



Managing Universities in Contemporary South Africa¹

Universities are the product of the political and socio-economic systems in which they are embedded. South Africa's political and socio-economic system has undergone significant transformation as a result of the country's democratic transition. This transition has been a double-edged one. On the one hand, we have had a political transition which involved enabling the access of South Africa's black population to the institutions of governance and the State. On the other, we had an economic transformation in which the South African economy has been increasingly integrated into the global economy with significant consequences for private and public enterprises.

By Adam Habib

The political transition has had a number of positive consequences for the higher education system. It has increased the pressure on universities to become more accountable. It has massified and diversified access to the nation's universities. While it has not yet non-

racialised the academy, it has made it much more diversified than it was 15 years ago. It is true that one of the downsides has been that the State has become much more interventionist in the higher education system, which has resulted in some erosion of the autonomy of the universities. But,

on balance, the net effect on the universities from the political transition is, I believe, positive.

The economic transition has also had significant impacts on the higher education system. But this time, the impact, on balance, has been negative. As a result of the impact of

a very conservative macro-economic agenda, especially in the first decade of the transition, State institutions and, through them, other public entities, like universities, have become increasingly corporatised. Managerial practices and accountability mechanisms from the corporate sector have unthinkingly been imported into public institutions and universities. Universities and their divisions are increasingly treated as business entities, and power has shifted decisively from structures like Senate (where academics predominate) to Finance and Council (where administrators and external stakeholders are in the majority).

The net impact on South Africa's universities has been dramatic. Profitability rather than sustainability seems to be the driving ethos of universities. Academic departments

higher education system was not a friendly, collegiate place, either in the Historically Black Universities (HBUs), or in their historically white counterparts, especially for young black academics who were never part of the power brokers (both ruling and oppositional) within the universities.

A more active and nuanced version of this response bemoans the current state of affairs, but fights back by trying to keep at bay the worse consequences of corporatisation dynamics. It is a response manifested in most universities in the country but is perhaps most successfully practiced in small towns where corporatisation dynamics are least intense. However, it is a response that is failing and is unlikely to be successful in the long term because it is impossible to create islands of collegiality in a market-

and a managerial agenda. There is a difference between profitability and sustainability. There is a difference between corporate behaviour and entrepreneurial leadership. It is a response that attempts to engage in ways that pluralise power in the higher education system. By seeking to disperse power, in a system that contains authoritarian tendencies, checks and balances can emerge and progressive change can be enabled. But it is also a response that recognises that there will be costs, and while it tries to mitigate the costs, it does not use it as an excuse for non-engagement.

One exemplar of this alternative response is a recognition that any serious restructuring of an academic institution is going to require great academics that have relative autonomy to focus on their work, are provided

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have had their budgets slashed dramatically in real terms. The administrative workload on academics has significantly increased. There is a greater push for third stream income, and quantitative indicators of performance have begun to proliferate in these institutions. The net effect of some of these developments is that the academy is no longer an attractive career prospect. The brightest students stay away from the universities. We have an aging cohort of academics and researchers, with the result that alarm bells have begun to ring loudly in important quarters of the higher education system.

What is to be done? The standard progressive response has been largely one of wringing one's hands and bemoaning the current state of affairs. Sometimes there is a romanticisation of the previous system of higher education as one where universities were defined by a sense of collegiality. The problem with this response is that it is simply confined to critique. It does not involve any active attempt to do something about the current state of affairs. The past is also misrepresented in a serious way. The Apartheid

oriented higher education system. This is especially so since universities are funded through the State in accordance with a funding formulae that is itself market-oriented.

An alternative response, in which I am involved, centres on proactive engagement with the context one finds oneself in with a view to subverting it in the long term. It is akin to a strategy suggested by John Saul in the early 1990s entitled "structural reform." This is a response which involves an engagement with a view to initiating reforms that have the effect of enabling further reforms, all of which in the long term will create a new structured balance of power that should enable the transformation of the very system itself. This is a response that tries to advance a progressive agenda within the context one finds oneself in. It is a response that recognises that there are negative consequences to the engagement, but nevertheless argues that it is better to advance a progressive agenda with some negative consequences than do nothing at all.

Furthermore, this alternative response recognises that there is a difference between a corporate culture

with an enabling environment to do so, and are rewarded for their initiatives. Restructuring also requires resources and if it is not immediately available, then it has to be mobilised. Sometimes hard choices will have to be made about what gets sacrificed so that more crucial and core initiatives are adequately resourced. So, in the institutions that have been successful in restructuring and enhancing academic and research efficiencies – the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) being two such cases in the last decade – there has been the hunt for successful academic talent who are sometimes paid beyond the scales of the mainstream academy.

In the institution I currently work at – the University of Johannesburg (UJ) – we have created an environment of incentives where productive researchers are rewarded. There is a small core of excellent research and teaching staff who are rewarded in terms of their remuneration beyond the normal scales through a special non-pensionable allowance. In addition, we have an annual Vice Chancellor's award where the top

researcher gets R500,000, and the top new researcher gets R250,000. Three top teachers also annually get a reward of R150,000. The institution has also established a research incentive system where a minimum of between R22,000 and R33,000 of the research subsidy is invested in individual researchers' research accounts to support the continuation of their research. Finally, the university has more than quadrupled its internal investment in research activities.

The downside of this development is that it creates a much more unequal academic environment. But there are a number of upsides as well. First, the systemic message for younger academics is one that suggests that one does not have to leave the academy and become a bureaucrat if one wants to earn higher salaries. This is, after all, the message that became prevalent

remuneration of the academy, has nevertheless had some positive outcomes for both the higher education system and for UJ. The hunt for academic talent by UJ, for example, has broken the ethnic logic of academic recruitment in the Gauteng region. Until recently English speaking academics, and a few Afrikaner academic dissidents, gravitated towards the University of Witwatersrand (Wits). Afrikaner academics, with a smattering of English speaking dissidents who fell out with the academic mainstream at Wits, tended to locate themselves at the Universities of Johannesburg and Pretoria. The UJ's active recruitment across the ethnic divide broke this logic, and created an open academic market which has enhanced the leverage of academics vis-à-vis their respective executive managements.

power in the medium to long term. The new practices of remuneration and drive to incentivise efficiency and productivity, while undermining the relatively egalitarian character of the academy, nevertheless change the balance of power between academics and institutional executives. Younger academics do not only have to cast a gaze at senior managers as role models of better remuneration, and better remunerated A and B rated scholars constitute an alternative configuration of power within the institutional settings. These changes in the structured balance of power within both institutions and the higher education system create the conditions for further reforms down the line.

As of now, higher education executives in South Africa, as elsewhere, fall in two camps. There are those on the conservative fringe who explicitly

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in the higher education system in the post-Apartheid era when managers were increasingly better rewarded than the academics who undertook the core business of the universities. Now, younger staff can identify role models within the academy – A and B rated researchers for instance – who also earn generous packages. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the effect of this incentivised academic environment is the pluralisation of power within the academy because of the creation of a new group of privileged and empowered stakeholders like top researchers. Suddenly, the Vice Chancellor and the senior executives within the institution are not the only power brokers within the university. A and B rated researchers have also become institutional power brokers in their own right.

But what makes these reforms transformative or structural? What suggests that they are not simply accommodative within the parameters of the existing political economy?

The examples of the reforms and practices detailed above, despite some negative consequences like the increasing inequality in the

The infusion of new academics and the activation and empowerment of existing staff at UJ has significantly enhanced the research productivity of the institution. In 2009 its output was 40% higher than what it was three years earlier. Yet all of this has been occurring in an institution that is increasingly racially and ethnically integrating and which continues to service a primarily working- and middle-class student base. The UJ's student fees still run at a significant discount to those of its regional and national peers, and it consciously acts to ensure that none of its campuses become de facto racial enclaves.

But it is not these positive ends – however important they may be – that defines these reforms and practices as structural or transformative. What makes them so is that they begin, however timidly, to pluralise power and change its balance among stakeholders to enable further reforms down the line. If the prevailing state of affairs in higher education is a product of the existing balance of power, then any agenda of change has to speak to the immediate context and be directed to changing this structured balance of

or implicitly see universities as business entities that should be treated as such. Other higher education executives are hostile to this idea, recognising that universities can never be simply treated as corporate organisations with students as clients and academics as workers. Were this to happen, they realise that the nobility of the higher education project itself will be compromised. I count myself among this progressive group of executives. But until now the mainstream of this progressive group has fought a rear-ended battle to hold at bay corporate systemic pressures bearing down on the universities. The recommendation here is to engage the system with a view to advancing reforms that focus on the methodologies of change, that transform the balance of power among stakeholders within the universities and the higher education system as a whole. Only then, will we be able to change the tide in favour of progressive social and educational ends. ■

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¹ This article is based on remarks made at the Roundtable on Higher Education, Rhodes University, 27-29 October 2010.