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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 Prof Yunus Ballim
Interview conducted by Prof Crain Soudien and Prof Thierry Luescher on 07 February 2023

Crain Soudien: The present interview may cover a number of topics, including the emergence of innovations and good practices at African universities which may address wicked problems on the continent and be scaled up to become models for its development.

It is also hoped that it will provide an opportunity for you to describe your work in setting up the Sol Plaatje University and developing an academic and intellectual agenda for that institution, including in relation to the pedagogical innovations and curricular frameworks that were established there, as well as in relation to issues such as language of instruction, digitisation and the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). Your work in helping to establish Sol Plaatje represented a deliberate attempt to constitute the place in a distinct way. So, could you talk about the dynamics around that and the extent to which the interventions that you promoted there have been institutionalised and have survived your departure? Also, could you talk about how your efforts to establish this university were shaped by a place-based agenda, siting the institution in relation to needs and realities of the Northern Cape?

Yunus Ballim: In addressing the issues raised by the brief for this interview, I will draw quite heavily on my experience of starting a new university at Sol Plaatje, which was a unique privilege. I will also draw on my experience at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), where I was Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic for seven years and an academic in the department of civil engineering. In

addition, I want to draw on my experience as the founding elected president of the African Materials Research Society, which is one of only two multi-country institutions, alongside the European Materials Research Society, among the family of materials research societies around the world. In that capacity, I've had occasion to spend some time teaching and in research collaboration at a number of universities on the continent, including in sub-Saharan Africa and across North Africa.

The idea of the university and the role of the state in this

In seeking to help establish a vision for Sol Plaatje University, I focused on the question: What does it mean to be at a place that calls itself a university? I think this is a big question for institutions of higher learning on the continent and I'm not always convinced that the leadership in the sector has thought through this question of what the term "university" means. What does it mean to develop, teach and learn at a place that calls itself a "university"? There seems to be relatively little comprehensive engagement in Africa around ideas about the nature of the university.

Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani once highlighted the problems that were caused when postcolonial academics in Ghana invited the government onto the campus to assist them with their efforts to transform higher education in relation to issues of race and local context. The invitation was to prove a big mistake, since, once the government arrived on campus, it never left. In this regard, states have great influence over the administration of universities and over fundamental matters of academic freedom – that is, the ability to reason and speak freely – at many higher education institutions across the continent.

In some cases, the post of university chancellor is held by the head of state, while the posts of vice-chancellor and registrar and other key positions at the institution may be reserved for (usually male) members of a panel of politically approved higher education leaders. Membership of such a panel, which acts as an instrument of control, comes at a price. If an individual speaks out of turn, they may well be removed from the panel – or "unpanelled", as it is known. And so, members of such approved panels tend to err on the side of caution, which can distort the fragile balance in the relationship of tension between universities and the State about the role of these institutions, which has to be continuously negotiated.

The question of the relationship between State and university is further complicated by issues of legal domain, funding and function. In relation to legal domain, when a university acquires land or property in South Africa, it is considered an organ of state and has to engage in bureaucratic or administrative processes as such. But in its founding formulation and statute, the university has the status of an independent institution and is not to be considered as an organ of State.

Meanwhile, in terms of funding, public universities are largely dependent on the State; and their function is, in many ways, shaped by the demands of the State – for example, in relation to developing intellectual capital that will underpin national economic development, and in relation to offering working-class students access to the possibility of middle-class lifestyles. But these do not constitute the fundamental core purpose of the university. However, the debate on such topics has yet to be held properly.

In a number of countries on the continent, there is an acknowledgement that the primary purpose of the university lies in the development of what may be described in Gramscian terms as the "organic intellectual" – that is, individuals who bring intellectual effort to bear on changing the way in which society sees and thinks of itself. A university must always be more than a place that develops students' ability to pass exams. Universities should also be developing critically engaged citizens who will go out and ask the difficult questions.

Institutional culture

In this regard, a university has its own institutional culture, which can be hard to pin down in writing but which is real and tangible and can be felt. For example, walking around the campus of a dysfunctional university imagining that one is a parent of a son or daughter who is studying there, the unpleasant nature of a particular institutional culture is immediately evident in the uncut lawns, the unpainted walls and the slum-like student residence area. One can also tell if this is an institution that celebrates masculinity or does not take women seriously.

Entering one of the classrooms or laboratories, it is possible to identify the approach to intellectual engagement adopted by any given institution. I once walked into an electron-microscope unit and there was probably half a millimetre of dust on the floor. But electron-microscope work cannot be undertaken in a dusty laboratory room, the sample surfaces are usually highly polished and research is compromised if the samples are contaminated with dust. At the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras in India, students and staff take off their shoes before they enter the electron-microscope laboratory, indicating an institutional culture of care.

In this respect, the fact that there's dust on the floor should not be attributed to a lack of care by cleaners, but rather to a management failure to instil such care among the staff, making them aware of their role in creating the conditions for students to learn. This is what should be meant by a "student-centred" university – acting to ensure that every single interaction with a student at the university will contribute positively to their learning experience. So, when a floor is improperly cleaned, that represents a negative learning opportunity for the student. Similarly, when a cashier at the canteen speaks rudely to a student, that is a negative learning opportunity, inculcating an attitude that may shape the student's behaviour even after they leave the institution. In this context, it bothers me that vice-chancellors rarely acknowledge the contribution of the cleaning and other support staff at graduation ceremonies. The whole institutional effort should be focused on the students' learning needs – which is the approach that I tried to adopt at Sol Plaatje University.

Developing a relevant curriculum

Although I was ostensibly presented with a blank slate at Sol Plaatje University, I quickly came under pressure to develop the curriculum in certain ways – and, in particular, to introduce qualifications in mining engineering. The pressure was applied by political leaders in the province and nationally, and by industry. In this regard, although the figures provided by Stats SA showed that mining accounted for about 37% of the gross product of the Northern Cape, they also showed that this industry only accounted for about 6% of employment in the province, and most of the employed people actually

work in low-skilled mining jobs. In addition, Wits and the University of Pretoria were already producing enough mining engineers to meet national needs, which were anyway declining with the depletion of the ore seams in a number of mining areas and towns – as is well illustrated by the Big Hole in Kimberley.

On the other hand, 25% of people in Northern Cape work in the agricultural sector, and of these, about 30% work only between November and February during the planting and harvesting seasons. In this regard, it seemed fairly obvious to me that if the university were to put its limited resources, mind and effort to advancing the social development of the region, then it should be attending to agricultural development rather than producing mining engineers. So, at the undergraduate level, consideration was given to placing the focus on agricultural sciences; while, at the postgraduate level, the ways in which the Northern Cape, given its arid climate, may foster food security amid relative water scarcity became an emerging research topic of interest.

The drive to promote agricultural sciences at the university also highlighted the ways in which agriculture as a discipline and practice had become the preserve of white higher education institutions under apartheid. Only the Afrikaans universities along with the English-speaking University of Natal were allowed to offer agricultural studies – and, even after 1994, the agriculture departments at the University of the Free State, Pretoria and Stellenbosch University had continued to be staffed by predominately white and male academics.

When I approached the scholars at these universities with the suggestion that Sol Plaatje University should introduce agriculture as a discipline, they generally approved of the idea but with the caveat that "black people don't want to be farmers" – although they had no answer to the question, "Why do white people want to be farmers?", which I would then put to them. Such interactions highlighted the ways in which 1913 Land Act had not only robbed people of their land but had also severed the connections that had existed between their sense of themselves, their identities, and the ways in which they used their land. In this context, giving someone a patch of land would not necessarily turn them into farmers.

So, when Sol Plaatje University introduced its agricultural diploma, it was also planned to undertake an outreach programme, seeking to identify students who already had "mud in their toes" and who had a relationship with the land, with women planned to comprise a large part of the new cohort due to the leading and often unacknowledged role that many women have played in rebuilding the land and agricultural sector.

There was also a move to introduce information technology (IT) certificates and diplomas at the university, which, in the context of the establishment of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) in the province, soon led to the more ambitious introduction of a degree in data science, which was the first of its kind in the country. The idea was that if the university started early and pioneered such a qualification, it would, by 2027, be producing students with Master's and PhD degrees who would work at the SKA. Although the introduction of a new qualification at a university is generally

constrained by budgetary, rather than curriculum-planning factors, there was such great financial support in this case that the number of bursaries exceeded the number of students.

In such ways, socio-political and economic contexts played a crucial role in the thinking about the curriculum and the areas of study that were developed at Sol Plaatje University.

African languages and identity

Kenyan pan-African scholar Ali Mazrui once noted that while sub-Saharan Africa cannot claim to be the most brutalised part of the world, it can certainly claim to be the most humiliated. In the past 25 years since the introduction of democracy in South Africa, that humiliation has persisted insofar as African culture is widely considered deserving of disrespect. So, for example, I can walk into a bookshop in India and find a copy of Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* translated into the local language, but I cannot find a copy of that book in Tshivenda or in Setswana in South Africa. Similarly, Sol Plaatje's novel, *Mhudi* is not read in South African schools.

The extent to which African languages have been neglected should be a source of collective shame. Meanwhile, African languages in the cities are deteriorating into a local patois. Unless, African languages are codified through creative writing – which is better than textbooks and dictionaries as a way of defining a language – the value systems that are communicated through these languages will be lost. I should also say that this is a problem that seems more significant in South Africa than in other African countries, where there is creative writing and a well-developed culture of writing and reading in home languages.

In response to this problem, Sol Plaatje University established a master's degree programme in Creative Writing in African Languages and introduced a focus on topics such as heritage studies at undergraduate level. The latter served to prepare students for the master's programme; train people for work in museums and other heritage centres; and inculcate an understanding of the value and higher-level meaning that may be derived from one's cultural heritage.

Fostering new ways of knowing

Although it is important for those designing undergraduate curricula to introduce qualifications in the academic mix as a response to national socio-economic challenges, they must also maintain their focus on fostering students' fundamental competencies and habits of mind in order to produce the organic intellectuals of the future who will be capable of engaging in society's development.

In this regard, the present debate on decolonising the curriculum has been quite unhelpful even as it has fostered intelligent engagement on the issue. It has generally adopted a parochial approach to the relevance of curriculum content, for example, arguing that Shakespeare should no longer be taught – which indicates a failure to understand that good literature travels across cultures and languages, speaking to fundamental questions about the human condition.

As the scholar and novelist Njabulo Ndebele has said, the universal can be found in the individual, it is just a matter of looking for it. In this respect, those who adopt a posture of cultural arrogance

damage the prospects of intellectual development. In addition, by trying to remove the intellectual and cultural contributions of other groups of people, they are, as Aimé Césaire gave warning, establishing cultural enclosures and, in effect, seeking to remove Africanness from the global discourse about the human condition.

When this happens, there is the danger that the lessons of struggles that have taken place elsewhere – such as that of Inuits in Scandinavia, and working-class indigenous people in South America – would be ignored. If such had happened in the past, Mexican prisoners would never have been inspired to overthrow their government by stories of the Russian Revolution that they had heard. The idea was rather to undermine the imaginary barriers of nationality and ethnicity and to place a focus on translation of the works of the great writers into local languages – such as Albert Camus, who wrote in French, and Naguib Mahfouz, who wrote in Arabic – so that their thoughts about the human condition may be integrated, criticised and used to enhance self-reflection by the students and local communities.

The aim, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o wrote, should be to decolonise the mind rather than merely the content of the curriculum. After all, the content of curricula, even of those promoted under apartheid, is a product, not the cause, of social context. For example, under apartheid, I read and spoke Afrikaans, which allowed me access into the ways of thinking of what it meant to be an Afrikaner – and it was then that I realised that, in many ways, institutionalised racism was often the social logic of a group of frightened people with guns in their hands, who had become convinced of the exceptional nature of their constructed identity.

So, for me, the issue of decolonising the curriculum relates more to modes of teaching and learning than to mere content. In general, it is the way in which the material has been taught that has been the problem, which places an obligation on academics to become better teachers. In this regard, I don't expect an academic to be fully functional in all the languages spoken by their students; but I do expect an academic to be open to the possibility of other ways of knowing.

For example, if an English-speaking sociology or public health lecturer who knows only one word for "uncle" is teaching to a class comprising Indian, African, Chinese and South American students who have a range of words and familial concepts for the idea of "uncle", that lecturer will be at a serious academic disadvantage – and may have to undertake bridging training to improve her or his teaching capacity. Only in this way can there be co-creation of knowledge that is of value to everyone. Otherwise, the only way of knowing that will be communicated is that favoured by the mono-cultural group from which the teacher hails, while the students who come from other groups and class backgrounds which have their own epistemologies will be alienated from the "education" they are receiving.

Such alienation is, at present, commonplace. If a middle-class student acquires a degree, they become more affirmed in their community. If a poor rural working-class child acquires a degree, they become alienated from their community. A young woman graduate who returns to her rural community will

be rebuffed the minute she seeks to express an opinion on a family matter by somebody, usually a male, saying something like: "You think you know everything because you went to university."

None of this is to recommend that humanities and sciences curricula should be made easier. Rather the goal should be to ask students to be open to the possibility of other ways of knowing, without which there will be many problems that cannot be solved, including in fields such as quantum mechanics. To this end, scholars in the field of education studies may be able to help general academics to address the problem of pedagogy in more serious, more positive and more engaged ways, so that universities no longer produce the mindless technocrats of the past who failed to understand the environmental, social and communal damage that their purely technical solutions created.

There must be new ways of thinking and knowing, particularly in order to address the damage to the Earth caused by previous generations. This may be fostered by greater interdisciplinarity to address the shallowness of scientific understanding among humanities graduates and the relative lack of understanding about socio-economic and cultural development concerns among science graduates. The drive should be to promote human-centred development; and humanities graduates could play a crucial role here by sharpening their own understanding of the social, ethical and contextual aspects of scientific development.

In fact, the administrative logic that has led to the separation of the humanities and sciences into separate faculties and departments has, arguably, shaped the intellectual development of students in a number of constricting ways, as has been shown by the fact that the leading edge of much current research and development may now be found at the interfaces between disciplines rather than within those disciplines. Accordingly, it is important to acculturate students into other ways of knowing – into the ways that lawyers know, the ways that sociologists know, the ways that physicists know – so that they can become the positive organic intellectuals that they should be.

Deploying the new technologies

I am something of a 4IR sceptic. I'm not sure that the advances in digitisation and the new technologies represent another industrial revolution. For example, the use of artificial intelligence to make decisions has been in place since the 1960s, although the ways in which neural networks and machine learning are now being used is new. But the deeper concern with the present discourse around AI, for example, around ChatGPT, tends to focus far too much on the means of production and too little on the relations of production.

In this regard, a key issue, as with other recent scientific developments, is whether the science is getting ahead of the ethics and the regulatory frameworks. To take the human genome project as an example: scientists working in this field have been obliged to subject themselves to a regulatory framework before undertaking research. They have agreed that no one will try to patent any development in human genome sequencing and that all the data produced will be published within a matter of days on open-source internet platforms so that nobody owns it. However, there is unlikely

to be early adoption of a regulatory framework for AI research given the significant commercial opportunities offered by ownership of this technology.

Meanwhile, there is concern in the higher education sector that students will use AI technology to write their assignments and essays for them. However, such fears miss what should be the key concern, which relates to how best to engage students in the process of teaching and learning given that the content of the knowledge being imparted in the classroom has become so ubiquitously available. The question for the lecturer should be: "Why am I asking my students to come into my classroom?" Starting from that question, lecturers may then reflect usefully on what they are doing in the classroom and, in particular, how they are conveying learning and behavioural values in the ways that they act and teach. For example, a lecturer who starts their class by picking up a piece of waste paper and putting it in the bin is creating a positive learning opportunity for students. More broadly, considering the various alternative interpretations of AI responses to questions that have been posed in the classroom can encourage students to develop that essential component of the intellectual mind – a sceptical attitude to all received knowledge.

Using new technologies to address student needs

The massification of higher education around the world represents a phenomenon that is almost as revolutionary as the invention of printing. For example, England went from 18% to 70% participation rates in higher education as universities increasingly opened their gates to pupils from poor and working-class backgrounds in the belief that everybody should have opportunity to attend university. At the same time, massification produced a number of new challenges, including that the Oxbridge model of one-on-one tutorials was no longer feasible in the South African context, as institutions such as Wits now catered to 45,000 students rather than the 8,000 students of the 1970s. Increasingly, large-class pedagogy became an important issue. In this context, digital systems offer opportunities for identifying, understanding and addressing the learning challenges facing students more effectively.

To give an example: failure rates spiked across faculties at Wits once the university started taking students who had qualified with the then-new National Senior Certificates (NSCs) from 2009. However, there was one group which did not show this spike: students receiving National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding who were living in on-campus residences. The data on this led to a series of pertinent questions being asked around the effectiveness of the learning support on offer to these students and the learning-support needs of a range of students. To give another example: when I was a deputy vice-chancellor at Wits, I noticed that the largest proportion of students who arrived with mental health problems at the university's Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development were African women from rural areas. Which data led to efforts to identify how these women may be supported more effectively so that the stresses that they faced in arriving in the city and at university could be alleviated.

Soudien: So, at Sol Plaatje, what innovative methods were deployed to support pupils' transition into the university?

Thierry Luescher: And through and then out of the university, as well into the world of work or into postgraduate studies.

Ballim: When I arrived at Sol Plaatje, I sought to develop the relationship between the university and the city and then later the region. I met with the media, I met with the church leaders, I met the judges at the High Court in Kimberley and I met the political authorities. I explained that I was trying to establish a university that would provide tangible benefits for the local community – such that even informal street vendors would be able to describe how the presence of university had benefitted them. In this regard, I even had a Sunday afternoon session with taxi drivers, inviting them onto campus for tea and a bun. I sought to make the case for why the university deserved to be in this community. In particular, by sharing the information about what the university offered in terms of courses, I was promoting the idea that local people could send their children to the institution – and that it was there for them.

In this respect, I should note that many South African universities have perhaps been negligent about, and incapable of, developing a positive and engaged relationship with the local people on whose behalf they speak and whose support may be necessary to their success. In the absence of such backing, it is uncertain whether South African citizens would stand up and defend their universities were a future minister of education or higher education to decide to take a sword to them.

As part of the efforts that I undertook to foster such engagement at Sol Plaatje, I entered into some interesting conversations with headmasters and teachers about the nature of pupils in the area; and also established relationship with the prison in Kimberley to develop matriculants there.

Promoting student access and success

In my years at Sol Plaatje University, most of the student cohort did not come from wealthy homes and few of them had matriculated with high marks. In fact, by the time I left, about 87% of the students were either funded by NFSAS or an external bursary, and came from homes where they could not pay the fees.

Against this background and notwithstanding the entry level of many of the incoming students, it was decided not to allow bridging courses at Sol Plaatje University on the basis that these had proven relatively ineffective at other universities. Although this decision, as expected, encountered resistance I stood by it, having seen too many students being academically excluded despite their participation in two-year bridging programmes – which, in some cases, would lead to the destruction of the hopes and dreams of a whole village which may have sold cattle to pay for the tuition of a local student. So, although the occasional student who had undertaken a bridging programme would succeed, it seemed to me that the numbers were too small to justify the waste that was being caused. And when people asked why I refused to institute bridging programmes, my usual response was: "I cannot apologise for black people's learning, and I don't wish to do so."

Meanwhile, the focus was placed on the university's capacity to teach undergraduates, noting that its evolution as a place of research would come later. To this end, we sought to craft an early identity for

the institution as a site renowned for its teaching ability – a university that would be identified by prospective young students from Bloemfontein or Cape Town or Johannesburg as a place where their learning would be taken more seriously than elsewhere. Early-career academics from other universities were then recruited on this basis and inducted in how to construct a curriculum that took account of competency development. As vice-chancellor, I delivered a series of lectures on the issue of competency development as part of the curriculum. It was emphasised that during the student's first year, the focus should be on addressing learning needs and holding effective tutorials rather than on the issue of content transfer. In this way, the lecturers were charged with identifying and taking responsibility for the competencies that they were fostering in their students as they taught the content of their particular courses.

Under this view of their role, the lecturers also became answerable to their colleagues in the tearoom. For example, a lecturer teaching second-year students would perhaps encounter insufficient writing skills among them and would then seek an explanation from the lecturer who had taught them during their first year. In this way, the root of the problem could be identified – for example, whether the expectations of the second-year lecturer were too high, or whether the first-year lecturer had failed to develop the appropriate competencies.

This institutional culture spread among the academics at the institution, in part because of university's relatively small size, and appears to have persisted since my departure in the ways in which the students and staff engage with each other. It seems that the importance of learning continues to be taken seriously as a principle at the university.

In supporting the transition of the students into higher education, the focus in the first year was on promoting their capacity for critical engagement with a body of text and knowledge. So, for example, I taught a first-year course in material sciences to heritage studies students, introducing them to concepts of stress and strength and elasticity in relation to stone, timber and grass as building materials. I would put a weight on a wooden beam and the class would measure the deformation under the load, which can be predicted by a particular equation. The students noted that this was the first time they had ever been asked to apply an equation to modelling a concept – but although they found the lesson challenging, they understood it perfectly. In such ways, effective teaching and learning can promote new forms of understanding – in this case, inducting humanities students in the scientific method.

The overall approach at the university was to foster increasing competence among the students during the course of their studies, regardless of the discipline in question. The expectation was that their capacity to critically engage with a body of text and knowledge would improve from one year to the next. So, for example, in English literature, it is possible to set exactly the same exam question on *Hamlet* each year. But the answer that receives a 100% mark in the first year may only receive 50% in the second year and may be deemed a failing mark in the third year. In this regard, the percentage is relative to an appreciation of what the student should know at a particular stage in their development, rather than an indication of their ability in relation to an absolute standard.

My approach to marking differs from that adopted by many of my academic colleagues. I prefer to start from the basis that I should be able to give the student 100%, while many colleagues take the view that the student is starting with zero and has to prove why they should receive a higher mark. In fact, I end up giving students a lot more marks than I would if I used the other approach. The point is: I mark on the basis that I am assessing students who are trying to communicate what they know, but are struggling with the discourse of knowledge.

Which brings me to the issue of the language of teaching and how this relates to the capacity for learning. As a young academic, I was often told that black students were failing Engineering because they didn't understand English and that the solution was for them to undertake an English course. However, as South African educationalist Chrissie Bowie has shown, the impediment is not so much the language of instruction but a lack of familiarity with the discourse of knowledge. It is about an ability to use words to externalise ideas. So, for example, south-east Asian students who have never spoken English in their lives can attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) or Oxford University and be top of the class by the second year – because they understand the concepts and just need to find the equivalent English terms for them. In large part, this capacity for understanding was fostered by an earlier engagement in creative writing in their home languages.

In this context, my sense is that even if I set my exam in isiZulu and ask students to answer in isiZulu, they will probably fail. Accordingly, there is a need to foster the habit of extending ideas using words; and Sol Plaatje University sought to undertake this by promoting discussions and debates. For example, the Dean of Student Affairs and I would sometimes host popular movies at the residences – and at the end, after the good guy has beaten up the bad guys and got the girl, he would ask a number of critical questions, such as: What did the movie say about its director's view of women? Why were the majority of the bad guys Chinese? And, in this way, promote a critical engagement with questions of race and gender.

Similarly, I used to deliver a lecture to students on the evolution of the Curtis Mayfield song, *People Get Ready*, and its conceptualisation of the idea of belief in one God. I played the original song and then I played Jeff Beck's electric guitar version; Bob Marley's *One Love*, which challenges the original version's notion that sinners are not allowed on the train; and Bruce Springsteen's recent version, *Land of Hope and Dreams*, in which he declares that gamblers, whores and sinners are also allowed on the train. And the lecture, which was popular, helped students to think differently about the way in which they engage with music.

So, I am convinced that it is the habit of engagement with ideas that helps students to do better at the undergraduate level and that facilitates their transition. I don't think it should be about providing more content, which is a mistake that South African universities commonly make, unnecessarily overloading both the students and the academics.

In addition, I think that Sol Plaatje University's mission benefitted from its close engagement with broader society and the community in Kimberley. For example, the agricultural department worked closely with this sector locally, including by facilitating access for students to provincially managed

research farms. The local police also engaged with the university, indicating their willingness to employ Sol Plaatje's data-science and management students. In addition, humanities students undertake their heritage studies in a province that may be considered to be one of the country's and the world's most underrated tourism destinations. For example, Driekops Eiland, 70km west of Kimberley, is home to around a thousand petroglyph images of plants and insects, as well as abstract designs, carved on smooth, glaciated rock. The images, which include a depiction of a human and some animals, are reminiscent of the hieroglyphics before the Rosetta Stone was discovered and used to decode ancient Egyptian writing. You can see there is a story, but you don't know how to read it; and I am convinced that there's a counting system there that it just hasn't been possible to decipher yet.

Luescher: You noted that it is at the intersections of the humanities and the sciences that the real new knowledge is being created – and that the division between these fields and between disciplines is essentially an administrative one. So, have you contemplated an alternative way of dividing up the university and of dividing up knowledge?

Ballim: For administrative reasons the modern university around the world has seen fit to divide its studies into the humanities and the sciences – a separation with which I struggle conceptually and about which the Russian-British philosopher Isaiah Berlin has written intelligently. So, the question then is: How to break those barriers? I have tried and been unsuccessful. At Sol Plaatje University, I tried to avoid characterising buildings by discipline. For example, I tried to make the first floor a space for the humanities and the second a space for mathematics – and I failed dismally.

The reality is that the way in which academics organise and think about themselves is primarily shaped by their allegiance to their discipline. Even as this allegiance may be the product of an inability to make a strong case for why their own discipline should be considered a separate field of study; as well as by a drive to justify one's academic existence through membership of a group – with the separation of the academic project into separate disciplines operating as a kind of caste system: "I'm good because I belong to this group."

Edward Said in his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* made a strong argument for the value of the humanities as a field of study at university. But when I was charged with reviewing the Faculty of Humanities at Wits, very few of the academics there were able to make a coherent case for the value of their own disciplines. On the other hand, I have yet to find a sound argument for why accountancy should be taught at university; and the notion that civil engineering, say, should be taught at university because it always has been is not sufficient reason.

It is noteworthy that the more academics become confident in the integrity of their own discipline, the more willing they are to engage with their peers in other disciplines. For example, as an academic who is primarily a civil engineer, I have tried hard to learn to converse with chemists and environmental scientists about the place of civil engineering in the questions they are addressing. At the same time, in the absence of a sense of confidence in one's own discipline, cooperation between disciplines can be hard to promote. For example, at Wits at the time, the Faculty of Humanities taught

a master's degree in Development Studies and the School of Architecture and Planning also taught a master's degree in Development Studies. But in my seven years as a deputy vice-chancellor there, I was unable to persuade them to merge the courses and offer a single master's programme. At Sol Plaatje University, by contrast, there was an absence of disciplinary sclerosis, which allowed the possibility of trying new things, even if these weren't always successful. After all, in order to address the "wicked" questions facing the continent, universities need to consider how they can enable students, particularly at the postgraduate level, to think and reason across disciplines.