CHAPTER 8

The Contribution of Higher Education to Reconstructing South African Society: Opportunities, Constraints, and Cautionary Tales

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The changing role of higher education in creating knowledge and strengthening nations raises particular challenges for developing countries. In the contemporary context, strengthening developing countries entails a 'dual development imperative': On the one hand, the basic needs of the majority poor must be addressed, by providing adequate social services and through the substantive redistribution of opportunity and wealth. On the other, it is necessary to engage as effectively as possible in both the new knowledge society and the highly competitive global economy. These two goals are in tension, governed as they are by opposing redistributive and global discourses and practices. The case of South Africa is particularly informative in addressing these contradictory demands.

With the political victory over apartheid, expectations were high for a fundamental transformation of society that would reduce the embedded inequalities that sharply divided the social structure of South Africa. The large-scale reconstruction of the higher education system was identified as an immediate policy goal, as a precondition enabling the role of higher education in building the new society. Then higher education could contribute towards national development and other priorities of the new democracy. The policy framework for progressive transformation was impressive. However, for numerous reasons, progress towards the dual development imperative and higher education policy goals has been very uneven. Current conditions in South African society and its higher education system can be characterized as ambiguous. They reflect a combination of tenacious continuities with the apartheid past

and some remarkable, if mainly unanticipated changes. Examining the reasons for this and identifying the constraints facing higher education in contributing effectively towards national development may hold lessons for other developing countries.

Two inter-related themes are woven throughout this account of recent South African higher education policy and the cautionary tales we can derive from it. First, concerns for equity and redistribution have been largely displaced. Advancing the public good through pursuing redress, equity, and redistributive justice, in higher education as well as in other areas of public policy, is increasingly constrained by the hegemony of 'global' market-oriented, neo-liberalism. The dominance of the single market model and its higher education equivalent - the entrepreneurial university, which has become the benchmark of innovation and relevance - ignores the pursuit of equity and redress or, worse, discredits it as outmoded idealism. Second, there is a gap between transformative purpose and actual outcomes. Despite the best of progressive intentions, certain developments in South African higher education have been unanticipated; they were driven by factors other than policy, and, in some cases, they have been counterproductive. These two strands are linked. Together, they obstruct the advancement of transformative development goals, which are priorities in developing countries particularly.

The chapter begins by outlining South Africa's current political economy as context for the first theme. Among the purposes of higher education is the furtherance of national development. The second theme is examined through a focus on various instances of recent higher education policy and planning in South Africa. However, the two themes are conjoined: The disjunctive gap between anticipated progressive policy intentions and actual outcomes hinders the effective contribution of higher education to national development. Certainly, that has been the case in post-apartheid South Africa.

Current Political Economic Tensions in South Africa

The tenor of the anti-apartheid struggle was leftist. South Africa had a relatively advanced infrastructure, resources, and capacity, as well as a rich, progressive policy environment. Thus, expectations were high that substantive progress towards redistributive transformation would be made by the new African National Congress (ANC) government. Many South Africans, and others, hoped and expected the new leadership to vigorously pursue a 'third way': The implicit assumption was that the new

administration was going to transformatively reduce poverty and inequities, while positioning the nation advantageously in the

investment, South Africa has been automatically associated with other troubled emerging economies. It has been subjected to successive waves of short-term speculative investments, accompanied by manipulations and fluctuations of the currency exchange rate which have created enormous turmoil in local markets. The anticipated kick-start to economic growth and subsequent redistribution of wealth and opportunity has not transpired. Rising inflation drove up basic food costs which had an enormous effect on the poor in particular although inflation has shown a recent downward trend. Unemployment growth is unabated, and social services, housing, and land redistribution remain grossly inadequate for the majority of the population. These conditions have generated high crime rates and expanded informal economic activities. They have also intensified the HIV/AIDS crisis, so that South Africa now has the world's worst prevalence rate for HIV/AIDS. Despite government claims to the contrary, key socio-economic indicators show that during eight years of new government policy, poverty and social stratification has been exacerbated, rather than reduced (Terreblanche 2003).

This scenario prompts obvious questions: What shaped the choices made by the choices ANC government? Is compliance with the global discourse inevitable - according to the 'TINA' (there is no alternative) position - or are there meaningful options available? Two broad views on this may be distilled.

The prevailing view of the government of South Africa, as well as of some analysts, is that acceptance of the realities and constraints of a developing country within the global order[1] - and in particular such a country's limited potential for redistributive intervention - represents policy maturity. Correspondingly, advocating such alternatives is, in this view, dismissed as a naive, anachronistic, nostalgic remnant of left rhetoric that is characterized as high on critique but low on alternatives. This discursive position derives from the coincidence of South Africa's political transition during the 1990s with the intensification of globalization, the triumphalist ascendancy of neo-liberalism, the demise of the Soviet bloc, and the emergence of universal hostility to and scepticism of the left. Dominant market discourses and practices have closed down the discursive space for interventionist redistribution. This is the context that shaped South Africa's recent formulation of macroeconomic and social policy. The new government appears convinced that the only effective development path is the eventual redistribution through international investor-led growth - even though its current growth, employment, and redistribution strategy has largely not achieved its targets. Furthermore,

it has elicited severe criticism from, among others, the ANC's tri-partite alliance partners, the South African Communist Party and the leftist Congress of South African Trade Unions. Apparently the government fears ostracizing itself from global networks and foreign investors if it contravenes the dictates of neo-liberal economic orthodoxy. Terreblanche (2003) traces the roots of this position to the key shift in the balance of forces in South Africa which occurred during the period of negotiations prior to the 1994 elections. Global market-driven discourse, strongly advocated by the corporate sector, over took the redistributive concerns of the ANC and its political allies. This shift laid the foundation for the neo-liberal monetarist and

in this is an assumption that a grand system-wide 'comprehensive policy' approach, driven by strong-willed centralized decision-making in the national interest, is necessary to override sectoral interests and regional variations. This is clearly manifest in the education minister's current approach to the mergers and in the tensions this has generated among stakeholders (described below).

Consensus was easily attained consultatively at the level of symbolic policy formulation. However, a different kind of change strategy, which Cloete at al. (2002) call 'differentiated' policy, is required in the subsequent phases which address details of implementation where contestation inevitably arises. Citing Finnish and Dutch examples of linking higher education and the economy and the implementation of merger policies, respectively, Cloete et al. argue that differentiated policy, based on the information-rich interaction between government, institutions, and society, will be more effective in facilitating change and implementing policy. This view draws from Carnoy's vision of a network state which is 'made of shared institutions, and enacted by bargaining and interactive iteration all along the chain of decision-making' (cited in Cloete et al. 2001, 485). This is a state 'whose efficiency is defined in terms of its capacity to create and sustain networks - global, regional, and local, and through these networks, to promote economic growth and develop new forms of social integration' (ibid.).

This differentiated policy approach might find suitable application in another key national development: the attempt to link planning of higher education and human resource development (HRD). Kraak (2003) assumes that to achieve national priorities, coordinated and integrated 'joined-up' cross-sectoral policy and planning is required. In light of now-discredited 'manpower' planning projections, it is commonly held that higher education outputs and labour market needs cannot be precisely matched. Pursuing the goal of coordinated planning runs the risk of adopting another assumption, which is that more complex planning frameworks and capacity will automatically achieve a closer match. However, the rapidly changing dynamics of the labour market create an indeterminacy that resists even the most complex planning approaches. Quantifying labour market needs cannot be an exact science. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify broad areas where there are shortages of skills, and through greater interaction with employers and other social partners, identify the optimum mix of knowledge and skills required in the workplace. An effective HRD strategy will strive progressively towards greater exactness in mapping shortages with a view to aligning the out-

puts of higher education more closely with the needs of the labour market. This kind of 'incremental fine-tuning' involves, as Schwartzman (2002) illustrates, careful monitoring of labour market trends, sophisticated information, and clarity of developmental objectives by all key participants - precisely the kind of network envisaged by Carnoy. However, this vision of a networked state, and its goal of iterative relations generating new forms of 'social integration,' may optimistically underestimate the depth of social divisions, conflictual interests, and asymmetrical capacities among developing country governments, institutions, and stakeholders, especially given the knowledge intensity of this approach. Evidence of this is the current rather combative relationship between the South African higher education ministry and other stakeholders in higher education. This is closing down, rather than opening up opportunities for participatory involvement in policy-making and will now be described.

Mergers: The Challenges of Integrated Planning and Consultation

The 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education* provides the detailed framework and operational steps to implement the goals of the 1996 white paper produced by the Department of Education. Among other things, it established targets for increased participation and rates of graduation, for reshaped enrolments by field of study, and for staff equity. The plan also provided for the restructuring of the institutional landscape through mergers, but without reducing the number of institutional sites and capacity for expanded participation. The department argued that pruning institutional numbers will increase the overall efficiency, equity, and effectiveness of the system in fulfilling its various functions and in contributing to national development. The plan is highly interventionist and regulatory in character,[5] with the three-year iterative planning process at its centre. For the purposes of this discussion, three aspects of the merger process illuminate potential pitfalls of policy planning and implementation.

First, unsurprisingly, the merger proposals aroused fierce and passionate opposition. Opposition was particularly strident from historically disadvantaged institutions who interpreted mergers as an attack on and a denial of their historical and potential future role in development. The fundamental rationale for most of the recommended mergers was strongly criticized by many institutions and analysts, as were the criteria and data on which these were based. In motivating the mergers, the min-

ister of education stated the intent to eradicate the anomalous and duplicative proliferation of institutions which were, in the minister's words, the outcome of the geo-political imagination of apartheid planners.' Significantly for this discussion, most policy analysts saw little relation between the preoccupation with reducing numbers of institutions, on the one hand, and advancing key policy goals of higher education and national development priorities, on the other (Subotzky 2002). In the absence of a compelling rationale, the minister's single-minded focus on pruning the system appears to be primarily motivated by the political need to achieve demonstrable change. The ANC is now (2003) approaching the next election, and given the increasingly vociferous criticism of government's perceived persistent non-delivery on fundamental socio-economic transformation, this need is understandable. However, making mergers the priority will absorb enormous energy and resources, with little certainty that these will be cost beneficial. This highlights the danger of higher education policy being primarily politically, rather than educationally motivated. Such a tendency augers poorly for the effective contribution of higher education to national development needs.

Second, within this overall framework for change, educational institutions face a bewildering array of somewhat disjointed policy and planning initiatives and change imperatives, leading to a crippling demand overload. Not only do they face multiple aspects of change in policy on higher education, but they are also subject to various pieces of labour legislation, including employment equity stipulations. Within this assortment of over thirty change initiatives, as pointed out by the South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA 2002), what is clearly lacking is the sequential alignment of policy and planning priorities. This is not to suggest a resort to 'big bang' grand policy approaches but simply to assert that without sensible policy coordination and prioritization, ongoing multiple demands will simply exhaust capacity, energy, and compliance. Ultimately, the result will be resistance to implementation.

Third, in releasing the national plan, the minister insisted that the period of consultation (which began with the 1996 National Commission on Higher Education) was over, and the time for decisive intervention and delivery had arrived. The Department of Education has shown diminishing patience with what it interprets as obstructive sectoral interests hindering the implementation of the plan and hence of the national interest. Accordingly, the government has recently adopted an increasingly intolerant and belligerent posture towards the higher education sector and its stakeholders. Keeping itself at a distance, the government

is forfeiting opportunities to work with intermediate bodies such as the South Africa Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association. This shift in relations between the government and stakeholders threatens the white paper notion of cooperative governance, and has - significantly for the purposes of this chapter - important consequences for policy implementation, raising a central challenge in this regard. Decisive government action to overcome inevitable contesting interests is necessary in any system. However, needlessly antagonizing stakeholders in this way reveals a short-sighted and potentially counterproductive view of policy. Consultation does not constitute merely a single phase in the policy process. Without an appropriate degree and form of participatory involvement by stakeholders and practitioners in policy-making and implementation, compliance with the government's stronger interventionist approach is unlikely. Indeed, this will simply elicit legal and bureaucratic obstruction of implementation. Change must be managed through finding the appropriate mix of consultative engagement, creating the space for constructive critique, and acting decisively from the centre to avoid reactionary obstruction and ideological recalcitrance. This balance is crucial to successful policy and planning implementation, and in turn to the achievement of the broader purposes of higher education and national development. Otherwise there is the ever-present danger that the government will justify strong intervention to counter opposition in the name of the national interest.

Applications-driven Knowledge Production and Acquisition

South Africa's re-entry into the global globa an

ciplinarity was the key to preparing graduates adequately for the new knowledge society and for solving pressing socioeconomic and technical problems. This follows the global proliferation of new organizational and epistemological modes of knowledge production, which has manifested in the shift from 'disciplinary' to 'problem-solving' or 'strategic' research. While various accounts of this change emerged (Etzkowitz, et al., 1998; Rip, 2000), the notion of a shift from 'Mode 1' knowledge production (that is, knowledge produced within conventional disciplinary frameworks, based on peer-review quality criterial) to 'Mode 2' knowledge production (that is, trans-disciplinary knowledge produced to address specific problems, conducted increasingly in transient teams of specialists, based on end-user quality criteria) (Gibbons et al., 1994; Gibbons, 1998) had a major impact in South Africa. According to Gibbons, for institutions - particularly in developing countries - to remain relevant and at the cutting edge of research in the context of a 'new economically oriented paradigm of the function of higher education' (1998, 1), they must develop partnerships and alliances to produce relevant Mode 2 knowledge. They should adjust from being *producers* of mainly disciplinary knowledge to being creative *reconfigurers* of knowledge into interdisciplinary combinations to solve complex problems.

Around the time that the National Commission on Higher Education was doing its work (the mid-1990s), policy-hungry analysts readily seized on the progressive, cutting-edge appeal of the Gibbons thesis. They adopted it rapidly, and rather uncritically, linking it to optimism about an inclusive high-skills path and to meeting national development goals (Cloete et al. 1997; Scott 1997; Subotzky 1999; Kraak 2000). Following this initial optimism, however, Gibbons's version of Mode 2 and its role in fostering development received more circumspect criticism (Jansen 2000; Muller 2000; Muller and Subotzky 2001).[6] It was seen as ambiguous as to whether Mode 2 should *replace* Mode 1 disciplinary knowledge or should be an *adjunct* to it (Muller 2000). Although Gibbons and his co-authors would hastily affirm the latter, their account remains equivocal in this regard. It has led to several cases in which interdisciplinary problem-solving curricula have supplanted traditional disciplinary-based curricula. Shifting patterns in knowledge *production* was thus unquestioningly adopted into the realm of knowledge *acquisition.*

Inquiry-rich curricula have a long history and many evident benefits. However, the cautionary concern here is that shifting teaching programs towards interdisciplinarity without a solid foundation of disciplinary training may prove counterproductive. This may be especially so in

developing country contexts where the quality of disciplinary training is often suspect. This also runs the risk of setting graduates up for failure by expecting them to contribute to development priorities by means of innovative problem-solving Mode 2 activity without ensuring their prior competence and capacity - which depends on thoroughly grounded discipline-specific knowledge and skills (Muller and Subotzky 2001). Applications-driven research and inquiry-rich instruction may hold much promise for developing countries in meeting their development priorities. However, the potential perils of too-literal interpretations and the uncritical adoption of current trends must be considered.

The key challenge for curriculum development in addressing labour market and development needs in the new knowledge society is, as Schwartzman (2002,12) argues, 'not with quantitative targets for specific professions, but with the general need to provide society with the proper combination of specialized, generic and "transferable" skills.' Finding this balance remains highly elusive. Employers tend to overemphasize specialized competence above generic high-level competence 'which is a platform for any specialized competence' (Cloete and Bunting 2000, 46). Instead, for skills to remain adaptable, they cannot be too context specific 'or else the knowledge economy will not prosper' (ibid., 47-8). The inculcation of concrete skills precludes the 'kind of adaptability required by an economy characterized by ever-changing cognitive demand' (ibid.) and, without a solid platform of knowledge processing, leaves the student stranded in the particularity of those skills.

In curriculum debates in South Africa, the pursuit of this balance is reflected in two contending positions, framed by the 'disciplinary' and the 'credit accumulation and transfer' positions (Ensor 2001, 273). The latter arises from the advocacy, in recent documents higher education policy, of a 'high skills, high growth' economic development path, aimed at rapid integration into the global world economy. The principal instrument for this is the national qualifications framework (NQF). It is aimed at fostering mobility across the system of education and training through credit accumulation and transfer. NQF rests on the notion of equivalence of forms of knowledge and a series of shifts including the following: from subject-based knowledge of content to student-based generic skills; from courses to credits; from disciplinary curricula to outcomes-based modularized interdisciplinary curricula; and from disciplinary-based departments to interdisciplinary programs, inspired by the Mode 2 thesis. As Ensor (2001) shows, the tension between these discourses has persisted in South Africa throughout the process of making policy on

higher education and has led to a current review of the NQF. Tracking some institutional attempts to gear programs to the world of work, Ensor concludes that despite the reorganization and repackaging of these programs, most remain firmly discipline-based and do not constitute integrated interdisciplinary curricula. However, the unintended result of the restructuring is less portability and less flexibility of choices for students than before. In some cases, the process was so extreme that the number of core disciplinary majors were drastically reduced - a situation that had to be rapidly rectified. This is another example of progressive intentions leading to unanticipated outcomes.

These perspectives indicate that far more effort is required to determine the optimal mix of knowledge and skills required in the new knowledge-driven workplace. The task, Ensor argues, is to find common ground between the position favouring disciplinary knowledge and the position favouring transferable skills, thereby addressing the shortcomings of each and combining disciplinary coherence and depth of learning with flexible entry and exit opportunities (and interdisciplinary relevance, it may be added). This remains the principal curricular challenge in preparing graduates for the labour market and thereby in ensuring their effective contribution to development priorities. These experiences suggest the need for caution towards the uncritical borrowing of apparently progressive and innovative policy - especially in the key area of research and curricula - in addressing national development priorities.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Another area of the rapid and problematic uptake of progressive policy and practice has been the adoption of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a mechanism to ensure greater equity of access and mobility across education and training. A useful description of RPL and its significance for higher education policy in South Africa is provided by Osman and Castle (2002, 63):

> The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a tool that assists adults to identify existing knowledge and skills, acquired informally, through work and life experience, while allowing institutions to make judgments about their preparedness for study and eligibility for credit. In South Africa, RPL was introduced to increase the participation of black students in higher education, and to improve the knowledge and skills base of the workforce in the interests of global competitiveness. These intentions link RPL to issues of

> equity, redress and social justice, on the one hand, and to lifelong learning on the other. RPL has a prominent place on the national policy agenda, and is one of several initiatives associated with the challenges of globalization and pressures to transform the education and training system.

From this, the attraction of RPL in the South African context is readily apparent. However, while RPL has been widely instituted, this has been largely ad hoc. The first studies monitoring and evaluating the operational challenges and effects of RPL practice are emerging (Shalem and Steinberg 2000; Thaver et al. 2002; Breier 2003). The main challenge for RPL is to facilitate the interface between (both formal and non-formal) varieties of knowledge and experience which arise outside the academy in the world of work, on the one hand, and highly structured formal academic knowledge, on the other. Defending the practice against sceptics who regard it as a soft access option, proponents of RPL do recognize 'that experiential knowledge is distinct from academic ways of knowing, and that learning that occurs in a variety of contexts is not always transferable' (Osman and Castle 2002, 67). In so doing, they optimistically assume that a seamless and meaningful interface can be achieved. However, while paradoxically acknowledging differences in forms of knowledge they do not explain how these can be bridged. This epistemological question is thus reduced to the political issue of attitudes and power relations among different but purportedly equal knowledge workers. It also assumes the equality of all knowledge forms, despite the stated differences: 'the epistemological challenges in RPL relate to whose knowledge is valued and privileged, and whether knowledge outside disciplinary boundaries can be recognized alongside others within the discipline' (ibid.).

Other researchers are more cautious about such claims. Drawing from the work of Bernstein (1990, cited in Breier 2003) on vertical and horizontal knowledge forms in order to develop insights into the complexities of different typologies, it is argued that academic and local forms of knowledge are not reducible to equal status (Breier 2003). In this perspective, academic knowledge is characterized by its vertical structure, that is, the extent to which it generalizes insights beyond local context. Based on this framework, Breier's recent research (ibid.) focuses on combining empirical observations with more sophisticated theoretical modelling of classroom interactions and dynamics between RPL students and teachers within curricula structures. This suggests that, despite the progressive intentions of RPL, access to the highly structured vertical struc-

tures and discourses of academic knowledge is not automatic for students whose socioeconomic backgrounds and workplace conditions do not provide opportunities for socialization into these specialized forms of literacy and knowledge.

Other studies show that operationally there are challenges and limits to the effectiveness of RPL as an institutional policy. After sustained efforts to institutionalize the practice at one university, the cost benefits in terms of enrolment remain lower than expected (Thaver et al. 2002). This is not to suggest that the practice will not work without improved approaches, only that initial anticipation of its effectiveness motivated by progressive intent must be moderated in the light of actual experience. In addition, Shalem and Steinberg (2000) identify the enormous load on the educator in facilitating classroom interactions and the interface of the different knowledge forms. The process, therefore, involves far more time and effort than anticipated.

Bernstein's framework remains controversial and contested. Nonetheless, these studies suggest that progressive political motivation to democratize access to academic knowledge, and the interface between the local and academic epistemological forms, must be approached with more circumspection. Democratizing agency and knowledge on the basis of simple equality denies epistemological differences embedded in unequal social relations and knowledge interfaces and, ironically, might disempower those whose positions one seeks to advance.

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the contemporary role of higher education by focusing on the recent higher education policy process in the context of the current political economy of South Africa. The purpose was to draw out possible lessons from the exploration of inter-related themes. One concern is the difficulty of pursuing concerns for equity, redress, and the redistribution of opportunity and wealth - the foundations of national development and transformation in developing countries — within the current hegemony of neo-liberalism in the global discourse. This is evident in the paradox that, despite heightened expectations to the contrary, socio-economic divisions, poverty, and social fragmentation have been exacerbated, rather than alleviated under the new progressive South African government. Another concern relates to how progressive policy intentions and plans do not always lead to desired outcomes. This is apparent in the fact that, despite a comprehensive

higher education policy framework for transformation and several progressive policy initiatives, policy implementation and the achievement of policy goals have been delayed and diverted, and have led to unintended and potentially counterproductive consequences.

From this account, various constraints, challenges, and cautionary tales emerge. These can be summarized as follows:

- The dominant political economic context imposes overt and covert conditions on developing countries to adopt prevailing neo-liberal economic policies. These clearly constrain equity, redress, and redistribution - which are central concerns for developing countries.
- The tendency in the prevailing discourse about the role of higher education in the globalized knowledge society is to focus on one pole of the dual development path which developing countries must embrace, that is, engagement in the competitive global economy.
- Linked to this, the current predilection in higher education policy and practice is to focus on the economic purpose of higher education and to advocate the single model of the entrepreneurial university.
- Centralized interventionist policy-making has limited effectiveness. Correspondingly, there is a need to develop ongoing consultative networks between government and higher education stakeholders, without whose meaningful participation in the policy process, lack of compliance and resistance will arise, and this will impede successful implementation.
- To implement complex policy and planning frameworks, the required capacities must exist at the government and institutional levels.
- Assumptions about change and the limits to system-wide and institution-wide grand 'comprehensive' policy and planning may be dangerous.
- There is rapid and often uncritical uptake of global discourses within developing countries.
- A strong disciplinary Mode 1 foundation is important in the trend towards Mode 2 applications-driven knowledge production and acquisition.
- Caution must be exercised concerning the claims of the seamless interface between, and equality of academic and non-academic knowledge forms and agents in recognition of prior learning (RPL) programs.

These challenges and constraints to the effective contribution of

higher education towards both global and redistributive development in the context of South Africa may provide instructive lessons for other developing and, indeed, developed countries.

NOTES

1 Exploring this issue requires a fresh look at the theory of the state in the contemporary global, in terms of which examining the case of South Africa as a developing country would be particularly informative. This forms the focus of a proposal for collaborative research in which the author is currently involved.

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