www.up.ac.za/centre-for-the-advancement-of-scholarship/article/1929472/prof-charles-van-onselen>

# A Tale of Two Disciplines: Reflections on the State of the Humanities and the Sciences at Universities

*A university training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society... It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them and a force in urging them.'*

*John Henry Newman - The Idea of a University*



**KAMEEL PREMHIID** is a Research Fellow at the Helen Suzman Foundation. He holds a BA and LLB from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, and recently completed an MSc in Education (Higher Education) at the University of Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. Kameel has recently returned to Johannesburg and hopes to pursue a career at the Bar

## Introduction

Although a funding crisis in South African higher education may seem like a distant challenge, current problems experienced by the sector in the United Kingdom offer a valuable opportunity for policy-makers back home. Two years, more recently reading for a Master's degree in Higher Education Policy, have offered me a ringside seat to watch this 'battle' unfold. And while one may be exasperated by the overuse of 'war' words – the 'war' on waste, the 'battle' for the soul of the party, the 'fight' against corruption, *ad infinitum* – it is peculiar that these phrases have come to describe the mainstream debate in academia. Managers and the government resemble anything war-like tends to be a matter of opinion. But, that those engaged in this debate see it in as stark terms as they do, stresses the need for South African decision-takers to be even more careful. The British example is a lesson in unintended consequences; and, so how South Africa meets its developmental challenges, with universities playing a central role in that process, means that we should be making the best decisions we can now to avoid these problems worsening in the future. Internecine warfare engulfing our universities, places where our "ideals of democratic liberty are enshrined",<sup>1</sup> is something that we should do everything to avoid.

## The Disfiguring of Higher Education

The resignation of Dame Marina Warner of her professorship at the University of Essex, in protest at what she describes at length as the 'disfiguring of higher education',<sup>2</sup> is a case in point. Warner, a recent recipient of the Holberg Prize in recognition of her scholarship, has written that "(her) department was freighted to breaking point with imperious and ill-conceived demands from much higher up in the food chain – from people who don't teach or research at all, or if they ever did, think humanities departments work like science departments."<sup>3</sup>

As *The Guardian* recently noted, "Warner has found herself, rather reluctantly, at the forefront of the struggle to defend the humanities against assaults from within and without the universities."<sup>4</sup> In her visceral critique of Essex,<sup>5</sup> Warner took aim at what

she sees as the privatisation of higher education. The march towards corporatism is evidenced by the “sprawling management class”<sup>6</sup> specifically employed to force these changes – funding cuts, rationalisation exercises, performance management regimes, and so on. Although this ‘business-speak’ may seem out of place in the genteel world of academia, this kind of cross-over is now the norm. The humanities, The Guardian argues, are particularly susceptible to this unfair treatment because “(its) products are necessarily less tangible and effable than their science and engineering peers (and less readily yoked to the needs of the corporate world)...”<sup>7</sup>

Reference is often made to how universities operated in the past. So the argument goes, universities were better funded, more generous to students, and more conducive to letting the humanities flourish. This may be true. However, nostalgic recollections of the past can obscure a true appreciation of what actually was. In particular, universities were by-and-large elitist (catering to a select few), compounding rather than alleviating class difference (and poverty). By catering to a smaller number of students, universities may have seemed better funded because the ratios were disproportionately in favour of the select few. So too, universities may have been given more money than they deserved: the asymmetry of power between elites and the masses skewed the distribution of resources. As power shifted, however, with the extension of the franchise and the recognition of rights of previously oppressed groups, the ability of elites to be entirely self-serving could no longer be sustained. Accordingly, universities faced a funding crisis in the context of broader societal change – and new demands for funding. The need to address underdevelopment, for example, in previously all-black communities after the fall of Apartheid is an appropriate example. It is ironic, then, that universities of yesteryear would be looked to as the best-practice model when they were arguably at their most unequal.

*This influence also acts as an important link to the market: universities have a responsibility to teach but also make their students employable.*

Universities, then, have to do more with less and, increasingly, have to become self-sufficient. And even though innovative funding solutions may be more popular – such as joint business ventures between universities and businesses, particularly in the area of research and development – they, too, are open to fair criticism. Given the influence their money buys them, businesses can – and do – determine research agendas. Universities, then, face the temptation of focusing on cash-cows: research for private use (and profit) that brings in a lot of money. These raise significant questions about universities’ functional independence. Governance decisions can be prejudiced by the need to attract said funding and institutional biases can form around those commercial decisions. Cross-subsidisation may be a motive but the reality is that much of the universities’ ‘profit’ is absorbed by snowballing bureaucracies. But, considering the general squeeze on tertiary funding, these are also useful. Much science research, especially, is expensive and requires high start-up costs: things universities can hardly afford but which they benefit from. This influence also acts as an important link to the market: universities have a responsibility to teach but also make their students employable.

Financial pressures, then, are also of concern in the funding of students. As universities receive less, additional personal responsibility is passed onto learners themselves. In an unequal society like South Africa, that is particularly harmful where access to capital – let alone disposable income on education spending – is a rarity for

the many. Although the state has mechanisms to address these funding gaps – in recognition of how important tertiary education is to our transformational project – stories of its mismanagement are horrifying.<sup>8</sup> Further, skewed understandings of the relative value of STEM subjects<sup>9</sup> as opposed to the humanities in a country with an acute skills shortage like ours means that funding from various sources is more readily available for the sciences as opposed to other disciplines. Ironically, however, the beneficiaries of this support is dwarfed by the numbers of students who are matriculants of a poor secondary education system and do not have the critical skills to undertake STEM study and so flood humanities classrooms. This situation, despite what our needs may be, is condoned by both university managers and government departments alike: more bodies in chairs mean higher government subsidies and better transformation statistics under the government’s narrow bean-counting interpretation of transformation.

### The Problem of the Humanities

The humanities especially suffers in this transactional relationship, because the knowledge they produce is not as commercially viable and garners less market interest. Thus, universities can – and do – slant towards the sciences providing then

*The disjunction between academics who may want to teach for the pursuit of knowledge and students who want to do a bare minimum – as encouraged by university managers who seem to treat students as cattle to be processed rather than scholars in training – harms humanities particularly harshly.*

with greater institutional support: more fellowships, bigger research grants, and so on. And, given the lower investment needed to run humanities classrooms, lecturers are made to teach high class numbers. Humanities students’ fees cross-subsidise other expenses within the university. They also suffer because mechanisms of management are unsuited to what the humanities subjects do. Outputs, results, and impacts are easier to discern as a result of experiments rather than an extended period of scholarship in a niche area of study. This situation is further exacerbated by students who bear the personal cost of their education seeking to gain skills that make them employable as opposed to knowledgeable. In the market place

economy, spending as little time in university to acquire skills that should gain a graduate meaningful employment to meet their – and often their families’ – debts is of primary concern. The disjunction between academics who may want to teach for the pursuit of knowledge and students who want to do a bare minimum – as encouraged by university managers who seem to treat students as cattle to be processed rather than scholars in training – harms humanities particularly harshly.

This is particularly relevant where academics are facing a ‘casualisation’ of their profession. Lecturers no longer enjoy tenure, job security, or good pay. Rather, many lecturers are forced into contract work (sometimes even being paid by the hour) with exploitative conditions attached to continued and/or permanent employment. Most notably, conditional employment (either getting a job to begin with or keeping it thereafter) is dependent on an academic’s ability to attract (large) funding grants or deliver ‘outcomes’. The critique that ‘business speak’ and ‘business models’ of running universities is inappropriate and unhelpful has some merit: universities are, categorically, not businesses – they are not about making a profit. As such, many of the practices imported into university management may yield unhelpful results. While a degree of uncertainty may, theoretically, be useful to act as an incentive to pressurise lecturers into working ‘harder’, the reality is that this low morale environment acts as a disincentive for many scholars to join, or remain in,

academia. This hollowing out of the profession means that critical thinkers move into other industries which means, while they may be making a high impact, their potential contribution toward knowledge generation is squandered. Unlike business strategies, success cannot be measured in as tangible a way: an increase in market share is easier to discern than a novel idea of conceptualising gender relations in the ancient world. While scientists may be able to more readily adapt to this commercial environment, the humanities are particularly vulnerable: even best seller books have limited consumption beyond the field.

Although this may point to a problem of how our academics achieve ‘impact’ – another contested buzzword that has entered the academic management lexicon – there is a rational basis to try and bring greater accountability and professional discipline into academia. The problem, as Nicholas Kristof, writing in the *New York Times*, put it, “Some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university professors, but most of them just don’t matter in today’s great debates.”<sup>10</sup> The reason for this is twofold: on the one hand, the kinds of academic research academics undertake are judged to be irrelevant/esoteric/arcane; and, on the other, they do not see the value in engaging in societal issues, preferring the rigours of academia rather than the laxity of social commentary. Scientists may be less prone to this assault: science, after all, is similar whether conducted in a university or commercial research laboratory. And, for professional scientists, high academic qualifications and interest are crucial to their career advancement. Humanities students and academics don’t have it that easy because what they do is not as readily quantifiable. But, it would be a mistake to dismiss them – even seemingly irrelevant research has certain benefits.

*The ruling elite have humanities degrees because they can do critical thinking, they can test premises, they can think outside the box, they can problem-solve, they can communicate, they don't have linear, one-solution models with which to approach the world. You won't solve the problems of religious fundamentalism with a science experiment.'*

Sarah Churchwell, a prominent public intellectual and professor of American literature at the University of East Anglia, argues that “there’s something quite sinister”<sup>11</sup> about the treatment being meted out to the humanities. “Virtually every cabinet minister has a humanities degree...they get their leadership positions after studying the humanities and then they tell us what we need is a nation of technocrats. The ruling elite have humanities degrees because they can do critical thinking, they can test premises, they can think outside the box, they can problem-solve, they can communicate, they don’t have linear, one-solution models with which to approach the world. You won’t solve the problems of religious fundamentalism with a science experiment.”<sup>12</sup>

Churchwell’s reproach of the discourse within academia also deserves mentioning. She warns against a “two cultures mentality” where the sciences and humanities square off against each other to scarp for whatever is doled out from the cabinet table. Rather, she says that they’re “on the same side ... (it’s) a divide and conquer strategy ... They are creating a zero-sum game.” And Churchwell also argues the caricature of academics – dinosaurs from another era who publish nothing after being appointed and sit around in stuffy common rooms, dressed in tweed and drinking too much port – is specious. Apart from the natural incentive to keep working and producing – the stuff that enhances academics’ reputation, their teaching curriculum, and the

chance to win financially lucrative prizes as Warner has recently done – academics have their own professional identity which they seek to protect. The way they do so is by working. While there may be “some dead wood”<sup>13</sup> the fanciful notions of underperforming dons being the norm is inaccurate. Professionalisation, then, is good, but what needs to be guarded against is a misapplication of distinguishable cultures and practices.

## The Research Excellence Framework

A useful case to understand these competing, though sometimes complimentary, ideas is the United Kingdom’s REF exercise. The REF (or Research Excellence Framework) is:

“an exercise that assesses the quality of academic research ... The results determine how much research funding (universities) are granted ... and they’re used to determine institutions’ rankings in league tables. A poor performance can close a department, while a top rating means steady funding ... Every six years, institutions are asked to submit examples of their best research to be assessed by a team of academics and industry experts. Each subject area is awarded up to four stars. The process is designed to ensure that public money is spent effectively ... only subject areas that were awarded three and four stars secured research funding.”<sup>14</sup>

*Apart from the vagueness and ambiguity of the measures used, she (as do many others) also takes issue with how this universalist approach is being forced onto diverse disciplines that have very little in common with each other – ranging from content, skills biases, cultures, etc.*

Unsurprisingly, “the methodology used to assess university research has changed, provoking controversy among academics. The big difference is that research is now judged partly on the impact it has had outside of academia – this accounts for 20% of the overall score. By giving a weighting to impact, the government hopes to reward universities that engage with business and civil society. But academics have complained that this demand adds an extra layer of bureaucracy.”<sup>15</sup>

Warner has savaged the REF process as a meaningless exercise.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the vagueness and ambiguity of the measures used, she (as do many others) also takes

issue with how this universalist approach is being forced onto diverse disciplines that have very little in common with each other – ranging from content, skills biases, cultures, etc. One has some sympathy for Warner, who also points out that these tick-box exercises may look good on paper and in annual financial statements, they detract from teaching and research. Academics are now meant to be self-promoters, fundraisers, publicity hacks too. But, one can also see why this kind of exercise is useful: by identifying and applying rigorous standards of measurement across the board, a mechanism of evaluating competing claims (for funding, impact, etc) becomes possible. Additionally, specified standards of conduct mean that performance assessments are predictable and can be rationalised. Very importantly, they also create goals that academics and departments can work towards. The ever-present danger, however, is that form is put ahead of substance: that work is done to meet the REF, rather than the REF being used as a means to measure the quality of work. The humanities disciplines are most likely to see these shifts occur as their vulnerability within the university organism (as against the sciences), and the difficulty to apply these types of measures to them, can jeopardise their academic focus in order to fight their corner in funding rounds.

This dislocation in identity also plays itself out in other ways. The ‘teaching vs. research’ debate is a good example: academics see their role as being more research-centric but university managers see them as primarily being teachers; consuming resources vs. bringing them in. The underlying tension this speaks to is how universities manage their knowledge distribution and knowledge generation roles. What this argument often muddies, however, is the need for both elements to be accommodated within the university model: teaching is needed to bring in income to sustain research, and research is pointless if it cannot be communicated through teaching. Biases in the form of research and teaching intensive universities are not impossible but, in the current ‘mixed’ model which prevails, both elements need to be present. The warning here, then, is that a one-size-fits all approach needs to be guarded against – and this, possibly, even extends to how humanities subjects are judged against scientific ones.

## Conclusion

Market needs influencing university research trajectories demonstrate the kind of accommodation needed: universities should maintain their academic character pursuing knowledge but should equally be subjected to the positive aspects of market forces. Universities may be perceived as indicators of society’s progress and, indeed, have a role to play in achieving that progress but when genuine attempts are made to transform them such efforts are treated with suspicion.

This is not to discredit Warner’s critiques. Many of them are justified. But universities have enjoyed a high degree of isolation – and while they may have given rise to those who have implemented wider societal change, they may have not always kept up with it themselves. Undoubtedly some reforms which are implemented vary between being banal if not stupid (such as the increasing ‘management consulting’ culture that has taken hold within universities) whereas others could be construed as being more sinister (such as reorganisation of university departments to force out critics and clamp down on academic freedom). It is not always clear where these decisions fall on the spectrum, or whether the introduction of greater means of accountability in university departments could qualify for this purpose, but an uncompromising attitude taken by either administrators, on the one hand, or academics, on the other, is not conducive to maximising universities’ power.

In this war of words, where the stakes are not that high, it would be wise to recall Alexander Herzen’s acute observation that ‘the point is to open men’s eyes, not to tear them out.’<sup>17</sup>

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### FOOTNOTES

BA, LLB (UKZN), MSc candidate (Oxon), Research Fellow of the Helen Suzman Foundation.

1 Warner, M. 2015. ‘Learning My Lesson: Marina Warner on the Disfiguring of Higher Education’. London Review of Books.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Preston, A. 2015. ‘The War Against Humanities at Britain’s Universities’. The Guardian.

5 Note 1 above.

6 Note 4 above.

7 Note 4 above.

8 See, for example, a cross-section of statements by the DA Shadow Minister of Education, Dr Belinda Bozzoli, MP: <http://www.da.org.za/tag/belinda-bozzoli/>.

9 STEM subjects: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

10 Kristoff, N. 2014. ‘Professors, We Need You!’ New York Times.

11 Note 4 above.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ratcliffe, R. 2014. ‘REF 2014: Why is it such a Big Deal?’ The Guardian.

15 Ibid.

16 Note 4 above.

17 Berlin, I. 1978. *Russian Thinkers*.

# The Challenges of Undergraduate Education: Looking Back and Ahead<sup>1</sup>



**ELIZABETH DE KADT** has spent her academic career at UKZN and at UJ, with the final ten years in executive management, in an academic development portfolio. Post retirement she continues as a consultant at the University of Johannesburg, in a variety of developmental projects relating to staff, students and curricula.

## Introduction

*The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training of 2013 presents the following major challenge to South African universities: 'Participation rates are expected to increase from the current 17.3 per cent to 25 per cent – that is, from just over 937 000 students in 2011 to about 1.6 million enrolments in 2030. As participation increases, universities must simultaneously focus their attention on improving student performance. Improving student access, success and throughput rates is a very serious challenge for the university sector and must become a priority focus for national policy and for the institutions themselves, in particular improving access and success for those groups whose race, gender or disability status had previously disadvantaged them' (DHET 2013a: xiv). The White Paper is but one of four major policy documents which in recent years have thematised the envisaged role of Higher Education in South Africa's developing democracy, together with the consequences in terms of student participation and success. Common to all is the expectation that far more students must both enter and benefit from higher education.'*<sup>2</sup>

This challenge for the coming two decades should be seen against the background of developments during the past two decades. Since 1994 student enrolments have nearly doubled, from a headcount of 495 396 in 1994, to 953 373 in 2012 (CHE 2014: 3 Fig 1). This has been accompanied by a marked shift in the demographics of enrolments. As the White Paper noted: 'Redress policies driving improved access for blacks and women have clearly worked. In 1994, 55 per cent of students at public universities were black (African, coloured and Indian), 43 per cent were African, and 55 per cent were male. By 2011 these figures were 80 per cent black, 68 per cent African and 42 per cent male' (DHET 2013a: 28). Of course this progress does not yet represent demographic equity in student intake, nor does it represent the levels of participation in higher education required in a developing country.

These changes were achieved in an environment of constantly tightening state funding, which has not kept up to date with growing student intake. The Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities points out that 'state funding of higher education (in real terms) has been declining over the years. Between 2001 and 2010, state funding per full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolled students fell by 1.1% annually, in real terms' (DHET 2013b: 7). South African Higher Education has been expected to do more with less; and has indeed



been doing more with less – to the extent that the Higher Education system is presently under severe strain, staff / student ratios have been severely impacted, and considerable infrastructural backlogs are to be found, not only in the historically disadvantaged universities. At the same time, however, the budget for NSFAS student funding has grown massively, although student unrest during each enrolment period points to the continued inadequacy of these funds.<sup>3</sup>

Within this context, moreover, the Ministerial Report points to ‘unacceptably high levels of inefficiency in the system’ (DHET 2013b: 7), by which are specifically meant ‘low levels of production of graduates at undergraduate level, and more worryingly low levels of production of graduates at postgraduate level’ (ibid: 16) – in short, higher education is not delivering the skills needed for development. As Fisher and Scott concluded in 2011, South African Higher Education is and has remained a ‘low-participation, high-attrition’ system (Fisher and Scott 2011: 1). Detailed cohort analyses, beginning with the 2000 cohort, have

shown that in the contact institutions only around 25% of the intake graduate in regulation time; and only around 48% graduate within five years. (In distance education graduation figures are considerably lower.) Overall, it is estimated that around 55% of the intake will never graduate (CHE 2013: 15). (The challenge of dropout, of course, is by no means unique to South African Higher Education; it is a challenge with which universities world-wide have been confronted since the massification of higher education commenced around 50 years ago.)

*(The challenge of dropout, of course, is by no means unique to South African Higher Education; it is a challenge with which universities world-wide have been confronted since the massification of higher education commenced around 50 years ago.)*

Growth at postgraduate level has been rather more moderate: in 2012 around 150 000 students were registered, with well over half of these studying for Post Graduate up to Honours. In 2007, with 10 052 doctoral enrolments, 1274 doctorates were awarded; in 2012, 1878 awards were made against 13 964 enrolments (CHE 2014: 20-21, Figs 28 and 30). As the National Development Plan noted: with current production of PhD graduates standing at just 28 per million per year, the target has to be over 100 PhD graduates per million per year (NPC 2012: 319).

The analysis of performance indicators for the period 2000-2010 in the Report of the Ministerial Committee confirms that, while there have been improvements, most of the set performance indicators have not been met (DHET 2013b: 17-19). Hence the conclusion that the system remains a very inefficient one – in spite of what staff have experienced as considerably increased workloads over the past decade.

The remainder of this paper will focus on the challenges, past and future, associated with accommodating growing undergraduate numbers and seeking to enhance their throughput. While doctoral graduates are needed to drive innovation, their numbers will always remain more limited, even with the expansion proposed by the White Paper. The main growth in numbers will, of necessity, be at undergraduate level, and the White Paper states unequivocally that ‘all universities in South Africa must offer high-quality undergraduate education’ (DHET 2013a: 30).

## Challenges: Past and Future

To date, increases in numbers have been able to be accommodated by the sector, with – over the six years from 2007-2012 – moderate growth and a levelling

off at the University of Technologies and the comprehensive universities, higher growth at the traditional universities (which appears to be continuing), and total growth of around 40% at Unisa (CHE 2014: 33, Fig 45; see also 36-38, Figs 51-55). By 2012, there were 387 133 students in distance education as against 566 239 in contact education – a ratio of approximately 40% / 60% (CHE 2014: 33 Fig 45). However, at the growth rate specified by DOHET, which implies an average growth rate of 3.05% per annum through till 2030,<sup>4</sup> such accommodation will no longer be possible without considerable new investment in staffing and infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> This issue will be addressed again towards the end of this paper.

*Considerable effort, and funding, has since been spent on initiatives to improve both retention rates and graduate output. While this is certainly still work in progress, a good example of the progress that has been made are the First Year Experience programmes now in place at most universities.*

We turn now to the second matter highlighted by the White Paper, the inefficiency of the system, in terms of poor graduate output. This topic was first taken up by academic development initiatives which emerged during the gradual opening of certain historically white universities to black students three decades ago. These initiatives gradually expanded into extended curricula programmes at most universities which, on the one hand, have been accommodating entrants who do not satisfy the normal entrance requirements while, on the other, have succeeded in placing the issue of teaching and learning on university agendas.

Considerable effort, and funding, has since been spent on initiatives to improve both retention rates and graduate output. While this is certainly still work in progress, a good example of the progress that has been made are the First Year Experience programmes now in place at most universities. Yet it is disturbing that in spite of considerable efforts, student success rates, and specifically qualification completion rates, have barely shifted.

## Teaching and Learning

Over the past decade there has been an expanding awareness of teaching and learning as core university function, and of the need to professionalize university teaching, with the matter increasingly being placed on agendas, and the efforts of individual universities being supported by the DHET and CHE. An initial step was the inclusion of foundational provision grants in DHET's earmarked funding awards; subsequently Teaching Development Grants were included. National Teaching Awards were introduced by Heltasa and DHET in partnership, and most institutions now offer a variety of institutional teaching awards. Importantly, the second round of institutional quality audits was conceptualised as the Quality Enhancement Project, with the goal of 'producing an increased number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable' (Grayson 2013), not least by means of collaborative approaches. Grants for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research have been made by both the NRF and the HEQC. The Teaching Development Grants were recently complemented by the competitive collaborative Teaching Development grants which are now funding (for instance) the national Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowships programme and the South African National Resource Centre for The First year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), both based at the University of Johannesburg. A Teaching and Learning Centre or Office has been established at all institutions.

## Student Dropouts

These developments have also achieved a broader awareness of the actual graduate output of higher education, together with growing agreement that this is unacceptable, and that, while many entrants may be ‘underprepared’, the quality of curriculum and teaching are also implicated in this outcome. The important cohort analysis studies by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) first demonstrated conclusively actual completion rates over five years, as well as the lack of equity in outcomes. Student ‘dropout’ (especially during first year) was identified as a core challenge to the system. Out of this work emerged the more recent CHE publication, A Proposal for Under Graduate curriculum reform, which conceptualised student dropout as follows: ‘Success and failure in Higher Education is the result of a complex interplay of factors. These factors are both internal, that is, intrinsic to the higher education system, and external, in relation to social, cultural and material circumstances. It is beyond dispute that individuals who are socially and economically disadvantaged are less likely to gain access to and successfully complete any form of higher education’ (CHE 2013: 54-55). The report concluded that ‘modifying the existing undergraduate curriculum structure is an essential condition for substantial improvement of graduate output and outcomes’ and proposed ‘a flexible curriculum structure for South Africa’s core undergraduate qualifications – based on extending their formal time by a year as the norm – designed to address effectiveness, efficiency, quality and responsiveness to diversity across the higher education sector’ (ibid: 16) After system-wide consultation, recommendations for pilot implementation of these proposals have been forwarded to the DHET for the Minister’s consideration.

*It is beyond dispute that individuals who are socially and economically disadvantaged are less likely to gain access to and successfully complete any form of higher education’ (CHE 2013: 54-55).*

## Structural Challenges

Yet, at the same time of these promising developments, structural challenges within the universities remain, and not least the tension between research and teaching and learning, which is underpinned by longstanding values and policy. These include the widespread prioritization of research output in applications for promotion; the role of the research output component as contributing to the university block grant through publication subsidies (and in turn to the research cost centre of the author); the rapidly growing focus on university rankings, where teaching and learning tends to play a reduced role in much sought after institutional prestige. It will be of considerable interest to see how current calls for differentiation within the sector (eg CHE 2013a: 29-30) play out.

## Inadequate Funding

While inadequate responses to the articulation gap between school and higher education are strongly implicated, at the same time, lack of adequate funding remains a core reason for student dropout. The increased student intake envisaged by the White Paper will of necessity involve indigent students who are dependent on public funding. Without a changed approach, the NSFAS budget (even though rapidly escalating) is unlikely to be able to satisfy requirements, with additional factors also impacting: students at FET/TVET Colleges now also compete for NSFAS funding allocations from the same pool; and, contrary to the initial approach of allocating NSFAS loans which, when repaid, would again return to the NSFAS kitty, an increasing quantity of this funding is now granted as bursaries, and does not have to

be paid back.<sup>6</sup> All of this contributes further to the depletion of the NSFAS funding pool, at a time of rapidly growing demand. Many institutions have complemented their NSFAS allocation from own funds; and the institutional NSFAS allocation may be spread ‘thinly’ among a greater number of students, leading to a reduction in individual grants: as a result students may be able to register, but cannot afford accommodation, do not have enough food, cannot purchase study materials and so on. These factors undoubtedly contribute to the heavy dropout rates. In addition, the ‘missing middle’ – those whose family income is low, but still above the NSFAS threshold – do not qualify for such funding and hence this societal group is largely excluded from higher education.

Looking ahead, teaching and learning is now on institutional agendas, and system-wide developmental strategies are increasingly emerging. But undoubtedly funding issues will remain core: the funding of students; and the funding of the universities themselves.

*Current institutions working with traditional models of context learning are more or less at capacity. There will of necessity be impact on staffing, teaching venues, residences, systems, with substantial financial consequences.*

While the National Development Plan calls for a ‘revision of the funding framework for universities (which) should be based on the needs of a differentiated system, with adequate funding for teaching and research alike’ (NPC 2012: 83), the White Paper does not go into detail on this topic. Section 4.6, ‘Making university education affordable’, addresses NSFAS, escalating student fees, the desirability of fee-free education for the poor, and student funding which includes reasonable living costs and other study-related expenses. Strategies to make these funds

available are to include the role of partnerships in student funding initiatives; the principle of cost recovery of loans from students who have benefited from state funding; and the ‘possibilities of developing formal graduate service programmes, which link community or state service to the repayment of loans’ (DHET 2013a: 37). However, this section is silent, for instance, as to the infrastructural consequences of such a massively increased intake. Current institutions working with traditional models of context learning are more or less at capacity. There will of necessity be impact on staffing, teaching venues, residences, systems, with substantial financial consequences. In short, it is essential that the decrease in pro capita funding in real terms over the past decade be reversed.<sup>7</sup>

As regards the universities themselves, ‘more of the same’ will not produce the outcome envisaged by the Minister. At the same time, South African higher education has in the past repeatedly experienced the unintended consequences of policy decisions (CHE 2004: 36). Similarly, the danger of a quality collapse through inexorably growing pressure on the system should not be underestimated.

## Recommendations

Three possibilities would seem to offer some scope.<sup>8</sup> In the first place, the affordances of the new educational technologies must be explored, from two perspectives. Firstly, increasing the distance delivery component in the system (which is funded at 50% in the block grant) would allow for increased numbers at lesser financial impact on the Department – and hopefully on the universities. Increasingly, distance education draws on educational technologies, and the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) could also be explored. However, throughput rates for this mode of

delivery are known to be much lower than for contact mode (and for South Africa's 'underprepared' students, this may be exponentially the case); and the costs and staffing implications of introducing educational technologies on a massive scale should not be underestimated. The same caveats apply to the possible introduction of blended learning components within contact programmes, which might decrease the required classroom time by one half and allow for additional student registrations. Any thoughts of system-wide implementation must certainly be prefaced by pilot implementation and careful evaluation, both of success rates and of actual costs.

In the second place, private higher education institutions could be allocated a greater role. While statistics are not very reliable, it is assumed that at present 90 000 – 100 000 students are registered in private institutions, for diplomas and degrees. However, a substantial increase in this category of intake could probably only be achieved through the extension of NSFAS funding to private higher education. In addition quality considerations would need to be carefully addressed.

Finally, an improvement in graduate output with a concomitant reduction in the number of years that the majority of students spend in undergraduate education, would allow more students to be accommodated. In this regard the recent *CHE Proposal for the Restructuring of Undergraduate Education* (complemented by the range of teaching and learning initiatives currently underway across the sector) would seem to have considerable merit, and it is to be hoped that the Minister approves this for sector-wide pilot implementation. As the financial analysis in the *Proposal* concludes, 'implementing the new structure would be financially viable and would constitute the most resource-efficient way of achieving substantial undergraduate growth' (CHE 2013: 23).

Clearly, the project of an equitable and effective higher education will require collaboration and partnerships between all stakeholders; and the challenge of a higher participation rate, together with a higher graduate output, will need to be addressed from multiple perspectives. Each input, too, will have potential knock-on effects which will require careful monitoring and regular adjustment of strategy and policy. A more realistic funding package alone will not be a solution. However, expecting the sector to address this challenge in the absence of such funding will in all likelihood result in a decline of quality and output which may prove irreversible. And as argued by the National Development Plan, what South Africa urgently needs is a vibrant and sustainable higher education sector which can drive the knowledge society and economy and build citizenship.

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#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 The inputs into this paper by Professor Charles Simkins of the Helen Suzman Foundation, and Mr Jaco van Schoor, CFO at the University of Johannesburg, are gratefully acknowledged.
- 2 The other three key documents are: The National Development Plan 2030 (NPC 2012); A Proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: the case for a flexible curriculum structure. Discussion document (CHE 2013); Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of on the Funding of Universities (DHET 2013b).
- 3 Total NSFAS funding rose from R1 876 311 103 in 2007 to R7 897 127 057 in 2012 (CHE 2014: 93 Fig 152).
- 4 Professor Charles Simkins, personal communication.
- 5 The three new universities will be unlikely to register substantial numbers of students, and will therefore not impact significantly on the numbers required.
- 6 In 2012, 53% of funds awarded by NSFAS took the form of bursaries. (Professor Charles Simkins, personal communication)
- 7 The Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of Funding of Universities (2013) does indeed recommend increased funding for Higher Education. The following comparative figures are pertinent: 'In 2011, South Africa's state budget for universities as a percentage of GDP was 0.75% ... , which is more or less in line with Africa as a whole (0.78%). When compared to OECD countries (1.21%) and the rest of the world (0.84%), South Africa lags behind in this regard. Although South Africa spends a considerable amount on education, its expenditure on higher education is much lower than desirable. Higher education expenditure as a percentage of education expenditure for Africa was 20%; for OECD countries it was 23.4%; and for the world 19.8% in 2006 (closest year). However, in 2011, South Africa's estimated higher education expenditure as a percentage of education was approximately 12%.' (DHET 2013b: 19). Hence Recommendation a) states that 'Government should increase the funding for higher education, to be more in line with international levels of expenditure.' (ibid 20; see also P 153).
- 8 The assistance of Professor Charles Simkins in developing these recommendations is hereby acknowledged. CHE 2004. South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

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# What University Autonomy? A Case Study in the Death of Quality Control



**BELINDA BOZZOLI** is the Democratic Alliance Shadow Minister for Higher Education and Training and Honorary Research Professor at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research. She was formerly Professor of Sociology and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand and Board Chair of the National Research Foundation. Bozzoli's DPhil is from Sussex University and she has had multiple international visitorships and fellowships. She previously held an A-rating from the NRF, and has published dozens of articles and six books, many of which, including her award-winning book, *Women of Phokeng* have a world wide academic readership.

## Introduction

*There is no doubt that the autonomy of South African Universities is not what it used to be. While academic freedom is protected in our Constitution<sup>1</sup> and University autonomy is protected through the law,<sup>2</sup> from the moment the post-1994 Government put its Higher Education Act in place in 1997, Universities became subject to a creeping movement towards ever greater government interference. The new Act entailed the annulment of all the original Acts through which Universities were individually formed as legal entities, and placed them together under one, comprehensive new legal framework, thus removing full legal autonomy in an instant. Subsequent major and minor amendments to the Act and its associated documents have been many (9 amendments, and hundreds of changes to the regulations) and most of these have entailed greater say by Government over what goes on inside our Universities. Today, Government hardly blinks an eye when it tells Universities what to do, how to do it and what the penalty will be if they don't comply. This assertive and interfering behaviour by Government is becoming increasingly treated as a matter of course. And behind the flurry, important things are happening to the University sector, which warrant closer attention.*

The question of quality in Universities provides a case study through which to understand the significance of these developments. It is the *sine qua non* of the respectable university that it is responsible for its own quality control, via the use of external examining systems, tenure systems and the like, and that the state should provide guidance, but not interference, in these matters. Thus the management of quality is a prime example of University autonomy. Direct state intervention in this would in many parts of the world be regarded with considerable concern.

## Quality Control in SA – Guiding Principles

When, after 1994, it became clear that the state wished to play a far more interventionist role in the system this was at first tempered, and weight was given to the desire of Universities to manage themselves. Universities had a say in the content of the original Higher Education Act, and not only does its Preamble defend

academic freedom and university autonomy, but it also states that ‘it is desirable’ to ‘respect and encourage democracy .... freedom of speech and expression, creativity, scholarship and research’. Significantly for our analysis here, it also states a desire to ‘pursue excellence’ and to ‘contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship in keeping with international standards of academic quality’.

When it came to designing a quality assurance system with the capacity to ensure that these latter goals were fulfilled, similar caution was indeed displayed. The drafters of the Act wished our Higher Education system to be excellent, but tried not to reach this goal through crass interference. By 2001 the new government had set up a comprehensive system to ensure that the quality of our higher education was protected and advanced. It was never perfect, but it was based upon international best practice, and included the creation of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which was expected to

*It was never perfect, but it was based upon international best practice, and included the creation of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which was expected to oversee, investigate and correct lapses in the quality of the system.*

oversee, investigate and correct lapses in the quality of the system. The HEQC’s founding documents stated that its central objective was ‘to ensure that providers effectively and efficiently deliver education, training, research and community service which are of high quality and which produce socially useful and enriching knowledge as well as a relevant range of graduate skills and competencies necessary for social and economic progress’,<sup>3</sup> and that it would ‘uphold the accountability requirements of higher education provision’ and ‘where necessary, expose and act against persistent and unchanging poor quality provision’ while being ‘committed to independence, objectivity, fairness and consistency in all its quality assurance activities’ It also undertook to make ‘appropriate audit and evaluation information’ available in the public domain, subject to the agreement of the HEQC.

So the HEQC was designed so that quality would be ensured, while both the autonomy and the academic freedom of Universities were protected from direct government interference. As was the case in Australia, the UK and elsewhere, the plan was for an intermediate ‘buffer’ body to be created, and to be shaped by the broad framework of the Higher Education Act and the specifics of the National Qualifications Framework. It would be managed by a semi-autonomous body with its own mandate, an independent board with significant university input, and a peer review methodology which meant that academics were themselves the evaluators of systems.

Universities and individual programme types were to be subjected to regular in-depth reviews of how they *themselves* evaluated what they taught, how they taught it, and how they performed in research and community outreach.

## Early Hopes

Unusually for a quality control entity, this body was also charged with examining the ‘transformation’ of universities; but the responsibility for ‘transformation’ was to be placed upon the Universities themselves. What was meant by transformation was vague and indeed unfocussed, (as is perhaps always the case). But in its founding document the HEQC seemed to interpret the term in a broad, fairly enlightened manner, stating that it would ‘develop a quality assurance framework that includes an explicit focus on the quality of teaching and learning activities, research and

community service in order to deepen and extend the process of higher education transformation’.

Based on these principles, the HEQC and its managing authority, the Council on Higher Education (CHE), spent its first years constructing an evaluation system which, while tedious to engage in for many academics, was managed relatively efficiently and effectively, with peer review at its heart.

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Within a few years of its establishment, the HEQC began an ambitious series of comprehensive evaluations of every University, using local and international peer reviewers from top institutions. The most encouraging part of these evaluations was that instead of directly evaluating every course in every university, the HEQC evaluated each University’s own evaluation systems and sought to strengthen them, thus respecting the buffer role it had to fulfil. Reports

on these evaluations were mainly cast in the spirit of constructive engagement. But they were also sometimes fairly tough, with stern recommendations made to the Institutions concerned, including raising questions on transformation, where appropriate. In turn, institutions were required to report on the actions they had taken to address issues pointed out in the report.

In addition, the HEQC undertook specific programme reviews of key, mainly professional, degrees starting with the MBA. Nine of the worst-performing MBAs lost their accreditation as a result. The HEQC had its critics, but in its first decade it had teeth and was prepared to bite.

## Decline and Fall

The HEQC today is significantly weaker than it was in this initial phase. Like the Chapter 9 institutions set up to monitor government and to protect the constitution, the evaluation system in Higher Education has gradually been enfeebled. The society into which graduates are sent has no official guarantee from this body of the overall quality of the Universities they are attending, or the programmes being offered.

This is not as uniformly bad as it sounds. The better Universities continue to evaluate their own courses through internal quality systems such as External Examining, tenure rules and regular peer reviews of courses, programmes and schools. Individual courses registered in Universities are still required to conform to minimum standards through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Furthermore, many professional degrees, such as those in Engineering, Medicine, Nursing and others, are *sometimes* separately monitored and protected by their respective professional bodies. But none of these systems is by its nature able to do what the HEQC was designed to do. Self-evaluation by Universities is not consistently excellent in all institutions. The NQF minimum standards are just that – a minimum. It is not the NQF’s job to look at broader issues of course delivery, overall coherence, contemporary relevance and the students’ broader experience. And while professional bodies, at their best, operate more or less in the manner first adopted by the HEQC (programmes are vigorously peer reviewed, and de-accredited or suspended where appropriate) these bodies are very uneven in quality - the nursing profession, for example, does not appear to be properly regulated,



with numerous unregulated private colleges flourishing - and teaching is hardly monitored at all.

Furthermore, even the best professional bodies, such as those in Engineering, Architecture or Accounting, tend to represent the narrow interests of the industry or profession from which they come rather than the broader interests of the student and of the society as a whole. They will tend to favour more instrumental programmes and more conservative syllabi, and the narrowing down rather than broadening of course content; and will tend to be hostile to introducing interdisciplinary approaches, or comparative global thinking. A body such as the HEQC always has the potential to take the longer and broader societal view on these things.

Some think the problems of the institution emerged after 2006, when the then CEO of the Council for Higher Education (CHE), Saleem Badat, resigned to become the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University. According to interviews with former staff in the institution, as well as his statements in Parliament, the next CEO, Ahmed Essop, (once the adviser to Education Minister Kader Asmal) did not support the tough form of the evaluation system. He interpreted quality mainly as a matter of pass rates. The CHE ended up in the situation of being mandated legally to protect quality, but being run by a person who did not believe this was desirable or necessary except in the most mild and uncontroversial of forms. Quality control was replaced by 'quality enhancement', through which Universities were simply 'assisted' to improve their pass rates.

*We have recently been made particularly aware, as a result of a damning report by Nick Taylor, of the degree to which poor training of teachers damages the opportunities of learners.*

Examples of the HEQC's inability to perform its proper function of protecting the public multiplied after this. Perhaps the most egregious is that of Teacher Education programmes. In the absence of a proper authority for evaluating teacher education by the profession itself (something which even the Department of Education has lamented, for example), the HEQC is perfectly positioned to make an important intervention into the poor training of teachers. We have recently been made particularly aware, as a result of a damning report by Nick Taylor, of the degree to which poor training of teachers damages the opportunities of learners.<sup>4</sup> The one thing that would help would be a proper evaluation of this by a body with sufficient authority to rectify poor performance.

And Teacher Education programmes throughout the country were indeed evaluated by the HEQC in an extensive exercise in 2006-7.

Some of these programmes were found to be weak and possibly incompetent. However by the peculiar logic used so often in South Africa, the Universities offering these programmes were somehow exempted from harsh action for political reasons<sup>5</sup> - being as they were in 'historically disadvantaged' institutions. In a betrayal of all that was intended in the setting up of a quality control system, the most mediocre programmes of all, producing the most execrable teachers of all, were allowed to continue training teachers, who in turn were allowed to inflict their inadequate training upon a new generation of pupils.

Instead these failing courses were placed upon an 'improvement programme'. However there is little evidence that this programme actually delivered any

improvement, or that it was followed up on. According to insiders, the HEQC, with the exit of staff and institutional memory, eventually lost interest in pursuing the matter. Thus the HEQC needs to take responsibility for at least some of the poor teaching which we see all around us and which afflicts our society.

In the earlier period of the HEQCs existence, in the case of the weak MBAs, programmes had been closed, as we saw above. Significantly, the de-accredited programmes were all in private institutions. No similarly harsh action has ever been taken against a course or programme run by a public institution.

### **The Cost of Ineffective Evaluation**

Further problems in the HEQC emerged in 2008, when it began to evaluate the University of KwaZulu-Natal. At that time the University was headed by a controversial figure, Professor William M Makgoba. Rumours had long been emanating from the institution that it was being run in an authoritarian manner. Many unhappy academics had left the University over the years of Makgoba's Vice-Chancellorship, some of whom now occupy senior positions in other Universities throughout the country. In a recent Parliamentary Portfolio Committee meeting

UKZN's Chair of Council Ms Phumla Mnganga said she believed that those who had left were 'hostile to transformation', but there is little evidence that this was indeed the cause of their departures. Interviews with several of the departed academics, as well as published work by them, indicate that authoritarian management, which is said to have included such unorthodox methods as spying on staff, was to blame.<sup>6</sup>

The draft HEQC report into the University, it appears, confirmed these rumours and was allegedly highly critical of the Vice Chancellor himself and his management. However the Vice-Chancellor objected

to the draft report, arguing that it was biased against him, and that the Chair of the Review, Prof Martin Hall, was incapable of objectivity. Controversially the HEQC and the CHE agreed to quash the report.<sup>7</sup> To this day the review of UKZN has not been tabled.<sup>8</sup>

According to interviewees, the University was subjected to the alleged authoritarian system for a further five years, and the flight of top staff and students continued. Only now, with a new Vice Chancellor installed, might it start to recover.

This was a case of system failure. The interests of the public were certainly not protected and it could be argued that the HEQC was damaged, some might say corrupted, by the incident. Once the objects of scrutiny start being able to suppress the findings of those doing the scrutinising, the latter lose all credibility.

Since that date, no further University evaluations have been scheduled.

### **An Impotent End? The Death of Academic Freedom in South Africa**

The HEQC, continued to decay. Its top staff left and it is now an organisation which, like so many failing government institutions, appears driven by the imperatives of pleasing the Minister and sustaining its own bureaucracy rather than those of performing its essential functions excellently and independently. It

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remains to be seen whether the newly appointed CEO of the CHE, Prof Narend Bajjnath, will revive the institution.

He may find it difficult because the decline of the HEQC suits government: it leaves a handy gap in the system of 'remote control' over universities, which government has long wished to render less 'remote' and more 'controlling'. While at first, the 'buffer' role intended for the CHE/HEQC was respected by Ministers, the current Minister, Blade Nzimande, has taken particular pleasure in extending his reach. One suspects he never really favoured the idea of University autonomy and is only too pleased to see its decay. Indeed he is busy extending his direct authority over University Councils themselves. Whereas in the earlier years after 1994, Ministers of Education (as they were then) took a moderate line on the legal provision for no fewer than five Ministerial appointees to be members of University Councils, and in most cases only three were appointed in consultation with the Universities themselves, Minister Nzimande has taken a hard line – if the law says five, then five it will be, and he is busy appointing the five nominees in all universities.

Nzimande often reads the riot act to what he considers to be recalcitrant Universities. In August 2014 he, together with the President, called for Universities to become more 'patriotic'. He has become notorious amongst University Vice-Chancellors for adopting a bullying tone towards them. And whereas the University sector's transformation was originally intended to be handled by Universities themselves, through HEQC processes, it is now front and centre in government's own direct, often hectoring, engagement with Universities. Bodies such as the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training collaborate with this creeping intervention, apparently oblivious of the significance of the Government's invasion into University matters. And the question of quality has almost vanished from the agenda.

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## Conclusion

The public discourse today is so filled with outrage at the multiple failures of Government that the shortcomings in University autonomy and independent quality control have passed most people by. Increasingly, Universities are considered to be simply another set of bureaucracies, much like High Schools or Vocational Colleges, which warrant close state control, monitoring and indeed direct management. Transformation is the only criterion by which they appear to be being measured these days. Furthermore, any mention in the public arena, let alone Government circles, of quality control, or of the concept of University autonomy is met with bafflement at best, and downright hostility at worst.

Universities themselves remain largely silent on these matters. Perhaps the crushing of the original vision of quality control, and its substitution by an overwhelming concern with other matters as well as by crude government interference, have barely been noticed by Universities themselves, cowed and bullied as they are. But they cannot be ignored by enlightened intellectuals. They present a danger to the very concept of a university and its capacity to offer to the society a freely conceptualised vision of itself and its future.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 An achievement for which the late Professor Etienne Mureinik, who participated in the Constitutional negotiations and ensured its insertion, deserves the thanks of every academic in the country
- 2 The Higher Education Act of 1997 preamble vows to 'respect and encourage ...academic freedom'.
- 3 HEQC Founding Document, Pretoria 2001
- 4 Nick Taylor, 'An examination of aspects of initial teacher education curricula at five Higher Education institutions', report of the The Initial Teacher Education Research Project, Joint Education Trust (JET) August 2014
- 5 This was confirmed by CHE representatives themselves in a Higher Education Portfolio Committee meeting in April 2015
- 6 For a published version of the Makgoba years, as perceived by two members of the UKZN faculty at the time, see the book: Nithaya Chetty and Christopher Merrett, *The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University*, Self-published, September 2014
- 7 For a critical view of these events see Martin Hall, 'Varsity's voices of dissent gagged', *Mail and Guardian*, 14-1-2011; for the HEQC/CHE view of the same events see Ahmed Essop, 'CHE panel acted with integrity', *Mail and Guardian* 21-02-2011.
- 8 The HEQC report on UKZN, or at least a draft thereof, remains in the HEQC archives, but attempts to obtain it have been unsuccessful. Several Parliamentary questions to the Department and to the CHE and the use of the Public Access to Information Act have been rebuffed

# Transforming the Socio-Academic Space in the University

## Introduction

*Universities have always served as fertile grounds for nurturing competing ideas. They are also breeding grounds for groups set on collision course with one another as they endlessly climb the greasy pole for authority. But these dynamics are part of everyday life on campus and the South African socio-academic space is not exempt from this, not least in the post-apartheid era where attempts to erase painful memories of the past are a never-ending quest for various ideologies.*

The recent wave of student protests across the country, united under the banner of changing the shape and character of former white universities, bears testament to a nation still haunted by the politics of race and the rhetoric of racial identity. We are compelled not only to reflect on the wider South African body politic, but we are equally charged to take stock about the presence of these nuances within the internal socio-academic space of the University.

This piece recounts personal experiences at two former white universities with starkly contrasting cultural heritages. The release of the *Luister* video by students and some academics of the University of Stellenbosch struck a chord and it serves as a prompt for these reflections. The video sparked nationwide condemnation for the alleged racism at the University with others further arguing that the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction at the University is the reason the University remains unflinchingly racist. I felt impelled to reminisce over the time I spent at Stellenbosch during my postgraduate student days after my undergraduate spell at the University of the Witwatersrand. Needless to say, the video reopened wounds that I thought had healed. It began to dawn on me that transformation of academic staff complement in the University serves no good purpose if the socio-academic space remains resolutely unchanged. To put it bluntly, transformation must happen wholesale.

## The Socio-Academic Space of a Post-apartheid University

Universities do not only serve the academic mandate of producing an enlightened generation. There is a mandate much larger than that as they nurture the talent of people who are innately social. The socio-academic space is then comprised of social beings intent on pursuing academic excellence yet inextricably enmeshed within the social space that will have the ultimate impact of shaping their world view. These socio-academic spaces serve as informal places where different worlds intersect to offer a richer learning experience outside the confines of lecture halls



### ELIAS PHAAHLA

obtained, from the University of the Witwatersrand, a BA Hons (with Distinction) in International Political Economy and a PhD in Political Economy from the University of Stellenbosch. He is a 2009 Mandela Rhodes Scholar (South Africa and Stellenbosch) and, he is currently working at the Helen Suzman Foundation as a Researcher. He has recently been awarded a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein.

and tutorial rooms. It is also a world where different groups, ideologies, cultures and identities are pitted against each other in a bid to challenge conventions and unleash a new understanding of the world we claim to have knowledge of.

The former white universities are no doubt a consequence of their colonial origins. These institutions of higher learning remain bastions of privilege where class and the pursuit of academic excellence overlap. Herein lies a fertile ground for students to question the intransigent nature of this state of affairs, carrying the covert, yet impactful message, that academic excellence should not be pursued at the cost of the national project of reconciliation and the ideals of a non-racial society. In other words, the University in post-apartheid South Africa must dispose of its white identity if it is to avoid the folly of being out of touch with the rest of society.

*That a University retains its traditionally Afrikaans identity, or Anglo-Saxon traditions, or even Semitic culture is preposterous and can only serve as blight to the very idea of education itself. Any University that retains a particular cultural or ethnic disposition and still considers itself a fountain of knowledge ceases to exist as one.*

I do concede that a distinction of former white universities must be made here. Compared to former White Afrikaans universities, former white English universities played a significant role in transforming the landscape of higher education sector during the dark days of apartheid by opening their doors to students of colour. Many of these white English universities adopted a defiant stance against the laws that barred many blacks from accessing white universities simply on the basis of skin colour. But the bone of contention here is not access, nor the politics surrounding that issue. Instead, a case is made here about the challenges which confront students of various backgrounds as they navigate their way through university today.

Considerations relating to belonging and ownership of the social space within the university must be taken into account. Therefore, it is also covertly, yet loudly stated in these student campaigns, that the contemporary post-apartheid University can shed off its white, colonial identity and still be at the forefront of academic excellence. In essence transformation of the socio-academic space within the University and the pursuit of excellence are mutually reinforcing and the two can be carried out in tandem.

Indeed, beyond the trappings of ivory tower lecture halls there exists a platform which allows minds to question this colonial heritage as a vice that is divisive and toxic to the socio-academic fabric of the University and the wider South African social fabric. The proponents of Rhodes Must Fall, Open Stellenbosch and Transform Wits, to mention but three, highlight one grim reality about the socio-academic space at former white universities: that is, the University remains at odds with the wider social fabric of post-apartheid South Africa and theirs is an advocacy for change. That a University retains its traditionally Afrikaans identity, or Anglo-Saxon traditions, or even Semitic culture is preposterous and can only serve as blight to the very idea of education itself. Any University that retains a particular cultural or ethnic disposition and still considers itself a fountain of knowledge ceases to exist as one. A University in post-apartheid South Africa should, *inter alia*, accommodate an array of cultures, identities and religions, and any attempt to the contrary serves to defy the national project of reconciliation and coexistence itself. No cultural disposition or heritage should trample upon the other. Certainly, space must be made available for different cultural backgrounds to exist alongside each other.

How can universities continue to exist as special enclaves while they ignore the wider social milieu surrounding them as if they are blind to the pressing realities confronting our society? Firstly, continuing to do so is dangerous and will only serve to threaten the existence of these institutions in the long run. Secondly, the research enterprise in these very universities will not thrive if their research output and curricula lose relevance to the African context. It is then laughable that a University continues to retain its European heritage in terms of pedagogy, throughput and research focus, and still claims to be at the forefront of producing African solutions to African problems. The trick is not to replace these forms of teaching with alternative ones, but rather to strike a balance between the two.

The poignant reality about all of this is that universities that are resistant to change show symptoms of an identity crisis, which further perpetuates even the more the notion of 'us and them' without the harsh, explicit racial overtones we loathe. Herein a call is made by the advocates of change in the socio-academic space of the academy; that universities should cease to act as colonial outposts, must break with tradition and must begin to embrace the freedom that comes with our democracy of embracing one another as equals. Others are quick to call this an attempt to change the levers of power and tilting the balance of forces. I call it change long overdue.

*... who owns the socio-academic space within the University; what shape have these socio-academic spaces taken; and can the socio-academic space in the University serve as an agent of change?*

### **Distinctions of Socio-Academic Spaces in the Academy**

As a point of departure, perhaps it is worth asking the following questions: who owns the socio-academic space within the University; what shape have these socio-academic spaces taken; and can the socio-academic space in the University serve as an agent of change? A look into the distinctions of universities in post-apartheid South Africa is warranted.

Two set of public universities exist in post-apartheid South Africa. These are, the former white universities and, the previously disadvantaged black universities that were created (mostly) in the 1960s under the auspices of the Bantustan policy. The former are paragons of public-funded excellence and they continue to attract top academics and students from across the country transcending class and racial differences. Although the doors of learning in these universities have been made 'open' for all, the demographics are largely white, indicative of high social class status of the students who attend these institutions. The perception out there is that one did not quite receive an education if they were not educated at these universities. The latter set of universities struggle to shed the perception of mediocrity and, rightly or wrongly, stand accused of failing to emulate the research rigour of their white counterparts.

Against this backdrop, the socio-academic space in former white universities can be surmised in this way: it is predominately white owned, culturally predisposed to dance to the tune of the white social formation and, suffers severely from lack of advocates who can champion (with earnest) a balanced and plural socio-academic space in which all students, irrespective of colour or social class status can find belonging and not be made to feel like sojourners. University bureaucrats at these former white universities have not been entirely willing to rectify this social misdemeanour besetting the academic space of their respective universities.

Instead they have a knack for playing lip service accompanied by meagre actions with the hope that the flame dies slowly.

The rise of the Open Stellenbosch campaign should not come as a surprise. Students pursuing undergraduate studies in that institution are having Afrikaans shoved down their throats<sup>1</sup>. Granted, Stellenbosch is steeped in Afrikaans tradition and it will take a while to reverse that; nevertheless the dominance of Afrikaans should not be used to exclude and marginalise others and end up compromising prospects of academic success. Afrikaans surely has a right to exist, like any other language in South Africa. However, the University has a duty to treat all students equally including those who wittingly or unwittingly choose to enter the University in spite of its notorious reputation. Many opinionated voices out there tend to erroneously ask the following question: why go to Stellenbosch if you know you are going to have problems with Afrikaans? The courage to ask such questions 21 years into our democracy not only defies the blissfulness of ignorance, but it attests to one being stuck on the wrong side of history. There is a need for an education about what the youth of June 1976 fought for here. How we forgot so soon!

*The cultures these institutions embrace, by virtue of their Euro-colonial orientation, tend to be difficult for many poor students to identify with. A young person coming from a rural, underprivileged school in the Eastern Cape might find the Oxbridge-styled socio-academic spaces nestled in these universities highly unnerving.*

In the next section I explore the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes in shaping the socio-academic space of the academy in post-apartheid South Africa against the backdrop of the social class make up that grapples this nascent democracy. I give due consideration to the legacy this man bequeathed the higher education sector in the wake of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which sparked nationwide student protests calling for transformation in the academy.

### Cecil J Rhodes Revisited

The socio-academic space in most former white universities owes much of its existence to Cecil John Rhodes (CJR) himself and his legacy thereon. UCT

came about as a result of CJR's generous land donation and Rhodes University in Grahamstown received a cash windfall from the Rhodes Trust and saved the University from closing doors indefinitely, while Victoria College (modern day Stellenbosch) produced eminent men like Jan Smuts who went on to become defenders of the British imperial project. In these universities, not excluding Natal, and to some extent Wits, we may find the legacy of CJR to be present.

Perhaps the impact of this man's legacy must be sought in the light of the institutional cultures of these universities. The cultures these institutions embrace, by virtue of their Euro-colonial orientation, tend to be difficult for many poor students to identify with. A young person coming from a rural, underprivileged school in the Eastern Cape might find the Oxbridge-styled socio-academic spaces nestled in these universities highly unnerving. They find themselves standing in stark contrast to their counterparts with Model-C or private school education who gained familiarity with such spaces long before entering University.

The end result is a disheartening one. Instead of facilitating social intercourse that transcends class and race, these University spaces cause a balkanisation of



social class and racial groupings which helps little to spur a common identity within the University's socio-academic space. Such is the travesty of University education in post-apartheid South Africa and it appals many of us who take notice of these trends. Regarding this point, some ask, now that the infamous statue of Rhodes on the UCT campus has been plucked out and stored – what now? Will his palpable absence spur the pace of transformation of the socio-academic space within the University? Are we not barking up the wrong tree here? I find the cynicism there disturbingly spine-chilling as it misses the point entirely.

Controversial figures such as CJR must and should be recorded in the annals of history, lest we forget. However, divisive figures such as Rhodes do not deserve simply to be celebrated and certainly do not deserve to adorn the socio-academic space of our universities. Paying homage to such a figure, even under the pretext of remembering his 'generosity', is inappropriate. For a university to allow the statue of CJR to exist on campus in such a prominent position can be interpreted as an act glorifying the evils he may have committed. The socio-academic space in such universities simply cannot get more oppressive than that.

### ***Luister – Listen, and Please Take Heed***

It is often said that riots is the language of the unheard. The Luister video, however, is symbolic to the voice which landed not only on deaf ears, but whose reverberations have been perceived as *swartgevaar*. And indeed *swartgevaar* tactics have been employed by the University to hold on to Afrikaans culture as well as preserving its identity. This is where the University and those who control the town of Stellenbosch show that all along they have not been listening to what the marginalised students have been saying. The issue was never the Afrikaans language, nor Afrikaans culture and identity. What irks many, and what has also proven to be abhorrent, is when the Afrikaans language is being used to drive a wedge among groups that ought to be living harmoniously.

*However, turning a blind eye to barbaric means of the 'black burden' in an institution of higher learning is called acting in complicity. That makes such a University as equally guilty as the perpetrators who commit the offence and it should stand on the pedestal of infamy for this.*

Granted, the Afrikaans community is not comprised of whites only; how then can the dominance of the Afrikaans language in that secluded part of the world be indicative of the prevalence of racism there? It is exactly that – racist, if black students (or students of any colour, really) express discomfort at being taught in a language they are unable to understand and that language is used as a symbol of group identity. When racially charged insults are hurled mainly at black students who are at times advised to vote with their feet if they find the dominance of the language offensive, the atmosphere easily qualifies as racist.

Moreover, South Africa belongs to everyone who lives in it, black or white, and Afrikaans, like any language has a right for preservation. However, turning a blind eye to barbaric means of the 'black burden' in an institution of higher learning is called acting in complicity. That makes such a University as equally guilty as the perpetrators who commit the offence and it should stand on the pedestal of infamy for this.

## Conclusion

Spaces are created for the sole purpose of interaction among various groups. In the University, such informal spaces, aimed at facilitating social interaction are in existence and they were referred to in this piece as the socio-academic space. However, the socio-academic space in the academy, particularly at former white universities, needs to be reconciled with the society as to sincerely partake in the project of change that we want to see taking place in South Africa. The division that exists among the inhabitants of the socio-academic space in these universities becomes a crude reminder of the road we still need to travel in order to get to the Promised Land. A University that still does the bidding of the old guard (culturally) at the exclusion of marginal groups must be educated about the need to move with the programme and understand that all persons have an equal right to exist, even in the socio-academic spaces they may have created themselves. Advocates of change in these intransigent socio-academic spaces, led mainly by the student movement, expose the toxic and pervasive nature of social class and racial divisions that these universities helped to create.

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### FOOTNOTE

1 Postgraduate studies are conducted in English at Stellenbosch.

# A personal narrative of an educational journey

## Introduction

*I share some personal views on education without any formal pedagogical training but through a lifetime's experience of learning and then teaching, mentoring and wardening at the University of Cape Town (UCT). As a medical biochemist I have restricted my views and approach to learning in this area. It is my good fortune to be associated with UCT, which has taken the initiative to address many of the issues mentioned here, continuously re-appraising and evaluating its programmes of teaching and learning.*

## Education as a transformative experience

It is my view that education has to be transformative for it to have any value. Matters of teaching and learning must be guided by ethical principles, which in turn define trusting relationships in a learning environment, in which learner and teacher grow together. The idea of transformation is broad, taking on different meanings in different contexts. Whilst our campuses boast of producing the best graduates, ready for the job market locally and internationally, the cries of protesting students that the curricula on South African campuses are Eurocentric and not relevant for Africa, are not unheard or unheeded.

I propose an alternative view of transformation in education, one that is inextricably linked to the curriculum, and which does not focus on the 'decolonisation' of the curricula. What I am seeking is a revolution of the mind, a fundamental change in consciousness which empowers our learners to function as citizens and not subjects and which repudiates any claims to ownership of knowledge by any group, be it African or European.

My argument is that, despite producing top-class graduates in every field, the design of our curricula needs to be continually interrogated to produce a 'holistic' graduate, the curious life-long learner, one who is equipped, upon graduation, to deal with the major afflictions of our society, like racism, inequity and poverty, and corruption. I share some experiences that moulded my ideas since my student and early career days during apartheid and the post-apartheid period whilst on the staff at UCT. These experiences are transformative in the sense that a foundation of independent thinking in which freedom of thought and speech are valued is established, and on which further knowledge is built. The exciting possibility is one of being able to extrapolate from this knowledge-base into related areas of knowledge, thus creating a worldview.



**PROFESSOR ANWAR MALL** is a surgical researcher at the University of Cape Town (UCT). His speciality is in mucus in health and disease, largely in cancer, TB and HIV-AIDS. He trains postgraduate students in this area and teaches Medical Biochemistry to undergraduate medical students. He is the warden of Varietas Residence and is currently Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor at UCT. Mall is married to Shaida and they have two daughters, Sumaya and Raissa.

## The entry experience

It is a fact that students entering university for the first time do not all have the same level of preparedness. Many are at a disadvantaged starting point through poor schooling, lack of motivation and readiness, and feelings of alienation and inferiority about being at a university, particularly at an historically white institution, where the experience could be very unwelcoming. The recent ‘Rhodes must fall’ campaign at UCT declared this very stridently. Often young ‘freshers’ in the residences cite loneliness as the single-most important factor causing unhappiness. Added to this are poor study methods, being overwhelmed by course content and guilt about being privileged, whilst parents struggled to meet fee payments. Then there are the difficulties of English not being the first language of many of the students who, in addition are expected to learn the ‘language’ of medicine. These examples are cited out of my actual experiences.

*The Problem-Based Learning (PBL) curriculum offers the advantage of placing the responsibility of learning on the learner and gives the tutor the opportunity to interact more closely with individual students in small groups in a pleasant classroom setting, conducive to learning.*

## The university’s responsibility

It is imperative that our tertiary institutions have programmes in place to deal with issues of alienation and disadvantages of the past. The starting point must be a good orientation programme that is extensively informative, welcoming and participatory. This is a delicate period for new students when the tone is set for the rest of their undergraduate careers. The programme should highlight the possible difficulties, both academic and otherwise, that a student may be confronted with. The role of senior students as mentors in this process is invaluable. The UCT

Faculty of Health Sciences established a student support programme (available to all students throughout the duration of their degree) comprised of extremely dedicated members of staff who give of their time to ensure that all students flourish within the faculty and are academically successful. Non-academic problems, an impediment to academic success, require the service of senior students acting as mentors to their junior peers. The Problem-Based Learning (PBL) curriculum offers the advantage of placing the responsibility of learning on the learner and gives the tutor the opportunity to interact more closely with individual students in small groups in a pleasant classroom setting, conducive to learning.

## Classroom learning

Any field of learning can be an entry point into something deeper. Teaching must take place in a manner that fundamentally transforms young minds, giving them a new and empowered way to view the world. It should not be a case of mere facts to be learnt from a text, but a living experience. The very processes and chemical reactions being described are happening in our bodies, keeping us alive. For example biochemistry, the study of molecules in a living cell, takes one from biological macromolecules to higher levels of organisation such as cells, tissues, physiological systems, organisms, consciousness and society. This involves the concept of ‘emergence’, as organisational complexity increases from the bottom up, with each new level of organisation being more than the sum of its parts, around which there is exciting discussion between scientists, philosophers, theologians and educationists.<sup>1</sup> Underpinning these facts is a philosophy which becomes a part of normal discourse, and a new and transformed way of thinking. There must be an appreciation of the contribution of science to humanity, a recognition that



every statement in the textbook is based on evidence and somebody's blood, sweat and tears.

A classroom topic need not be confined to the content of that topic alone. Links can be made with other topics to widen the interest of the students. For example, the metabolic pathways in our cells produce energy in the form of ATP from glucose, to keep each cell functional and alive in health, disease and starvation. The pathways make adjustments to ensure that energy is still available under dire circumstances. Such a topic in biochemistry has wider implications for societies and with the aid of social media<sup>2</sup>, the focus shifts to world events, in this case major starvation epidemics in the world. This can trigger a different discussion about starvation on our continent, raising issues of poverty, administrative bungling, colonialism and post-colonial dictatorships, corruption and incompetence of leadership. Thus a biochemistry topic is placed in a wider context, indicating how the health of the individual is linked to societies and matters of politics, all very important in the understanding of the complexity of this world. There is a new focus on interdisciplinary learning at UCT and a recent initiative has been the introduction of the Medical Humanities, a link between medicine and the arts, to bring together two seemingly disparate fields of study, forever divided.

*There is a new focus on interdisciplinary learning at UCT and a recent initiative has been the introduction of the Medical Humanities, a link between medicine and the arts, to bring together two seemingly disparate fields of study, forever divided.*

Intervention in its various forms is necessary in the case of the struggling student. One example is the intervention programme, by which the medical curriculum accommodates a parallel stream at the end of the first semester. Students requiring more attention are identified and diverted from the mainstream course for a year

and provided with guidance from specialists, enabling them to look both backward and forward in their course. This is an amazing support tool that allows a learner to reflect and get a deeper insight into both the coursework, study methods and an opportunity to address personal issues that could impinge on a career.

### Out of classroom learning

There is ample opportunity to learn outside the classroom, especially in a dynamic and diverse living and learning space such as in a residence. There is a shift from the notion of a residence being a mere bed-and-breakfast to a 'learning space'. Besides tutorials, there is another kind of learning that takes place there, one designed to build leaders, to encourage students to grow attitudes of tolerance and respect for

*The lecturer-learner relationship, in many cases, was underlined by a sinister racism and manipulation of a vulnerable student body, within the context of an inhumane political system. Political protests against apartheid (in itself a learning experience) were common, disrupting learning.*

the other, without compromising the development of a critical faculty. Residences have cultural events and entertainment activities of an educational nature like debates, which foster integration in a community or family of peers. Dedicated wardens oversee each residence and participate in creating an environment that offers life-lessons. Residence fellows, who are UCT staff members in various fields, are invited to share their experiences, broadening the minds of our youth. It is no coincidence that many young people making a mark on our society today have had a residence experience at their institutions.

### School and University

I am able to empathise with the plight of many students today because of my own experiences. My conceptual development had been delayed, growing up in the apartheid era and attending an under-resourced school for Indians, in a little hamlet in the Natal Midlands (ironically, in retrospect a better schooling than what many receive today). Rote learning was the only method of learning I knew, reinforced by memorisation of long Arabic verses in the Holy Qur'an from a very young age in a traditional religious environment. At school I was unable to grasp the significance of the atomic structure of matter or that the cell was the basic unit of living matter. Upon matriculation I entered the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), formerly the University College for Indians, one of many tertiary institutions established by the apartheid government, in line with its separate development policy. My schooling had not prepared me for higher education. I had no conceptual framework, and saw no links between my voluminous first year subjects, never mind the links and continuities between topics within a single discipline! Lecturers taught with a condescending attitude. The lecturer-learner relationship, in many cases, was underlined by a sinister racism and manipulation of a vulnerable student body, within the context of an inhumane political system. Political protests against apartheid (in itself a learning experience) were common, disrupting learning. I can barely recall any worthwhile kind of orientation and academic support programme for new students, such as the excellent ones we have at UCT today.

### Beginnings of transformation

I shall always remember the day when, in desperation, I realised that the compartmentalisation of subjects was arbitrary and that everything in the Universe was linked and related. That was the first self-initiated step to transformative thinking which I carried through to my teaching, an epiphany in the second year

of my undergraduate degree! I felt as if I had unlocked a mystery of the Universe, stepped upon one of its secrets, a new world view that was to transform my mind forever. I now had a foundation on which I could build a body of biological knowledge that led from atoms to consciousness and beyond, into culture and society. I was overtaken by a habit of seeing relationships between all things, no matter how bizarre and remote from each other two objects of interest could be. Everything, all matter was made of atoms, the different arrangements of which produced a human, cat or tree! If it were biological or scientific concepts I was thinking of, I tested my own understanding of the concept before verifying the information in a prescribed text or in discussion with somebody. I had become a self-initiated learner and ‘find out for yourself’ became my dictum. A new worldview and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge emerged that went beyond academic subjects to other pertinent issues in life. My curiosity had been triggered and life had taken on a new meaning, and it continues to this day!<sup>3,4</sup> It is curiosity that sparks the passion for wanting to know, and knowledge, in the words of John Henry Newman, is power<sup>5</sup>. I had become an unashamed reductionist, forever seeking out the fundamental component or particle of any system under consideration, including the Universe.<sup>6</sup>

*At the end of the day, a university experience should give one a worldview and a transformative philosophy of life which equips one to face the many challenges of the day.*

I made a commitment then, that if ever I were to teach, I would approach it in a manner that stimulated and instilled the joy of learning and teaching in students, thus contributing to creating ‘learners for life’.

### **The lifelong learner**

It is extremely regrettable that there is no culture of reading in our society and institutions. As an undergraduate my readings outside science, more in politics, brought with it a gradual development of critical thought that pervaded my personal, social and academic life. I developed a general attitude of being more critical about what I was learning rather than being a passive recipient of unrelated facts. I now questioned everything – ‘the path to holiness’ according to Peck<sup>7</sup>. The ‘big’ questions of life, existence and meaning and the relevance of what I was expected to know came to mind. It was the beginning of a new dawn, an exciting time that I would never have predicted, in a curiosity-filled world<sup>3,4</sup> in which learning became a joy! Unbeknownst to me I was laying the early foundations of the teacher I was going to become, to share with future students many of the exciting ideas that grew out of my tough early experiences and occupied me with such intensity. In retrospect what was developing in my mind was the idea of integrated learning, much in vogue today. A teacher should refer students to relevant reading material outside the formal curriculum. At the end of the day, a university experience should give one a worldview and a transformative philosophy of life which equips one to face the many challenges of the day. Many great minds were transformed by looking deeply into their own disciplines, and subsequently creating a philosophy of life which embraced a whole lot of seemingly disparate and unrelated ideas and concepts into a unified whole, as shown below.

### **A worldview**

In 1859 Charles Darwin famously wrote in his *The Origin of Species*, ‘There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally

breathed into a few forms or into one; and that whilst this planet has gone on cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved'.<sup>8</sup> One cannot doubt that the formulation of his theory, which itself evolved over time, stirred something very deeply in Darwin, an awe and wonder of nature, akin to a spirituality. Humans were taken off their lofty pedestals and humbly placed into the animal kingdom; all forms of life were related, as modern genetics later confirmed<sup>9</sup>, with no room for racism.<sup>10</sup> Evolution is the very grammar of biology<sup>11</sup> and nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.<sup>12</sup>

*The scientific account of nature which starts with the Big Bang, the formation of stars and planets, the origin and evolution of life on Earth with all its diversity, the advent of human consciousness and the resultant evolution of cultures, have the potential to unite us because it is a common narrative for all living forms.*

Albert Einstein's worldview grew out of his science and observations of the physical Universe, which included atoms and light-quanta, space and time, electromagnetism and gravitation, with their motions and interactions governed by precise mathematical laws. He saw in it a connection of all things at a very deep level. This humbling experience formed a basis of his philosophy and which influenced, for example, his political view regarding the establishment of the state of Israel, which he supported, if and only if, Israelis and Palestinians could live together in harmony, without discrimination and the power-mongering that accompanies military superiority. Einstein warned that nuclear weapons were not the

answer to the long-term security of any nation. He was a pacifist who believed passionately in social justice.<sup>13</sup>

Phillip Tobias, the late Wits polymath, who had made a special study of race and fossil ancestry in South Africa felt that he would have been failing his academic ethos if he did not protest against apartheid, when the scientific truth about race ran counter to the assumptions of apartheid policy.<sup>14</sup> He worked to expose those responsible for the untimely death of the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, to return to South Africa the remains of Saartjie Baartman and to protest against the apartheid government's exclusion of blacks from universities. He showed that the San, like the rest of humanity, had 46 chromosomes, a serious blow to racist thinking.<sup>15,16</sup>

Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard University biologist, who classified most known species of ants, had an epiphany when he discovered the theory of evolution as a first year university student. He experienced the 'Ionian Enchantment', a conviction that the world is orderly and can be explained by a small number of natural laws. The opening line of his book *Consilience* reads 'I remember very well the time I was captured by the dream of unified learning'.<sup>17</sup> Wilson realised that his contemplation of his ants led him to 'climb the steps in biological organization from microscopic particles in cells to the forests that clothe mountain slopes'.

These examples illustrate that a serious and insightful reflection of one's studies, can be an entry point into a larger empowering and transformative world that encompasses the learner's relationship with society. There is a need for a global tradition that begins with a world view, independent of culture, religion, race and ideology<sup>1</sup>. The scientific account of nature which starts with the Big Bang, the formation of stars and planets, the origin and evolution of life on Earth with all



its diversity, the advent of human consciousness and the resultant evolution of cultures, have the potential to unite us because it is a common narrative for all living forms.<sup>1</sup> We are all stardust! Each one of us has journeyed from being a single fertilised cell or ovum, through the various stages of gestation and development to a fully-fledged human being.

## Conclusion

In 1979 Peter Vardy, a medical practitioner, wrote that education should be about producing a person with an enquiring, curious mind for life, available to anyone at any time of life. With proper education there can be no boredom!<sup>18</sup> Phillip V. Tobias reminded students that whilst there was a demand for specialisation today, ignoring other branches of knowledge was inadvisable. A specialist in one field should be able to carry on an intelligent conversation in the other fields of human endeavour. 'That is the mark of an educated person'.<sup>19</sup>

My focus has been the transformation of the individual mind as a first step towards transforming society, through the love and deep reflection of knowledge. It becomes the duty of our institutions to provide the context for self-initiated learning and scholarship to produce a new kind of graduate.

## Acknowledgement

This piece is dedicated to my colleagues in the Health Sciences Faculty, the College of Wardens and the Student Housing Office at the University of Cape for the dedicated work that they do towards the development of young minds. The views expressed here are my own.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### CHARLES SIMKINS

is a distinguished economist and senior researcher at the Helen Suzman Foundation. He was Vice President and Professor of Economics at St Augustine College and formerly held the Helen Suzman Chair of Political Economy at the University of the Witwatersrand. He is a former Rhodes Scholar and is a recipient of the Helen Suzman Chevening Fellowship, a UK Foreign Office award.

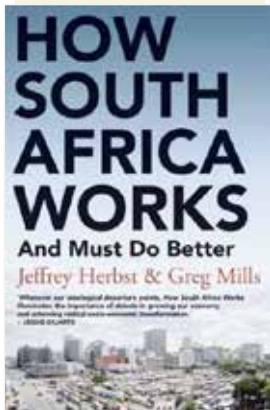
# *How South Africa Works, And Must Do Better* by Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills

*Everyone knows, or at least senses, that the South African economy is on a hiding to nothing at present. Finance Minister Nblanbla Nene is reported to have told the July ANC lekgotla that slow growth was the 'new normal', that risks originating from the international economic system make South African economy vulnerable and that fiscal consolidation was necessary. As Nene pointed out, the South African economy has grown on average as fast as the world economy historically. The last sustained period of lower growth was between 1985 and 1995, the dying years of apartheid. If IMF projections are anything to go by, the current spell of lower growth will last from 2009 to at least 2020, an even longer period. Nene's presentation seems not to have moved the needle. The ANC statement following the lekgotla simply notes it and goes on to recycle tired boilerplate on the key role of manufacturing and the centrality of state owned corporations. Which ones – ESKOM, SAA, the Post Office and PRASA, perhaps?*

South African politics are increasingly being shaped by how interests and constituencies are reacting to these circumstances. These reactions cut across the political divides of the immediate post-apartheid period and there is agitation beneath the old surfaces. The emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters, the ructions within COSATU and the formation of the United Front, restiveness within the South African Communist party, issues about ANC leadership and parliamentary function, the search for new traction by the DA, and uproar In Parliament are all observable aspects of the ferment.

In these circumstances, two liberal analyses have been published. The first to appear was R W Johnson's *How long will South Africa survive? The looming crisis*,<sup>1</sup> reviewed elsewhere in this edition of *FOCUS*. Hard on its heels has been the appearance of the Herbst and Mills book, the subject of this review. The two books are complementary in that Johnson comes at the issues from a political angle, whereas Herbst and Mills are primarily concerned with the economy. They are also in competition since their implications are different, a point to be returned to.

Herbst and Mills clearly understand that economics is necessarily dismal (since it refers to constraints on getting what we want) and usually dreary in its technicalities. They have given considerable thought to presenting their material in a generally accessible and attractive fashion. They have succeeded on the whole, largely through the device of weaving case studies with more abstract analysis of



**HOW SOUTH AFRICA WORKS: AND MUST DO BETTER**, By Jeffrey Herbst & Greg Mills  
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context. The book can be read in an evening and leaves a definite impression. It consists of a core of five chapters – on agriculture, services, manufacturing, mining and education – flanked by two introductory and two concluding sections.

The major theme of the book is lost opportunity. Comparing the economic progress of seven countries 21 years after a new constitutional order, Herbst and Mills find the only country which has performed more poorly than South Africa is Zimbabwe. The future of agriculture lies in exploiting economies of scale and technology rather than the expansion of small farming units. Services such as tourism offer ways of expanding employment at low cost, and are not helped by heavy handed regulation by the Department of Home Affairs, or a national carrier constantly in crisis. Manufacturing runs up against labour unrest, unhelpful regulation, and skills constraints with a consequent bias against new hiring. Mining runs up against unintended consequences of the Mineral and Petroleum Development Resources Act and demands for beneficiation, the latter, in the view of the Harvard study of the South African economy, being simply a bad idea. Education necessarily produces poor outcomes, when teachers cannot pass examinations appropriate for the learners in front of them.

What accounts for this situation? Poor governance, and critically the shut out of the unemployed, lack of competitiveness, and corruption. Herbst and Mills produce a table which shows the deterioration in governance and competitiveness indicators between 2000 and 2013. A heavily rent seeking approach carries with it the risk of tipping over into corruption, a risk which has been progressively realized, especially since 2009. And on such a competitive basis: alliances of convenience, fallings out, scapegoating, framing, disciplinary hearings, court cases and buyouts have created a rapidly turning wheel of fortune in institution after institution, obliterating attention to useful function.

*[Attempts to create dialogue between government and business] have failed partly because the ANC and the government it controls sees white-dominated firms increasingly, in the words of one white business person, as 'little more than an impediment to the Nirvana of a black-owned economy'*

Growth requires a laser-like focus (to use one of Herbst and Mills's favourite phrases) on production, and this in turn requires producer interests to become a coherent, indeed hegemonic, force. Such an alignment is not currently to hand. Herbst and Mills note that:

*[Attempts to create dialogue between government and business] have failed partly because the ANC and the government it controls sees white-dominated firms increasingly, in the words of one white business person, as 'little more than an impediment to the Nirvana of a black-owned economy'. In turn, business has felt no compulsion to move beyond immediate commercial interests to embrace the ANC agenda, and has inevitably struggled to speak with a single unified voice.*

That has to change if growth is to be supported. And this is the point where Johnson and Herbst and Mills diverge. The Johnson thesis is that South Africa

can either choose to have an ANC government, or it can have a modern industrial economy. It cannot have both.

On the other hand, Herbst and Mills address themselves in the first instance to government, and secondly to business. Certainly it is a condition of progress that ANC elites perceive the weakness of the growth coalition and its consequences, jettison unhelpful historical baggage, and act accordingly. All else is obstacle. An indicator that headway is being made will be the arrest of a constant stream of policies and parliamentary bills, acts and regulations which undermine the rights on which production is necessarily based. Change will not happen overnight, so it is difficult to avoid Johnson's prediction that things will get worse before they get better.

Would a strengthening of the growth coalition, if it happens, simply amount to a reactionary reversion? On the contrary. Herbst and Mills's case studies, in each sector of the economy they discuss, contain both examples of successful initiatives which meet contemporary aspirations for more and better employment, and initiatives which, while currently failing, would succeed if policies were changed. The key need in each case is for market space, moving on from dyspeptic historical fixations,<sup>2</sup> understanding the critical components of contemporary issues, and the willingness to work away at them until productive outcomes are achieved. The curse on South African development is nationalist sentiment, with its propensity to promote some interests at the cost of demobilizing the contributions of others. The cure is to set innovation free and to support it.

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FOOTNOTES

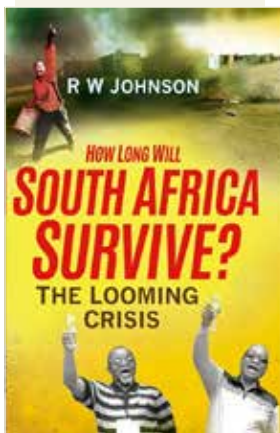
1 Jonathan Ball, 2015

2 There can be no happiness, no serenity, no hope, no pride, no present, without oblivion. A man in whom this screen is damaged and inoperative is like a dyspeptic (and not merely like one): he can't be done with anything... Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Section II Part I

## BOOK REVIEW

**RAPHAEL DE KADT,**

a research fellow at the Helen Suzman Foundation, is Professor of Political Science at accadis Hochschule, Bad Homburg, Germany. He is a former Head of the School of Politics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, with which institution he still has an honorary association. He is also a research associate in Political Studies at the University of Witwatersrand. He was also for twenty years, Editor-in-Chief of 'Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory' and has authored, co-authored or edited over eighty publications.



**HOW LONG WILL SOUTH AFRICA SURVIVE? THE LOOMING CRISIS**  
by RW Johnson  
EAN: 9781868426348  
Published by Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2015

# A Latter Day Cassandra? A Review of R.W. Johnson *How Long Will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis*

*In a moment of despondency about the United States of America, Walter Lippmann, the great American journalist wrote that 'there is no greater necessity for men who live in communities than that they be governed, self-governed if possible, well-governed if they are fortunate, but in any event, governed.'* Lippmann's 'Hobbesian wisdom', quoted by Samuel Huntington in the opening pages of his pioneering study, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, helps to frame the remit of that now classic work. It is also a leitmotiv of the book under review.

R.W. Johnson, in this provocative new book, claims that South Africa is no longer governed – at least in any reasonably meaningful sense of that term – and, certainly, is not well governed. Further, he asserts that the consequences of the ills of the South African polity entail a looming, major, economic crisis likely to culminate in the need for a bailout by the IMF. Such a bailout would bring with it inevitable hardships and austerity which, though necessary, would afflict most harshly the worst-off members of the society. It would also have significant political implications

The source of South Africa's woes, as Johnson sees it, lies in the structure and history of the ANC as both a party of 'government' and as an organization with a distinctive history as a *soi disant* 'liberation movement'. In essence, the ANC – on his account – is not, and never really has been, properly equipped to serve as a party of government in a modern, constitutional, liberal democracy. He goes so far as to say that 'South Africa can either choose to have an ANC government or it can have a modern industrial economy. It cannot have both'.

Johnson's principal claim is that the ANC is a system of patronage and, as an organization and national party of government, is riddled with corruption, rent-seeking and, inevitably, squabbles over the distribution of patronage. The patrimonial nature of the ANC has also shifted in the past decade, with two major sociological factors playing an important role. The first has been the increasing salience of ethnicity, with the ANC becoming ever more rooted in KwaZulu-Natal through its absorption of much of the Inkatha Freedom Party's peri-urban and rural support base. The second, and related, factor is that since the highpoint of its post-apartheid electoral successes, its purchase on its erstwhile electoral support base in major metropolitan areas such as Pretoria, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth has weakened. Indeed, the ANC has – under the leadership of President Jacob Zuma – become

ever more beholden to traditional rural constituencies and to their leaders, and to its Zulu ethnic support. Paradoxically, the ANC – hailed so often as a progressive, modernizing party – has, he argues, become increasingly ‘traditionalist’ in character and, under Jacob Zuma has granted ever greater muscle to traditional ‘tribal chiefs’. In other words, it is not a party, in terms of political support and political purpose, equipped to preside over the desperately needed rapid growth of the South African economy.

Johnson alerts his readers to a number of key issues in the evolving pathology of South Africa’s political economy. I shall, for reasons of space, refer briefly to only five that strike me as crucial. The first is the ‘criminalization of the state’ and the corresponding degradation of state capacity. The second is the pervasiveness of rent seeking. The third is the role of ethnicity, ‘discursively suppressed’ for so long, and now reasserting itself. The fourth is the extent to which the entrenched interests of organized labour have distorted the workings of the capitalist market economy. The fifth is the growing disconnect from ‘the West’, and the embrace of an arguably illusory preference for the countries of the BRICS grouping and, by extension, of regimes that are not notable for their commitment to broadly liberal democratic modes of political organization or to the rule of law.

*Each of these pillars seems increasingly wobbly in South Africa. Further, and more recently, Vladimir Popov, in an impressive exercise in comparative political economy, argues that state capacity may be a ‘forcing variable’ in determining the relative economic fortunes of countries.*

It is now well established in the political economy literature that state capacity is crucial to both economic prosperity and, though perhaps more complexly, to political well-being. As Francis Fukuyama in his magisterial *Origins of Political Order* pointed out, to ‘become Denmark’ (a metaphor for both economic prosperity and social and political well-being) three basic institutional pillars are needed: an efficient, bureaucratically professional, state, the rule of law and governmental accountability. Each of these pillars seems increasingly wobbly in South Africa. Further, and more recently, Vladimir Popov, in an impressive exercise in comparative political economy, argues that state capacity may be a ‘forcing variable’ in determining the relative economic fortunes of countries.<sup>i</sup>

Certainly, as Johnson argues, a ‘criminalized’, patronage-riddled, and thus inefficient and non-meritocratic state does not augur well for South Africa’s future. Worrying, to this reviewer, have been recent efforts by the ANC in government to weaken the powers of the independent arms of the state, such as the judiciary, to hold the executive arm of the state to account. It is disconcerting when the Minister of Police acts in a manner seemingly disregardful, if not contemptuous, of High Court and Constitutional Court judgements and rulings and it does not bode well for a democracy when the Minister of Higher Education publicly reprimands and criticizes members of the judiciary.

Johnson provides a number of examples of alleged corruption and patronage and refers to pervasive rent-seeking behaviour. Corruption, of course, is not the same as rent-seeking. However, despite the claims of some ‘denialists’ that rent-seeking and corruption can be ‘good’. This is not a persuasive argument.<sup>ii</sup> Johnson’s account of ‘the new class structure’ and of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ is both compelling and disturbing, albeit that the phenomenon is not unique to South Africa and, in a way, was predictable.

Johnson may be largely correct to draw attention to the ‘intra-Nguni’ rivalry – especially between Xhosa-speaking and Zulu-speaking members – for dominance within the ANC. He is certainly correct, in light both of voting patterns at Mangaung and the voting patterns discernable in the 2011 Local Government Elections (LGEs) and the General Elections of 2009 and 2014, to note the increasingly important role of KwaZulu-Natal in defining ANC policy. He is also correct to identify the role of traditional leaders in shaping the overall balance of power within the ANC. <sup>iii</sup>

Many economists would agree that distortions in the South African labour market have impeded both economic growth and the alleviation of poverty. The creation of a ‘labour aristocracy’, whose members are beneficiaries of the crucial political support their unions provide to ANC, has made it more difficult, through labour market inflexibility, to generate employment for the destitute and thoroughly impecunious. Thus, South Africa’s Gini coefficient remains persistently and unconscionably high. Further, such extreme inequality – as global data-based research by Christian Houle has shown – augurs ill for the consolidation and entrenchment of democracy.<sup>iv</sup> Johnson is right to alert us to this, and to show how it articulates with the broad support-base (and reward) structure of the ANC

*Johnson’s account of South Africa’s embeddedness in the global political economy is perhaps the greatest strength of the book, not least in light of the ‘parochialism’ that he correctly identifies as a feature of South African life.*

Johnson’s account of South Africa’s embeddedness in the global political economy is perhaps the greatest strength of the book, not least in light of the ‘parochialism’ that he correctly identifies as a feature of South African life. A major study by Levitsky and Way has demonstrated that the extent of linkage with, and potential leverage by, the western democracies has been historically crucial to the persistence, or collapse, of authoritarian regimes.<sup>v</sup> In other words, intense linkage to the West is good for democracy. Johnson sounds a warning bell on this score, in that he identifies a South African shift, in international relations, away from the West and towards the so-called ‘countries of the global South’. One manifestation of this has been South Africa’s minor-part membership of the BRICS grouping with, of course, China and to a lesser extent Russia and India as ‘major’ players. The significance of this in terms of Johnson’s larger picture is that, since South Africa seems inevitably headed in the direction of an economic crisis and need for a bailout, a possible first port of call for a loan would be the BRICS grouping. He is doubtful that this would issue in an effective financial rescue deal, and thinks that the more likely outcome would be a politically vexed approach to the IMF, which naturally would be resisted by protectionist and ‘leftist’ elements in South Africa.

Johnson proceeds to offer possible scenarios in light of his projected or ‘looming’ crisis. One is the ‘Mugabe option’ which – and here he offers some comfort – is unlikely in South Africa. The country is too urbanized and industrialized – and too fully integrated into the global economy – for this to be plausible. Autarchy is not an option. More likely is a dissolution of the present regime – in other words a change of regime or government. Here, naturally, he enters a realm of uncertain speculation, but offers a number of possible scenarios – ranging from the dissolution of South as the geo-political entity that was constituted by Union in 1910 to various possible alliances and political re-alignments. I leave it to the readers of this review to read the book and reflect on these.

If one were to criticize aspects of Johnson's book, it would be to say that – while the author is a master 'story-teller' – he sometimes allows personal animus to weaken an otherwise persuasive case. There is a 'register' of people whom he seemingly dislikes, at whom he seemingly sneers, and to whom he either attributes a greater capacity to shape things than is, perhaps, the case – or whose positive contributions he fails to note. Sadly, these displays of *ad hominem animus*, sometimes of dubious relevance to his larger case, detract from the force of an otherwise powerful critique of the ANC and a shrewd essay of South Africa's political and economic problems. Johnson is at his best when he focuses on the structural features of South Africa's political economy, not least its embeddedness in the global political economy, which he analyses superbly. He is at his least compelling when driven by animus.

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A more important flaw in an otherwise arresting exercise in analysis and daring 'prophecy' is his failure to sufficiently acknowledge the lingering impact of Apartheid's 'legacy effects'. These are still to be felt – devastatingly – in the education system, especially in the poorer black education system, both at school and tertiary levels.<sup>vi</sup> Of course 'mobilizing the relevant counterfactual' is never easy with regard to historical trajectories, but my sense is that even a government of angels would have been hard-pressed to put the system reasonably right within 20 years. This is not, of course, to excuse the poor performance of government since 1994, nor to pardon the South African Democratic

Teachers' Union (SADTU) for its largely negative role (a force that even good government would have had difficulty dealing with), but to place things in better perspective. Another instance of a legacy effect which has likely rendered poverty eradication more intractable and job creation harder, is – in light of recent research done by Dr David Fowkes at the Reserve Bank – the result of impeded urbanization through influx control and the homelands policy. Indeed, Fowkes goes as far as to suggest that the so-called 'Lula miracle' in reducing poverty in Brazil was not so much a result of specific Lula policies, but a long-term outcome of rapid, relatively unimpeded urbanization.<sup>vii</sup>

I share many of Johnson's critical essays. I do, however, think that a less 'monochromatic' account of South Africa might help to get Cassandra Johnson's prophetic warnings more keenly heeded, not so much among his friends (who will likely largely agree) but among his critics. It would be good if R.W. Johnson – despite his protestations that he is not a 'Cassandra' – could, through fewer *ad hominem* attacks, be transfigured into Cassandra's brother, Helenus, whose prophesies were indeed heeded. One should note, though that, despite his gloomy appraisal, R.W. Johnson remains 'optimistic'. I suspect that beneath the surface of his book (in which he fails to say much about what does actually work well, and has been done well in South Africa – such as mostly sound macro-economic management) lurks a view that he once expressed in a Politicsweb comment: South Africa is a pragmatic society.

In conclusion, this is a book every South African should read and take heed of – even if they disagree with the author's analyses, projections and dislike his sometimes overly polemical and acerbic style. R.W. Johnson has, despite my criticisms, a special talent for getting many of the 'Big Things' right. South Africa not only needs to be



governed but, in light of the international context in which it is located, exceptionally well governed.

\*The title of Johnson's book is borrowed from his famous and perceptive 1977 book, 'How Long Will South Africa Survive', he correctly anticipated the ability of the Apartheid regime to hold on to power until sometime in the 1990's.

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