Transforming Higher Education in South Africa: Finding new direction

All the articles in this edition of Discourse celebrate the joy and power of thinking, the exuberance of new ideas, the crucial need for bold and innovative intellectual challenge. All the writers below have the ability to connect on matters of both theoretical and more directly lived experience, causing us to think anew and in different ways.

The writers have immense practical experience. Nearly all are associated with institutions of higher learning (Wits; UCT; Free State; UWC). All are passionate about the struggle to create a properly functioning and quality higher education system. The articles represent a range of approaches and viewpoints. They comment on a seemingly disparate field of issues, yet are closely linked in the higher education terrain.

Thus, David Monyae talks about university access and financial support via the NSFAS bursary, its strengths and problems. Nan Yeld explains how to enhance retention in the system and focuses on academic support, exposing the weaknesses in much of the current approaches.

Crain Soudien talks about transformation and discrimination, whether perceived or real, while Jonathan Jansen challenges some of these views in favour of what he argues is a more nuanced and focused perspective on racial change. Brian O’Connell talks passionately about ensuring that at UWC there is quality and engaged research of international standing.

Yet none of the authors are praise-singers. All have institutions, programmes and viewpoints to defend. Yet, all use the intellectual space of Discourse to contextualise and think through their positions and to subject their assumptions to their own self-critical scrutiny. They identify weaknesses: not only as areas for further research and knowledge transformation, but also as areas for practical intervention and advance. None of the authors think that the terrain of Higher Education is without its complexities. All of them find pleasure in rising to the many challenges that the universities and higher education present.

Jonathan Jansen, in his human-focused way, talks of 'goose bump' moments of transformation and calls for a 'deep change in race relations'. He argues that to 'understand racial affliction is not the same thing as condoning racist behaviour' and sets out a programme of enormous complexity and sensitivity. Crain Soudien, on the other hand, sees the only virtue in the Reitz incident being to make transformation 'the single most urgent issue' on the public agenda. He shows how the higher education system is effectively a 5% system that conspires to exclude young African men and women at every turn and level of education. Furthermore, he argues that 'at virtually every hearing conducted across the country, black members of staff raised issues about their treatment by their white colleagues'. Soudien puts out a heartfelt call for 'trust, recognition of difference and mutuality'.