THE CHALLENGES FACING SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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The challenges facing South African universities in this transition from apartheid to a non-racial democratic society are immense. They are however also diverse, for there is no general South African university. The universities diffe enormously in their history, composition and functions.

The established liberal South African universities are called on to maintain their academic standards from the past whilst reorienting their institutions to face the new challenges of the future. Those facing the historically Black universities are even more daunting. For most of these institutions, the repressive shackles of apartheid made them not only political pawns but also stifled the development of academic excellence. As for the Afrikaans universities, what is required is a sea change to shift them away from their perceived historical role as allies of the apartheid order.

The needs of this transition impose major obligations on university academics and their institutions. South Africa has to establish a stable social order in order to restructure itself politically and economically for the future. The institutional fabric that holds the society together cannot simply be replaced with a stroke of a pen, nor indeed are any of the political forces contending for power strong enough to do so. But institutional restructuring and adaptation, and this includes the universities, is absolutely critical if realistic policies articulated under this transition have any hope of being implemented. Just as it makes no sense in these difficult days for universities to think they can blithely carry on in the same old ways, it can also be tragically farcical to create wholly unrealistic goals of 'total transformation' or 'people's universities', out-of-step with the general process of reconciliation and reconstruction taking place in the broader society.

The development demands are such that realistic socio-economic policies focusing on redistribution of access to resources are critical to redress the inequalities of the past and bring an end to the current endemic violence that plagues selected parts of the country. Without such redistribution and stabilization no economic growth can take place. Yet without policies to stimulate economic growth, inequalities cannot be redressed and the goals of stability will be chimeral. The intellectual and practical requirements of solving these problems, whilst still maintaining the inter linkages between growth, redistribution and stability, are formidable.

The universities must relate to these tasks in three ways:

● Make themselves externally relevant to the needs of the society in this process of transition, which requires institutional restructuring and the development of a new strategic vision regarding the place of the university as a research and policy generating institution in a developing society.

● Make themselves internally relevant to the specific needs of a non-racial educational environment by restructuring their institutional approach towards academic teaching, staff and student composition, and teaching curricula so that they are able to contribute towards the accelerated creation of graduates with specific skills and a holistic approach to the world.

● Integrate the two aspects of external and internal re-orientation with each other so that the teaching taking place in a university is relevant to the domestic and social needs of the students, and that the research/policy/outreach activities of a university are able to relate to the cognitive framework of its students.

Part of this task has fallen on the shoulders of university-based academics, and much of the necessary research and policy work being generated is being done by them. It is, however, either being done in their capacity as private consultants, or as isolated individuals engaged in disparate and unconnected policy research work within the universities. There is very little institutional support for such activities, and the current research assessment

criteria based on publishing in narrowly accredited journals tends to devalue the status of developmental and policy research. Most of these universities are concerned with purely educational issues and do not place a high priority on the research and development challenges posed by the transition. Hence the research activities of those academics involved in this process operate in a less than helpful institutional context. As a result they are rarely able to achieve the necessary critical mass, which institutionally brings together numerous inputs and synthesises individual analyses into a larger analytic picture.

The substantial challenge facing universities is to relate their daily activities in producing students to the demands of the wider society undergoing a major political, social and economic transition. But this cannot be done through the medium of individual academics merely extending their research and popularizing activities in outreach programmes and policy related work. It requires universities as institutions to makes themselves strategically relevant to the development needs of the populace in their immediate environs. And since South African universities exist in a developing African country, albeit one that is more economically advanced than the rest of Africa but which still displays the most appalling levels of poverty and underdevelopment, this means the universities have to restructure themselves to combine the best traditions of Western intellectual institutions with the needs of the majority of the population. In short they have to reorient themselves strategically to be African universities with a major commitment to the problems of transition facing the society whilst still maintaining the traditions of academic excellence.

This requires breaking with an academic heritage which makes a fetish of disciplinary boundaries and professional training, and instead to view problems as holistic and interconnected, and hence requiring interdisciplinary approaches. It means providing resources for teaching and research programmes and schools focusing on development issues. However South African universities cannot undertake this task on their own. They lack sufficient expertise and the resources to do so. Furthermore the years of isolation under apartheid have meant that many academics in South Africa are no longer at the cutting edge of international knowledge. This places a major responsibility on foreign universities and academics who are sympathetic to the development tasks of South Africa to give institutional support to strategic interventions of this sort.

Each university emerges from the apartheid era with its own specific set of racially tainted and educationally distorted characteristics, and these have to be addressed in order for them to undertake the difficult task of addressing their major role of producing graduates. The Afrikaans medium universities continue to be predominately White in student and staff composition. The Black universities, which have started to escape some of their origins, inherit a culture of repression and rote learning, a student composition severely disabled by the segregated education of the apartheid Department of Education and Training and the Bantustan governments, with very little research and post graduate education taking place. The English speaking liberal universities, with very few Black academic staff, ranging between 51-75% White in student composition, and drawing off the cream of the Black school - leaving population, regard themselves, to a large extent correctly, as the centres of academic excellence, but are stymied by a smugness and conservatism which impairs their ability to see the need for institutional restructuring and reorientation.

The internal educational tasks facing universities are even more daunting than the external ones of relating to the needs of their society. The mass of the students entering universities are ill-prepared for a university education. This applies to White as well as Black students, albeit in different ways. The schooling system in general does not encourage intellectual abstraction, lateral thinking and analytic synthesising. This requires new teaching methods which are relevant to the cognitive framework of the students whilst at the same time insisting on high standards. Yet the staff are themselves also often the victims of their own society. Insofar as most of them are White their lived experience is radically different from their students. Often the teaching methods applied by staff are wholly inappropriate and assume that the students they are teaching have entered via another educational door. And when this is taken into account it is too often done by adhering to authoritarian rote learning methods. Teaching is also dominated by rigid disciplinary boundaries, which divide up the social problems students are encountering in their daily lives in analytic ways

that make little sense to their lived experience. The problem universities face is finding appropriate institutional forms for capturing and implementing a multi-disciplinary approach to higher education.

A number of immediate and varied educational tasks face the universities. One cannot however generalize these, given the different historical trajectories of each institution. The staff composition in many universities is a serious problem. Unless an affirmative action programme of substance is implemented it will be difficult for many Black students to identify with the necessary role models that their teachers assume in such situations. However implementing affirmative action simply as a recruitment policy is likely to lead to education disaster. We have inherited an educational system where Blacks have been denied access to educational opportunity. The pool from which to draw local trained Black university staff is too small relative to the need, and this is exacerbated by the pull of institutions and businesses outside of the universities which are offering much more attractive packages, and themselves going on a drive to implement affirmative action in regard to Blacks. There is little point in recruiting Black staff for the sake of it, if such staff lack the necessary competence. Affirmative action has therefore to be both a recruitment and a qualification process if it is to be successful. Internal resources are, however, limited and some responsibility lies with the international community to integrate some of their postgraduate teaching with that taking place inside South African universities, particularly insofar as it assists in the process of creating a new generation of Black postgraduate students.

Staff and students come from backgrounds that are wholly inappropriate to the tasks required. This is not an individual problem applicable to this staff member or that student. It is the consequence of an historically inherited system where the language of instruction, and the cognitive framework that students bring to the university do not meet in the lecture theatre. When viewed at the systemic level, the staff do not know how to teach in the environment they find themselves in, and the students do not know how to learn because of the environment they have come from.

In conclusion, the strategies that, in our view, universities have to develop in this transition are:

● Shifting their focus which is currently aimed only at producing graduates with a first world perspective who are primarily prepared to enter the shrinking corporate or professional world, towards a bifocal approach which also stresses the development needs of the society we live in.

● Curriculum reform, which not only caters for the different educational experience of under prepared students entering university, but also produces graduates with an informed knowledge of where they are historically situated and what is demanded of them in this time of transition in South Africa.

● Tackling gender and racial inequality in terms of entrance requirements to make universities more accessible as well as to ensure that the academic staff more closely reflect the demographic makeup of the society.

● Striving for greater collaboration between different universities in the same locale and thereby creating stronger linkages between English liberal, Afrikaans medium and traditionally Black universities.

● Establishing increased international linkages to bring South African academics and post graduates closer to the cutting edge of intellectual work in their disciplines/areas.

● Establishing interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches to teaching and research.

● Accessing international research experience in policy work, and, in the process, generating local policy research, to make an institutional contribution towards a non-racial, more equitable, democratic order.

Universities have both an educational and a political responsibility if they are to square up to challenges of the transition towards a non-racial democratic order. Sloganizing about the future or hiding behind their past achievements will not prepare them for this new role. They have a complex and often contradictory task of restructuring the institutional framework and re-orienting university life to meet the needs of the mass of the population whilst at the same time maintaining existing, and generating new, fields of excellence.