

Some conceptual tools for imagining the nature, purpose, and role of universities

Anele Dloto

This short paper outlines the emerging conceptual thinking of the nature, role and purpose of the university, and what it could become. This is achieved by setting forth pre-existing ideas and assumptions that the goal of universities should be to contribute significantly to developing and sustaining democratic learning spaces (formal and non-formal), communities and societies. Moreover, the aim is to show how these ideas connect to an emerging conception of a progressive social justice education system. A historical and contemporary case is provided to illustrate that the democratic mission of South African universities is understood as a necessity to the success of national efforts to boost productivity, competitiveness and economic growth (Bloom *et al.*, 2006). This is contrary to previously held conceptions that universities play a small role in promoting poverty alleviation. The implication of these realities is that the role of the university – indeed of public education, in general - has been severely compromised by marketisation that followed the economic downturn of the 1970s. The phases of the compromise are aptly captured in Clover's review of *The Great Mistake*, authored by Christopher Newfield, using Newfield's description of the reasons why universities have declined.

This paper further puts forward arguments and claims that the university has several related purposes in the context of present-day South Africa. Universities must contribute to and support the process of societal transportation outlined in policy with its compelling vision of people-driven development leading to the building of a better quality of life for all, which equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. Therefore, making a university a key allocator of life chances is an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens. Thus, universities should address the developmental needs of the society and provide for the labour market in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy.

What is happening in universities?

Many universities are confronted by widespread poverty, inequality and unemployment. The graduate unemployment rate is exponentially increasing. The implication has been that universities manufacture and produces highly trained graduates who end up unemployed. The question is then, what is the role of the university in responding to these societal problems? Drucker (1997) put forward a shocking message when he stated, “Universities won’t survive” and argue that “today’s [college] buildings are hopelessly unsuited and totally unneeded”. Although Drucker was perhaps exaggerating with this prediction since universities are still around and continue to grow, he helped us to recognise that while higher education is becoming a dynamic, global enterprise, the strategic management of higher education facilities is becoming increasingly complex. Recent problematic tendencies within higher education have been 'academic capitalism'. Although university staff are still largely state-funded, they are increasingly driven into entrepreneurial competition for external funds. Under such pressure, staff devise “institutional and professorial market or market-like efforts to secure external monies” (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997).

Beyond simply generating more income, higher education has become a terrain for marketisation agendas. Since the 1970s, universities have been urged to adopt economic models of knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance, accounting and management organisation. They must do so in order to deserve state funding and to protect themselves from competitive threats, this because of the hegemonic neoliberalism ideology. Moreover, higher education has become synonymous with training for 'employability'. These developments in academia threaten what people may value in universities, the space for critical engagement and analysis. Marketisation agendas have provoked new forms of resistance around the world. An extreme case was the 2015-2017 student protest on the call for free education up to university level, which became a test case for the potential nationalisation of the public good. Similarly, Barnett (2013¹) talks about the “lack of ideas of the university that are critical in tone, positive in spirit, and with an awareness of the deep and global structure that underpin institutions”.

“Massive global forces affecting universities, such as the emergence of a global knowledge economy, marketization and neoliberalism. More recently, two global changes in knowledge creation and circulation have been noted, so helping to form cognitive capitalism. Partly because of such global forces, we are witnessing the rise

of the entrepreneurial university. This is a university that has come to understand that it is in command of services and products intimately connected with the formation and transmission of knowledge that have exchange value in the market economy.”

In his introductory chapter, titled ‘No one to blame but themselves’, Motala (2014) puts forward a very provoking view on rethinking the relationship between education, skills and employment. He further states, “accepting the link between education and training and economy, and the idea that higher education has a defining role in promoting individual economic capability and national economic performances, requires critical reflection”. The role and the purpose of the university are understood through the crude and uninformed formulation of many business leaders, experts, economists, and even some of the higher education leaders and academics.

What is then the nature, the role and the purpose of a university?

Emerging concepts

Universities across the world continue to maintain the prestige’s status, and as a space that is dynamic, but also a space for rethinking and creating possibilities for social change. Lebakeng *et al.* (2006) argue that universities in South Africa lack a pre-accusative autonomy and scholarship is essentially derivative. This framing argument informs us that the legitimacy of South African universities is consciously and consistently clear within the framework of the various western philosophical and methodological institutions. Dewey (1941) states that universities, like families and like nations, live only as they are continually reborn, and rebirth means constant new endeavours of thought and action. This means an ever-renewed process of change and that the goal of universities should be to contribute significantly to developing and sustaining democratic learning spaces (formal and non-formal), communities and societies, and how these ideas connect to an emerging conception of a progressive social justice education system.

Levidow (2002) argues that universities represent the needs of the state and capital, as the needs of society, while adapting the skills of professional workers to labour markets. Despite this role, often university spaces are created for alternative pedagogies and critical citizenship. He further puts forward a critical argument by saying that as part of that long-standing conflict,

marketisation tendencies have a long history. Student numbers have increased while teaching has been under-resourced, which results in an 'inefficiency' problem, and suggests a solution by standardising curricula. Knowledge remains packaged in textbook-type formats, resulting in students who become customers for products. I see university as not necessarily located in a fixed space but rather situated in community spaces and working in community institutions, which exist for the common good. I conceived a *university* as a network of community-learning spaces, involved in formal and non-formal education. I see university as not necessarily located in a fixed space but rather situated in community spaces and working in community institutions, which exist for the common good. Therefore, university by its nature is not divorced from the realities of our community; we see university as an institution which is located and embedded into the struggles of communities.

Dominant forms of knowledge uphold existing social relations and are often embedded in our curricula, which are presented as either 'common sense' or hidden knowledge (Apple, 1990). We need an education that helps us produce transformative forms of knowledge (Mezirow, 2000) – "really useful knowledge" (Johnson, 1988) that would help transformative social relations to take root. We have thought about *curricula* as 'living', in other words, fluid and emerging, rather than as a fixed set of established content and associated educational practice. For me, the purpose of a university should be to develop curricula that bring pedagogy and different knowledge systems into a whole, enable questioning and provide the generation of 'really useful' knowledge for the betterment of society.

The architectural model of a university is one comprising a multifunctional space, which gives access to the teaching and learning spaces (lecture theatres, tutorial rooms, laboratories and libraries), administrative areas, and social and leisure environments. These spaces support a range of cultural expressions, such as community theatre, writing and poetry sessions, and the exploration of indigenous knowledge, which incorporates ecologically friendly design and practices.

Conclusion

The concepts in this paper are not fixed. They represent our current emergent thinking. They are currently effective but need us to question them too. As we connect thought and action to a constructive interrogative tension situated in everyday life and work, learning becomes the movement of consciousness between thought and action (Carpenter and Mojab, 2011, 13) that

leads us to deeper understanding and intentional considered action. Such learning opens us to the recognition that the world is not given but made and we hold the power to re-imagine and remake this world.

A starting place for our thinking has been to see *university* as not located in a geographical space but also as a community of interest (Tett, 2010). However, my conception of the university has been that it directly implicates the societal realities and it is not divorced from the problems that communities encounter and it has a role to place. The notion of the university arises from the idea that a university is a highly complex societal institution that has evolved from the pre-feudal age to the modern era, and the university will likely continue its transformation into the future.

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