

Conceptions of a Transformed University: ‘South African’, ‘African’, ‘Engaged...’ – CHE Roundtable discussion, Professor M W Makgoba, 10-11 November 2004

Introduction

There have been a variety of critics of the HE restructuring process. There are those that say that the restructuring is a front for an exclusivist Africanization agenda (and the inevitable drop in academic standards). Others charge that the merger planning process has overlooked the need for ‘epistemological redress’ and, among other things, has not included consideration of curriculum-related issues. Still others argue that the architects of the restructuring plan have adopted a technicist approach, which thinly masks their servility to market forces, and which will exacerbate rather than ameliorate existing inequalities. In other words, there are people who question the capacity of the restructuring process alone to bring about real transformation in our HE institutions.

Our own Minister of Education has warned about the effects of ignoring issues such as curriculum change and organizational culture. Noting the absence of ‘Africa’ from the academic programmes and from the overall institutional culture of our universities and technikons, Ms Naledi Pandor, said earlier this year that “our universities have been racially desegregated in student composition if not yet in staff composition, but changing their ‘way of doing things’ is a far more complex process. Much worse difficulties than student profiles will face us.” As Pandor has noted, institutional culture is embedded at many different levels and requires both changes in structure as well as in attitudes and consciousness on the part of academic staff and administrators. Furthermore, she said, if we “fail to frame a unifying institutional culture the promise and potential inherent in the institutional restructuring process is likely to be compromised”.

Essentially, the notion of a ‘transformed’ university must involve discussion about the institutional identities or cultures of our universities. That a roundtable discussion on this topic is taking place is evidence of the fact that there is recognition that not all problems of politics can be turned into problems of management and that the problems of education in South Africa, and higher education in particular, cannot be addressed only through the creation of new governance structures at universities – merged or otherwise.

For the record, and to obviate the need for discussion around this, I would like to make the following point: Institutional identities, like individual identities, or racial identities **are** social and historical constructs; as the postmodernists would say, identities are *constituted* -- a set of signs that are given meaning in the social world. This is accepted. This does not mean, however, that they are any less real -- particularly to those constituted by a particular identity and who feel the daily effects of such an identity. Nor does it mean that identity cannot form the basis for a very powerful strategy to transform society and the higher education sector – to create cultural norms and codes which counteract prevailing systems of domination or colonization. An African vision and identity is no longer negotiable as part of the national programme of transformation. It is a demand of justice, a human right and a necessity.

Conceptions of an African University

The concept of an African University essentially means two things which are inter-related:

1. That our African-ness gives us access to a powerful and liberating consciousness, one that is worth 'reclaiming' (I use this word advisedly), defending and promoting in the context of Higher Education and in the arena of social transformation. It is an important tool in the necessary process of decolonization of higher education in Africa and in the development of a sense of ownership and investment in higher education process by Africans themselves.
2. That an African identity provides our HE institutions with an appropriate intellectual focus and an institutional ethos which can give Africa, and South Africa, a competitive advantage on the world stage.

Consciousness of an African identity can therefore be both a source of pride and psychological emancipation, as well as the source of competitive knowledge production and form part of this continent's contribution to the production of meaning in the world. It is a consciousness which draws to a close Africa's traditional role as a political football or geopolitical playground.

As Pandor has noted, the African University cannot be solely concerned with a change in the structure of university management or the racial composition of the staff and student bodies. The creation of the African University entails a holistic transformation, and it is a process that does not shy away from issues such as curriculum content, language of instruction, relevance and appropriateness of the institution in terms of national objectives and societal needs, the capacity of the institution to grow its own wood in the form of young black academics and intellectuals, the development of an institutional culture and identity that is not alienating to those who choose to study and work within it – the list could go on...

The African university does not reject European or Western knowledge systems or traditions, but believes that African scholars may raise alternative questions and that they offer a valuable interpretive key, not only to the African experience but the global experience as well. The African university is grounded in African communities and concerns itself with knowledge production that takes the African condition and identity as its central issue -- knowledge production that recognises the African condition as historical, not biological and defines its key task as coming to grips with this condition **critically**. The African university is actively involved in the reclamation and promotion of indigenous knowledge systems and the deconstruction of colonial discourses. It considers the African experience as is a source of ideas that leads to exceptional and original scholarship as well as informed public policy.

Conceptions of a South African University

"Truly South African" is the catchphrase which is commonly used to describe the kind of institutions we aspire to in this country. That we have felt the need to insert the word

“truly” into our discourse points to the complex past from which we are emerging and which presents us with particular challenges in the creation of our new institutions.

The first point to make is that injustices and inequities of South Africa’s past point directly to the need for our new institutions to embrace equity and to promote it in all spheres. So, major features of a South African institution, must be equity and justice.

Another important consideration in achieving “truly South African” status is the consideration of access issues, and this is also related to equity. For much of their history, the universities in this country have been indefensibly closed to particular races and to particular classes. Even though progress has been made in improving overall student demographics, certain disciplines such as science and engineering, today remain beyond the reach of black students and sometimes female students. These are the issues that we need to tackle if we are to deserve the title of a ‘truly South African university’.

The South African university is an institution that obviously understands the need for economic development and skills development. However, the effects of colonialism and apartheid on the people of this country cannot be ignored. This means that South African universities need to recognize the need for the psychological rehabilitation of the South African people, their cultural affirmation and the nurturing of their intellectual independence. This recognition filters into all aspects of the University’s life: its curricula, its institutional culture, its language policies, its style of management, the composition of its student bodies, academic staff and administration.

A South African university is one that understands its role in contributing towards broader social transformation, but it fiercely resists the notion of sacrificing research and science to narrow political interests. The South African university **critically** examines the political, social, cultural and economic concerns that are common to the majority of South Africans and its research agenda is one that resonates with the interests and aspirations of black majority. For example, it is concerned with poverty alleviation, rural development, the African Renaissance, issues around multilingualism, economic development, illiteracy and HIV/Aids – these are some of the key issues affecting the majority of South Africans.

The South African institution recognises that there is a historical, geographical and strategic relationship between South Africa and the African continent. It is committed to developing that relationship and exploring the potential benefits such a relationship can bring to all the people of Africa.

The engaged University

Again, we need to take a holistic approach. The concept of engagement applies to all aspects of the University’s work: Research, teaching, service. The concept of engagement with society is now seen in the light of a mutually beneficial relationship, rather than one-way philanthropic service by universities to communities. This new relationship puts universities in a better position to deal with challenges of development.

Community engagement embraces partnerships with the productive sector, the public and private sector. Such engagement needs to be focused, organized and integrated into the institution, and appropriately resourced.

Engagement also extends to the university's constituents – staff, students, unions, convocation, etc, and with its stakeholders – and this should be reflected in its management style, in the principles and practice of democratic participation and accountability.

An engaged university makes a visible and constructive contribution to public debate and influences public policy through its research findings.

There is also engagement with the rest of Africa and a re-examination of the South African university's role in helping to develop and promote the continent.

Conclusion

I do not perceive an incompatibility between the need for “an equitable, sustainable and productive HE system that will be of high quality and contribute effectively to the human resource, skills, knowledge and research needs of the country” (DoE, 2001), and the creation of a University which boasts an African and South African identity. On the contrary, and as I hope to have illustrated, I see the consolidation of a strong institutional identity as critical in our quest for ‘true’ transformation.