Interview with Prof Saleem Badat
Interview conducted by Prof Crain Soudien on 12 May 2021

Crain Soudien: Could you describe your current situation in relation to higher education on the African continent?

Saleem Badat: Many people go to university but not many people have a close, long-term relationship with universities. I was at university not just as a student, also as an activist, helping to create and lead student organisations and confronting apartheid and injustice from the age of 19. Subsequently, the key theme that has run through my research and writing is how do institutions such as universities, and societies reproduce themselves and how can universities and societies be transformed. I developed as an academic over ten years at the University of the Western Cape, and then moved to help establish the Council on Higher Education from 1999. Then I was vice-chancellor at Rhodes University for eight years before joining the Andrew Mellon Foundation in 2014 and directing an international programme that brought me into contact with universities in a grant-making capacity. Now I am a professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), leading a research project on the histories of universities in South Africa and mentoring early career scholars in the humanities.

Soudien: We may in the course of this discussion look at this issue of what might be termed the "activist scholar" and think about that as a way of developing an objective for what is wanted outside the university and the knowledge project more generally.

Badat: I have had to confront whether, at heart, I have been primarily an activist. I have been a student activist; an academic/scholar activist; a vice-chancellor activist; and a philanthropic grant-making activist. So, I have thought about the relationship

between activism and what I may have been doing at any particular moment – as a student or as a vice chancellor or as a head of an advisory board to a minister – and I wonder whether the "activism" tag, which actually derives from my student activism and involvement in liberation-movement politics, may not sometimes get in the way. In seeking to address this kind of concern, I have been working on a paper on the idea of mentorship in academia, which is a concept that was probably adopted from the business world by universities without too much critical reflection. The paper seeks to dispense with the concept of mentorship that is based on a particular kind of power relationship and replace it with the notion of "academic comradeship", reaching back into liberation history and think about what comradeship in a contemporary academic context may mean.

Soudien: What in your view are the purposes and roles of the university from the perspective of your activist scholarship position?

Badat: As far as purposes are concerned, I want to distinguish between what I call educational purposes and what may be termed social purposes, although they are of course related. For me, one of the core purposes of the university is to produce knowledge – and when I speak about making knowledge, I include interrogating the epistemological foundations of that knowledge. The concept embraces all kinds of knowledge and all kinds of research, whether basic or applied or strategic and so on. However, the contemporary reality is that no university can do everything. Most universities have to choose the kind of knowledge-making in which they can engage, that is, the particular forms of research and ways of enhancing understanding of the natural and social worlds, that they wish to pursue.

The second core purpose of universities is teaching and learning, which is about cultivating graduates and ensuring that they are able to think critically, write and speak eloquently and, hopefully, embrace particular values. I am happy to grant the title "university" to an institution that only produces knowledge and educates postgraduates equally to one that only undertakes teaching and learning, assuming that in this case it will critically reflect on teaching and learning and produce scholarship on that.

Then, there is a third 'purpose', which is community engagement, although I am ambivalent about whether this can be defined as a core educational purpose. For example, I don't know of any higher education institution that only undertakes community engagement and I would not be able to grant such an institution the status of "university". Community engagement, in my view, stands in a particular relationship to teaching and learning, and research – and I would not advise an institution to rush to undertake community engagement if it had not already established itself as an effective teaching and learning or research institution. Such engagement would be an insult to the communities involved. My notion of community engagement is as a generation-three or generation-four idea. It should be firmly embedded in service learning. There should be a synergy and a mutual relationship between the research and teaching-and-learning purposes of the university and its community-engagement

mission. The findings from the community engagement should inform the curriculum and research; and the knowledge and pedagogic outputs should inform the engagement within a reciprocal and respectful relationship. Furthermore, the community which is being engaged may not necessarily be a local one. For example, it could be in Malawi for a South African university research project considering how insects may be used to combat weeds.

Moving beyond the university's educational purposes, the issue of its social purposes arises. In this regard, the concept of "place" is crucial. For example, part of the problem for universities in South Africa is that they have not come to grips with this question of place, which is why I argue that there is no such thing as a "South African university" or "African university" but rather only universities in South Africa, or universities in Africa. 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 this place, although in a way that is not parochial but rather connects with the global and is open and permeable to knowledge moving in and out. In this context, "place" should not be defined according to a narrow concept of relevance – whether that is geographic or relating to the terms of its intellectual endeavour – for example, merely servicing some local economic needs rather than fulfilling a more profound social, political and cultural role in our society.

Seeking to reach an understanding of what the social purposes of a university can be/should be, a number of questions arise about the kinds of research and pedagogy undertaken at the institution. For example, what intellectual material should form the basis of the curriculum? Certainly, the great texts by Marx, Weber, and Durkheim – but what else of relevance to the institution's place in South Africa and Africa? Also, in relation to the institution's social purposes, what kind of graduates is it seeking to produce; and to what end in terms of social change? Also, what kinds of community engagement should be undertaken? The old charity-based kind; or a type similar to Campus Compact that has become popular in the United States (US)? There is too much mimicking of external models and insufficient appreciation of the kind of community engagement already practised in South Africa which has a longer history of such engagement than many other places. Indeed, the country has much to teach the rest of the world in this respect.

In considering the role that universities should play in society so that they are of their place while also operating globally, it becomes clear that a university cannot be a single thing anymore, although it should be characterised by a number of core purposes. In this regard, I champion a differentiated university system. South Africa's 26 public universities do not and should not do the same thing. The country does not need 26 universities of Cape Town. In South Africa, the problem is one of history. Previously, differentiation was accompanied by disadvantage; and differentiation and disadvantage have still not been properly uncoupled. Nevertheless, there should be differentiation – there should be research universities; comprehensive universities and teaching and learning universities. The notion that all universities should be research universities is misplaced. Even in the US and Europe, there are only a handful of so-

called top research universities. Many others are just good quality teaching and learning institutions. There is nothing wrong with that.

In this context, attempts to establish a new global standard and the so-called "world-class university" are quite corrosive, creating also a competitive ranking game that is loaded against universities in the global south. This system is all about how many articles an institution has produced and how many Nobel-prize winners are on the staff, and so on. But it does not, for example, measure commitment to equity. Although it is useful to assess institutional performance relative to other universities, the global rankings as they are presently constituted are perverse and unhelpful. I have published on this.

The social purposes, functions and roles of universities must change, in accordance with time, space and place. The social purposes of universities in India during the 5th Century, for example, should differ from those of Bologna in the 11th century or Cambridge and Oxford in the 13th century. Universities are historical, cultural and place bound institutions – which further undermines this notion of a 'world class' university. \The leading higher education institutions in the US benefitted from the country's imperial dominance over the past century and have particular histories founded on, for example, slavery. So, this notion of world-class universities, as if they are abstract, free-floating, global institutions, is quite flawed.

Soudien: From your experience, how relevant are African universities to the current economic situation and governments' demands of their own countries?

Badat: Any effort to transform the public universities in line with the country's present idea of itself as a 'nation', even as this notion is being debated and is in the process of being forged, begs the wider question: What is South Africanism and how may it be constituted? It is important to acknowledge the fragility of the country's universities as institutions. For example, misjudgement in the management of a Rhodes University or dire local conditions could quickly lead to its demise. Similarly, untheorized 'revolutionary' action can wreak serious institutional damage. In this regard, the notion that something new may be created through cathartic violence, for example, by burning down the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), 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. So, it is important to tread carefully, however offended one may be by those early university pioneers who, while they may have been 'good' scholars, were also racist and patriarchal and so on.

So, while I am a (loyal) critic, I also value South Africa's higher education institutions. It is important to proceed from an acknowledgement of what already exists and is the reality in terms of which transformation is pursued, and to not be led astray by the idea that one can transform universities overnight. In this context, I think that increasingly many South African stakeholders do not value higher education and misunderstand its purposes. For example, government officials constantly use the

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word "skills" in their discourse but hardly reference the idea of "knowledge". South Africa's universities cannot be skills factories. They are knowledge institutions; and there is a difference between knowledge, competencies and skills. Similarly, while it is important to interrogate the performance of public universities, which can be quite dysfunctional in some ways, there should also be acknowledgement of their relevance to society through producing outstanding graduates in some cases, new knowledge in others, as well as some effective community engagement.

Broadly, there is a need for a social compact on the role of universities in South Africa/Africa that defines their educational and social purposes and the associated roles and functions that they should play in society This debate should start with the question: 'What is a university'. Following the student protests of 2015 and 2016, this is a question that everyone – students, scholars, administrators and policy makers – need to address. A common conception of what is a South African university is required and is a necessary condition for a shared discourse around the issue of the transformation of universities.

The question of what is a scholar and what is a student also needs to be addressed. For example, politics and scholarship are different vocations with different sets of responsibilities, a distinction that is not always clear to some activists.

Appreciating the challenges, I would like a clear definition of the much bandied about concept "transformation". Universities South Africa (USAf) and the strategy group which was created to address this issue have in my view failed to ask and answer key questions: What does transformation mean practically in the domain of knowledge-making? What does transformation mean in the domain of teaching and learning? What does transformation mean in the domains of governance, financing and institutional culture? The meaning of transformation in each of these domains and in the overlapping domains of the university and its place in higher education and society must be defined.

The debate needs to address the practical issue of, for example, how the discipline of philosophy can be transformed – and what would intellectually constitute such a transformed discipline. I assume that the curriculum that would emerge from this important debate would not merely entail more Indian or African philosophy, any more than it would reference only Socrates and Plato as its basis. Such transformation would not be a one-year or even a five-year project; it would be a generational project. It would also require establishing archives for some disciplines and fields – for example, in the field of music.

In terms of the progress that is being made on transformation, I do not concur that nothing is changing at universities in South Africa. But, equally, I do not buy the argument by some academics that everything has changed. I think the transformation project is somewhere in between and could either stall and be skewed or result in positive outcomes. I also think that the project is not a South African one alone; it is a wider African project. The issue of the decolonisation of universities needs to be

addressed across the continent and the relative failure to enact such decolonisation across Africa needs to be interrogated.

There must be an understanding of the currently limited capacity of academics to undertake transformation, as well as of the broader issue of 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. 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 universities. The question then is: Who is to drive the transformation of South Africa's universities? It tends to be left to vice chancellors and academics, although they may not be well-equipped to promote transformation. Decolonial theory itself, which is new to many academics, poses some significant intellectual conundrums – for example, there is the concern that black identity politics can fail to take issues of class and other social structural matters seriously enough.

So, there is a lot to think about in terms of the transformation of the country's higher education institutions so that they reach the tipping point at which they genuinely become South African universities that are mindful and respectful of place and their local and broader African contexts –not in a parochial or narrowly economistic way, but rather in the service of the broader social, cultural and political needs of society.

Meanwhile, many scholars who are committed to their pedagogic roles and promoting greater community engagement are struggling with the move to online teaching and the increasing unpreparedness of the incoming student cohorts, many of whom struggle sometimes to string a sentence together in English. One possible solution to this would be to introduce a four-year undergraduate degree that some students can do in three years, but others would undertake over four years. The idea was rejected by South African higher education minister Blade Nzimande, but it has been shown that even if establishing such a qualification would cost a bit more, the dividends in terms of quality, equity, higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates would more than compensate.

A further impediment to change at universities has been the extent to which the process of transformation has been accompanied concomitantly by a process of reproduction of other phenomena. In terms of the social order, South Africa's universities are highly reproductive institutions. Even at the height of the struggle against apartheid during the 1970s and 1980, and notwithstanding protests by some universities and some black students being at the forefront of resistance, in general universities played significant roles in reproducing apartheid and especially capitalism with its attendant deep-seated inequities. Universities, whether black or white, have continued to reproduce a capitalist mentality, even if racism and patriarchy have been challenged and undermined to an extent. This reproductive role is not something that is talked about. The question for universities is whether they are part of the project of the governing party and its macro-economic and political directions or do they stand for something different. The reality is that although academics rail against e

neoliberalism, they and their institutions continue to reproduce dominant social and economic (capitalist) relations .

Soudien: Could you describe your vision for the university as a model or an example not just for Africa, but for the rest of the world?

Badat: In conceiving new university systems for South Africa/Africa, it is important to address the issue of agency, including the balance of class and social forces, and to connect with the politics of the day rather than to produce pipe dreams. Ideas are Utopian not because of the goals that they seek to achieve but because they are conceived outside of human agency, outside the social forces that must popularise and realise them. In this regard, there is a need for adherence to values and principles and flexibility of strategies and tactics, given the class forces and the antagonisms, contradictions and paradoxes that exist within society. Notions of what constitutes a good society, public good and an ideal university must necessarily be tested in the heat of competing interests, including those of social classes, political and economic elites, the private and public sectors, civil society and social movements.

A first step on the path towards an ideal African university is to agonise about and agree why the university 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. 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.

The ideal African university must be predicated on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, with the former ideally being guaranteed by a country's constitution. However, it should be acknowledged that academic freedom is a gift from society and there are public duties and responsibilities that inhere on the part of universities, academics and students. In this respect, the individual scholar's autonomy may not differ that greatly whether their salary is paid by the state, as in France, or by their university, as in South Africa. In much as institutional autonomy is important for various reasons, is academic freedom is aided by but not entirely dependent on a particular form of institutional autonomy for the university.

Student class sizes is another example of the kind of issue that can become a bone of contention if changing material realities remain unacknowledged and there is insufficient discussion about what is deemed necessary and why. For example, with massification, a well-known university in Nigeria still clung to the idea of teacher-student ratios akin to those of the Oxbridge tutorial system, even as its funding could not support this. Although there may have previously been agreement about the importance of relatively small class sizes for effective pedagogy, academics may not entirely have a choice in some contexts – and may find that, anyway, large classes can be taught effectively.

So, hard conversations must occur in the quest for the ideal university in Africa. At the same time, there are some foundational principles that the university must embody. It must be an institution that is highly committed to making and remaking knowledge, although the kind of knowledge and its epistemological foundations would need to be debated. For example, should there be a "let a hundred flowers bloom" approach to knowledge production, with the existence of numerous and diverse institutions, or should the national effort in knowledge-production be tightly framed and directed?

The ideal university should also encompass an institutional drive to produce graduates who possess both knowledge, technical expertise and competencies and also the values and attitudes appropriate to studying and living in a society that is undergoing a difficult transition. South Africa is still a fledgling developing democracy.

There is the question of the core purposes, roles and functions of the university, although this discussion means little if no forces or agents for change are identified that can give effect to agreed purposes, functions and roles. There is the question of whether the African university should undertake community engagement and, if so, why and how.

I recently argued in *Transformation* (December 2020) the need to establish a progressive 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.

Although the ideal in Africa should entail *equitable* treatment of all universities, it should not mean *equal* treatment. The aim should be to ensure that institutions complement each other within a differentiated and diverse higher education system, rather than to have universities that all do exactly the same thing. A range of mandates related to teaching and learning and research need to be forged and all institutions need to be appropriately and adequately funded. It is discriminatory to permit the enrolment of PhDs at, for example, the University of Cape Town (UCT), but not at Walter Sisulu University (WSU). The establishment of a properly differentiated system requires discussion about the visions, mandates, roles and purposes of each of the universities.

The Californian higher education system, which seeks to promote both access and success for a wide range of students, offers a model to consider. The top 12.5% of students attend the leading research universities; the next 37.5% attend state universities; and the rest go to community colleges, but with strong articulation and mobility among the three different kinds of institutions. The South African system in its effects is actually quite similar, although senior government officials may not publicly

admit this. So, a way forward would be to forge a compact under which the various universities are offered appropriate and adequate funding according to the different functions and roles that they play and the purposes that they prioritise and pursue. (In some respects, the historically black universities remain inadequately funded, despite receiving billions of Rand in special funding from the state).

In a differentiated system, and acknowledging that most students do not enter post-graduate studies, some institutions would be allocated principally a teaching and learning role. Their goal would be to produce outstanding undergraduates; those of sufficient calibre, should be able to enter research universities for honours, masters and PhD qualifications. The quality of their graduates and the number able to enter research universities would constitute their reputation. Successful differentiation within the higher education system requires strong relationships among all the universities and to ensuring effective institutional articulation and mobility between universities.

A differentiated system would need to be financed adequately, with funds being distributed equitably and funding being provided principally by, the state and not the private business sector. Private funding can all too easily tie universities even more strongly to the corporate sector, with the increasing dependence on third-stream income coming at a price. There are implications for institutional governance. Although the direct role of the state is limited in South Africa, institutional autonomy can be threatened when governance structures are captured by particular forces.

It is necessary to speak about curriculum. There should be a course for all first-year students on what it means to think ethically, morally, systemically, structurally and environmentally about their place in the world, including their immediate neighbourhood, the surrounding town or city, their region, country and continent. It is exciting to contemplate how universities in Africa could not merely meet the needs of the 'knowledge society', but also promote what Rajesh Tandon and Budd Hall term a "knowledge democracy".

Establishing a societal compact on universities and transforming them accordingly requires a long timeframe, the spaces for meaningful debate and exchanges between key actors and shunning political opportunism and the short-termism that afflict many states and governments. Nor should universities be dominated by civil society, which is also a site of class and political contestation and promotion of donor agendas. The ideal university cannot be entirely above society, but it can only fulfil its purposes and roles if it enjoys academic freedom and institutional autonomy and has the space to dissent from the state and civil society, and adequate public funding.

Soudien: Could you talk about the issues of decolonisation and indigenous knowledges in relation to higher education institutions?

Badat: Indigenous knowledge is important for various reasons, not least as part of redressing the epistemicide that has occurred under colonialism and imperialism.

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Sometimes, the way that indigenous knowledge is presented as an aim or object of research concerns me. There needs to be more conversation on what exactly is meant by indigenous knowledge; what criteria, processes or what claims must be satisfied in order define knowledge as indigenous.

There is a need for more substantive conversation around the question of indigenous knowledge because it seems to mean different things to different people. In this regard, the description of a course as ethno-musicology, as at Rhodes University and elsewhere, and the general use of the prefix ethno- for other courses in Africa perhaps betrays a lack of confidence in the knowledge that is produced on the continent.

More broadly, the ideas of indigeneity, Africanisation, and decolonisation need to be interrogated closely, particularly if they are proposed as part of a project of decentering the western, universalist, enlightenment foundations of the epistemological model currently dominant at universities. If there is to be a move into something else, it must be undertaken in such a way that it expands the capacity to understand and intervene in the natural and social worlds, which is one of the core purposes of knowledge-production. Knowledge is seldom produced for its own sake, but rather, to a greater or lesser extent, to intervene in the world to make it a better place or to control people and resources more effectively. The drive should be to liberate the curriculum and efforts to indigenise, decolonise, or Africanise it should be framed accordingly.

There is the issue of authenticity in relation to indigenous knowledge. For example, in relation to the idea of tradition, what may be considered indigenous knowledge may have been shaped by colonialism. Similarly, the notion of chiefs as the founts of indigenous knowledge is problematic, given that the source of their authority may have had sometimes to do with colonial machinations.

So, it is important to open and bring to the centre the issue of indigenous knowledge to robust discussion, rather than merely confining it to a discrete corner of the university. Whether it is indigenous knowledge or decolonial theory, there has to be debate on how they help understand the world better and how they contribute to the intellectual transformation of South Africa's universities.

A certain degree of eclecticism is required, with an emphasis on integrating the new theorising into the curriculum and research in ways that can be of value – for example, for addressing the issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality and social justice more effectively. There must be space to dream and pursue all kinds of new approaches, the applications of which are not immediately evident, but some of the work must connect with the important problems and troubles of the day as part of a larger effort to create a more decent, fairer and humane society.

Soudien: Could you share your thinking about digitalisation and innovation in the university?

Badat: The digital opens a great vista in terms of knowledge, research and publishing, including by enabling the faster, more effective production of high-quality research. At the same time, I am sceptical about the deployment of online learning, especially it being the new normal and the dominant new mode for providing education, notwithstanding some benefits that remote learning can bring. Although online higher education has an important role to play, does it mean that every one of South Africa's universities should become online? I support blended learning that mixes residential face-to-face and online learning, but resist the notion of an entirely online future. In the present context, contact, face-to-face higher education is hugely important to ensure equitable access, opportunity and success at the country's universities. Working-class and impoverished students require significant institutional support if they are to be provided every opportunity to succeed. This may include libraries, computer facilities, residence accommodation, three meals a day, on-site mentors, counsellors, wardens and the like. In the absence of such support, higher education will fail to realise its promise, remain a killing field of aspirations and ambitions for many students, with some 50% never graduating. The notion that online education can solve the high dropout rates that are a feature of almost all universities is a delusion.

Although the continuing problem of high failure rates may partly be attributed to inadequate state funding, it begs the question of whether the country's universities are really geared to supporting students other than those from wealthy or middle-class backgrounds. Students need to be better prepared by schools for university, but universities also need to change in profound ways. They cannot imagine that they are Oxfords or Princeton's, institutions that are essentially the tramping grounds of the rich and elites, unless their aim is to reproduce the inherited apartheid class structure and foster assimilation into the dominant classes. In this case, there is no project at all to contribute to transforming society only the continuous reproduction of capitalism.

Soudien: In this context, could you address the issue of access requirements, particularly in relation to the question of transitions to livelihoods in society?

Badat: As vice-chancellor at Rhodes University [from 2006 to 2014], where access requirements were fairly high, I agreed that there were minimum skills, competencies and knowledge that had to be expected of prospective students. But, I was also concerned that the idea of merit was reduced to the results of students in their matriculation exams. I wanted to use the national benchmark test (NBT), which can be undertaken by South African students as an alternative measure to identify students whose matric results may have been below the bar set for entry to Rhodes but who demonstrated the intellectual capacity to flourish at university with appropriate support. Alternative paths to admission could also include the presentation of portfolios by would-be students, as is the practice at some universities in the United States (US).

At the same time, a certain minimum standard is required to undertake a university degree. Otherwise, things become really difficult with respect to quality, meaningful equity and development needs, as they already have, for students, academics, and

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society. Outstanding committed scholars talk about the graduation of students who struggle to write. The introduction of performance management and key performance indicators (KPIs) for academics, which can include ensuring a high student pass rate, introduces potentially dangerous perversities that further corrodes quality.

The problem of access may also be attributed to the inherited inverted pyramid of higher education, under which students who should be going to further education and training (FET) or community colleges are entering universities instead. In a better planned, differentiated and articulated system, the universities would have access requirements appropriate to their purposes, functions and roles. It is time to revisit the size and shape of South African universities and review whether they are still adequate to society's needs. It has been more than 20 years since the last such assessment in 2001. Such a review would help to define the access requirements for the various higher education institutions based on their purposes and roles.

Although entrance requirements cannot be based on race, sex, gender, age, geography or income, there is clearly a higher proportion of middle class and wealthy students than working-class and rural poor students at the country's top research (and historically white) universities. In addition, a relatively small percentage of South African schools produce the bulk of students who enter research universities such as Rhodes, UCT, Stellenbosch, Wits, and others.

Although the implementation of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has freed many poor students of the burden of debt accrued at universities, it has also given rise to the argument that billions of Rand of public money is being 'wasted' because some 50% of students drop out and never graduate – an issue that must be taken seriously.

Notwithstanding the clear socio-economic inequity in terms of access, it would be unwise, if only from the perspective of institutional budgets to restrict the access of fee-paying students from middle-class and wealthy families. Rather, until the country's macro-economic and social policy and tax system is more egalitarian, the middle classes and the wealthy who tend to derive the greatest benefits from a university education should pay for it, while free higher education should be for those who are otherwise unable to financially access universities.

My approach at Rhodes was that only students who had a prospect of success with the support offered should be accepted. Given funding challenges at that time, the policy was that it was better to accept fewer students with greater prospects of success than to accept more and see them fail. I rejected the "equal misery" policy which sees large numbers of black working class or rural poor students quickly dropping out for financial and other reasons.

Of course, adopting such a 'better fewer-but-better' policy poses a real political and social dilemma. For example, how do you constitute cohorts in relation to race, class, gender, sex, geography, income, and so on. In addition, appropriate support must be

provided – such as places in residences, three meals and so on. This was possible at Rhodes because it is a highly residential university with over 50% of its students in residences.

The success of democratised access also depends on the provision of effective student and staff support through academic development programmes. In this regard, despite greater state funding for academic development programmes, it is debatable whether such funding is deployed effectively. The focus should be on strengthening the academic development support – such as supporting academics to teach and supervise effectively– that has been undertaken in South Africa for over 40 years now and through which much has been learnt. The challenge of academic development programmes relates primarily to a lack of staff with the appropriate knowledge and expertise who can effectively support academics to implement new initiatives.

Access is also related to ensuring an institutional culture that is embracing and makes students and scholars feel at home, while also challenging them intellectually. The cultures of South Africa's universities still fall short in terms conditions that maximise opportunities for students and black and women academic staff.

The overall challenge is to transform universities while ensuring that equity is accompanied by quality and that there is a significant contribution to society's development needs. Not one or the other, but all these goals need to be pursued simultaneously. Without equity, the inequalities of the apartheid past are reproduced. If insufficient attention is paid to quality and standards (appropriately defined), then it is a hollow equity that is being produced, and society is deprived of the graduates that are required to manage, administer and provide public services and ensure economic development.

Soudien: Can you reflect on an innovation or a best practice from your experience that may be used as an example or as a way of thinking about making South African universities better?

Badat: The academic development work undertaken at Rhodes has been a significant achievement, promoting the importance of modules on learning and teaching, curriculum and assessment so that academics are effectively equipped to design curricula, teach and assess. The work, which has challenged the simplistic notion that a PhD or outstanding research credentials qualify academics to be teachers, has produced profound innovations in the field of teaching and learning, some of which have taken scholars out of their comfort zones, but to their benefit. The academic development movement in South Africa is a field of innovation in which the country leads the world. South African universities, collaborating in the field of academic development with leading universities elsewhere on the continent and in the world.

Impressive innovations have also occurred at the micro-level. An outstanding Rhodes English literature scholar with a profound commitment to community engagement has sought to address her concern with the literacy standards of undergraduate students

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by fostering reading and book clubs in a nearby historically African township. The initiative could not solve the failures of schooling, but it enhanced literacy in English, as required by the university.

It is important not to forget the broader language issue when considering this notion of the ideal African university. Struggle stalwart Neville Alexander warned in 2001 as the leader of the Language Plan Task Group that unless efforts were taken to introduce multilingualism at universities, the issue would still be discussed in 20 years' time, which has been the case. For all his talk about multilingualism, minister Nzimande has done little to support practically programmes that can lead to history and other disciplines being taught in Xhosa or other indigenous languages. Of course, there are challenges in promoting Xhosa, Sotho and Zulu as languages of instruction and scholarship – and there is also the issue of whether all indigenous languages, can or should be similarly promoted. The apartheid government, however, succeeded in establishing Afrikaans as a language of scholarship at universities, so it is possible. Language is important beyond human rights concerns and the issue of respect. Perhaps the present high failure and dropout rates would dissipate if students were educated in Zulu or Xhosa – which would entail producing multilingual academics, all of whom should be able to teach in at least one indigenous language not including Afrikaans. However, and notwithstanding the major resource implications of instituting multilingualism, the major obstacle to such a programme is a lack of economic or political interest. A new multilingual approach could have been instituted at Sol Plaatje University and the University of Mpumalanga when these institutions were established in 2014. Instead, new universities of essentially the old kind were created and for quite parochial political reasons –every province must have a university.