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True transformation of HE requires deep discussion and time

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 18 August 2022

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Great care must be taken in transforming South Africa's universities if they are not to be overtaken by ruin or subject to persistent, unresolved contestation, according to leading South African higher education policy specialist Saleem Badat.

The task of establishing a new social pact under which there is broad agreement over the role of universities in the country must, of necessity, be a generational project, he says, and should not be subject to the "political opportunism and short-termism" or dominated by particular civil-society or private-sector agendas.

"I believe it is important to proceed from an acknowledgement of what already exists ... and not be led astray by the idea that one can transform universities overnight," says Badat, who is a research professor in humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

In this context, he emphasises the need to "tread carefully", citing the threat that may be posed by a direct-action approach, such as that adopted during the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests that erupted across South Africa in 2015.

"It is important to acknowledge the fragility of the country's universities as institutions," he says.

"In this regard, the notion that something new may be created through cathartic violence, for example, by burning down the University of the Witwatersrand, is ill-founded.

"All that will happen is that smouldering ruins will be left in the place of institutions and research cultures that were forged over the course of decades and centuries."

Comprehensive review about core purpose

Rather, Badat advocates a comprehensive review of how universities should fulfil their core purposes, which he defines as knowledge production, teaching and learning, and community engagement as long as this is enacted by effective teaching-and-learning or research institutions so that it is not "an insult to the communities involved".

"A first step on the path towards an ideal African university is to agonise about and agree why [it] should exist and what are its purposes, functions and roles in such and such society. A social compact should then be established between the state, other political actors, economic institutions, universities and other forces to advance and support universities," he says.

"In the absence of such a discussion and the establishment of such a compact, the silent class and other struggles that underpin differing conceptions of what constitutes a university will persist and undermine higher education."

Accordingly, Badat notes that, despite the centrality of the notion of 'transformation' in the discourse about change at universities, there is no clear definition of the term's meaning.

"Universities South Africa, or USAf, [which provides representation to the country's 26 public universities] and the strategy group which was created to address this issue have failed, in my view, to ask and answer key questions: What does transformation mean practically in the domain of knowledge-making ... teaching and learning ... governance ... financing and ... institutional culture?"

In this context, Badat refers to the extent to which the process of transformation has been accompanied by a process of reproduction of other phenomena.

"Universities, whether black or white, have continued to reproduce a certain capitalist mentality even if racism and patriarchy have been challenged and undermined to an extent," he says. "The reality is that, although academics rail against neoliberalism, they and their institutions continue to reproduce dominant social and economic, [that is] capitalist, relations."

Coming to grips with a 'question of place'

Badat considers the concept of 'place' as crucial to any effort to produce a common understanding of the social purposes of the country's universities.

"Part of the problem for universities in South Africa is that they have not come to grips with this question of place," he says.

"These institutions remain a work in progress as they struggle to come to grips with what it means to be a South African university; to be of

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this place, although in a way that is not patriarchal but rather connects with the global and is open and permeable to knowledge moving in and out.”

In relation to social purposes, Badat asserts that there is “too much mimicking of external models” by the country’s higher education institutions.

“They cannot imagine that they are Oxfords or Princetons, institutions which are essentially the tramping grounds of the rich and elite, unless their aim is to reproduce the inherited apartheid class structure and foster assimilation into the dominant classes.”

Rather, he says, the country’s universities should place greater emphasis on promoting those functions where they have achieved excellence. These include community engagement and the development of academics as teachers, he says, both of which are fields in which South African scholars lead the world, having honed their expertise and practice over generations.

On a strategic level, Badat places great emphasis on identifying who can be the actual agents of transformation.

“At present, the social composition of academics constrains transformation due to a lack of consciousness, knowledge and expertise and an unwillingness to wholeheartedly grapple with critical issues,” he says.

“In this regard, student activism has played a key role in creating pressure for meaningful changes in higher education – although such pressure tends to dissipate once the participants in the student movement have left university.”

So, he notes, it is “left to vice-chancellors and academics, although they may not be well-equipped to promote transformation”.

Progressive union for academics needed

To foster a more progressive approach among these agents of change, Badat has motivated for the establishment of a progressive trade union for academics.

“Such an organisation must enable scholars to retake the universities from the administrators who have been permitted, sometimes with the support or tacit approval of senates that no longer function as guardians of the academic project, to exercise almost complete control.

“Of course, a campaigning academic union requires discussion among scholars about the kind of academic project they propose as opposed to the ones that have become shaped powerfully by corporatisation, managerialism (as opposed to effective and efficient management and administration) and the commercialisation and commodification of knowledge.”

Beyond the institutional level, Badat is a firm advocate of a differentiated university system as a means of addressing the country’s complex development needs: “The country does not need 26 universities of Cape Town.”

In this respect, he notes that the challenge in establishing a properly differentiated and articulated higher education system in which the institutions complement each other is one of history.

“Previously, differentiation was accompanied by disadvantage; and differentiation and disadvantage have still not been properly uncoupled.”

At the same time, while there has been significant reorganisation of the higher education system, it has actually remained quite differentiated, “although senior government officials may not at present publicly admit this”.

In this regard, Badat advises that more than 20 years since the “size and shape” debate, “it is time to revisit the size and shape of South African universities and review whether they are still adequate to society’s needs”.

A ‘killing field’ of aspirations

Meanwhile, structural factors in the tertiary sector are a major factor exacerbating the access challenges faced by universities: “[Under] the inherited inverted pyramid structure of higher education ... students who should be going to technical and vocational education and training institutions or community colleges are entering universities instead.”

As a result, the system is then failing to meet its duty to educate.

Badat explains: “A certain minimum standard is required to undertake a university degree. Otherwise, things become really difficult ... as they already have for students, academics and society.

“Outstanding, committed scholars talk about the graduation of students who struggle to write.”

To address the concern, Badat supports the principle that every student who can undertake a university degree should be able to do so – even advocating alternative paths for admission given the flawed nature of the schooling system and of the matriculation exams as an equitable measure of merit.

However, he notes that more must be done to ensure the success of such democratic access.

Accordingly, he supports free higher education for those who cannot afford it and the implementation of more academic development programmes that can improve scholars’ teaching skills.

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In addition, he says that working-class and poor students require significant institutional support “if they are to be provided every opportunity to succeed”. This may include three meals a day, and on-site mentors and wardens.

“In the absence of such support,” he gives warning, “higher education will ... remain a killing field of aspirations and ambitions for many students, with some 50% never graduating.”

In this context, Badat further argues that “the notion that online education can solve the high dropout rates that are a feature of all South African universities is a delusion”.

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Crain Soudien for 'The Imprint of Education' project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on their reimaginings of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher edited the transcript for focus and length.

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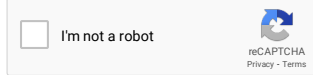
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