

RESEARCH AND THE ROLE OF THE HISTORICALLY-BLACK UNIVERSITIES¹

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Introduction

It is now generally accepted that universities are not just independent institutions of learning. As important organs of civil society they form part of a matrix of key institutions generating ideas and policy options which contribute to shaping social, economic, and scientific development.²

It is with this notion in mind, in the rapidly changing scenario of South Africa, that a vision of transformation of universities has to be developed.³ In the broadest sense, such models need to be concerned with developing a commitment to create, to articulate and to communicate a compelling new vision of the post-apartheid university. Among its tenets are to democratise institutional structures, increase accessibility to universities, re-examine the articulation between different forms of tertiary education, reorient and redefine syllabi and curricula, contribute to human resource development, develop new policy options, become responsive to community aspirations, and address the problem of the many gross inequalities in South African society.

This paper sets out some ideas on the role of research in historically black universities. These ideas are located within the context of the broader changes which are occurring within universities and in South African society.

University Autonomy and Research

The unbanning of political organisations and the beginnings of Codesa creates an immediate and inexhaustible need for research options for the liberation movement and all those constituencies involved in the negotiations process. One question which arises here relates to the autonomy of the academic to conduct such research independently of political direction and control.

In one view social and scientific research is ethically and political neutral, value free and objective. The opposing view is that such research is not value free but should respond to relevant social and political concerns - especially in our case to the struggles over the transformation of South African society.

Extending the latter view, Harold Wolpe argues that structural conditions have a considerable impact on research - the allocation of resources, the structure of ideologies, career patterns of researchers, editorial and book acceptances of research publications etc. can all impinge on the research effort.⁴

In post-independence Mozambique, where these contradictions obtained, the policy of Frelimo became the starting point for research and investigation - not its conclusion; in fact, the Centre for African Studies ended by questioning Frelimo policy on issues such as the collectivism of agriculture and large scale industrial

development. In the South African context, research should be concerned to elaborate, clarify and critique the liberation movement's analysis of the present. Wolpe, for instance, warns of the danger that our rejection of reformist options may lead us away from analysing their effects. John Saul cautions that scholar-activists must be aware that there will always be the danger of shaping one's analyses to fit one's perceptions.⁵

Centres of Excellence

There is emerging a line of thinking within the state bureaucracy and in certain universities that the South African research effort should be located within a limited number of defined centres of excellence viz. the historically White universities. The other universities are to concentrate largely on their teaching capabilities. I wish to argue against this proposition on the following grounds:

Firstly, that the historically Black universities are well-placed and suited to undertake the kinds of research that are relevant to the emerging South Africa particularly in developmental, rural, gender and health issues; but also in certain areas of the sciences.

The history of most of these universities were intimately shaped by anti-apartheid struggles. Black students and staff confronted the reality of apartheid life and these experiences have shaped the world view of such individuals. These anti-apartheid struggles have also drawn the historically Black universities into a more dynamic engagement with the concerns and problems of social forces such as the unions and democratic political organisations.

Secondly, such a thesis will exacerbate existing inequalities - clearly creating two classes of universities - one White and superior and the other Black and inferior. A host of published data starkly reveals the gross inequalities between the two groups of institutions.

Universities such as University of Durban-Westville (UDW), University of Western Cape (UWC) and Fort Hare draw their students from the majority black population, who are severely disadvantaged by the time they arrive on these campuses.

The university students/population ratio for whites is 31 per 1 000 (about the highest in the world) and for blacks it is 2,5 per 1 000; 51 per cent of African students are in historically black universities, 35 per cent are studying through UNISA and only 5 per cent attend the historically White universities; only 5 per cent of Masters and Doctoral students are Africans; 90 per cent of tenured academic staff are White and less than 5 per cent African.

In addition these universities still carry with them, a not insignificant amount of apartheid baggage despite their autonomy. A core of staff in both the administrative and academic sectors of the apartheid era remain obstacles to change, a symbol of mediocrity, a lack of commitment and sensitivity. The state functionaries appointed to senior positions at these universities in the past are often inefficient and unsympathetic to new ideas, and remain obstacles to transformation.

The alumni as a support base is almost non-existent because this constituency

deliberately distanced itself from the 'bush colleges'. Also unlike the open, white universities (or American or British universities) only a few of the alumni of the black universities have entered influential positions in the private and state sector.

Their relatively recent establishment, location, history and ethos are all factors which are not conducive to attracting to the historically black universities significant external funding through bursaries, endowments and other grants. In view of the socio-economic status of the students, their fee income is about half that of the established universities. The vast majority of the students from the Department of Education and Training (DET) are found in these universities - with their academic deficits resulting in high failure rates, and financial and housing problems. The campaign to isolate these universities in earlier times has ensured that progressive academics did not take up appointments there.

All these factors contribute to disadvantaging seriously the historically Black universities. To limit their role even further, by denying to them, a legitimate role as research centres will be to deliver a serious blow to their development and transformation.

Thirdly good teachers are generally also good researchers and the two are mutually reinforcing. The reinforcing relationship between teaching and research is best amplified by Fletcher's observation:⁶

Teaching divorced from the excitement of research soon becomes dull and reactionary. Research that is divorced from teaching is in danger of becoming esoteric and unreal university teaching rises to its highest level when it is shot through with the thread of discovery.

Research also informs curriculum development - an important aspect of transformation at this juncture in the development of the historically black universities.

The Role of the Historically Black Universities

There are several areas in which research in the historically Black universities can make a positive contribution to the reconstruction of South African society in the transition to, and in its post-apartheid period.

Social and economic research

Research in general and development studies in particular have been initiated, formulated and shaped from a Western vantage point eg. in the area of economic policy formulation and research we would need economists who can bring into macro-economic policy, sophisticated mathematical models, who can analyse international monetary and fiscal policy etc. However we also need economists who are sensitive to and committed to the challenges involved in rural development, in small scale agriculture, small business development and the promotion of entrepreneurial skills among the informal sector and the unemployed. These are not mutually exclusive economic skills; it is necessary that the historically black universities develop both elements as an essential part of the academic training necessary to develop human resources in this area.

In September 1991, the ANC's Department of Economic Policy invited some of

the historically Black universities to assist in setting up a macro-economic framework of the South African economy (MERG).

As the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Mission Report, which recommended the creation of MERG, noted 'most policy-oriented academic research has been carried out, hitherto, on behalf of the state and by the Afrikaner universities.'⁸ It was therefore a conscious decision of the ANC to seek assistance in the first instance from the historically Black universities in its national economic research effort. One important secondary objective of the MERG is to assist these universities to develop their research capacities more fully.

At both UDW and UWC there already existed a core of researchers who had for some time been engaged through various forums (such as the Cosatu-linked Economic Trends Research Group) in economic research for the democratic movement.

Through its training dimension, MERG has the potential to contribute concretely to existing efforts to transform these universities and their teaching and research capacities, so that future graduates from these campuses will have the skills to serve the new South Africa.

A similar relationship, involving UDW, COSATU and the ANC, underlies the establishment recently of the Macro-Education Policy Unit at UDW, whose principal objective is to participate in the development of policy research in the field of education, where educational policy will be related to economic strategies for reconstruction.

The Institute for International Education (IIE) has supported the establishment at UDW of a Social Policy MA course work degree, which will also encourage students and staff to undertake policy oriented research relating to the myriad of problems which the rapid urbanisation process in South Africa has brought in its wake. The course aims to attract (as students) decision-makers in the private and public sector, and many of the staff involved in the teaching and research have been intimately involved in struggles around social and urban issues for many years.

Faculty from the Universities of Michigan (Ann Arbor) and California (Berkeley) will interface with local staff in developing and teaching parts of the course. Similar IIE-supported exchange relationships have already been established with the Universities of Fort Hare (in agriculture) and Western Cape (Mathematics Education), and similar relationships will be worked out soon with the remaining historically Black universities.

Technology and Development

The transformation of the world economy in the last two decades has been very significantly led by the major technological revolution in products and processes; the high tech centres are the fastest growing sectors of the world economy; information technology and its development becomes a fundamental factor in the process of development.

Because the adequate use of advanced information technologies is highly dependent upon the general level of education and culture of labour, there is a growing

connection between the intellectual skills of people and their development potential. Yet expertise in science and technology is very unevenly distributed in the world; this is exacerbated by the flow of scientists from the Third to the First World thus creating fundamental inequality in wealth and power.

Amongst other initiatives, a research system is needed to assimilate the discoveries taking place in the advanced countries, adapt them to specific needs of developing countries and to participate in international scientific networks. The historically black universities can play an important role in the development of such research systems.

It is encouraging that the Foundation for Research Development (FRD) had initiated an Affirmative Action Programme - the University Development Programme (UDP) at the historically Black Universities.¹⁰ To quote from the UDP document:

We know that it is easier to fund excellent research at Universities with a critical mass of skilled scientists and advanced facilities. It is very important to maintain this if South Africa wants to be at the forefront of technology, but it is no less important to build up an infrastructure at other institutions for the proper training of enough scientists, technologists and educators, as well as to develop excellent research for the future.

The UDP aims to support staff members and students at the historically Black institutions who in the past did not have opportunities equal to other South Africans, the chance to improve their knowledge and skills in order to excel in a competitive society. Among its objectives, it plans to promote a research culture in both science education and science technology.

While the UDP initiative is most welcome, it is important to point to some of its limitations. The financial resources set aside for the programme remain inadequate in relation to the needs. Only about R1m has been budgeted for the UDP for 1992.

The capacity of researchers at these campuses to match the research efforts of their colleagues at the open White universities is also limited, by the heavy teaching responsibilities that most of them have (UDW in 1991 had 930 first year physics students!) and by the involvement of many of the most able researchers in the urgent task of transforming these universities at all levels.

Summary and Conclusions

An analysis of the research potential at South African universities cannot be made in isolation from wider social forces. One must begin by relating this discourse to the broad social, economic and political forces that are reshaping the present and the future of this country. This follows the realisation that universities are inextricably organs of civil society; that they have a role to play in the social, economic and political reconstruction of a society that has been deeply ravaged by apartheid and economic exploitation.

On the other hand the academic autonomy of the universities must be paramount. It is in this light that Saul's interesting concept of scholar-activists is important. It provides a model that helps understand the role being played and will be played by

historically black universities in the reconstruction of those campuses and of society in general.

The idea that only some universities will be centres of excellence will only lead to further disparity and unequal development.

The research activities of these universities depend fundamentally on a new system for resource allocation. Academics at these universities bear the burden of heavy teaching loads which arise from a commitment to increasing accessibility. This commitment in turn stems from a desire to provide channels to the victims of apartheid schooling to obtain a university education and from a commitment to the development of the human resources potential of the country.

Recent initiatives at UDW, UWC, Fort Hare and other universities, such as the MERG, MEPU, RESA, etc flow directly from links between these universities and larger social and economic forces of transformation.

If South African society is to enter the information age, development policies must include the impulse for the transformation of higher education system as a key element. Historically Black universities must emphasise research (both fundamental and applied) and they must be developed as complete academic centres of learning and research at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, mixing science and technology, humanities, social science and the professional schools.

To overcome economic inequality and political oppression, and the lack of harmony between economic growth and ecological conservation requires multi-lateral tackling of development processes on a global level. Individual faculty members doing research should therefore fit their work into the broad scheme of development and reconstruction. Scattered and unrelated research does little to solve major problems of economic development¹¹.

NOTES

1. I should like to thank Dr Ahmed Bawa and Dr Vishnu Padayachee for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.
2. Bawa, A (1991).
3. Reddy, J (1991).
4. Wolpe, H (1985).
5. Saul, J.S (1982).
6. Fletcher, B (1968).
7. Coetzee, J.K (1991).
8. IDRC Mission Report, August 1991.
9. Castells, M (1991).
10. FRD University Development Programme, 1991.
11. Streeter, P (1988).

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DISCUSSION

RENE LOEWENSON: I'm having a problem, because the discussion as it's been going so far has been centred around institutions rather than around issues. If we're talking about transformation, we're talking about change, and we need to identify what change and which of the social and economic forces and organisations are going to produce that change. And how can research contribute to giving initiatives to those social and economic forces and organisations? What has happened (in Zimbabwe) after ten years is two things. One is that the researchers have increasingly watched their own economic bases dwindle as the economy has made it more and more difficult to finance those researchers. And we have a flux of researchers away from the public sector, away from the universities, into UN agencies and so on and so forth, following the devaluation of the dollar and the increasingly difficult conditions. To the point where research has become totally motivated by the economic motive of their own survival, and not by economic transformation. We lost a lot of our national expertise. We've also lost quite a lot of our national sovereignty in planning, because the World Bank and the IMF and so on have taken that over. And the national researchers don't know where their role is.

FRANCIE LUND: In institutional terms, how do we find the appropriate structures on the one hand and the processes to work through them? What system of rewards will that exciting new university find to keep people there, to keep their commitment going? And how do you get organisational processes in place, which reward creativity, because I think the university is an incredibly conservative institution, which continues to reward going and making individualised, personal deals with those at the senior level because that works.

HAROLD WOLPE: It seems to me that the question of resource distribution depends first of all on the conception of the university sector that we develop for South Africa. The decision to transfer resources may be politically very important in terms of equity and equality, but it doesn't actually answer the question about the role of the universities. It seems to me that Christopher Cresswell's review of this university could be applied anywhere in the world. All universities talk about excellence and relevance, for example, and research. And the question that seems to me to arise in relation to the universities is: what substance do we put into the development of excellence and which kind of disciplines, at what levels, for what purposes?

FRENE GINWALA: I think one of the problems is we're taking the universities as given and the problem being of putting more black students into it, putting different types of research into it. The question we always get is how to obtain more black students, more money, more scholarships. But nothing about changing that structure, that whole conception of the university's relationship to society. And I'm not sure that now we have taken that debate much further. It's just incorporating or transferring resources from establishment to non-establishment or whatever the words are. I think there has to be a much more fundamental questioning of the role of universities; about changing that structure, that whole conception of the university's relationship to society.

JAIRAM REDDY: I want to turn to Francie Lund's question which she raised about research rewards. The task in fact is very complex and I have no easy answer. You referred to the University of Natal as an incredibly selfish institution. I'd just like to add mine too. We still have a tremendous amount of apartheid baggage. Many people who have been recruited under the apartheid era for ideological reasons, not for academic reasons, were little connected to teaching or research. And many of these people occupy high positions in our university. I think that's a major factor.

MARC VAN AMERINGEN: No matter how rapidly affirmative action goes, in the context of this society, it will eventually succeed only in transforming the fate of the minority in the white universities. The question for the black universities has to be addressed much more in terms of institutional transformation and in terms of division of resources between white and black universities. My remarks should not be seen as against affirmative action per se, but as a call for something much broader.

MIKE MORRIS: We have to have a certain kind of realism. It is patently ridiculous to talk about the possibility of transforming the Universities into some of the grand conceptions that some of us have had in the past. These are institutions that have contained within them an inherited logic of conservatism. They have no ideology. They just resist change. The issue is how to transform certain spaces within the university to give opportunity for those kinds of positions that have an alternative vision of the society, and can therefore link up to other social movements that can link between universities. If we operate on the basis of transforming the universities into some revolutionary institution, we are going to fall into the trap of lots of ideology and very little substance.

SIPHO PITYANA: I think that the problem at the moment is that the universities, especially the white universities as far as I'm concerned, are ivory towers. I think that the challenge that faces white university structures today is that they have got to change. They are not involving the vast majority of the people of South Africa. They are not acceptable to those communities. If they don't change, they will be forced to change. The black pigeonholes that they are creating today will not be acceptable in future.