

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: A SOUTH AFRICAN MODEL OF HIGHER EDUCATION?¹

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Comrade Minister, the calling of this summit on higher education has been a bold, brave and imaginative move, indeed. To bring together all the stake holders in higher education into one venue, here at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, could so easily court trouble and raise unrealizable expectations. Especially as you have taken a rare broad view of the stakeholders – a view that included not only the visible actors – Vice Chancellors, managers, civil society organizations, government bodies – but also students represented by the Presidents on the SRCs and workers represented by NEHAWU. No doubt, the perspectives from below are often the most illuminating, but also the most challenging.

This is a rare endeavor, indeed. I may even say only in South Africa would a Minister call together such a broad range of interests to tackle and discuss, in a no holds barred way, the biggest issues facing higher education. To start the summit with the stakeholders representing their views, to break up into commissions on the academic experience, on the student experience, on differentiation, and on governance and then to have the commissions report back to the summit turned out to be a stroke of organizational genius. The seriousness with which each set about its work, the heated discussions, the open conflicts and tensions, the desire for considered solutions marked the work of each commission.

My ticket of entry to this wondrous event was to offer some concluding reflections as an outsider. I have heard quite a few speeches about higher education in South Africa and they usually take the form of laying out all the achievements – demographic profile of students, the research output, the vitality of some of the best academies – but then to follow with all the challenges of transformation that remain. I will reverse the order, starting with the challenges and then focus more on the way South Africa is going about meeting those challenges. What have I learned from these one and half days as I have listened to the opening speeches and then the discussions in and reports from the commissions? Well first, I have been amazed how well developed and informed you all are about the problems facing higher education in South Africa. But, second, I can only conclude the transformation is not for sissies. That's an expression that is usually applied to old age, and we can say that many South African universities are long in the tooth, but they are having to adapt to the still youthful postapartheid order as well as meet the challenges of a modern, globalizing world.

¹ These comments are the concluding reflections I presented to the *Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation* held at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, April 22-23, 2010.

If I were to quickly list the challenges facing higher education in South Africa, they would include: at the most basic level the unequal access to higher education and the even more startling unequal success rates, by race in particular, but one might suspect even more deeply by class. From this follows much else. On the one hand, the preparedness of students, the articulation of basic education and higher education, the difficult living conditions on campuses, the institutional racism of the pedagogic function and the lack of adaptation to and comprehension of the student of today. On the other hand, there is the question of the preparedness of the universities, many inherited from apartheid, the failure to attract and retain the best teachers and researchers who find more remunerative work elsewhere. Within higher education there is the enormous differentiation between institutions – the abiding differences between HBUs and HWUs -- under-resourced at one end and subject to global competition on the other. In short we may say that higher education is caught between the disabling legacies of the past and the structural pressures of the present. The danger is that these twin forces become excuses for inaction – to throw up one's hands and point fingers at apartheid or neoliberalism. The enterprise of this summit has been an attempt to overcome rather than submit to the heavy weight of the past as well as to resist the intruding pressures of marketization.

My first observation is that South African higher education is in relatively good shape compared certainly to anywhere in Africa but also more generally to the global south. South African higher education is the jewel of Africa, which is why so many students and faculty come to South Africa from the rest of Africa. It stands in relation to Africa as Brazil stands in relation to Latin America, relatively well funded public education, both inherited from previously authoritarian regimes – apartheid and military dictatorship. The conditions of teaching and learning in the rest of Africa are, sad to say, at a much lower level than in South Africa.

My second observation is that South African higher education is not unique in facing the challenges of transformation. Universities across the world, not just in the South but in the North too, are facing such challenges and it is about this that I wish to devote the remainder of my time here at the podium. We can safely say that almost everywhere the university is in crisis. Put in the broadest terms the place of the university as simultaneously inside and outside is being eroded. Except in a few antiquated hold outs the idea of the ivory tower has gone, we have to engage society beyond the university. We no longer can hold on to a privileged position. We have to justify our existence. We were living in the Golden Age of the University, but perhaps it was also a Fool's Paradise that simply couldn't last.

The university as simultaneously participant in and observer of society is dissolving, the university is losing its capacity to fend off pressures of instrumentalization. These pressures come in two forms – commodification and regulation. I come from the University of California, which, with its seven plus campuses, is surely one of the shining examples of public education in the world. This year it was hit with a 25% cut in public funding. This is a sizeable chunk of money! The university has never faced such a financial crisis and it has taken correspondingly

drastic steps – laying off unknown numbers of non-academic staff, putting pressure on already outsourced low paid service workers, furloughing academics that included world renown figures, Nobel Prize Winners. Most significantly it involved a 30% increase in student fees, so that they now rise to about \$10,000 a year, but still only half the price of the best private universities. These are drastic measures indeed, and a violation of the 1960s Master Plan, the vision of free higher education for all who desired it, orchestrated through a system that integrated two year community colleges, the state system of higher education and then at the pinnacle the University of California. All this now is turning to ruins.

But it has not been an overnight process. The state has been withdrawing funds from higher education for over three decades so that before this year's cuts it supplied only 30% of the university's budget. So 25% cut is more like a 7% cut in the University's budget, still sizeable. The cuts began in the 1980s with the new era of marketization, which some call neoliberalism. Marking the shift was the change in intellectual property rights, and Bayh-Dole legislation on patents of 1980. Before patenting was seen as an infringement of the market. Knowledge was a public good that should be available to all and, therefore, even the discoverer should not have monopoly access to its revenues. That changed and today a patenting mania lies at the bottom of expanding industry-university collaboration. As the leading universities cashed in on their research so the government saw less need to pour funds into higher education which only intensified the commercialization of knowledge, which had all sorts of implications for those disciplines that could not convert their knowledge into tangible assets. They were told they had to find alumni or corporate donors to support their enterprise! With the corporatization of the university so the university came to look more and more like a corporation, and its managerial ranks expanded rapidly. Within the last two decades the ratio of faculty to senior administrators has fallen from 3 to 1, to 1 to 1! And the salary structure has been distorted accordingly. The President of the University is supposed to earn a corporate executive salary – he actually earns in excess of \$800,000, which is twice the President of the country! All managerial and administrative salaries are stretched accordingly, and salaries within the university become ever more unequal, varying with the marketability of the associated knowledge they produce. As universities become the site of investment so national and global ranking schemes – Times Higher Education (now QS) or Shanghai -- inevitably emerge to suggest which universities are most likely to provide the best monetary returns.

Let me now turn to the second model – the regulatory model. The source of this model, we might say, was the Thatcher Revolution in England. Here the strategy is not to commercialize the production of knowledge, bringing the still public university directly into the market, but to make it more efficient, more productive, and more accountable. The Thatcher Regime introduced the notorious Research Assessment Exercise – an elaborate scheme of evaluation based on faculty publications. An elaborate incentive scheme was introduced that you might say was intended to simulate market competition but actually generated something more like the Soviet

model of planning. Just as the Soviet planners had to decide how to measure output of the factories, how to develop indices of plan fulfillment, and these led to inevitable distortions, shoes that all looked the same, tractors that were far too heavy, and the inevitable shortage of everything, so now higher education is full of parallel distortions that obstruct both the production (research) and dissemination (teaching) of knowledge. Ironically, the Thatcher Revolution, which was supposed to applaud the market against the plan, proved to be a simulation of Soviet planning, developing an elaborate auditing culture that led academics to devote themselves to gaming the system, distorting their output – such as publishing essentially the same article in different venues, the devaluation of books, importing into departments academic rock stars, even on a short term basis -- all to boost RAE ratings. Perhaps, the most debilitating consequence has been the shortening of time horizons in the conduct of research, so that it becomes ever more trivial and superficial. Basic research gives way to contract research. This Soviet model has been exported to Europe with the Bologna Process that homogenizes higher education across countries. The Soviet model is especially applicable, therefore, to those states that want to hold onto public higher education, but seek to rationalize it by monitoring of the pursuit of short term goals.

The two models combine in different ways in different countries, but together or individually they conspire to instrumentalize higher education, subjecting professionalism to formal rationality and exaggerating the importance of policy research, but policy research that is subject to control of the client. All this comes at the expense of critical thinking that makes academic knowledge accountable to academics, and public engagement that is concerned with building a higher education responsive to the interests of the wider society. It is, therefore, in this connection that the model of higher education implicit in what we have been doing here at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, at this summit, becomes clearer. It is a model of the university that does not deny the importance of its instrumental moment but subjects it to critical examination. What I have witnessed these last two days is a reflexive model of higher education – a dialogue that is both internal to higher education between for example managers who point their fingers at academics and academics who point their fingers at the corporatization, but also a dialogue between government, civil society and the institutions of higher education. What emerges is neither government regulation nor commercialization but one of deliberative democracy, in which the stake holders are participants in a political process. We can call this a model of empowered participatory governance.

While it takes courage for the state to engage in such a dialogue with the sector of higher education, it is nonetheless quite rational to do so because it allows the adjustment, articulation of interests – articulation in the sense of voicing but also in the sense of mutually adjusting – rather than every group pursuing its own narrow interests, responding to the exigencies of the day, oblivious of the perspectives of others. As the barriers between the inside and outside of the university break down, as the boundaries become porous the academic can try to retreat into its

shell, sabotaging outside interests while protecting its turf within the university, or it can take a more outward looking approach that seeks to tackle the challenges together and in public. We are arriving, therefore, at a new vision of the public university, one that is publicly accountable that engages with publics rather than simply with itself. This does not preclude relations with business or the development of incentive structure but does so through open discussion, a discussion that includes all the stake-holders, that recognizes the tradeoffs at stake!

You can, of course, be cynical about this project. You can say you've tried it all before in the 1990s and nothing came of it and that it got bogged down in futile debates about trivia. You can say that this is just an exercise in legitimating state policies and the government will simply pursue whatever suits it. You can throw up one's hands in disgust to say that this was just a staged ritual of an ANC state, unresponsive to the interests of society. You can say that this stakeholder summit has nothing to do with me, whether I be a teacher, administrator or student, and that the participants were handpicked and unrepresentative. But this cynicism, this defeatism is to overlook the uniqueness of South Africa, its long history of negotiated politics and dialogue, and thus to miss an opportunity – a public debate concerned less with transition and more with transformation. You can refuse this opportunity for dialogue and suffer the consequences of an invading regulation and commercialization, and by thus retreating behind the screens of academic freedom and autonomy encourage the state and market to vanquish the university as we knew it. And there are some terrible examples of that, Russia being one with which I am familiar. Or you can take the fig leaf, and exploit the space for deliberation, call upon the state to honor its commitments, open up debate both within and outside the academy, a debate about the meaning of the public university, especially in the South, and its place in transformation.

The irony is that the university protests that have spread across the Global North – United States, England, France, Germany, Austria and beyond – during the last year are all groping toward a model of deliberative democracy in public education, a model that South Africa almost takes for granted, that it inherits from its past. It's not perfect, and ultimately it has to deliver reform, but it is an important beginning from which we can all learn.