

The Imprint of Education

The Imprint of Education (TIE) is a project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation that is exploring the post-graduation trajectories of Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program alumni. TIE is investigating topics such as ethical and transformative leadership, give back, employment and entrepreneurship, student support and mentoring. It consists of five sub-projects or learning activities. The TIE project principal investigators are Prof. Sharlene Swartz, Dr Alude Mahali and Dr Andrea Juan.



Reimagining the African University – Conversation Series

Learning Activity Four consists of a series of conversations with experienced scholars and thought leaders on the future of higher education in Africa. In Reimagining the African University, they discuss challenges, best practices, and the potential for innovation to initiate further dialogue. This transcript is part of a series of interviews conducted in 2021 and may be used with appropriate attribution for scholarly purposes. The learning activity is coordinated by Prof. Thierry Luescher, under the intellectual leadership of Prof. Crain Soudien.

Interview with Ms Lihle Ngcobozi

Interview conducted by Prof David Everatt on 08 July 2021

David Everatt: Tell me about your relationship with higher education in South Africa.

Lihle Ngcobozi: At Rhodes University, I went from being a regular teenager transitioning into a young adult in a new environment and province, to becoming quite immersed in student politics and student-organising in the period just before the nationwide #FeesMustFall protests erupted in 2015. I went from engaging in fun stuff, such as the university's music radio station, and a quite apolitical form of activism to becoming involved in a struggle which addressed the issues of race and class and the ways in which these shaped how the classroom, the university and the community as a whole in Grahamstown and eRhini were experienced. So, I then found myself dealing with the vice-chancellor and the different departments, including the student governance department, within the institution – and I had to learn how to manage this engagement quite quickly. For example, in the face of an administration which was very passive aggressive, I needed to be quite forthcoming and abrasive in my interactions. As a result of this experience, my view of the university, including my department, changed greatly as I came to realise that the administration was just, in some instances, a reflection of the current governing structure in South Africa.

Everatt: Can you describe how that activist experience has affected how you see yourself now that you have become a lecturer in the School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and have crossed from being one of the students to being identified potentially as part of the problem?

Ngcobozi: Having moved from student to lecturer, I felt obliged to pay what has been described as the “black tax” – that is, to give back to the community from which I come. However, I had just moved to a new university and province and was not sure how to make the necessary connections to pursue activism in my new environment. In addition, the Wits School of Governance is quite remote from the undergraduates and their struggles on the main campus both spatially and culturally; and I think I took advantage of that, adopting the view that since the school was not doing anything, no more was I obliged to do so. At the same time, I felt some pangs of conscience remembering how I used to promote the view that academics have a responsibility to the students and should use whatever power they have to make things better. So, there is guilt, particularly given that I was one of the few members of the 2015-2017, #FeesMustFall movement not only to have survived, but also to have reaped the rewards of the decolonising project – to have acquired a salaried academic post. In this regard, my situation may be compared with that of the protagonists of the struggle against apartheid after 1994 who were presented with the keys to the kingdom but no solution to the problem of how they should use them now that their campaign was won. So, although I incorporate the theoretical aspects of decolonisation in my work, I have little interests in student activism *per se* and have little contact with those networks or people anymore.

Everatt: In the context of your own experience, what do you think the purposes and roles of a university in Africa should be?

Ngcobozi: In the social sciences, students are not trained for the labour market beyond entering academia – they are not exposed to the possibilities of what a humanities degree may offer in terms of employment. In addition, universities feel like factories at present, pushing students along the assembly line so that they learn whatever they learn in order to take and pass their exams – and that is it. In this regard, the social component of the university is shrinking, when it should be a space providing learning about how to tackle the present crisis, offering the tools to enable students not only to diagnose the issues but also to find the solutions. In the absence of such a component, the university is failing to create the kind of value or incentives required to retain African humanities graduates – which is sad because the humanities can be quite useful in addressing social issues. The situation has also led to a lack of interest in activism among students.

It was partly in an effort to address this problem and restore value through the promotion of a different academic approach within the university that I wrote *Mothers of the Nation: Manyano Women in South Africa* (2020). In this context, I was surprised by the extent of its impact beyond the university, where the public discourse is largely concerned with national politics and the trajectory of the economy and issues such as the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and artificial intelligence (AI) – particularly the interest in the book that was shown by those in the corporate sector, including among people working at firms such as Ernst & Young and Anglo American. In this regard, I am not sure whether the volume added much value to the lives of these people.

Rather my main concern has been that the university is failing to undertake the kind of work in the world of ideas that can give people the tools to think through their history in a different way – and thus be able to address the present crisis.

Everatt: In this context, how would you define the present crisis?

Ngcobozi: I am referring to the crisis South Africa is facing in terms of everything, including unemployment and corruption. The whole thing is just falling apart and no one in the humanities or in the economics departments knows how to fix it, although they know how to theorise about it. For example, although the causes of gender-based violence have been thoroughly researched and diagnosed and policies have been forged accordingly, something is just not clicking and no one seems to know what that is – although it is a moot point whether it is the responsibility of the university to train people to fix crises.

Everatt: So, is it not enough then for universities to nurture young academics such as yourself, enabling them to publish their thought and make a contribution to social change in this way?

Ngcobozi: On one level, perhaps, yes. But there is also the issue of just how many students from previous cohorts – including my peers in the #FeesMustFall protest movement – fell by the wayside and ended up unemployed or taking drugs or suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is something that I do not think is being talked about. The reality is that some students walk into the higher education space as privileged, having attended a particular school or having won a particular scholarship and not necessarily having to worry about funding their families. Many of these students, who have significant support, are thus able to become the ideal graduate and reap the benefits and rewards of a university education.

Everatt: So, are universities in Africa today relevant?

Ngcobozi: Yes, I think they are. If I had not gone to university, I think I would still be a card-carrying member of the Democratic Alliance (DA) party¹ as I had been throughout high school. I would be a very different person. Much of my intellectual growth, my political inclinations, the way I see life and understand the world – much of that has been shaped by the fact that I went to university and read the things I read and met the kind people whom I otherwise would not have. In addition, my status as a first-generation graduate and masters' graduate offers an example that can offer hope and inspire others.

More broadly, universities can offer important opportunities for individual development for black people. For example, students who are used to living in

¹ The Democratic Alliance, which is South Africa's largest political opposition grouping, is a socially conservative and economically liberal party founded after the introduction of democracy in 1994.

households where everything is shared with many other family members can now occupy their own space in a residence, on or off campus, and manage their own resources as private goods. Their money need not be shared with others, which offers a new kind of experience that they can take with them into the job market.

Everatt: What is your vision of African universities going into the future, bearing in mind the racialised inequality at the global level which has produced great scarcity among higher education institutions on the continent?

Ngcobozi: I am very disillusioned with the university space. Partly because the salaries for junior academic staff are too low to enable them look after others or to take care of business more generally. In addition, pursuit of the tenure track, which is a full-time job and requires years of academic effort and major juggling of scholarly and other responsibilities and priorities, offers insufficient financial rewards compared with those for comparable levels of effort in the private sector.

Furthermore, the value of the academic project as it is presently being implemented is questionable. Some scholars are deeply theoretical in their outlook – keen, for example, to ensure that their students know all about the thought of the founders of the discipline of sociology; others are more practical in their academic orientation, which is also fine. But, in general and outside their own research interests, a lot of academics cannot clearly define why they are doing what they do – in other words, the overall point of the academic project; and I think that the teaching and learning environment reflects this lack of direction.

Most of those who embark on a career in academia do so due to a sense of purpose and a desire to have an impact, both in terms of their teaching and research. But this sense of mission has dissipated and the space seems to have shrunk. Increasingly, the work is just about churning out papers. So, a lot of the younger academics, including myself, are looking at other areas of work beyond the campus gates which might not necessarily be that meaningful but at least offer an appropriate reward as the incentives to leave the academy outweigh those of staying.

Everatt: From your own experience, what do you think universities should be providing in terms of access, funding and support, including psycho-social support?

Ngcobozi: There is no crash course or training or development-support or whatever on how to navigate being an academic, apart from in relation to the writing and publishing aspects of the role. For example, there is little or no advice on how to acquire funding, including where to look and what the requirements may be; how to establish a research project; or how to write a research proposal. Such skills may be taught at occasional webinars or seminars but there is no in-depth course on all of this. In addition, although there is much talk about the help that can be provided through mentorship, the establishment of such a relationship depends on being chosen, that is on whether a senior academic is prepared to help amid their other priorities. Then, even if one is chosen, it may be as a proxy in some academic conflict – meaning that

there is an expectation of loyalty to a particular faction in the university. And all of this comes on top of the pressure of actually satisfying the extensive technical and other criteria on which confirmation as an academic depends.

There is also the pressure of time which is exacerbated by participation in the management side of the university, attending bland, inconsequential committees, which seem to have been established to enable the operation of particular forms of power rather than with any practical purpose.

Meanwhile, there is no training on how to apply for and successfully access funding – where to look, where to go, who to talk to and how. There is also no training on how to develop yourself as a researcher and producer of ideas. For example, there could be advice on responding to critical feedback so that instead of producing insecurity it may be used to produce growth in an individual academic, enabling them to process their thinking more effectively and improving their capacity for developing an argument. At present, however, post-graduate supervisors who have received no such training are nevertheless expected to provide it to their own students.

In this context, it not just access to funding and resources but also access to information that can determine whether one becomes a better academic – which is a problem for junior academics who are just left to sink or swim.

Everatt: Do you envision a space for indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in higher education? And how can these be integrated so that they infuse the DNA of the university?

Ngcobozi: I am not so much an indigenous knowledge person as someone who finds a lot of value in making use of people's lived experiences as a theoretical base for my work. For example, I do not discard the epistemological narrative produced by the founders of my academic discipline. Decolonisation does not mean that white authors should not be read. Rather it is saying that there are other knowledge systems that need to be accorded the same value, respect and place within the academy. Accordingly, in my work I have sought to broaden the scope of what is considered theoretically sound, and not to pigeonhole work around community narratives or indigenous knowledge as merely anecdotal or as just a series of stories. These representation of experience in the world should be part and parcel of the everyday theorisations produced and deployed by academics.

So, for me, IKS are about being able to glean knowledge from the quotidian and also about making the everyday theoretical in a way that reveres how people's lives are also places where theory can be learnt and may be exemplified. For example, my work on the Manyano women was undertaken as part of an attempt to bring that reverence for indigenous knowledge into the academy. So, I was quite disappointed by some of the comments on my thesis which characterised it as anecdotal despite my best efforts to reframe the notion of theoretical engagement. In this regard, a large part of the problem is a history of academic engagement with black communities which has failed

to acknowledge their capacity for theoretical intervention. A history which has failed to acknowledge that the knowledge which has emerged from these communities can counter or stand side-by-side with the viewpoints produced by dominant theories. In this respect, I am not one of those who say that only black people are able to create knowledge from, for example, local community contexts. But I do seek to elevate the legitimacy of knowledge systems that stand outside the dominant academic discourse.

Everatt: So, what do you think are the key challenges facing the university that it would need to overcome for it to be the kind of university that you would want?

Ngcobozi: Although the university space may be seen as a commodity, it is also a public good and the funding model should reflect this. People should be able to access higher education without getting into debt and without poverty looming throughout. For many students, it is a challenge to survive economically. For example, they may sleep in the labs; or lack access to laptops and toiletries. In this regard, universities need to take their role of offering a safety net and providing basic welfare to students from poor homes more seriously.

For students from rural areas, the provision of three meals a day, shower facilities and basic security is invaluable – unless they are provided with the wherewithal to survive, they cannot be expected to undertake their studies effectively. So, at Rhodes University, the student movement made it clear to the institution’s leadership that it had a duty of care to the students beyond just teaching them, recognising that many of them may fall into debt or may remit grant and bursary money to their families at home. Setting aside the theoretical aspects of decolonisation for one moment, a transformed university should understand its social responsibility far more deeply than South Africa’s higher education institutions do at present.

Everatt: Your argument that the university’s social responsibilities override or at least equal its academic or intellectual responsibilities could form the basis of important research. In the context of your take on the country’s universities, how would you address the idea of African universities having to become more agile in response to a changing world?

Ngcobozi: I do not have the answer to that. But I do believe that a core mission for any academic is to teach. In this respect, I find myself annoyed by academics who seem to be more invested in their own career progression and being superstars than they are in the fundamental work of teaching. For example, why are certain academics constantly on the radio or television? Is it to accelerate their career and as a path to being appointed as a consultant on ministerial committees or presidential task teams? In which case the individual should acknowledge that these rather than undertaking the everyday work of an academic are their goals. Such behaviour also has the effect of setting a standard to which younger academics may aspire. As if an academic is not worth their salt unless they have written a number of books, or been selected for a ministerial committee or appeared widely as a public commentator.

For the average young academic who is doing a masters and obtaining their first academic job, that is an impossible standard and can produce a sense of not being good enough at one's work, as well as undermining one's belief in academia as a calling. It can create a feeling of pressure – as if failure beckons for those who are not already on a top task team and widely published by the age of 30. But, in fact, the core mission for academics should be to teach – and those academics who are not engaging in this but are instead pursuing other goals should not be held out as an example. In this respect, while there may be nothing wrong *per se* with wanting to be a superstar, such aspiration tends to reinforce a corporate view of academia as a ladder that must be climbed, a profession in which promotion is all-important. However, that cannot be the fundamental purpose for being in a university – although maybe I am just somebody who really believes in academia and sees it as a calling.

Everatt: Is there anything else you want to add?

Ngcobozi: The boys' club networks in the university system, which are more influential than is often estimated, pose a particular challenge for young women academics.