

National Education Crisis Forum

National Convention - March 2017

Transformation in South African Universities

Preamble

South African universities, and Higher Education in general, has been a space for contestation and vigorous debate on the notion of transformation and how it should manifest in our universities. The apartheid-era landscape of colonial-model universities contrasted against bush colleges should have changed as a consequence of high-level legislation and grassroots activism. It is now widely accepted that, 23 years post-1994, this has not happened. Many interventions have addressed the challenges of transformation, and many institutions have claimed victories, but the speed and outcomes of the overall process of transformation have not met the expectations of student, staff, government or society at large. It may be argued that transformation at universities, on the whole, has mostly been a failure.

This document serves to contextualise the discussion on transformation by presenting an overview of the key challenges facing universities, and opportunities for radical transformation, to serve as the basis for exploring approaches to accelerate and increase the effectiveness of transformation henceforth.

Staff

[**Challenges**

- **Employment Equity:** Employment Equity (EE) is concerned with changing the demographic profile of staff, in terms of race, gender and disability status, through planning, monitoring, programming and interventions. Most universities have put substantial, albeit arguably superficial, effort into planning and intervention, with little associated resourcing. As a result, the staff profile is not changing substantially, especially at higher pay classes. EE fails at some universities because of numerous factors, including: an unwillingness of some staff to change; attempts to circumvent the legislation and re-interpret it (e.g., by refusing to hire staff who can be trained to do the job in a reasonable amount of time); EE planning as a compliance exercise rather than an instrument for change (e.g., by planning to do what was going to be done anyway); blatant lying about statistics (e.g., reporting non-South African Africans as Black); insufficient support for staff within the system, leading to high numbers of resignations among Black staff; a failure to provide appropriate support to staff; inadequate funding to support EE interventions; a lack of suitable training for human resources and members of selection committees on EE legislation and implementation; and systemic blocks in selection processes that disempower EE representatives on committees (e.g., by insisting on complete secrecy, coupled with outvoting the EE rep).
- **Leadership Development:** At higher pay classes, staff in academic leadership roles and management positions are particularly untransformed. While the top level of management at many universities includes many Black and female South Africans, the tier below, responsible for implementing policy and effecting transformation, has not fundamentally changed at some institutions. Thus, while equity is a key consideration for the hiring of Deans and Directors, HoDs and Deputy Directors are not in the public eye so do not get the same level of scrutiny. Black and female staff in leadership roles

also find they are placed in hostile environments, where they are sometimes set up to fail, where they are expected to meet a higher standard than their counterparts, where their decisions are constantly questioned and where the training and support they expected do not materialise.

- **The Black Professoriate:** The failure to establish a substantial Black professoriate in South African universities impacts on the development of a post apartheid intelligentsia, evolution of universities, but also on the teaching, learning and research cultures of universities. In some universities, senior Black role models are rare while in others they are appointed to serve mostly as window dressing, with no real authority. Promotions processes are used as a pseudo-political tool, to prevent Black staff from progressing, with criteria for promotions constantly changing as the goal-posts shift over the years in marketised universities. Universities often argue that merit is the only justifiable criterion for Black staff, while simultaneously hiring and promoting White staff for strategic reasons. At many institutions, the failure to develop Black academics has led to an influx of foreign academics - while internationalisation is important, it should be done explicitly in a planned manner and not as a reaction to the paucity of Black academics.
- **Disability:** Staff and students with disabilities are not accommodated adequately at universities to enable equitable access to resources. While the numbers of such individuals are low, they represent a sector of society that is most vulnerable and therefore deserving of careful attention.
- **Engagement:** The transformation project of many universities has inadequate engagement with staff as stakeholders, and relies on dysfunctional committees to provide the semblance of debate. Where staff seek to collaborate to find creative solutions, institutional management often fails to provide platforms and support for engagement across the staff body, effectively promoting disunity. **Staff Bodies:** Staff bodies, such as associations and unions, are not consulted adequately on matters of vital importance to staff, such as working conditions and the academic project. Many staff are highly overworked and underpaid, leading to widespread dissatisfaction over working conditions. That many staff unions seek industrial action in 2017 is an indicator of the rift between staff and university managements.
- **Staff Development:** Staff development is available at many universities but is frequently inadequate and does not promote the intellectual and personal development of individual staff. This should have been a primary responsibility of the university as employer.

[Unexplored Opportunities

- **Succession Planning:** Succession planning is inadequate, so Black and female staff who seek training in management and leadership cannot obtain such training, and therefore are further disadvantaged when higher positions become available. The lack of succession planning also means that EE at higher pay classes can be subverted because no suitable equity candidates apply for a position. Appointments are handled in an ad-hoc manner and new appointees are often expected to learn on the job.
- **Decent Work:** Poor working conditions of all staff are a problem, especially at lower pay classes. A new inclusive ethos is needed for university staff, where all staff take pride in contributing to the institution. This can only emanate from changes in policy on staff structuring and the provision of decent work for decent benefits to all staff in a university community.

Students

[**Challenges**

- **Access:** Admissions decisions are the first cause for frustration, where young Black matriculants find that they cannot access higher education, or cannot study in the field of their choosing. Some universities have student populations with demographics that are highly disproportionate with society, and in comparison with universities in peer countries. Admissions policies have begun to change, but have been very slow in promoting transformation of the student cohort at some institutions.
- **Success:** The rate of success of Black students is often lower than the rates of success of other groups. This is influenced by many factors, including: unwelcoming university environment; language adjustment difficulties; poor preparation and exposure to university studies; lower quality of basic and early childhood education; inappropriate curriculum and bias in teaching practice; shifting of the goal-posts for levels of achievement; and lack of appropriate student support. Poor performance is seen at both the course and degree levels. Black students are more likely to score lower marks and fail individual courses. Black students are also more likely to not complete degrees, to take longer to complete degrees and to exit from the higher education system at an earlier stage (i.e., without pursuing postgraduate degrees). Finally, when awards are given to students on the basis of merit, Black students are seldom the recipients of such awards at many institutions.
- **Exclusion:** Black students are more often excluded on academic and financial bases from university. Academic exclusion is integrally linked to success rates, and it is only when students are excluded that the detrimental effect of environment is realised; this is too late for many students. Financial exclusions have affected poor students, who are mostly Black, from pre-1994 and continue to have a severe impact on students, both during and after their university studies. Many students, as a result of exclusion, leave university with no qualification, a substantial financial burden and no hope for further training.

[**Unexplored Opportunities**

- **Accommodation and food:** Safe, hygienic housing is needed for students. The gazetted minimum norms and standards need to be implemented by universities and applied to private student accommodation as well. Food sovereign commons (e.g. fruit trees and vegetable gardens across campuses, link to community small-scale farmers) are required to ensure adequate nutrition to students. The current fast food outlets should be replaced by subsidized communal dining halls for staff and students.

Institutional Climate

[**Challenges**

- **Discrimination:** Racism, sexism and other forms of unfair discrimination are rife at universities, and affect students and staff. Disciplinary processes and policies are being developed but these are not accessible in all universities and implementation of policies has been uneven and unsatisfactory. Incidents of humiliation, such as the Reitz Hall incident, involving students and staff, have highlighted deep-seated problems within universities. While a few incidents receive media and judicial attention, a normatively racialised and gendered environment exists in many institutions, infusing the behaviour and expectations of staff and students in every interaction at university.
- **Gender-based Violence:** Immediate action is needed to address gender empowerment

and sexual violence. The "rape culture" at universities has to be addressed decisively and swiftly. Education for staff and students on gender-based violence has not been a priority.

- **Dignity:** Many staff and students feel alienated and unwelcome at universities, where decisions and practices frequently exclude or humiliate Black and female staff and students (e.g., initiation practices in residences, long-standing traditions that are meaningless to new generations). There is no sense of dignity, belonging and community. These are key elements of South African society, as enshrined in the Bill of Rights, and they should be mirrored at institutions of higher learning.
- **Managerialism:** Institutions increasingly exhibit a culture of managerialism and corporatisation in management and operations across all levels. Performance management, rather than development of staff, is seen as a goal, with an impersonal approach to student and staff relations. The market is considered more important than the needs of society and the students. Staff are expected to meet numerical targets for continued employment and promotion, with little emphasis on qualitative contributions, peer assessment, democratic workload planning and the quality of work done. Bean-counting has contributed to increased tensions in the workplace.

[**Unexplored Opportunities**

- **Physical Environment:** Many students and staff work in university environments that were designed during the colonial era, and celebrate the colonial era both in architectural style and explicitly with works of art. The RhodesMustFall movement highlighted the silence of universities on forms of oppression embedded into the physical environment and operations of universities, including the naming of buildings. Many universities celebrate the heritage of their colonial founders but not the heritage of current and past generations of Black students and staff. Bush colleges and bantustan universities were built in often stark and clinical styles, with little attention on the impact of physical environment on learning spaces.
- **Learning Resources:** There is a pronounced information deficit, lack of access to information technology and lack of skills to utilise libraries. In this regard it is crucial to pursue zero VAT rating on education material, increased funding for indigenous knowledge collections, promotion of the online commons, library training for students, access and promotion of libraries as a public good across society and free access to the Internet for all in university communities. A culture of learning must be cultivated.
- **Decision-making and Accountability:** University committees - such as Senates, Councils and Institutional Forums - are very slow to transform in structure and levels of representivity, even within the legislated frameworks. There is no accountability for decisions made in such committees, and especially no accountability for the lack of transformation of institutions. Universities need to reconsider the form and function of decision-making structures.

Curriculum

[**Challenges**

- **Decoloniality and Pluralities of knowledge:** Decoloniality must be promoted and implemented to replace the ethos and knowledge structures of the apartheid university. Knowledge structures and pedagogies that address the existence of coloniality should be encouraged, supported and promoted. Research, learning practices and pedagogical experimentation must occur in all disciplines to improve on systems of teaching and learning with implicitly colonial and neo-colonial practices in content, structure, and

forms of delivery and engagement. All knowledge systems must be valued.

- **Delivery:** Approaches to teaching and learning often use inappropriate examples that silently discriminate against Black students (e.g., assuming all students know the rules of rugby). Many modern teaching approaches allow staff to acknowledge and address issues faced by students from varying backgrounds (e.g., using glossaries or Learning Management Systems); these approaches and methods are not adopted sufficiently. More critical engagement is needed on aspects of teaching and learning. As teaching and learning evolve, institutions also need to provide adequate resources to support changes that ultimately help to level the playing field for students.

[**Unexplored Opportunities**

- **Public Good:** Most curricula are the result of evolution of previous iterations, without substantial re-evaluation of the underlying principles for university education. Universities need to re-affirm higher education as a public good, and this principle needs to guide both curriculum development and research. Qualifications, their content and structure, as well as research and outreach projects, must be guided by the needs of society, with a firm and fundamental local grounding.
- **Tiered knowledge project:** Many universities fail to support research agendas in departments and based on student research interests. Funding sources are skewed towards institutes and research units. Moreover, top down funding has the perverse effect of defining the knowledge project and forcing students to research topics based on resourcing rather than interest. Government grants, like from the NRF, cannot compete and are inadequate. Such funding also undermines the ability of departmental staff to manage teaching and be research active, thus reinforcing a tiered knowledge project.
- **Differentiated Higher Education System:** Due to historical reasons and marketisation universities have differentiated themselves. Some have more of an emphasis on research, some on teaching and TVET/FETS on vocational training. In the interests of nation building we need to make policy choices that strengthen research universities, high quality teaching universities and TVET/FETS in a manner that builds a functional, well articulated and purposeful higher education system that meets the needs of the country and of prospective students. A knowledge project for South Africa, the development of an intelligentsia and labour market planning have to define the development of higher education institutions.
- **Teaching and Learning Structures and Planning:** All academic departments and qualifications offered by universities need to be critically reexamined for relevance to our society and the world of work centred in South Africa. Structures at universities (e.g., faculties, departments) are seldom the result of careful planning after deep consultation with all stakeholders and are rather secretly agreed to by university Senates and Councils. Universities almost never create new departments because of urgent needs in society - instead, universities plead academic freedom to look only inward. Admissions planning is based on maintaining the status quo rather than planning based on the needs of society. Degrees on offer are sometimes highly questionable; many universities offer degrees in specialised topics (e.g., robotics) for which there are very few jobs in South Africa. Simultaneously, universities almost never respond to increased needs in other disciplines (e.g., computing). The Honours qualification exists purely because the education system was inherited from Scotland, even when the vast majority of countries around the world now have normative 4-year degrees. Underlying all these structures is the neo-colonial thinking that our universities are merely part of the fringes of a European education system. This desperately needs to change.

Universities, Higher Education and Society

[Challenges

- **Basic Education:** Numerous policy solutions, plans and proposals have been made to address the crisis in school education. Social power must be focused on the dysfunctionality facing our schooling system and that is contributing to the crisis in higher education.

[Unexplored Opportunities

- **Strengthening vocational training:** The TVET/FET college systems need to be strengthened through labour market planning, good governance, and accountability for job creation and national development. A functioning higher education system presents school leavers with greater opportunities and expanded options for further education. Such a system must ensure flexible complementarity and articulation so that learners can move into any level of the system based on their needs, and move between systems with greater ease. Universities should also support capacity building in TVET/FET colleges. Mobility of students within higher education must be promoted as a means to improve access to education.
- **Building eco-centric universities:** We need to address the lack of leadership on the climate and broader ecological crisis. In this regard, universities must champion zero carbon emissions through renewable energy, greater thermal efficiency in buildings, zero hunger through food sovereign commons, integrated public transport, car free zones, bicycle lanes, zero waste, research to develop climate science and an eco-centric knowledge project for university disciplines.
- **Links with Societal Transformation:** Transformation in universities is intricately linked to the ongoing transformation in society, and these efforts must be complementary. Universities can and should be a space for the development of new ideas that shape society while, simultaneously, the discourse within universities needs to be aware of and influenced by societal concerns. The university as ivory tower must evolve into the university as knowledge commons.

The Future: Radical Transformation for Reimagined Universities

A re-imagined university will not suffer from the myriad of problems currently present in our universities, and will reclaim its position of being a knowledge commons for the society it serves. This vision will require radical transformation of universities, where transformation is not a single end-goal but a continuous process of ongoing change and concomitant reflection.

This radical transformation can be accelerated through the following immediate actions:

- [A commitment to the public good from individual universities and the higher education sector in general, with associated resources and processes to invigorate related transformation projects.**
- [Development of an appropriate environment to support all staff and students, with respect and dignity for all, and appropriate resources allocated for this.**
- [Ensuring that there is accountability, with appropriate rewards and penalties, to incentivise the university community to change.**
- [An update to higher education legislation to create improved structures at universities, support the societal positioning of universities, and remove barriers to transformation of individual institutions and the sector as a whole.**

- [A greater understanding of the links between societal concerns and university transformation.
- [An initiation of a realignment process between universities and society, whereby the needs of students, university staff and society at large once again serve as the basis for the design of qualifications and operational planning at universities.

Governance and Accountability Framework for the Implementation of Radical Transformation

- [Discussion, dialogue and consensus on the framework to be implemented (Refer USAf, SAHRC and DHET documents). Policy to be formalised.
- [Independence of the transformation unit to be assured in reporting lines. Transformation unit should report to council as opposed to reporting to the VC.
- [Radical transformation should be a Key Performance Area, and cascaded from the VC to lower staff levels, so it is internalised as part of everyone's work and responsibility.
- [Time line for implementation of radical transformation: should aim for mid 2017 as launch and effecting date.
- [Tracking, monitoring and evaluation of implementation should be a formalised role.
- [Creation of an ethics line or whistle-blower facility for reporting anti-transformative practices.
- [Consequences for transgressions and non-implementation of transformation policy should be developed, consistent with the Constitution and other relevant laws and acts e.g., Hate Crimes bill presently out for public comment.