

SOUTH AFRICA: A progressive higher education agenda

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The focus of higher education in South Africa has been on policies and reforms and their impacts. What is sorely needed, says Adam Habib, Deputy Vice-chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, is engaged executives who critically reflect on their managerial experiences "leading to lessons that can advance a socially progressive higher education agenda".

Habib delivered "reflections of a bureaucrat" at an Aims of Higher Education round-table held at Rhodes University in Grahamstown from 27-29 October.

South African higher education had been the focus of widespread investigation and reflection in the last two decades, influenced by international and domestic factors, said Habib.

At the international level political elites, driven mainly by conservative macro-economic policy paradigms, had "subjected university systems to critical review with the goal of enhancing the relevance of graduates and increasing the output of universities".

Domestically, Habib noted, democratic transition had brought new stakeholders and political elites into the societal mainstream. They had their own aspirations and needs and generated new challenges and priorities for public higher education.

Intellectual energy had been overwhelmingly directed at the level of policy and more recently on its impact. The administration of President Jacob Zuma had reinforced the policy focus by initiating a widespread review of elements of the higher education system.

Absent from the debate was reflection on managerial practice, with the exception of capacity initiatives largely geared to enhance administrative skills, which were important but not the core of what management was about - understanding the context, reflecting on options available to achieve desired ends, and galvanizing support for implementing choices made.

"The lack of reflection on this issue is tragic for it creates the implicit impression that nothing progressive is possible as long as we are subjected to the current political economy paradigm," argued Habib. "But this is just not true.

"The varied performance of universities in South Africa suggests that much can be learned from comparative reflections of managerial practice." There had been cases of "impressive transformation, productivity and efficiency gains", with two examples being the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the Human Science Research Council (HSRC).

South Africa had undergone significant transformation since democratic transition in 1994. The political transition enabled the access of black people to institutions of governance and the state, and had a number of positive consequences for higher education.

"It has increased the pressure on universities to become more accountable. It has massified and diversified access to the nation's universities. While it has not yet non-racialised the academy, it has made it much more diversified than 15 years ago," said Habib. One downside was greater intervention by the state, resulting in some erosion of university autonomy.

Post-1994 the South African economy had also transformed and been increasingly integrated into the global economy, also with significant - but on the whole negative - impacts on higher education. As a result of a conservative macro-economic agenda, especially in the first decade, state institutions like universities had become increasingly corporatised.

"Managerial practices and accountability mechanisms from the corporate sector have unthinkingly been imported into public institutions and universities," Habib said. Universities and their divisions had been increasingly treated as business entities, and power had shifted decisively from structures like senate to administrators in finance and to council.

The impact had been profound, with profitability rather than sustainability the driving ethos of universities. "Departments have had their budgets slashed dramatically in real terms. The administrative workload on academics has significantly increased. There is greater push for third stream income and qualitative indicators of performance have begun to proliferate."

The net effect was that the academy was no longer an attractive career prospect to the brightest students. "We have an aging cohort of academics and researchers with the result that alarm bells have begun to ring loudly in important quarters of the higher education system."

Four distinct responses had emerged, explained Habib.

One from business and the 'right' was to celebrate the corporatisation of higher education, unaware of the negative effects on the academy. A second response, from progressives, was hand-wringing, moaning and romanticising a collegial past. But this response was confined to critique, did not attempt to act to improve the situation, and seriously misrepresented the past.

The third response bemoaned the state of affairs but fought back by trying to alleviate the worst consequences of corporatisation. However, this response would fail because it was "impossible to create islands of collegiality in a market oriented higher education system" - especially since universities are

state-funded using market-oriented formulae.

The fourth response, which Habib sees himself part of, "is a proactive engagement with the context one finds oneself in with a view to subverting it in the long term" - akin to John Saul's 'structural reform' strategy involving engagement with a view to initiating reforms that enable further reform that "in the long term creates a new structured balance of power that enables the transformation of the very system itself".

This response, he explained, recognised there were negative consequences to engagement but argued that it was "better to advance a progressive agenda with some negative consequences than do nothing at all. It attempted to pluralise power so "checks and balances can emerge in a system that contains authoritarian tendencies and enable progressive change."

A significant feature of the fourth response was recognising that serious restructuring of a university required "great academics that have a relative autonomy to focus on their work, are provided with an enabling environment to do so, and are rewarded for their initiatives". It also required resources, sometimes through hard choices about what to sacrifice as a result.

The two institutions that successfully restructured, UKZN and the HSRC, had hunted for academic talent and paid these people "beyond the scales of the mainstream academy".

The University of Johannesburg, too, has created rewards for productive researchers and a core of excellent research and teaching staff who are paid more than normal pay scales through a special non-pensionable allowance. The university has more than quadrupled its internal investment in research activities, said Habib.

There was also an annual vice-chancellor's award of R500,000 [US\$73,000] for the top researcher, and the top 'new researcher' gets R250,000. Three top teachers each received a R150,000 reward. There was also an incentive system with a minimum of R22,000 to R33,000 of the research subsidy invested in individuals' research accounts.

The downside, Habib admitted, was "a much more unequal academic environment". Upsides were the message to young academics that high salaries could be earned, and top-rated researchers as their role models. Crucially, these incentives pluralised power in the university by creating a new group of privileged and empowered stakeholders, the top academics.

Another example of the fourth response, said Habib, was Johannesburg's New Generation Scholars Programme, to tackle the huge challenge of South Africa's ageing professoriate and the urgent need to reproduce the academy.

In South Africa, most students are first generating working class and are under "enormous pressure" to earn a salary. Postgraduate studies delay earning, so students are not interested. With the private sector, Johannesburg offers masters candidates a scholarship of R80,000 a year for two years, and the top half of masters graduates are offered a doctoral scholarship of R150,000 a year for three years - and a job on graduating, a key element.

Another third example of this response, said Habib, was third stream income, which had become a major focus of South African universities because of declining subsidies or perceptions by some executives that this represented modern global managerial practice.

A major third stream income source is tuition fees. Habib warned South Africa against a model of free higher education, without commensurate additional investment in the sector - this route had caused "the complete collapse of substantive higher education in Africa".

The country had a unique third stream funding possibility - black economic empowerment (BEE), which involves the transfer of ownership of the economy from white to black-owned business through various processes. Each BEE deal must have a developmental component, which universities should be mobilising for investment - a potentially huge source of income.

A fourth example of the pro-active progressive response, said Habib, could involve procuring journals for university libraries. Only well-endowed universities were able to afford to get all the important journals, but their budgets were being stretched and universities that served the poorest South Africans were unable to provide a quality journal base.

"South Africa's higher education is confronted with three major priorities: produce a highly qualified human resource base which is needed for development; develop a new generation of academics to sustain our higher education system; and produce high quality research and innovation that can enhance our global competitiveness."

All three priorities depended on access to papers and publications that disseminate research results. The Academy of Sciences of South Africa is investigating how countries such as Brazil, Pakistan and Chile have secured 'bulk' access to international journal platforms for universities.

"Why is it that 16 years after South Africa's democratic transition, we still have not implemented a system-wide procurement of academic and research journals when it would be cheaper and would enable equitable access for all students?" Habib asked.

Progressive, entrepreneurial managerial practice would entail some of these and other initiatives, he continued, determined by the context of individual institutions. "The singular lesson to be learnt is that the focus must be on the local, and university executives need to develop a custom-made strategy for the specific conditions their institutions are located in."

But what makes these reforms transformative or structural? Habib asked.

The hunt for academic talent at the University of Johannesburg had broken an existing ethnic logic of recruitment "and created an open academic market which has enhanced the leverage of academics vis-à-vis

their respective executive managements".

The infusion of new academics and empowerment of existing staff at Johannesburg had enhanced research productivity: in 2009 its output was 40% higher than what it was three years earlier. Student fees remained significantly lower than the university's peers.

"All of this is occurring in an institution that is increasingly racially and ethnically integrating and that continues to service primarily a working and middle class student base," said Habib.

But it was not these positive ends that defined reforms and practices as structural or transformative. "What makes them so is that they begin, however timidly, to pluralise power and change its balance among stakeholders to enable further reforms down the line.

New remuneration practices changed the balance of power between academics and executives. Creating a more diversified new generation of academics would improve the legitimacy of higher education in society. BEE deal income would enhance the power of institutions vis-à-vis bureaucrats and corporate executives. System buying of journals would strengthen the leverage of government and institutions vis-à-vis the academic publishing industry.

"These changes in the structured balance of power within both institutions and the higher education system create the conditions for further reforms down the line."

Only this way, Habib concluded, "would we be able to change the tide in favor of progressive social and educational ends."

** Adam Habib's paper was titled "Managing Higher Education Institutions in Contemporary South Africa: Advancing progressive agendas in a neo-liberal and technicist world".*