



TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION – IMPACT OF A GROWING BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

What should a post-apartheid university in South Africa look like and how are students from an exploding African middle class handling the sociological transition into a world of opportunities that was not available to most of their parents? Prof Crain Soudien, HSRC CEO, spoke about these questions at a public lecture held at North-West University.

The idea of what a university should be is in dispute globally and there are no examples or models of existing universities that South Africa could simply adopt to transform the country's institutions, he said.

Speaking to an audience of academics and students earlier this year, Soudien said that debate about the definition of a university often revolves around the tension between access and excellence. "Is everybody entitled to a place in a university? It is a deeply provocative question when thinking about equality. Who should learn, who should teach and what should be taught?" he asked.

An evolving system

Soudien quoted the late Prof Martin Trow, an American academic and expert in sociology of education, who said that academic systems evolve through three phases. They start as elite systems for the privileged in which less than 15% of

the population is enrolled. They tip over into mass systems when more than 16% of the eligible population starts attending and finally become universal systems when more than half of the eligible population is in the university.

Soudien believes South Africa is in the midst of tipping over from an elite system to a mass system, but still a long way from a universal system.

"Elites think of their right to access to a university as a right of birth. The moment a system tips over to a mass system, it becomes meritocratic, requiring qualifications to get in. Elite systems are very homogenous. People come into the system from the same social background, speak the same kind of language and share the same kind of social experiences. They have the cultural capital that permits them to do that.

"Mass systems are more differentiated with people coming from all kinds of backgrounds. They

are like cities of intellect. We come out of an elite history that was structured around the reproduction of a small group of people who saw the university as a right of birth."

An exploding black middle class

Soudien said that the movement from an elite to a mass system in South Africa is the result of big sociological changes that happened after 1994 as result of the growth of the African middle class, an issue that sociologists have not studied adequately.

"It is a reality that has hit the country like a tornado. In 1994, the African middle class in this country was about 350 000 in a population of 44 million people. This has grown to either 3,8 million or 14,1 million Africans, depending on which sociologist or economist you believe.

"A massive social shift has taken place. It is not about the cars that

they drive, but the fact that people are now making middle-class choices in their lives.”

Cultural capital?

Soudien said that this middle class is “fragile”. It is not yet established, in the sense that societies become middle-class when people are able to reproduce their social standing. In material terms, their levels of wealth also remain fragile and they are highly indebted. South Africa has one of the highest debt-burden levels in the world with data showing that this new middle class spend a large proportion of their income on education. People are spending up to 60% of their disposable income to send their children to good schools and universities.

“They are thinking about how their children are going to be different to them. They are not like the white middle class that came out of the 1950s after the Second World War when middle class status accelerated incredibly and people were able to acquire property, to send their children to university and to move out of the working class. People who are now classified as white have been middle class for almost three to four generations and that makes a difference, because this process enabled them to accumulate and hold on to economic and cultural capital that made it possible for their children to succeed.”

According to Soudien, the new African middle class does not have this capital yet.

“It is still working itself out. People might be driving BMWs, but there are no books in the houses. It is a moment of development that is yet to happen ... and this is the dynamic that nobody talks about.”

A primary school challenge

A feature of the growth of this middle class is the growth in enrolments in the universities. The African student population at South African universities increased by 261% between 1993 and 2013. But in 2015, 47,9% of students were not finishing their degrees. The dropout

rate among black students in their first year was more than 32%.

Referring to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) report released in December, Soudien said that poor primary school education is probably at the root of this failure at university.

In 2016, PIRLS tested more than 12 800 grade 4 students from 293 schools and the learners could do the test in any of the 11 South African languages that they chose. Some 78% could not read with comprehension.

“It is an absolute national tragedy,” Soudien said about this finding.

Black academics

With half of academics still being white, the demographic shift among university staff has not happened at the same speed as among students. In 2012, there were 303 full African professors in the country.

“University of Cape Town (UCT) vice-chancellor, Dr Max Price, has argued that it takes 20 years for a university to produce a professor. His comments stirred a great deal of controversy with Prof Xolela Mangcu, also from UCT, rejecting the argument, suggesting that racism was responsible for the small number of professors,” said Soudien.

He noted that many successful black female academics believe their pathway through the ranks of universities is fundamentally through “giving up their blackness”; something he saw as a “deeply troubling accusation”. They were not able to concentrate on developing their academic identities. It was their racial identity that the circumstances were forcing them to pay attention to.

Against this example, Soudien referred to the biography of Prof Chabane Manganyi, one of the foremost psychologists in the country. Manganyi, when he realised that he was not familiar with the medical “dialect” that all health professionals all appeared to understand, made it his mission to find literature on neurology and neuropsychology and read himself into any important but unfamiliar

knowledge domains to develop a working knowledge of the brain. “He was able to come to a point in his life where racism (that he experienced) was not the most important thing he thought about as he was writing his PhD, but rather what he was able to say to the field about how the mind works.”

Decolonisation and black pain

Soudien said that the major contribution from the debate around decolonisation of the curriculum is the issue of black pain, which is prominent in people’s minds.

“We have to make it a pedagogical issue to be aware of as we work with our students in the classroom. It is a major existential thing, not just in South Africa, but also around the world. Don’t be oblivious to it, or think that you don’t have to deal with it or that it is somebody else’s business.”

Soudien said while speaking about decolonisation is important, the conversation also needs to move beyond that point. “We need to recognise the delegitimised African past to bring it into the full repertoire of knowledges that we have at our disposal. It needs to be as available to us as other forms of knowledge and other approaches to knowledge are. But we have to work with it critically, not romantically, in a way that shows that we can be critical about it and not only seduced by it.”

Moving forward

Soudien said people need to be empowered to feel whole again and to move on from what he calls a competitive and disabling “Olympics of anger” circulating amongst people in the country at the moment – ‘my pain is more important than your pain.’ He believes a university should be a place where students learn methods to consider different points of view. “Our explanations of things can never be brought down to and based on dogma, to a point where one person decides a truth. This is why I came to a university in the first place and it is an idea worth protecting, not to be given up.”

Report by Antoinette Oosthuizen