

# **The need for rethinking the South African Higher Education**

## **Transformation discourse: An argument for change from the bottom-up**

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Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the discourse on transformation of universities and broadly the higher education sector has been filled with various attempts to effect changes at a systemic level. What this has produced are bulk nice-to-have policies which are giving government and the sector challenges with regards to optimal implementation. These are policies such as the *Higher Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), the *Higher Education Act* (1997), the *National Plan on Higher Education* (2001), *Transformation and Restructuring: A New Institutional Landscape for Higher Education* (2002) and recently the *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* (2013). The outcomes of these policies have been difficult to monitor, and this is also revealed by the 20 Year Review of the sector published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2016.

This article makes a case for the need for the research and the discourse on higher education transformation to be grounded and brewed from the universities. The top-down national government policy driven logic has as its foundation the mistrust of the academics that the democratic government found in the sector. I want to argue that whilst the necessary exercise of caution is important in how the academics are viewed, there needs to be an understanding that the project of transformation is located in the universities and this is where it can be best advanced. The students as the primary stakeholders of universities are the central pillar of this programme.

### **The Pre-1994 Higher Education Reality**

It is important to view universities, like any other educational institutions, as microcosmos of society and as such they are a replica of what is generally prevailing in society. This approach helps to better understand that the nature of the fragmentation of higher education pre-1994 is intrinsically linked to the manner in which the system of colonialism and apartheid deliberately designed South Africa.

In advancing his conceptualisation of hegemony, the Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1971) makes a point that oppressive societies develop their methods from coercive to manipulative systems of domination through the use of various superstructures such as education, religion and the media.

This argument by Gramsci is further expanded by Louis Althusser (1971: 36) in his conceptualisation of the Ideological State Apparatuses when he states that:

“...for their part the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic.”

Before 1994, education, as one of the ‘ideological state apparatuses,’ was used to affirm the hegemony of apartheid and consolidate its existence in measures that were more sophisticated than the repression and brutal killings that the system meted. It was part of a complex web of creating a manipulative system of domination over the South African population.

The higher education landscape and the various higher education institutions were designed to entrench the dominance of apartheid. The system was highly skewed in favour of the white population and to the detriment of the majority black population. Higher Education Institutions were also designed for the exclusive use of the racial groups with 19 institutions being designated only for whites, two for the coloured population, two for the use of Indians and six for the exclusive use of Africans (Bunting, 2006). The underdeveloped institutions in the apartheid Bantustans were also for the exclusive use of the black population.

The South African higher education was therefore physical, racial and intellectual fragmented, characteristic of South Africa at the time. Teaching, learning and research was very distinct, with many institutions existing for the support of the regime. Apartheid’s involvement in the academy further created a base of conservatism and racism in the faculties and the management of the various institutions. There were some institutions that were known for having few academics that resisted the system but the official posture of even these universities was not anti-apartheid. Struggles by students and academics were also repressed by both the management of the institutions and the apartheid state itself.

This is the higher education reality that the democratic government inherited in 1994 and various systemic interventions were deployed to change this picture. A question that remains is whether the transformation project has made significant strides and what methods should be adopted going forward.

### **The Post-1994 Interventions and their weaknesses**

Ever since the end of apartheid, the South African government and some commentators have always approached higher education from the top-down. What this created are systemic impact policies with the good intention of fixing the system for the better. This started from the outcomes of the National Commission on Higher Education which laid the foundation for the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* and which also led to the enactment of the *Higher Education Act* in 1997.

These policies led to a broad understanding of the transformation objectives for the sector with the sole intention being to create a system that would play an active role in the non-racial, democratic and no-sexist progressive ideals of the new government. It also underscored the need for the production of critical citizens and graduates who would be skilled enough to easily contribute to socio-economic transformation and development.

The creation of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as a statutory body responsible for the general oversight of the sector and for giving informed advice to the Minister was birthed by these initial processes which were intended to transform not only the sector but the country. The CHE would later have its mandate expanded into a quality assurance entity for higher education sector, through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee. The 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education* and the mergers and incorporations became some of the vehicles that were used to transform the sector.

The democratic government is implementing the programme of transformation through three steering mechanisms; enrolment planning, funding and quality assurance. These three top-down mechanisms are still being applied but the higher education system continues to experience challenges and there are many critical problems in the various universities which continue to hinder access, success, equity and redress.

The top-down national-government-policy driven approach that the first democratic administration took had as its foundation the mistrust of the academics that were in the sector at the time. It therefore co-opted the few progressive academics that existed in the system into top-down policy designers based in Pretoria. This was not supposed to end at this broad systemic level if higher education was to be truly transformed.

The limitation of how higher education transformation was approached over the past 24 years is that it has cornered the entire sector into a debate about institutional autonomy, academic freedom vs public accountability, equity vs quality and many other side shows. Over the years we have been discussing powers of the minister over universities, more particularly regarding transformation.

A careful look at most of the amendments to the Higher Education Act demonstrates that the intention has been firming up powers of the Higher Education Minister or expanding powers of the various national bodies responsible for higher education. All indications are that we are continuing on this path as there is a process to draft a National Plan for the post-school sector. It is my view that though collectively defined and centrally coordinated, transformation does not need to be only implemented from above. The National government and the Council on Higher Education should coordinate the sector in developing a common understanding of transformation and find ways of infusing this to the primary stakeholders of the universities; students and academics. It is through these interventions that we will find differentiated responses appreciative of the peculiarities of the institutions. The concerted struggles by students and academics is what will better achieve meaningful transformation.

Towards a grounded discourse of transformation

The #MustFall phenomena of 2015 and 2016 already provides an example. This does not have to take the form of protests, but it can be in the detail of the scholarly work that is being undertaken and the various discussions in institutional forums, at Senate and at Council. This is where I locate the role of bodies such as the Chair on Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (*CriSHET*).

The argument that I am making should however not be interpreted to mean that government must begin to play a lesser role in higher education. We need a hybrid approach coming from both directions. We still need government to continue to play a role in higher education

transformation by using the three steering mechanisms but also create the necessary conditions for transformation from below.

There should also be an understanding that transformation is not limited to changing the apartheid and colonial character, system and manner of academic provisioning at our institutions. There are a number of things that are beginning to emerge in society. Universities for instance need to be transformed in their attitude and actions towards climate change, technological development and how they relate to differently abled people.

It is not a false argument that the various policy interventions that were designed by the democratic government have not substantially achieved meaningful transformation in institutions of higher learning. There are various cases which point to this reality and these include the challenges relating to the untransformed and alienating institutional cultures, high levels of dropout by black students, low participation rates by the black student population, an untransformed academy etc.

## **Conclusion**

The argument that I have presented in this paper is that there is a need for institutions of higher learning to be treated as the sites of struggle and that their opening up for transformation will mainly come and be defined from within. Scholarship and policy making on higher education transformation should thus begin to focus on debunking, encouraging and carefully steering the struggles that are taking place at universities.

The transformation of universities should be the main political agenda of scholarship and this is not because it is a correct route to take but it is an essential choice for the survival of free academic thought, research and debate. The scholarly, disciplined and dedicated activism of students and academics should therefore be encouraged as this is how our universities will open up from being enclaves for the sustenance of residual apartheid.

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