ABSTRACT

This article looks at the state of the transformation discussion in South African higher education. It uses the occasion of the publication of the Report on Transformation in Higher Education to provide the backdrop against which to draw attention to key developments that have taken place in higher education with respect to transformation. In the backdrop section of the article it looks at the major issues which confront the higher education system and proceeds to comment on the implications of these for reforming the sector.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die stand van die transformasiegesprek in Suid-Afrikaanse hoër onderwys. Dit publikasie van die Verslag oor Transformasie in Hoër Onderwys word as die agtergrond gebruik waarteen aandag op die sleutelontwikkeling wat in hoër onderwys met betrekking tot transformasie plaasgevind het, te vestig. In die agtergrond-gedeelte van hierdie artikel word die hoofkwessies ondersoek waarvoor die hoëronderwysstelsel te staan kom en lewer kommentaar op die implikasies hiervan om die sektor te hervorm.

SENAGANWA

Taodišwana ye e lebeletše seemo sa phetogo ya poledišano ka go thuto ya godimo ya Afrika Borwa. Ediriša sebaka sa phatlatšo ya Pego ka ga Phetogo ka go Thuto ya godimo go fa kakaretső ya maemo moo go tla bewago šedĩ go tlhabollo yeo e dirilwe go ka thuto ya godimo malebana le phetogo. Karolong ya kakaretső ya maemo ya taodišwana go lebelelua go merereng e megolo ye e lebanego le tshepešišo ya thuto ya godimo gomme ya tšwela pele go swayaswaya ka ga ditlamorago tša tše ka ga go fetoša lefapha

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THE STATE OF THE TRANSFORMATION DISCUSSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN 2010
Introduction

The decision by four young men in February 2008, at the Reitz Residence at the University of the Free State, to make a film to express their opposition to the University’s policy of residence integration has had consequences for the future of universities in this country significantly beyond anything they could imagine. Up until the time of the incident, interestingly, many people would have had some awareness of transformation, but not nearly the kind of head-lining profile it currently enjoys. From being a 'perennial' on Higher Education’s agenda, it became almost the single most urgent issue. In the broad public, outrage in response to Reitz was intense. Disappointment in the highest echelons of both government and the sector itself was almost palpable. Had the universities failed? The response of government was immediate. The then Minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor, established a Ministerial Committee of Enquiry to look into Progress towards transformation and social cohesion and the elimination of discrimination in public higher education institutions (hereafter simply MCTHE). The sector itself, in the form of Higher Education South Africa (HESA), initiated a committee that undertook to investigate the state of transformation in universities.

Because the HESA investigation did not materialise, it is important to reflect upon the work of the MCTHE. What did it do? What did it find? What were the responses to it and where does the sector find itself now in terms of the discussion of transformation? The brief given to the MCTHE was to look into: 'The nature and extent of racism and racial discrimination in public higher education, and in particular university residences. While the emphasis should be on racial discrimination, other forms of discrimination based, on, for example, gender, ethnicity and disability should also be considered' (Department of Education (DoE), 2008). It was given six months to report on its findings. Under this mandate, and given the nature of the incident at Reitz, it decided to focus on the most egregious issues relating to racism. While it would be alert to all forms of discrimination, it determined that – in the available timeframe – it should set itself up to identify, document and analyse the different kinds of racist behaviour that might arise in the system of higher education. This would practically mean looking at the macro-structure of the system and also at the detail of how the system worked in the lecture halls, the residences and in the informal experiences of students and staff in the system. The Committee emphasised that it could not undertake a rigorous academic study within the time it had at its disposal. In coming to this decision, the members of the Ministerial Committee were clear that what they could do had to be seen as an exploratory review of the nature of the system and, in the scheme of things, would help the Department of Education set an agenda for itself with respect to transformation. This particular matter has caused a great deal of debate. Its work, however, has been criticised by some for not doing this.

In seeking to fulfil the task given to it by the Minister, the MCTHE moved swiftly. It asked institutions to respond to its requests to complete questionnaires and surveys at short notice. It set up hearings and institutional visits when the sector was in recess and brought together information from a range of sources – from official reports to grey literature contained in obscure sources.

What did the MCTHE find?

Officially, the broad conclusion to which the Committee came was that ‘in legal and regulatory terms, the higher education system is in a good state. There is no doubt that significant progress has been made in effecting transformation, when narrowly defined in terms of compliance’ (DoE, 2008: 12). However, it went further to say that ‘compliance does not necessarily signify progress in substantive terms’ (ibid). It found, in terms of what it meant to be a staff member and a student, a significant disjunction between what was articulated in institutions’ policy commitments and the experience, as reported by staff members from the institutions.

It found that at the broad structural level there remained deep issues of inequality. Markedly demonstrating this, there were, and indeed remain, widely different participation and success rates for black and white students in the system. The Committee
drew the following conclusions from its structural analysis of student participation:

» The participation rate in 2006 was 12% for Africans, 13% for Coloureds, 42% for Indians and 59% for whites.

» In undergraduate programmes, African students accounted for 82% of enrolments in diploma programmes and 52% in degree programmes in 2007, while white student enrolments were 9% and 31% respectively. This suggests that, given that degree programmes are the entry point into high-level and professional careers, while diploma programmes are the entry-point into middle and lower-level vocational careers, white students continue to benefit disproportionately relative to their African counterparts.

» The gap between the African and white success rate is further confirmed by a cohort analysis of first-time entering undergraduates in 2000, which indicates that the average graduation rate for white students is double that of African students. By 2004, some 65% of African students in this cohort had dropped out and only 24% graduated, while 41% of white students dropped out and 48% graduated (DoE, 2008: 69-70).

In assessing what the Committee found, and these statistics are readily available, it is clear that structural discrimination is deep. An analysis of the statistics shows the enormity of apartheid’s legacy: the higher education system for African young men and women in the 18 to 24 age group is only a 5% system. By contrast, 65 out of every 100 young white people in the same age group can reasonably expect to graduate from university. The system, as the figures show, is unable to meet the needs of 95% of young African men and women. It is structured not to include them – it cannot give them access – and, crucially, when it does take them in, it is unable to realise their aspirations. It effectively conspires to exclude them.

There are other structural features of the system to which the Committee drew attention, such as the skewed racial nature of the teaching staff in the universities. It is, however, the inability of the system to achieve the target it set itself in the National Plan for Higher Education of a 20% participation rate for black students and, critically, its capacity to turn this participation into achievement that is now undoubtedly one of the greatest transformation challenges confronting the system.

At institutional level, it recognised that significant change, especially with respect to institutional culture and curriculum change, had taken place. Progress was evident in a number of important practical interventions and policy innovations developed in several institutions. In terms of the latter, several institutions had established programmes to address discrimination and prejudice. Important programmes amongst these were Courageous Conversations at Stellenbosch and the Khuluma initiative at UCT. In respect of policy innovations, important developments included the Grounding Course, at the University of Fort Hare (UFH) which deliberately seeks, amongst other things, to provide its undergraduates with a crucial and de-colonising framework in which to see and understand the world, the Continent and themselves; to learn a compassionate basis for gaining and applying their knowledge and energies to the world; and to provide UFH students and academics with an experience of diverse and humanising pedagogies, as a basis to both support and demand wider curriculum renewal in the University (DoE, 2008).

But large problems remained, as indicated by the report. Drawing on evidence in research papers, institutional reviews of the Council of Higher Education, and, significantly, from consultations it conducted on campuses, it heard the complaint across institutions – principally from black staff and students, including some members of Council – that racism continued to operate in classrooms, meetings and the informal spaces in which people found themselves. The nature of these complaints suggested that academic members of staff, students and support members of staff in institutions across the country were going through what was often described as indirect racism. At virtually every hearing conducted across the country, black members of staff raised issues about their treatment by their white colleagues. Significantly, white colleagues, by contrast, frequently presented their institutional experience in much more positive terms. Black students in many institutions spoke of their alienation from the experience. While many interesting
curricular developments were presented, even those academic development initiatives that sought to help black students, were criticised for ghettoising and stigmatising them at the institutions.

In reflecting on the experience of listening to academics, students and administrative and support staff, the Committee found itself in some difficulty. After hearing the positives and the negatives, it did not have the means to verify the claims that people were making. It could not confirm either the progress that was claimed or the deterioration in the climate which many black members of staff suggested was their experience. In presenting its report it suggested that a white view of the academic world, as well as a black one existed on many campuses. Interestingly, a similar phenomenon has been described in the United States. We have here, I suggest, two paradigms of the university. In reflecting further on these two paradigms it is important to signal what the Committee did not say in its report. Given the difficulty of presenting the claims people were making as truths, significantly, the Committee did not repeat much of the anger, frustration and even fear that were expressed in many places. The point to take away from this, and there should be no mistaking the challenge, is that the sector does have serious issues to deal with in respect of trust, recognition of difference and mutuality. There is a real danger that the criticism levelled at the Committee for not being able to substantiate the claims that were made in the process obscures the deep ways in which racial divides impede how universities can and cannot develop and how they move forward. There is a danger that the 'burden of proof' becomes the methodological gold standard that is required before institutions seriously engage with the challenge of the country's legacy.

What is the state of the discussion of transformation now?

As controversial as the report of the MCTHE has been, it has undoubtedly raised the significance of the transformation debate in the country. Its immediate consequences have been to place the issue of transformation at the centre of a number of new higher education initiatives. The Department of Higher Education and Training will have hosted its Summit on Higher Education by the end of April. This is an ambitious initiative to bring the sector together around the themes that were introduced by the MCTHE: namely the student experience, the academic experience and leadership in the sector. At the same time, the Development Bank of Southern Africa, as part of an initiative it has undertaken to develop a 10-Point Plan for Higher Education, placed the questions of transformation at the core of its consultations. The Council for Higher Education has raised the question of the curriculum response with its proposals for a four-year degree. HESA has established a standing transformation committee. At an institutional level, it is also noteworthy that some universities have deliberately and self-consciously initiated discussions, consultations and debates around these questions. The UKZN undertook a major review of issues of transformation at the institution in direct response to the provocation of the MCTHE and to issues that had been raised internally; the UFS has moved to establish the Reitz Institute – an institute that will look at the questions of reconciliation; the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University has established the Centre for Non-racialism and Democracy; and other universities have established lines of action around the learning experience and the residence experience. There is clearly an increase of movement in the country. These developments are deeply important and provide the early scaffolding for the larger platform that needs to be in place: the country needs a platform for renovating the whole higher education landscape and the edifice of the university upon it.

Indeed, with regard to discrimination, it was striking that, across institutions, black staff and students, including some members of Council, argued that racism was rife. However, it was pointed out that the racism experienced was indirect and subliminal, that is, direct manifestations of racism were, by and large, a thing of the past.
Reference