



ANNEXURE 16

SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

A Working Paper on key policy issues from a student movement perspective¹, prepared for the second national Higher Education Transformation Summit, 2015

David Maimela²

¹ The author is writing from a student and student movement perspective based on the fact that he served as a President of SASCO previously and is currently a post-graduate student.

² Maimela is a former President of SASCO (2007-2008) and currently works as Researcher at the Faculty: Political Economy at Mapungubwe Institute, MISTRA.

INTRODUCTION

1. Higher education (HE) transformation has been a terrain of struggle for various forces and a policy priority for the democratic government at least since the appointment of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in 1995 by the late President Nelson Mandela.
2. Since then, many ideas and policies have emerged to shape the higher education landscape in South Africa, from enrolment planning to funding, to governance and democratisation, to articulation and differentiation, etc.
3. From the outset, we need to clarify that this paper does not seek to evaluate the success or failure of the myriad of ideas and policies that have governed higher education since 1994. Neither will the paper regurgitate the major policy debates and discourses.
4. Further, the paper will not dabble in the philosophical and academic debates, important as they are, about the purpose and role of higher education in transforming society. Such debates have been had and will continue to be had. Although the paper focuses on the transformation of higher education itself, the reader can make inferences in relation to how a transformed HE education sector will contribute to the transformation of society.
5. Furthermore, the paper does not give a historiography or timeline of key turning points in the history of education broadly and higher education in particular; nor does it do so in relation to the period after 1994.
6. The purpose of this working paper is straight and brief: it is to discuss a selected list of pertinent unresolved and urgent policy issues in higher education. The issues are subjectively selected on the basis of the tension or stagnation they cause in the system. Ultimately, some ideas and policy options are suggested as a way forward and in some instances, progressive policy is endorsed. And by no means is the selection of discussion or issues exhaustive. If anything, as a ‘working paper’, the ideas put forward are preliminary; however, they are presented in a manner that suggests that *decisive action* is required to move them forward!

WORLD OUTLOOK – FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

7. The first point of departure for the student movement has always been the truism that ‘*we are members of the community before we are students*’. Put otherwise, this means that students are social constructs of their society and the issues they confront in the community are qualitatively the same as those they confront and seek to resolve in the campus setting. Further, it is an acknowledgement that the university is an institution within a particular time and space, never an island. It too, is a product of the polity. As such, it has to be responsive and relevant to the society it serves.
8. The second point of departure draws from the popular mandate of the Freedom Charter of 1955. The Charter declares that the ‘doors of learning and culture shall be open to all’. The Charter is

deliberate in its phrasing when it says ‘ALL’. This means that no position of social disadvantage must hinder access to education and cultural actualisation.

9. At all times, the struggle for the transformation of HE must be understood within the context of time and space. Whereas under a racist white South African state, as Badat observes; ‘...the twin concerns of the South African state were guaranteeing capital accumulation on the basis of cheap unskilled black labour and consolidating the structures of white political domination and privilege’³, today the new democratic state has the strategic responsibility to transform the sector in favour changing expectations and demands, most of which have been precipitated by the 1994 political victory. Except for the rise of the finance and service sectors, a consequence of global capital restructuring (See Sampie Terreblanche, Seeraj Mohamed, and Nicolas Pons-Vignon⁴), the fundamental economic structure of the South African economy has remained the same: minerals and energy complex.
10. What does this mean for the purposes of understanding the struggles to transform higher education? We suggest that it means the following:
 - a. that the struggle for education transformation must be understood within the context of the nature of our political economy and the interaction between the two;
 - b. that long before Apartheid (1948), white minority interests had always sought to use education as one of the key levers for social engineering; and
 - c. that the inequality that exists today, speaks to all manner of social deprivation of the vast majority of black people from earning better incomes, gaining skills, enjoying social mobility and being part of development.
11. Of course South Africa is a capitalist social formation. As a general rule, the dominant political economy structures of any epoch or society, tend to influence and direct development in all other spheres of society, so that even the mental or cultural production of that society resembles the basis of material production of the very society. Cultural institutions such as universities are not immune from this influence.
12. In the *German Ideology*, Karl Marx makes the point even clearer:

‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it...The individuals composing the ruling class...they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and

³ Badat, S. 1999. Black student politics, Higher Education and Apartheid. From SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990.

⁴ These are academics and researchers who have sought to characterise our political economy, especially since the 1980s up to date. They have published works that explain the changing as well as the unchanging nature of our political economy that reproduces the same reality.

regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.’⁵

What is transformation?

13. According to Badat, with whom the paper agrees, ‘transformation should be conceptualised as the *movement* from one set of social structural conditions to another set of fundamentally new social structural conditions through purposeful and deliberate social action on the part of social actors. In these terms, ‘transformation’ must be understood as a double *process*: a process of the *dissolution* of an existing set of social relations and social, economic, political, ideological and cultural institutions, policies and practices; and a process of the *recreation* and consolidation of an alternate set of social relations and social, economic, political, ideological and cultural institutions, policies and practices’.⁶
14. In other words, any project that lays claim to the concept of transformation, must at a bare minimum, aspire and actually seek to realise fundamental and thorough-going change. Anything short of this understanding will be pretentious and an exercise in merely marking time.

What is public policy?

15. Public policy can be understood as the interaction between intentions, actions and outcomes. Public policy implies official decision-making especially at a political strategic level such as at the party, cabinet or legislative levels. In terms of process, public policy involves initiation, formulation and implementation and review or evaluation. Policy review can feedback to initiation, formulation and implementation of policy. These are distinct but interrelated processes in policy-making.
16. It is important that we conceptualise what public policy is because; we need to be clear about the instrument or a set of instruments available to the various contending forces in the struggle for higher education transformation.

THE MEANING OF THE RECENT STUDENT UPRISINGS

17. Besides the demographic changes taking place both in higher education and in society (the rise of the new generation), the recent protest movements in historically white institutions are an emphatic statement of disapproval on the lack of transformation in the sector. The students are asking the simple and yet profound questions: what is the meaning of struggle and freedom? What is the pace and quality of change in the university when juxtaposed with the expectations and promise of 1994? What is the direction of this change, if any? Who benefits?

5 Marx, K. The German Ideology, 1845. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>

6 Badat, S. (Undated). Fourteen Theses on the Role of Higher Education in the Transformation of Society. A paper prepared by Badat as a participant in the international project of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University and the Association of Commonwealth Universities on *The Role of Higher Education in the Transformation of Societies*.

18. It seems that the students are saying, by and large, that we are merely marking time - that there is no transformation in higher education at least in so far as it is conceptualised above. Managers of universities have failed the transformation project. The fact that a generation later, we return to the Mamdani and Makgoba questions, means that we have indeed been marking time. And certainly, if we do not respond to the questions of the students decisively, a generation later, we will ask the same questions again.
19. But students are also saying that the movement for transformation will succeed if it comes from above and below. If the political leadership and university managers recommit themselves at all to the project of transformation, then the students are willing to use their agency to support genuine efforts for transformation. This new broad movement for transformation must be harnessed for better outcomes. Institutions and policies for transformation can only succeed if the momentum is kept alive from below.

GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATISATION

20. The commitment to democratisation means that we should strive to democratise all our public spaces and institutions; especially so that they gain more legitimacy and become more inclusive. For some time now, the higher education sector has been grappling with how best to govern the sector and the results show a mixed picture.
21. For some institutions, a well-run university is one that conforms to formalities: compliance with the so-called 'good governance' principles, a phrase which simply refers to corporate culture and capture. This means that:
 - many of our councils see themselves as corporate boards running corporate entities and our vice-chancellors see themselves as CEOs;
 - by and large, the end-game is about keeping a positive balance sheet to the detriment of all other important values, activities and outcomes;
 - due to the funding model and other demands on the fiscus, universities are managed in such a manner that increasingly; they are exclusive, bordering on being 'private'. In fact, our public universities in South Africa are semi-private institutions if one looks at the fee structures;
 - increasingly, almost all universities have adopted the corporate language and culture of 'client-service provider' relations. Students are now clients and in this context, the fundamental rationale for relations with learning and teaching, is through money. Those who have money have easy access. Those without money find it hard to gain access; and
 - for the university to survive, generate income and surplus, it must establish income generating schemes which sometimes take away precious time from teaching and learning as academics are increasingly committed to a myriad of consultancy-oriented centres. In some instances, some universities have expenditure items that really make the case for further and diversified streams of income unavoidable. To the extent that these expenditure items advance knowledge and the core tasks of a university, they are welcome. However, some of the items are unnecessary luxuries such as the built infrastructure that requires maintenance and therefore escalation of costs.

PROPOSALS

Do away with Councils and IFs!

22. Clearly there is a need to rethink our democratisation efforts and models. The Institutional Forum (IF), meant to drive transformation, has failed to perform its tasks because of two fundamental reasons:
- first, it does not have decisive powers; it serves as a body of opinion. So, by design, the IF was almost set up to fail; and
 - second, the idea that one can separate issues of transformation from issues of governance is fallacious. Therefore, there is an overlap between Councils and IFs in terms of scope of work or mandate.
23. We suggest that we do away with Councils and IFs and introduce democratic University General Assemblies (UGAs) in which all constituencies will be represented and heard equally. The UGAs must be founded on principles of fairness, social justice, democracy, equality, representivity, **public accountability**, etc. The community, management, students, workers, academics, must be represented in the assembly. The UGAs will decide on all key strategic governance and transformation issues in the university/institution, including mandatory charters in the mould of the *Education Charter* of the 1980s. The UGAs will be the new highest decision-making bodies. The meeting intervals, protocols and other modalities can be clarified in a separate law amendment process.
24. Among others, the UGAs must vote for and appoint the rectorate in an open contestation that is open to the public with open and publicly declared scorecards, requirements, process, etc.

Increase the autonomy of the SRC!

25. Clearly, the Student Representative Council (SRC) is an important and necessary organ. However, the autonomy and effectiveness of the SRC has been under question for some time now. It has also been experiencing relatively low levels of voter turnout year after year; the further we move away from the 1994 moment. Most universities have reduced the autonomy of the SRC through funding, narrow managerialism, corporate culture and other measures that close the space for democratic engagement. The narrow conception of power and authority has made it possible that SRCs are feared and seen as disruptive in the 'university enterprise', whereas, SRCs are partners and yes, creative disruptors in the transformation project. No institution is as more democratic as the SRC in the university setting: They are elected annually and not appointed. They are mandated structures. They hold regular popular assemblies for accountability purposes and so on.
26. We propose the following funding models and structures to increase the autonomy and vibrancy of the SRC:
- the first one is a reformist option: a return to the original democratic funding for the SRC as envisaged across generations of the revolutionary student movement. The original funding model for the SRC is that, as a principle, every student must fund the SRC. This means that

for every student registered, there should be earmarked fees for purposes of funding the establishment and operations of the SRC. The SRC Fee/Levy must be determined and adjusted annually. In instances where the student population is low, other institutional and community sources of funding must be sought to augment the coffers of the SRC. As a principle, university management must not determine SRC funding;

- the second option is to adapt the Student Union model of the United Kingdom to the South African conditions. The SRC will be established as a non-profit organisation and yet voted for and accountable to the students through the normal democratic processes and as well as to the community via annual reports to the Department of Social Development as required by existing law. It will still source its funding per every student registered and have the possibility to raise funds as an autonomous entity, including owning property and investing in productive activity to generate more funds. Some campus commercial activities should be owned by SRCs. Student Sports and Culture and related activities should be firmly under the control of the SRC for resource generation, active engagement with the students, increasing legitimacy, improving profile, engaging with the community, etc.; and
- further, the SRC must invest in policy and research capacity so that students continue their role of impacting society beyond campus life.

The South African Union of Students and campus politics

27. Instead of creating space for democratic culture and debate, some universities have adopted a conservative posture that closes space for democratic engagement. Increasingly, student politics are emasculated. Some managers dream of universities existing in a utopian apolitical society. Nowhere in human history have we had a non-political society. The idea of killing the rich student political culture is counter to democratisation and therefore the transformation project.
28. The South African Student Union (SAUS) should be a union of students and not merely SRCs. It should be accountable to its national conference, democratically constituted by all SRCs in the country. It should be recognised in official government policy. It should also register as a non-profit organisation which is partly funded by students. It should be possible for campus SRCs and SAUS to negotiate a model for a split of the SRC Levy on an equitable basis.
29. We propose that the SRC election model for each institution be freely and democratically decided by the students. No manager should interfere in popular platforms of the students and no manager should be allowed to ban student politics as a culture.

The role of student support and funding in achieving access and success

30. Access across the post-school system is dependent but not limited to two fundamental things: student support and funding. Student support is crucial in a transitional society like ours, as well as a society that is struggling to produce better outcomes at school level. In the long-term, if we improve the outcomes at school level, student support at university or TVET will play a slightly different role to the current one (managing transition to university, crisis management, etc). In addition to better school level outcomes, we need better articulation between the school and post-school systems.

31. NSFAS should continue as a prime funder that gets us closer to free education for the poor. As a principle, all students who finish on record time should have their loans converted into bursaries. And other incentives should be built into NSFAS scheme so that we have various categories of beneficiaries based on academic performance and the needs test. DHET should continue its efforts to cancel the national Student Debt which runs into billions of rands now. The interest charges should continue to be low and only chargeable as a fixed amount once the student starts employment. Black listing of students must be outlawed completely.
32. New creative ways to encourage private sector financial support must be sought. The 2015 Wits SRC 1 Million Campaign has many lessons for SRCs and universities.
33. The current funding model is such that universities with higher research output (historically white) get more funding in the form of earmarked funds and other grants. Among others, funding is based on the principle of ‘sharing of costs’ because higher education has public and private benefits. Therefore, from a funding standpoint, our public universities are semi-private. In addition, it is important to note that historically white institutions still attract higher private sector and donor incomes compared to historically black institutions. The skewed nature of the funding reflects the unresolved national question and the coloniality that still plagues the system.
34. Historically black universities still get less funding due to the legacy of incapacity induced by Apartheid. The current White Paper on the Post-Schooling system attempts to return to the ‘redress fund’ principle. The Paper states that ‘universities with lower levels of research output must be supported through planning and funding to develop their research capacity in particular areas of specialisation, as well as to develop a research culture’⁷.
35. We support the return to heightened and dedicated focus aimed at addressing the unique needs of historically black institutions. But two things are worthy of noting:
 - first, public accountability for previous and new funding and related support should be a priority for historically black institutions. The underdevelopment of historically black institutions is not only about funding but; other related aspects too; and
 - second, the question of spatial design (geographic location) will continue to burden historically black institutions. The wider South African political economy must find creative ways to deal with the *periphery*.

DIFFERENTIATION AND ARTICULATION

36. We support the renewed efforts to deal with articulation in our differentiated system. We believe that government should press harder and faster to ensure that our universities are more differentiated and that the system is well articulated from school to TVET and right up to university. Public policy in this instance seems to be on track.

⁷ White Paper for Post-Schooling Education and Training, 2013.

37. More importantly, we need to move faster in terms of understanding education provision for the future and how it will affect the university degree, access to higher education, institutional types, performance, quality, funding, etc. To quote Nathan Harden:

‘We are all aware that the IT revolution is having an impact on education, but we tend to appreciate the changes in isolation, and at the margins. Very few have been able to exercise their imaginations to the point that they can perceive the systemic and structural changes ahead, and what they portend for the business models and social scripts that sustain the status quo. That is partly because the changes are threatening to many vested interests, but also partly because the human mind resists surrender to upheaval and the anxiety that tends to go with it. But resist or not, major change is coming. The live lecture will be replaced by streaming video. The administration of exams and exchange of coursework over the internet will become the norm. The push and pull of academic exchange will take place mainly in interactive online spaces, occupied by a new generation of tablet-toting, hyper-connected youth who already spend much of their lives online. Universities will extend their reach to students around the world, unbounded by geography or even by time zones. All of this will be on offer, too, at a fraction of the cost of a traditional college education’.⁸

38. It is possible that technological revolution may solve half of our challenges of access to higher education but; it will require a bold and visionary political leadership as well as university managers willing to lead the next major innovation in the sector.

TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (TVET)

39. In so far as the TVET sub-sector is concerned, we agree and endorse the following key policy decisions:

- the introduction of NSFAS in the colleges;
- the efforts to make TVET colleges institutions of ‘first choice’ for the youth through improving quality, funding, infrastructure, governance and programme options; and
- the efforts to ensure that TVET programmes are well articulated in the higher education or post-school system.

CONCLUSION

40. As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this working paper is to discuss a selected list of pertinent unresolved and urgent policy issues in higher education. The issues are subjectively selected on the basis of the tension or stagnation they cause in the system. If anything, as a ‘working paper’, the ideas put forward a preliminary; however, they are presented in a manner that suggests that decisiveness is required to move them forward!

⁸ Harden, N. 2012. *The End of the University as We Know It*. The American Interest. Vol 8, No. 3. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2012/12/11/the-end-of-the-university-as-we-know-it/>

41. In some instances, the paper does not seek to introduce new ideas but rather endorses progressive ideas or policy that is already in place.
42. Some of the suggested ideas may be regarded as radical by some. However, if the conception of 'transformation' proffered here is anything to go by, then describing the ideas as radical is a misnomer. In any case, democracy thought of as less radical, is no democracy at all.
43. The university managers may continue to mark time and fail the transformation test but the voices from below will expose and hold them accountable.
44. The government must really take its tasks to hold universities publicly accountable seriously. The deal since 1994 was that universities will enjoy autonomy and the people of South Africa will hold them publicly accountable through the government of the day. There is no institutional autonomy without public accountability and no institution is autonomous from transformation.
45. From students to managers to government, we need urgent, decisive and visionary leadership. The new broad movement for transformation must triumph!