

SA universities haven't taken transformation far enough

AS university communities attempt to begin the academic year after a tumultuous year last year, there is wonder at what changes, if any, are in place to signify a shift in the trajectory of the higher education sector.

Such a shift has occurred within the financial planning aspect of universities where the government has, after decades of warning, acted more prudently on the problematic funding model of the sector. This of course was made urgent by the student protests in 2015.

Yet there hasn't been such massive change in terms of the broader calls of the fallist movement regarding decolonisation.

Students preferred decolonisation to transformation. The responses in the media and within universities suggest a discomfort with the term decolonisation as a framework for change in society and in universities.

There was never such hardened rejection about transformation – which because of South Africa's history of inequality was eventually accepted as the imperative.

I ask, though, noting our apparent unreadiness to speak of decolonisation, whether transformation as a framework has served any meaningful purpose within universities and within the broader call for social transformation.

Alongside the call for free education, students have been explicitly challenging racist, sexist and homophobic cultures, refusing to honour colonial figures, rejecting the exploitation of vulnerable labour, and resisting the commodification and privatisation of education over the last two years.

Often students raised issues which were prob-

lematic within university policy, many relating to the unpreparedness of universities to address racism and sexual violence. Students have faced much resistance from universities.

Yet, a cursory observation of the values and mission statements of all universities in the country reveals a strong commitment to transformation, often in the form of value statements regarding social justice democracy. Such is said to be reflected in how these institutions are run as well as in their teaching, learning and research.

Yet students in their protests reflect a different reality.

There seems to be a disconnect in how universities understand and implement transformation, and how students experience and view it.

This transformation discourse is mostly focused on representation targets within the staff complement and on admission policy.

Universities were for whites only as part of the apartheid state's policy. The state opted to set up racialised institutions for blacks.

Although institutions were said to be independent, they were still under the authority of the apartheid state. These institutions were of poor quality, providing substandard teaching, limited curricular and were chronically underfunded.

Much of the transformation focus in institutions of higher learning has been about redressing this phenomenon. In transforming higher education, all institutions were centralised into one department,

In my View



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sharing the same budget.

In effect, educational transformation in this sense has been defined by the provision of access where there had been exclusion for staff and students with racial and gender barriers. It is within this framework in which universities claim a transformed or transforming identity – by providing access and mobility to young black poor female students and academics.

The end of apartheid came with a challenge for the ANC as it prepared itself to govern. The challenge for policymakers was to formulate an educational policy that would ensure the country had a skilled workforce ensuring sound economic functioning.

Many of the policies were geared towards market-perceived needs informed by human capital theory. Thus the purpose of education was skewed towards the market.

This was against a strong educational tradition of popular education that took rise in the struggle against apartheid. In popular education spaces, education was about liberation, agency and collective action to transform one's world.

The failure here was the assumption that through a change of governance and the constitutional undoing of apartheid, society would thus be transformed.

Fast forwarding to the present, South Africa remains unequal with an alarming prevalence of violence. Similarly, institutions are fraught with rape and sexual abuse cases, anti-poor policies, ex-

plorative labour practices, and curricular and pedagogy that is not geared towards dealing with such issues, yet claiming to be transforming.

What the state and the institutions of learning share is a failure to critique the very bureaucracies we inherited. There is a greater role that education can begin to play in the quest for social transformation which is tied to its own transformation.

I offer two areas of intervention in which universities can begin to move towards being transformative.

Western society has bestowed on us an odd separation of being and knowing where knowing is only understood in its functional terms, as skills or qualification within a labour market framework. What this results in are learning institutions that neglect the intrinsic relationship between knowledge and being.

The act of being/becoming is seen as separate from your institutionalised learning. This is a problem for transformation because part of what needs to change is not what the knower – as the pupil, student, teacher, lecturer – knows, but the very being of the knower.

There is a need to revisit the adult learning tradition of transformative learning, which is about tying the acquisition of knowledge to one's becoming, where the knowledge changes how you see and engage with the world around you.

Universities and their researchers tend to be

part of those who have dominance in society – in terms of race, class and gender. Researchers tend to serve, with relative exclusivity, the interests of their dominant group.

Academics become a self-referential group which isolates itself from the rest of the world

which they study. Engagement with poor and disenfranchised communities is kept at a minimum often seen only in the form of charity drives and engagements that mimic the disempowering NGO practice.

These relations ensure that the dominant ways of thinking remain intact and result in academics and universities who are not transformed and are unable to transform society. Universities must collaborate with the poor to produce knowledge that changes society.

Knowledge that is exclusively produced in the current academic traditions will only reproduce an unequal society

Since South Africa inherited its institutions, including its universities, from an oppressive government to which we owe these insti-

tutions' current shape, it is important that deeper reflections be done about this shaping and what challenges it means for transformation – of the institutions and for society.

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