

## **BLACK AND WHITE UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA:**

### *The Challenges of Change*

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**A**s the 20th century has come to an end, the challenges of an uncertain future are becoming increasingly evident among academics in African universities including those in the post-apartheid South Africa. In both the natural and social sciences, the academic profession faces a number of substantial challenges, for which it is not entirely well prepared. Not only is the pace at which knowledge changes accelerating (accompanied by a substantial increase in the literature the professoriate must assimilate in order to stay current in their fields) but the very idea of certainty in relation to knowledge is itself under increasing attack, particularly from those who relativize knowledge (Welch, 1998).

Moreover, a shift from elite to mass higher education is producing radical changes at universities in South Africa and Africa in general during a period of economic constraints. The Government, as the main provider of higher education funding is pressing universities to demonstrate maximum output from public funds and to supplement their budgets from private sources.

Ideologically, education is being reconfigured as a key element in the micro-economic reform agenda, both as a high-budget industry in itself and as a supplier of human capital to other industries in the increasingly competitive global marketplace. This ideological shift, which puts emphasis on corporate organizational models, has been proclaimed by supranational organizations such as the World Bank. In order to survive and prosper in a rapidly changing world, universities must embrace the marketplace and become customer-focused business enterprises. They must adjust to the forces of globalization and deal with microeconomic reform already faced by other industries. In the post-apartheid South Africa, historically black universities, which were the first mass providers of higher education to the black majority since the

apartheid era, were also the first to feel economic constraints leading to the restructuring and increase in tuition fees.

### **African Universities and Globalization Practices**

The widespread economically motivated reforms generally related to "globalization" have been described by various authors as "MacDonaldization", "Toyotism", "Post-Fordism", etc. (Slaughter, 1997; Ritzer, 1995). Although each takes a different form, all emphasize economic efficiency, and a tendency toward homogenizing practices.

Although the term globalization first appeared in the 1960s, the first author to use it in the title of a sociological article was Ronald Robertson in 1985. He defined globalization as "a concept that refers to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (Robertson, 1992). Other authors such as Giddens (1995) and Waters (1995) have distinguished the transnational economic, political and cultural dimensions of globalization, while also suggesting that economic integration is more advanced than other forms of globalization.

The major factor affecting universities in this process has been the economic ideology prevalent in globalization that calls for primacy of the market, privatization, and a reduced role for the public sphere. One of Water's contributions to the debate is his focus on the culturalization of economic life. He shows how Toyotism, in which employers seek to develop a commitment among workers to the organization, was "lifted" out of its social setting and restructured across time and space so that Japanese organizational practices are now global.

To develop this "quasi-familial community", the company creates a corporate image and communicates directly with its employees. Managers worldwide seek out business ideas, and global communication networks help to create a homogenized view of "best practice" models. The company as a family is now considered one of those best practices. He argues that one of the peculiarities of these globalization practices and trends is that they are no longer restricted to particular types of organizations. Therefore, universities all over the world including South Africa cannot escape the trappings of this new cultural paradigm which includes aspects such as mission statements, strategic plans, total quality management (TQM), multi-skilling and staff development.

Davis (1998) argues that the new South African higher education landscape is rather confusing. Old uncertainties are no longer there, yet much remains the same. The modes of critiques used to salvage the vulgarities of the apartheid South Africa are now rejected as being mere manifestations of Eurocentric liberalism. Academics are requested to work towards an African renaissance, i.e. the new post-apartheid society is to be built on African roots and produce a truly African response to the challenges of the democratic transformation. At the same time, the new democratic government warns that higher educational institutions should come to terms with the challenges of globalization as stipulated above, i.e. the professoriate and higher educational institutions should not pretend that they are free to develop autonomous responses to the economic problems facing the country without taking into account the effects of the globalization process.

Globalization is not simply about transnational homogenization. Its complex and contradictory character has been discussed by various authors such as Hall and McGrew (1997) who described a dual effect of global-level homogenization on the one hand and localized differentiation on the other. Taylor (1997) argues that different countries and higher educational institutions do not respond in the same way to globalization practices and trends because specific historical, political, cultural and economic contexts will influence the way globalization trends develop in each country and institution. This applies to the universities in South Africa as well.

As a result of the apartheid legacy of unequal educational opportunities between historically white and historically black higher educational institutions, the general pace of response to globalization trends is faster in the historically white higher educational institutions (both historically white and black) and individual academics also construct distinctive responses to globalizing trends. However, the general challenges in both categories of institutions are the same as will be discussed in the following sections.

### **South African Academics and Challenge to Knowledge**

The Sunday Times Best In Higher Education Survey in South Africa (1998) shows that the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) was the most efficient academic institution in South Africa in terms of research output, i.e. production of new knowledge. It was followed by other Historically White Afrikaans-Universities such as the universities of Free State, Potchefstroom and Stellenbosch. It was commented that no longer were the

Historically White-English Speaking universities such as Rhodes, Wits, University of Cape Town and Natal the trendsetters.

Commenting on this trend of research output and new knowledge production among academics in the new South African universities, Mokgoba (1998) leveled a general criticism that South African academics (both whites and blacks) are producing very little new knowledge. He argues that the Higher Education Survey mentioned above confirms other studies showing a decline in new knowledge production rate in science and technology. In spite of criticisms from various South African academics that he neglects their role in teaching (Matheba, 1998), he raises the concern that if the quantity and quality of knowledge base is eroded, how does this impact on the quality of teaching in these institutions? He characterizes South African academics as merely engaged in recycling knowledge rather than producing new knowledge through research.

This paper argues that perhaps one of the most significant changes in the world of academe today is the challenge to knowledge itself. More recently, significant attacks on traditional forms of knowledge have come from two overlapping quarters. The first emerged via postmodernism's challenge to the presumed foundationalism of knowledge. In particular, postmodern critiques have increasingly questioned grand theories that profess to explain the dynamics of society (e.g. Marxism, Liberalism, etc.) and launched attacks on claims touting science and technology as the basis for reason or social reform.

Rejecting all such grand theories as forms of "totalizing reason", postmodernists would like academics within and outside Africa and across disciplines to re-examine often unchallenged assumptions and to question the role of theory in explaining phenomena (Agger, 1995). In comparative education, the claims and critiques of postmodernism have been taken up by various authors such as Liebman (1995) and Rust (1994). But there exists no consensus on the meaning of postmodernity among the authors. This levels students of social theory in Africa and elsewhere somewhat unclear as to which qualities associated with postmodernity are useful for understanding the trend of education in Africa in this era of globalization. However, regardless of whatever one thinks of the theory, the capacity of postmodernism to disrupt conventional assumptions regarding knowledge is a serious issue that confronts many academics in higher education in African universities and elsewhere.

### **The Changing Face of Pedagogy**

Traditional forms of pedagogy in higher education in South African universities and Africa at large also face the challenge from one principal global development: the advent of Global Information Society. This includes virtual pedagogies, which enable students to access information, share knowledge, pose questions, and seek advice from individuals (not necessarily, their university professors) world wide. This is a great challenge to the African professoriate because not all African academics have access to or feel comfortable with these new forms of pedagogy. professoriate

In South Africa the situation is critical among the professoriate in the historically black universities who due to neglect of these institutions during the apartheid era, had either no exposure to the use of computer facilities or due to financial constraints have no access to these facilities. In the historically white universities where students have access to internet facilities, the advent of Global Information Society challenges the traditional notions of teaching space by reducing the need for lecture halls and other infrastructure of the traditional university.

Although the availability of such technology is mediated by class, gender, racial and ethnic affiliation, growing access to electronic mail in much of Africa also poses significant political dilemmas, particularly in more authoritarian African states concerned with controlling the free flow of information. Since academics are more likely to have access to this technology, they generally possess a more international outlook, and are involved in research activities and may possess information, some of which may be politically sensitive, the profession may be something of an electronic Trojan horse in promoting freer international communication and movement of information.

### **Increasing Diversification of Education**

Another challenge to traditional dominance of universities in South Africa and Africa generally is the increasing diversification of education, much of which is now taking place outside traditional settings. Mathews (1998) states that the Post-Fordist intensification of demands for ongoing training and learning is part of the drive toward a more flexible workforce.

Lusonge (1997) explores the implications of this for academic profession in Africa. He argues that the implications of it are more far reaching, in the sense that, in an

increasingly competitive context, where education and training often are developed and delivered on-site by commercial and industrial organizations themselves, learning is becoming less and less the exclusive domains of universities. Modern management concepts and associated practices, such as "learning organization", "mentoring", etc. imply that each worker is responsible for improving her/his skills and learning. People in a learning organization feel a deep sense of accomplishment for what their whole organization has been able to achieve and for the contribution their learning has made to the total effort. They feel a sense of responsibility to learn how to do things better, and are proactive in seeking ways to improve what they do.

Universities in South Africa, especially historically black universities in particular (which were disadvantaged by the apartheid system) have to learn to compete for external training contracts and becoming more flexible in delivering education in a competitive global environment. The change is not without strain, particularly among academic staff who resist or feel uncomfortable with such changes to their traditional roles (Lacey, 1997).

### **The Decline of Disciplines**

Besides the increasing diversification of knowledge and education at large, another challenge to the traditional beliefs and practices of the academic profession consists of what has been termed the "decline of disciplines". At least two elements have begun to change the rationale for subjects. Firstly, there is an increasing demand for vocational relevance by both students and government in an era of tighter budgets in higher education. As a result of this increasingly utilitarian rationale, academics are faced by the challenge of cultivating more practical pursuits and at the same time remain in touch with newer modes of inquiry.

The new forms of inquiry are quite diverse but less easily confined within the bounds of any single discipline. This requires the professoriate and their graduates to be multidisciplinary. Studies in both developed and developing countries have shown that modern companies are moving away from traditional bureaucratic structures toward more fluid forms of organization, characterized by semi-autonomous work units loosely related through networks. In such an environment problems do not fall neatly into a specific discipline because more synthesizing competences are required. These developments raise questions about the existing tendency of distributing students over

different disciplines and about the relationship between knowledge, skills, competences and specific cognitive aspects (Kaya, 1998; Mabey, 1992).

### **The Changing Face of Students**

The change from Apartheid to a democratic South Africa has brought about the transition from a racial and elite education to mass higher education in South Africa. This is shown by an increasing number of students in higher educational institutions, especially black students in the historically white universities. This is a challenge to the professoriate in these institutions because traditional curriculum frameworks must be adapted to serve a more comprehensive cohort of students with a wider set of concerns, to which some universities are responding faster than others.

### **The Changing Context for the Academic Profession**

Callahan (1995) notes that despite increasingly blurred lines of responsibility, particularly evident is the trend in both historically white and historically black higher educational institutions in South Africa toward academics assuming more responsibility for program administration and management, as course and programme coordinators, heads of departments, deans, etc. This implies that academics are becoming part-time administrators.

Various scholars have characterized these developments as signs of a creeping managerialism within universities, in which a technocratic logic of efficiency prevails and collegiality succumbs increasingly to more hierarchical modes of decision-making. In South African higher academic institutions, this is characterized by tighter accountability, most often measured via quantitative performance indicators such as the allocation of funds to departments and faculties on the basis of the number of Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) produced by each lecturer per semester or per year.

A further outcome of the cult of efficiency in South African Universities has been increasing financial pressures. In the context of the current fiscal crisis facing the National Department of Education, the effects of these financial pressures on the life of academics have been substantial. One of the more insistent pressures on the professoriate is the continuing demand on the academic staff from educational authorities to do more with less resources. While being requested by the university administrators and policy makers to do more with fewer resources, academics are being

told they should not expect to be rewarded financially or otherwise for meeting ever-increasing demands.

This pressure on resources and working conditions for the professoriate in South African universities has taken various forms such as removal or reduction of night teaching and housing allowances, educational subsidies for dependants, etc. Retrenchment is thinning the ranks of the professoriate in the historically black universities. Another visible trend is rising student enrollments, especially at undergraduate levels, while at the same time, academics are being asked to be more entrepreneurial, by making efforts to bring in research grants and contracts to the university.

### **The Internationalization of the Academic Profession**

The internationalization of the academic profession has been influenced by a range of factors including the massification of higher education systems; convergence of in higher educational systems; programmes designed to promote academic staff and students exchanges; greater ease of international travel and communications; and for some, such as the majority of South African academics, the emergence of English as a dominant medium of scholarship.

Although commonly based on immigration statistics or origin of academic qualifications, measures of the internationalization of academics staff are varied. Research shows that the pattern is more complex. For example, using the measure "highest earned degree from another country" provides a different result than one based on the foreign citizenship of academic staff, since the former also includes nationals who have studied abroad.

In addition, "foreign highest degree" often understates the number of foreign academics in a country, who may have undertaken graduate studies in that country, and subsequently accepted a university post. This is indeed the case in South Africa, whereby the country's level of economic development compared to other African countries and the general high quality of higher education (especially in the historically white universities) including instruction in English is increasingly attracting international students from within and outside Africa, especially at the graduate level.

Despite these limitations in the measure of internationalization of the academic profession, "foreign highest degree" is a commonly used index of internationalization of

the profession in South Africa. However, when this measure is used, a number of salient differences emerge: First, more male academics are able to travel and gain an overseas research qualification than their female counter. For instance, during the apartheid era more males than females left South Africa into exile and came back with international degrees. Secondly, during the apartheid era more white South Africa, especially English speaking, had more opportunities to study in prominent universities in Europe, USA, Australia, etc. than Blacks or Afrikaans-speaking whites.

### **The Fall of Humanistic Intellectuals**

Currie (1998) states that some twenty years ago, when Alvin Gouldner wrote "*Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*," he could not have imagined how much the academic world would change over the ensuing two decades. Would he recognize the context for the modern academic: commodified, virtualized, globalised and postmodernised" ?

However, some of Gouldner's observations remain relevant at this turn of the century. For example, his analysis of a burgeoning academic proletariat is still relevant in South Africa, given the widespread use of contract and casual academic staff and research students in both developed and developing countries, to increase flexibility and contain costs. Moreover, his contention that humanistic intellectuals were more vulnerable to a loss of status, deference, repute, income and social power in a technocratic society than their peers from the technical intelligentsia has also stood the test of time in South Africa and other African countries. Furthermore, the proliferation of knowledge-centres for both research and teaching, which are increasingly outside the university, has meant increasing loss of exclusiveness and privileged market position for academics in both the natural sciences and humanities.

This paper stresses that the loss of exclusivity by academics should not lessen the need for the academic profession to speak out on issues of the day. Winch (1990) argues that the centuries-old ideal of the independent, but not detached scholar is a tradition worthy of defense, especially given the massive concentration of international economic and cultural power at the end of the twentieth century, the disabling effects of mass unemployment, the growing gap worldwide between the have and have-nots, and the increasing displacement of social good by the economic good, in a context of intensified global economic competitiveness.

## **Conclusion**

As the twentieth century has come to an end the academic profession in South Africa like in other parts of the world is faced by heightened demands, both internal and external. In the name of accountability, academics have become subject to measurement by performance indicators. In the name of quality, academics' time is increasingly governed by the technology of total quality management (TQM) in which style can overwhelm substance. The paper emphasizes that the centuries-old ideal of the independent, but not detached scholar needs to be defended by all academics, especially at this time of the growth of a technocratic business ideology in universities, increasingly economistic conceptions of education by government and others, rigidity and intensification of work caused by the culture of "do more with less" and increasing displacement of social good by economic good.

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