

CONCEPTIONS OF THE TRANSFORMED UNIVERSITY: SOUTH-AFRICAN / AFRICAN ENGAGED

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*Prof AT Mokadi
Vice Chancellor and Rector
Vaal University of Technology*

Introduction

Prior to the 1990s, the isolation of South Africa meant that higher education institutions turned inward and competed amongst themselves. Since 1994, the sector has been forced to recognise that the competition is “out there”. Higher education has therefore had to forge a new identity to cope with the pressures of globalisation - one of unity, coherence and single purpose as it confronts the world. It is however clear that higher education in South Africa has not yet come to terms with the needs, demands and expectations of the “new” South Africa; nor has it been able to effectively address as yet the degradation and disadvantage caused by apartheid. A programme of transformation was introduced in 1995 to begin such a process. Unfortunately, while transformation quickly became the buzz-word, it has not been translated into a coherent, systematic programme or taken beyond sloganeering or a convenient label.

Even more problematical are the strident calls for “Africanisation”, the urgent pleas for African Transformation and the increasing claims of support for an African Renaissance by South Africa higher education institutions. Commenting on “Négritude”, Professor Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate for Literature, is reputed to have commented that “*A tiger does not have to declare its tigritude.*”¹ Likewise, it should not be necessary for “Africans” to have to declare their “Africanness”; for institutions to declare their intention to “Africanise”; or for higher education to be constantly confronted with the need to transform. In the current debate on the transformation of South African higher education, many have fallen into the trap of sloganeering or academic bloodletting for a cause that should be a foregone conclusion. While espousing “universal” values and undertaking to safeguard academic standards, South African institutions have no alternative but to join the family of institutions of higher learning on the African continent.

There is however a dire need to define SA higher education institutions or locate them within the context of transformation in the emerging democratic society, before pressing claims for Africanisation or African transformation. For this debate to bear positive fruit, we need to endorse the call for the transformation in South African higher education institutions to be conducted in the communal African spirit of “*ubuntu*”. We need to agree to put a human face to the discourse between traditional universities, comprehensive universities and universities of technology: we need to humanise our institutions.

This transformation starts with setting goals in the form of a clear definition of what we are. To put it bluntly, it begins with the admission by each of us, individually and collectively, that we are *African*, regardless of whether we are black or white. We cannot be South African and not be African. The transformation we are calling for in our institutions of higher learning cannot be dictated or legislated from outside: it must come from within us, from within each individual institution. We need to share good practice and practical examples of what has worked. We need to build a consensus of agreed principles and elements which form the essence of what we mean by, and expect of transformation.

¹ This was not said to slight the late President Leopold Senghor of Senegal, a scholar and poet of note who was the driving force behind *Négritude* - the concept that ironically threatened to drive the African intelligentsia into disarray while seeking to unite it. *Négritude* was the African literary society's clarion call for unity and the equivalent of the politicians' *Africanisation* in the *uhuru* era.

This transformation is not to make us African: *we are African!* What it can do is make us better Africans. How? By giving our institutions a human face, a caring face. The spirit of “*ubuntu*” is humanising: it is nurturing; it is empowering; it is enlightening. The time has come for the higher education fraternity to shift focus from a preoccupation with their ivory towers, to showing concern for the needs and aspirations of the communities around us.

It is amazing that Africa actually looks to South Africa for leadership of the continent when in fact South Africa itself is largely so xenophobic that it does not recognise its position as privileged. Institutions of higher education in this country cannot afford to make a virtue of ignorance – they must act in an exemplary manner in spearheading the transformation to restore the African continent to its former glory after the cultural vilification of many centuries. That is the true meaning of the African Renaissance.

So, who are we? The answer is: we are Africans. We do not need anyone to tell us that our universities are African universities. The reality of our situation is that as African universities, whether we like it or not, it is our responsibility to find solutions to the myriad of problems besetting our badly underdeveloped continent. We are expected to provide these solutions: we have been empowered through our hard-earned education to be able to do so. Many of these are African problems for which we must find African solutions. Let’s not fall into the trap of hiding our heads in the sand and leaving it to the politicians alone to find solutions for Africa. Though politicians may “facilitate” development, the ways and means to attain this must be devised by academics through research if long-term solutions are to be found.

This may sound diversionary but it is necessary for us to know “what” we are and “why” we are before we can set about transforming our institutions to help us get to “where” we want to be. The time has gone when universities regarded themselves as sanctuaries that amassed knowledge for knowledge’s sake: in this day and age, the new knowledge that universities create can be termed “knowledge with purpose”. The goals are not merely theoretical goals: they are also the objectives we aim to achieve.

In the light of the above, I would like to address the issue of transformation in South African higher education because of its implications for our role in this country and in Africa. Only when we have successfully engaged with the process of transformation, can we hope to engage with Africa and our brothers and sisters in higher education in Africa.

Intent to Transform

In February 1995, President Nelson Mandela appointed a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) which submitted its report “A Framework for Transformation” in August 1996.

In December 1996 the Department of Education published a Green Paper on “Higher Education Transformation.” This document signaled the Department’s intention of Transforming education in South Africa in line with the agenda of the first democratically-elected government in 1994.

Further signals of its intent to transform higher education followed in

- the White Paper (3) “A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997);
- the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997;
- the CHE “Shape and Size” Report of 2000;
- the Report of the NWG (2001); the National Plan for Higher Education (2001);
- “A New Institutional landscape for Higher Education In South Africa” (2002) which laid out a programme for mergers of higher education institutions;

- the PQM document (2002) which outlined which programmes institutions could offer, and at what level;
- the “Language Policy for Higher Education” (2003)
- the “Establishment of a National Higher Education Information and Applications Service for South Africa” (2003);
- Replacing the present matriculation examination structure with the Further Education and Training Certificate (2003);
- “A New Funding Framework” (2004) which spelt out how government grants would be allocated to public higher education institutions
- “A qualifications structure for Universities in SA”, (2004)

In addition a number of amendments to the Higher Education Act were made between 2002 and 2003 which had very strong transformation connotations, inter alia

- The 1999 amendment to the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997) which provided for
 - the appointment of an administrator
 - the repeal of the Technikons Act No. 27 Of 1995, and the Education Policy Act of 1967
- The 2000 amendment to the Higher Education Act which
 - Limited the borrowing ability of higher education institutions, and to
 - Provided for the registration of private higher education institutions
- The 2001 amendment to the Higher Education which repealed the Private University Acts
- The 2002 amendment to the Higher Education Act which
 - Provided for the administrative powers of the Minister in the case of mergers, and to deal with the Councils of higher education institutions

Transformation Agenda.

The above gives a clear indication of the urgency which the Department of Education has attached to the issue of transformation. However, the transformation agenda has not been clearly defined; there have been no definitive monitoring mechanisms; there have been no instruments of assessment and no mechanisms to make adjustments when these have been found to be necessary. On the other hand, the sector has been characterised by a lack of heterogeneity and diversity; by lethargy, complacency, paralysis and a culture of minimum compliance.

Despite all the policies and amendments since 1995, the Department of Education has not had a clear-cut agenda to “action” its programme of transformation. There have been no key performance indicators, timelines or guidelines as to how it intended carrying out this agenda. As a result a number of clear signals for transformation have been obfuscated by contradictory policies and indications.

Higher Education institutions are regarded as the depositories, collectors, creators, providers and disseminators of knowledge, research and intellectual support. Yet, many policies,

government initiatives and pronouncements are made without sufficient consultation with the higher education sector.

Examples

- ❖ At the opening of parliament in 2002, the President spoke about establishing an ICT University. There was no dialogue with universities and technikons at the time to find out whether such a university was even necessary, or even how to set it up. There is a gap between what the Government says it wants to do and plans to do and what it can actually do. The consequences for the country are harmful and yet higher education could have been consulted. Why were they not? And what has happened since to this university?
- ❖ NEPAD was developed over a period of time through consultation at high level with African governments. The founding documents point out the problems in Africa and the areas which need specific attention and development. This is where higher education could now play a role and answer questions and issues such as: 'these are our problems', 'how do you think we can resolve it?', 'give us your input?', 'what can you do to assist?' There has however been no coordination, no coherent approach to bringing the two parties together.
- ❖ Numerous education-related policies and initiatives are constantly announced by various government departments without any attempt to get some intellectual input from the higher education sector. Use could be made of the expertise, the staff and students, and the proven research ability of higher education institutions. Yet, government departments will spend millions on consultants from countries who have no clue of the South African environment and dynamics, but who then come in here and impose a western/eastern/northern solution on a South Africa intergovernment problem.

Role of the Department of Education

Despite a number of policies, reports and initiatives over the years emanating from the Department of Education, there seems to be little coherence in its plan for transformation of the higher education sector.

We still talk about HDIs and HWIs ten years after democracy. Where has transformation got to; where is redress; where is the leveling of the playing field? The Department of Education has not yet begun to address such issues or even national issues which still bedevil higher education. It is tinkering with policies, student capping, funding formulae, PQM's, mergers and so forth without getting to the heart of the real issues. While the real problems in education are in the primary and high school realm, much time, effort, money and energy is spent on higher education.

Transformation is not merely simply addressing the racial imbalance in institutions. If that was the case, why then are a number of universities, which have always had a staff and student body which reflects the demographic face of the country, still struggling for survival? Is transformation only about changing names and faces? What about economic redress, policy transformation; programme change; industry/institutional cooperation; intellectual discourse; policy harmonization; economic interaction; sharing of best practice, etc.?

Policies contradict each other and the right hand appears not to be in harmony with the left hand. For example:

- ❖ The National Plan of 2001 promoted the concept of access to higher education. One of the methods to increase access is the funding of Foundation Programmes. However, when the programmes were developed and submitted for funding and accreditation, the Department indicated that they would no longer fund a Foundation Programme for access but for enrichment - thus shifting the goalposts.

- ❖ The National Plan of 2001 also promoted increased participation rate, along with access, in higher education. Yet, in 2003, the new Funding Framework shifted emphasis from input to output, and in 2004, the Department of Education capped student numbers in higher education - effectively limiting access and participation.
- ❖ In 2003, the Minister of Education announced that technikons would become universities of technology. However, the PQM document of 2002 does not allow a university to do what a university is internationally regarded as being there to do – i.e. decide what should be taught.² So, while universities of technology are universities, the PQM negates its right to be a true university. Yet, in a dialogue with the new Minister of Education, she gave the assurance that universities of technology should be allowed to operate as a university by offering degrees up to doctoral level.

Furthermore

- The Department of Education, which is the coordinator, supporter, nurturer and champion of education in South Africa often criticises its own higher education sector in the media and in its dealings with the public. Furthermore, the binary divide, which is supposed to have been dissolved in the NPHE, is supported at a subliminal level.
- It is therefore not surprising that higher education constantly faces a media frenzy, “bashing” and “trashing” of higher education in general and public universities in particular. The Department of Education stands mute when newspaper articles refer to technikons and universities of technology as “glorified high schools”, and when universities are referred to as “educating students for unemployment”. This seriously erodes the structure and integrity of higher education.
- Because there has been no clearly defined agenda, transformation has been tied to the term of office of the particular Minister of Education. Thus a Minister comes into office, drives a particular agenda or programme and then leaves. The next Minister does the same. There is no clearly defined departmental agenda which each Minister picks up and continues with. This of course is not the fault of the particular Minister but a problem of the system.

The Real Transformation of Higher Education Needs to Begin

1. Higher Education needs to be relevant to the local setting, the private and public sector, the impact nationally, the impact in Africa, the impact internationally. This requires a change in attitude and policies by the Department of Education and the government towards its “own” higher education sector. Institutions also need to grasp the initiative and position themselves to be relevant. There needs to be a vibrant and robust dialogue among scholars and intellectuals. Academics need to come together to debate important and critical issues relevant to the academic sector.
2. There needs to be a link between government policy and education, especially when government departments develop policy or when they set up agreements with overseas governments. They should come to higher education and say, ‘this is what we plan to do’; ‘this is the direction we are going to’, ‘what do you suggest’, ‘are we on the right track’, ‘are we doing the right things’, ‘how can you help us’, ‘what can you do for us’, ‘what input can you give us’; ‘what is your contribution’? Very few academics are included in technical committees or government delegations when these agreements are negotiated. Hence the implementation programme is hampered.

² The Extension of University Education Act No. 45 of 1959, which sought to limit the admission of black students to white universities, was regarded worldwide as a direct threat to academic freedom because it withdrew the right to decide “**who** should be taught.” In 2002, the PQM policy fell into the same category as it withdrew from academic institutions the freedom to determine “**what** should be taught.”

3. There should be a link between transformation and issues of access. Transformation is not only linked to ensuring that an institution moves from all-white students and all-white staff to black students and black staff. It is not also only the issue of access. There are institutions which always had a majority of black staff and black students, so where does transformation come in here in this situation? Clearly, there are other issues of transformation that need to be looked at in an institution.
4. The Higher Education Act has been amended every single year since 1999. This indicates a desire by the Ministry to control every aspect of higher education, and in this way reduce institutional autonomy and centralise power in the hands of the Minister. This goes contrary to the spirit of the NCHE report of 1996 which sought to keep elements of academic freedom and institutional autonomy intact. The NCHE Report stated that the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy should be maintained and that its proposed model of cooperative governance would preclude “any form of state control over, or arbitrary state interference in the affairs of institutions.” Guidelines were provided to limit the impact of the proposals on institutional autonomy.

Conclusion

What is the point of the proliferation of policies, processes and initiatives to transform; the various Acts and amendments; the plethora of interventions such as increased access, redress, mergers; if after of all of this, we are still faced with graduates who would act irresponsibly and apolitically and without refinement of character?

The concluding point in the transformation discussion should therefore be: what kind of graduate should higher education be producing. Issues such as employability, entrepreneurship and contribution to the economy are essential, but we cannot stop there. We need to go beyond that and look at educating, training and developing responsible citizens – a complete, well-rounded human being with a social conscience. Evidence of the real transformation of the higher education sector will see higher education equip a graduate with the ability and competence to participate creatively, constructively and meaningfully in seeking to find solutions to the socio-economic problems of the country; someone who will help to address the problems of crime, poverty, disease, violence, drug and substance abuse. What higher education cannot afford to produce is graduates who add to the problems mentioned above; or graduates who only want to get into the workplace so as to earn a fortune, drive an expensive car, or live in a fancy house. Higher education needs to produce graduates with an overriding interest in the improvement of the equality of life for all South Africans.

Even though it is ten years after the onset of democracy in South Africa, it is not too late for us to now embark on the real transformation of the higher education sector. Just as the formation of the NCHE in 1995 signalled the intent to transform higher education, this colloquium should today signal its intent to complete the process.

*Prof AT Mokadi
Vice Chancellor and Rector,
Vaal University of Technology
And Chairperson, CTP
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