Initiating the debate

South Africa’s Achilles’ heel and Phoenixian possibilities: Reflections on structured underdevelopment and transformation challenges

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Abstract
South Africa’s education system is teetering on a slippery and dangerous slope. The choice is whether to stay mired in a state of stagnation, camouflaged by a beguiling new vocabulary of change, or to transform a crippling historic legacy through an authentic vision, one fuelled by trenchant, and sustained vigour. The thrust of this article is on the tertiary sector, although, to provide a backdrop, I also refer to the historical poverty of general, pre-university education to explain the enduring effects of a design which has nurtured the debilitating underdevelopment that bedevils the present. The article reflects on the heavy weight of an inheritance that has been transmitted intergenerationally and differentiated through racialised and gendered epistemologies, pedagogies, and curricula; all these are deeply embedded in institutional cultures that are routinely executed by an entrenched staff complement who are socialised with dated attitudes and practices. My reflections are largely informed by the report of the 2008 Ministerial Committee on the Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institution (MCHET). Through identifying emergent trends, I ponder on some nascent trends that could lead to a meaningful and inclusive transformation, one with benefits accruing not only to small segments but to the whole of South African society.

Keywords: Higher education transformation; governance, leadership and management; curriculum; language; transformative leadership; social cohesion

INTRODUCTION
In pondering the current crisis in South Africa’s education system, it is apt to invoke Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country (1948). In many ways the country is blessed with an enviable endowment of a rich mosaic of human diversity, coupled with sought-after mineral resources. Despite being so richly endowed, however, South Africa is weighed down and underachieving in several areas, especially in education.1

The year 1996 was a watershed of profound historic import for South Africa, the
gravity of which was marked by the completion and ratification of an internationally-acclaimed democratic Constitution, one which continues to enthral humanity all over the world. In this sense, South Africa is a beloved country. But in another, equally palpable sense, it is also a bereaved country, one whose social fabric and integrity have been deeply fractured, so that lamentations have become a standard daily staple in its citizens’ private and public transactions. The optimism of the early years of the new democratic South Africa seems to be dissipating in the face of seemingly increasing inanities from certain sectors, suggesting a profound lack of care or educated insight.

The cry and the beloved thus represent the daunting, central contradiction of our time. These two coexisting features are not evenly distributed among the populace: they are experienced differently by virtue of race, gender, ethnicity and social location. It is a tale of two or more countries in one, to borrow a thought from Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), in which stubborn contradictions fatally confronted each other. Back in 1988, Miriam Makeba bemoaned the state of the country in a touchingly ethereal song, ‘Sabumoya’ (“This country has bad spirits, I’m afraid of bad spirits”). Only a clairvoyant could have foreseen the transcendental properties of Makeba’s troubled wail. Although I am not enamoured with ‘otherworldliness’, it is difficult not to appreciate the power of the metaphor. She was, surely, referring to the iniquities of apartheid, but paradoxically – and painfully – these still haunt the country, even in its democratic incarnation.

One of the paradoxes facing South Africa today is that, as compared to many other countries, it allocates a substantial proportion of its budget to education; yet, it performs poorly by both international and regional African educational achievement indicators, such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study Repeat (TIMMS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the Southern and Eastern Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQII), and the Monitoring Learner Assessment (MLA). African countries with less generous GDPs show better performance rankings. Today, South Africa suffers from a crippling skills shortage, has a largely under-qualified teaching corps, and a poor throughput rate, both at secondary and tertiary levels. Unemployment, especially among the youth, is very high. Over the last 50 years or so, the labour market has become less labour intensive and more capital intensive, further exacerbating the situation. Unless a dramatic upgrading of the quality of the education system takes place, with large numbers of learners being retained in the system until they have successfully completed Grade 12, the future will remain bleak indeed.

**BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE ROOTS OF THE EDUCATION CRISIS**

The current education crisis is the country’s Achilles’ heel. It is the result of centuries of deliberate colonial neglect, followed by a noxious apartheid prescription for the underdevelopment of education for blacks. Add to these the present blinding toxicity, which suggests, *inter alia*, a lack of focus and a superficial understanding
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of the centrality of education in the development project. A brief description of this systematic enforcement of underdevelopment is therefore appropriate.

Firstly, there was the colonial system. This proscribed universal education for blacks, allowing only for small educational initiatives, favouring mostly missionary schools in which a very small number of black students were enrolled.4

Secondly, with the National Party’s ascension to political power in 1948, further and deeper restrictions on equal education opportunities for blacks were enforced. The Bantu Education Act (1954); the Coloured Person’s Education Act (1963); and the Indian Education Act (1965), denied blacks,5 in different ways, access in general to meaningful knowledge and the vital skills necessary for effective national development.

At tertiary level, black enrolment was 9 per cent in 1930, but had risen to only 15 per cent by 1974 (Malherbe 1977, 731). The majority of black students were enrolled at the University of South Africa, which was dedicated to the ‘correspondence’ mode of teaching and learning. The vast majority of tertiary students during this period were white, acquiring a formidable foundation for an enduring, self-perpetuating, social and cultural capital, one which continues to flourish in today’s generally parlous environment. For those denied equal opportunities and burdened with the inheritance of oppression, however, the reality was the intergenerational transmission of negative socio-psychological capital. Malherbe (ibid., 26) decries the inequities perpetrated by apartheid and the costs they inflicted on the national psyche and product:

The whole process [apartheid] prevents men from realizing their full potential. It burdens our country, which must thus by other means subsidize living. It creates resentment among the inhibited [that is, blacks] and creates laziness among the protected [that is, whites]. Such devices dedicated to maintaining the opportunity, advantage and reward superiority of one section of the population cannot be free of costs and must ultimately lead to a reduced national product [Italics indicate logical deductions by the author] (ibid., 641).

A further powerful and asphyxiating legislation that blunted black and female occupational aspirations was the Job Reservation Act, already introduced by the Union Government in 1926. Over the years, a plethora of proscriptive legislations, reinforced by the general conventional beliefs of those in power, became deeply embedded in the psyche of those who were the object of discrimination, a condition which stubbornly persists, even in the post-apartheid era.

Thirdly, the advent of democracy ushered a copious release of expectations, reflected in a bevy of legislations, policy frameworks and directives. These however remained by and large symbolic pronouncements, unaccompanied by careful planning and implementation capacity at the ground level, or by sustained monitoring and evaluation strategies which would have allowed for immediate corrective measures where necessary.

It deserves to be emphasised that the first two phases laid a strong foundation for the current human resource deficit; the developmental aspirations of South Africa
are anaemic as a consequence. The weight of this historical background means that even the post-apartheid ameliorative policy frameworks are insufficient, at least in the short run, to overcome the legacy of underdevelopment. Malherbe’s (1977, 617) prediction in the 1970s, that it would take two generations to bridge the gap, between white and black academic achievement was not unfounded. In fact, given the current education crisis, it is not unreasonable to suggest that his prediction, based on positive assumptions, was conservative, and that, based on the availability of committed leadership, recovery will take at least another three generations.

In short, the colonial and apartheid educational projects wrought enduring socio-economic damage, the repair of which will require a Herculean effort from every level of society: from politicians and professional policy makers, down to teachers, learners and parents. The demons that plague present-day South Africa are the dividend of generations of neglect, discrimination and the massive disadvantagement of vast numbers of South Africans. That is the Achilles’ heel which deeply gnaws the very soul of an otherwise beloved country.

Thunderous voices are heard, continually decrying references to the iniquities of the past, wishing only to deal vacuously with the present, as if the country has no history. Ignoring the past is not only delusional but emasculates any initiatives designed to prevent any recurrence. Memory is crucial to facilitating a healthy understanding of the ravages of oppression, both for the formerly oppressed and for those who, knowingly or not, were beneficiaries of the nefarious discriminatory policies. Memory can serve as a prophylactic against recidivism. It should be a vital prescript in the national reconstruction project, informed by the social justice impulse which is so essential to building an egalitarian society.

In the following sections, an attempt is made, firstly and briefly, to sketch some of the challenges facing higher education in South Africa, and, secondly, to explore some possible solutions or initiatives in response to these challenges.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

The education crisis is not the exclusive domain of the tertiary sector. On the contrary, there is a firmly established consensus that the problem lies most starkly in the pre-university phase. Here, however, I wish to concentrate, broadly, on the tertiary sector, mainly because it is in this sector that the knowledge production and innovation so crucial to national development take place. It is these functions which, if fully performed, could immensely enhance the prospect of revitalising pre-tertiary education and, in turn, spur an effective national development. As we shall see, however, the tertiary sector is bedevilled by serious weaknesses, partly related to the still-lingering effects of parochial and discriminatory practices, coupled with an inability to launch into the future unencumbered by the past. It was this condition, as mentioned earlier, which in 2008 led to the establishment of the Ministerial Committee on Higher Education Transformation of Public Higher Education Institutions (MCHET) (DoE 2008).
Before commenting on a few key issues arising from the findings of the MCHET, I would like to present some of the motivations behind the investigation. A variety of incidents over a prolonged period, some documented, some anecdotal, suggested that transformation in the academia was not proceeding as decisively as was expected. In many respects, the aspirations of White Paper 3 and the Higher Education Act of 1997 seemed to be in a state of dormancy, and for a number of reasons.

Firstly, despite significant advances registered in the enrolment numbers of black and female students in tertiary institutions since the mid-90s, there have been widespread allegations of poor environmental factors (i.e. institutional cultures)\(^6\) that make life for the swelling numbers of new entrants, again mostly black and female, far from pleasant and therefore undermine their optimal academic performance.

Secondly, lurking at the back of some of the recent unsavoury incidents, viewed broadly as indicative of discriminatory practices, are two specific events: the epic curriculum debate at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1996–1998,\(^7\) which pitted Professor Mahmood Mamdani against UCT’s imperial gatekeepers and exclusive guardians of knowledge; and the so-called ‘Makgoba Affair’ (1995–1996)\(^8\) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

Thirdly, in his inaugural lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2005, Norman Duncan gave a telling account of the seemingly racially motivated allegations made by white students against two black males, Dr April and Mr Matlare, and one Indian female, Dr Patel, that undermined their professional legitimacy, leading ultimately to the diminution of their academic efficacy (Duncan 2005).

Finally, there was the Rietz episode at the University of the Free State.\(^9\) While this incident ultimately triggered the investigation, it was not, as popularly held, the only incident which precipitated it. It was the penultimate in a series of vulgar expressions of racial as well as other kinds of intolerance at institutions of higher learning. However, it did bring into sharp relief the fact that yesteryear’s ugly realities still stubbornly lingered, even in the post-1994 dispensation.\(^10\)

Besides these, many other undocumented acts of intolerance continue to haunt what should otherwise be university environments rich with a diversity of ideas and sworn to a civil and enlightened conversation about themselves and society at large. This is about what higher education should be and ought to be, in addition to its ancient core functions of knowledge production (including innovation), teaching and community engagement.

The mandate\(^11\)
In March 2008, the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, announced the establishment of a Ministerial Committee, entitled Progress Towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions. Its aim was to ‘investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism and to make appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and to promote social cohesion’
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(Government Gazette 2008). The Committee’s terms of reference stated, *inter alia*, that it should report on the following:

- The nature and extent of racism and racial discrimination in public higher education ... While the emphasis should be on racial discrimination, other forms of discrimination, for example those based on gender, ethnicity and disability, should also be considered.
- The steps that have been taken by institutions to combat discrimination, including an assessment of good practice, as well as the shortcomings of the existing interventions.

**The process**

The Committee’s investigation was based on a combination of documentary analyses and interaction with higher education stakeholders. Its method of data collection was ‘to listen and to clarify issues, to gain an understanding of how council, management, staff and students understood transformation, as well as an understanding of their assessment of the impact of the policies and programmes initiated to give effect to the institutional agendas’ (DoE 2008, 12).

**Findings**

The MCHET report found that various forms of discrimination existed in many tertiary institutions and that these expressed themselves to a greater or lesser degree in various forms, embedded in structural/institutional, governance, cultural, linguistic, gender (especially sexual harassment of female students in some institutions), epistemological, pedagogical, and curricular practices. Persistent discrimination was also found to be rife in student residences (DoE 2008, 117).

These conditions led the Ministerial Committee to draw the conclusion that ‘the higher education system found itself in a very unstable state of health’. Furthermore, the report, drawing on its massive data, noted that ‘every single institution ... is experiencing difficulties and facing challenges in being both transformative and successful. None of South Africa’s universities can confidently say that they have transformed or have engaged with the challenges of transformation in an open, robust and self-critical manner’ (ibid., 116).

In its commitment to objectivity and fairness, the MCHET (ibid.) report noted that in ‘legal and regulatory terms’ the tertiary sector was largely ‘in good standing’, and that some of the institutions had taken their first steps ‘in good standing’, and that some of the institutions had taken their first steps ‘in the process of transformation’.

Criticisms have been levelled at the ‘unscientific’ nature of the investigation (James 2009; Pretorius and Dibetle 2009). But it should be clear from the above that a broad array of research techniques, which could be described as mixed-method, were used, making the exercise substantively credible within the prescribed parameters of the investigation. The report did, however, acknowledge that it had not adhered strictly to rigorous research procedures, since it was not technically a
research project but rather an investigation which, let me reemphasise, employed appropriate investigative tools.

Two important, objective and more sober assessments were made of the report. One was from the CHE (2009, 11) which stated that: ‘The findings of the Report do not come as any surprise to the CHE and are consistent with our experience of working with the higher education sector.’ The other was Oloyede’s (2009, 433) critical review of the Report, which concluded that: ‘There is much to be commended in the report and the recommendations.’ His main criticism was that it inadequately enlightened the reader about what it meant by ‘transformation and social cohesion’.

A comment on some of the MCHET report recommendations
The MCHET report made 40 recommendations, assigning responsibility for their implementation to the various players within the domain, including the Ministry of Higher Education and Training and the tertiary institutions themselves. Here I want to highlight three that I consider fundamental, both to our identity and to our success as a society.

The first is language. In the light of the hearings and written submissions, it was clear that a sizeable number of students whose first language is neither English nor Afrikaans are faced with tremendous academic hurdles because of their lack of mastery of these languages of instruction. The resulting high failure rate is not a reflection of a lack of intelligence but rather of inadequacy in linguistic facility. Hundreds if not thousands of students are lost (through dropping out or failure) each year due, among other reasons, to the language hurdle. The economic and psychological cost (i.e. social alienation with consequent or potential social eruption) of such wastage is incalculable.

The second is the curriculum. Here again, there was evidence of a general lack of relevance in important areas. Far too much reliance is placed on knowledge and texts which are produced in other countries, for example. This is by no means a xenophobic expression; on the contrary, I believe that it is crucial to understand that this country is not out of sync with the rest of the globe. South Africa is an integral part of the world system and partakes in the joy of consuming products and services from a vast chest of world knowledge, while also to some degree making its own contribution to the general pool of global knowledge and innovation.

However, it is important to stress that there should be a fair balance between the global and the local, and that the two should be managed in a manner which can spark high-voltage knowledge synergies. Unfortunately, over-reliance on the West as the sole source of knowledge ensures an intellectual dependency that is often undergirded by strong doses of Eurocentric ideologies intolerant of other ideas or knowledge systems. Like all dependency syndromes, such reliance on other sources stifles the creativity and self-confidence of the subaltern.

During the hearings conducted by the Ministerial Committee there were accounts of lecturers in Philosophy who had no references in their syllabi of African philosophers, claiming that none existed. This of course is emphatically not the case,
as there is a recognised body of writings by African philosophers. This omission echoes a general practice in other disciplines, with a significant undercurrent informing exclusionary curricular practices. A short account follows to illustrate the centrality of the epistemological discourse in recent South African debates.

**Epistemological issues**

In 1998, UCT was embroiled in what came to be known as the Mamdani Debate. The core of this was a contest over curriculum reform and over deciding in whom the authority to make such reform should be vested (Social Dynamics 1998, 24). In short, the debate became a struggle of ‘old’ versus ‘new’ knowledge. In a broad reflection on autonomy and accountability, Van Vught (1991) ironically suggested that universities use these otherwise cherished values as shields against knowledge change. Cloete et al. (2002, 266) further observed that new knowledge ‘is rarely welcomed by the higher education institutions that have, through their many incarnations, jealously guarded the right to control what they may teach and research.’ Reviewing the stance of South African universities in general, Higgs and Van Wyk (2008, 5) noted that: ‘Academic knowledge has had a special, almost untouchable place in the universities that resisted outside attempts to interfere’. Lamenting this state of affairs, Jonathan Jansen (2009), Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State, declared in his inaugural address that: ‘The important challenge is the problem of knowledge. The university curriculum … has not yet confronted the crucial question of what a student needs to know in a dangerous and divided world’.

He went on to state that, in fulfilling the need to transform the curriculum, he would seek the support of the University Senate to effect ‘a fundamental curriculum overhaul’, promising that ‘no student graduates from this university without engaging basic human questions, such as who we are and where we come from; without learning how to live and learn together in ways that prepare our youth for leadership in the workplace’ (ibid., 5).

This is a tall order indeed. The question which must occupy the reader’s mind is whether such fundamental and necessary changes could be achieved without those who are in charge of knowledge production subjecting their epistemological and pedagogical orientations to a fundamental metamorphosis, one which would entail a phenomenal adjustment in their personal view of the world.

The third factor is **racial steering** or **academic discrimination**. One of the most obstinate and change-resistant areas in the academic environment is in embedded notions of racial superiority and patriarchal ideologies. Since it is no longer respectable to overtly subscribe to such ideologies, they assume rather subtle expressions and are conveyed via a powerful hidden curriculum the evidence for which is difficult to come by. During the interviews conducted by the Ministerial Committee, several black students referred to examples of discouragement by their white instructors/professors about their prospects of passing accounting courses, for example, or defending the absence of the writings of black scholars in their philosophy syllabi by stating that there were none, despite the fact that a little scratching of the surface
South Africa’s Achilles’ heel and Phoenixian possibilities would have uncovered their existence. Is this an act of ignorance or wilful exclusion of other knowledges? The practice represents a deliberate act of steering black students away from certain disciplines deemed unsuitable for them or obscuring what could potentially spark greater interest. Such practices evoke memories of the crass racist attitudes personified by Hendrik Verwoerd, who thought it was unwise to teach blacks Mathematics and Science. This results in the ultimate exclusion of many potential knowledge producers in, ironically, a human-capital starved environment.

**Governance [Leadership and management]**

There is a now taken-for-granted acknowledgement that since 1994 South Africa has produced a host of progressive legislative, policy and regulatory frameworks, including the Constitution. There is also general agreement that this bevy of progressive instruments has by and large been impaired due to an incapacity or unwillingness to implement them. It appears that the epidemic of malaise that is observable at the general level of the political economy is also afflicting the academy. The MCHET report found that, while many tertiary institutions had progressive policies, these were often undermined by a seeming lack of interest or will on the part of the middle-level management corps (including heads of department and members of senates, the majority of whom were not necessarily committed to the aspirations of the new dispensation). It was in this context that Fourie (2008, 6) described the pre-2009 University of the Free State:

> At times there appears to be a covert, unspoken agreement amongst some/many to approve and allow transformation – as long as it doesn’t change anything substantive, as long as it doesn’t change established patterns of institutional culture, as long as it doesn’t change established power relations and patterns of authority.

Although this observation refers specifically to the University of the Free State at a particular moment, it is not unreasonable to infer that a similar mindset is present at many other institutions. The MCHET report corroborates this in its finding that there is a disjunction between the policy regimes and the implementation processes in many institutions. On the basis of this finding, it arrived at the recommendation that ‘the vice-chancellor of the institution should be held directly accountable’ (ibid., 18). Councils, many of which seem to be pliant to the whims of senior management, are also implicated.

**On transformation and social cohesion**

In his review of the MCHET report, Oloyede (2009) points out that the report did not sufficiently address central issues, such as transformation and social cohesion. These can be seen as organically related, and there is a burgeoning body of literature on both concepts. Unfortunately space does not allow for a full critical exposition of these, but two crucial points deserve mention since they offer a contextual perspective; in this instance, South Africa is the point of reference.
The concept of ‘transformation’ can be used in different ways. Polanyi (1944, cited in Castles 2007, 10), for example, refers to the ‘great transformation’ that accompanied momentous historical events such as industrialisation and modernisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while Castles (2001) expatiates on the social changes brought about by decolonisation and nation-state formation in the mid-twentieth century, and the phenomenal economic development of recent years, as witnessed in the Pacific Rim. These were epochal events which ushered in new social structures, psychologically as well as physically. The overthrow of apartheid was of a similar magnitude, necessitating the revocation of all the restrictions against freedom and democracy, including the racial strictures on admission and access to the knowledge found in universities during the apartheid era. These revocations are of such magnitude as to merit their characterisation as transformation in the deepest sense.

Transformation is thus treated as a deep, all-encompassing process of change and not simply a black-and-white numbers exercise. It is informed by the democratic values declared in White Paper 3, the Higher Education Act (1997), and other socio-juridical instruments, and enshrined in the Republic’s Constitution. However, such a transformative project can only be successful if it is realised in all sectors of society. In reality, the process has been uneven and in some critical sectors has been opposed either fiercely, passive-aggressively, or in what can only be described as consignment to benign neglect.

In distilling the essence of transformation, Oloyede (2009, 430) suggests that: ‘What one notices in most of the observations on transformation is a move from one condition of existence – exclusion – to another condition of existence – inclusion’. That education in South Africa was historically exclusionary in terms of race and ethnicity is indisputable. The essence of the apartheid regime was exclusion on the basis of a defined set of ascriptive characteristics. Thus, the act of changing from a disabling to an empowering life condition inevitably entails a process of transformation.

Secondly, social cohesion implies the rejection of a past that was divided on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. According to the Council of Europe (2007, 14), social cohesion is ‘the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization’. A Task Force established by the Council (ibid., 14) to look into the meaning of social cohesion further elaborated that such cohesion is ‘Society’s capacity to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all ...’. It should be clear that the apartheid system was the antithesis of social cohesion. The democratic dispensation is therefore about the rectification of an historic injustice.

In the light of the above, transformation and social cohesion can be seen as intrinsically related within a specifically articulated context. Both concepts should enjoy a particular juxtaposition and integration within the current South African education system. Both are applicable to critical dimensions such as epistemology, pedagogy and the curriculum. In the present context they also recognise the historic
anomalies, with all their inherent injustices, and enjoin efforts to democratise and expand knowledge systems, and, consequently, to effect a broad and discrete renovation designed to achieve shared values within particular sectors, congruent with the well-being of all and the realisation of national aspirations. These are some of the critical practices which seriously undermine the prospect of effective and holistic transformation. Their impact on the efficacy of the system deserves serious attention.

PHOENIXIAN POSSIBILITIES

The title of this article began with a reference to the Achilles’ heel, which has been the symbolic reference thus far. Now the intention is to reflect on the subtitle, namely, the Phoenixian possibilities that are emerging within the higher education system. The invocation of the mythical bird, the Phoenix, rising from its own ashes, is found in several ancient cultural traditions, and here is intended to convey the dialectic of resurrection, with the newly-created form showing better qualities than its forebear.

In the current democratic dispensation, the concept of transformation ought to resonate with the mission of any university committed to development. This assertion is premised on the idea that, if democracy is a holistic concept, one which allows for the realisation of personal self-fulfilment and efficacy, by extension it should promote the welfare of all members of society. This includes the servants of the state whose fixed preoccupation currently is to be globally competitive. Logically, the latter cannot be achieved without the former. So, there is a material interest in all states to equip their citizens with the knowledge and skills which will make that possible. As producers of knowledge and innovation, universities have a self-evident role in promoting development in both basic and applied senses. The changes that have taken place at South African universities over the past 20 years or so can be broken down as follows:

- **Reluctant adaptation (early 1990s):** The pressures of rising expectations precipitated by the newly achieved democracy and the demographic imperatives caused a rapid surge in black and female student enrolments (DoE, Cloete et al, Bunting, etc.), without any substantive corresponding changes in the institutional environment or the provision of more expansive and epistemologically democratic curricula.

- **Compliance and correction (late 1990s to around 2004):** During this period, the Higher Education Act (1997) and the Employment Equity Act (1998), together with relevant policies promoting equity and access, legislated for the employment of designated groups and of the previously disadvantaged, and prohibited discrimination on grounds of race, gender, disability, etc. As a result, universities, like other enterprises in society, were obliged to submit reports demonstrating their efforts to improve demographic profiles. The new laws, policies and regulations led to increases in the number of black and female academic and administrative staff, but these were miniscule in
comparison to the increase in black and female students. It deserves noting
that two out of the 23 vice-chancellors in South African universities are white
males, five are black females, and the rest are black males. While female
representation (22%) at this senior management level is very low, it is quite
clear that a major demographic shift is taking place at the highest level of
management. However, the Ministerial Committee observed that, while
many of the universities demonstrated a high level of compliance with equity
rules, very few had made notable advances in deep transformation, which is
not about technical, quantitative change but about substantive advances in
meaningful areas of the academy.

- **Nascent transformational leadership nodes (both now and future-
  oriented):** In addition to what would traditionally be expected of universities
by virtue of their high-level missions of knowledge creation and innovation, the
complexity of modern societies, with the vastly varied needs of their citizens,
has created a compelling need for engagement with serious transformational
initiatives.

Transformative leaders should possess a profound understanding and appreciation
of the changed student demographics in South African higher education institutions,
unfettered by the traditions established in the colonial and apartheid eras. They
should be impassioned by the possibilities that are innate in every student, and by
the creation of an enabling academic environment; and the same should apply to
non-academic staff. Transformative leadership at all levels should see the correlation
between the exploitation of latent talent and the general well-being of society in
the broadest sense, establishing high academic expectations and an environment
conducive to the flourishing of democratic academic cultures, ideas and practice.

It bears noting that there have been encouraging developments in recent times,
suggesting the germination of possibilities for transformation in the tertiary system.
A few examples will make the point:

- **Curriculum and epistemological transformation:** The Council of Higher
  Education audit report (2009) and the Ministerial Committee reports
independently found that the curricula at many universities tended to display
fixed academic cultures, deriving their logic by and large from external
references. Little substantive curricula renewal informed by an interrogation
of the epistemological assumptions, premises and practices has taken place
at many tertiary institutions. Evidence is beginning to emerge, however, of
programmes in a few universities which should be welcomed and encouraged.
One innovative academic programme that warrants mention because of its
sweeping breadth and depth is the *Life, Knowledge and Action Grounding
Programme* (Keet and Porteus 2009) instituted at the University of Fort Hare.
It aims, *inter alia*, at promoting a critical disposition among students and
academics anchored in a deep social justice ethos. It allows for expanding
the boundaries of epistemologies and pedagogical practices, and promotes
the wedding of the local to the global. Such a broad approach, especially in
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the early years of the university experience, deserves wider consideration and possible adoption.16

• **Conferences:** A growing number of tertiary institutions are convening conferences, workshops and seminars around issues of the substantive transformation of particular aspects of the academy. Perhaps most notable in this regard is the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s annual teaching and learning conference, which grew from 50 papers in 2009 to the 140 papers presented at its 2010 conference, aptly entitled ‘Diversity, Transformation and the Student Experience in Higher Education Teaching and Learning’. Rightly placing the student at the centre both of the educative process and of the complexities that characterise universities, Professor Renuka Vithal in her opening remarks at the 2010 conference observed: ‘It is precisely this diversity that compels institutions to explore non-conventional transformative teaching and learning practices to accommodate changing student profiles and expectations, including students with varying disabilities and diverse learning styles’. This emerging perspective on the need to promote meaningful pedagogical transformation is a welcome development and if sustained could augur well for the future.

• **Seeds of innovation:** Finally, there is a plethora of promising ideas and initiatives which, if nurtured, cultivated and sustained, could mature as the source of great possibilities:

  * There is a crop of critical works, either in book form or journal articles. Foremost in this genre is Jansen’s *Knowledge in the Blood* (2009), a searing critique of the culture, epistemology and pedagogy at a particular university, which in many respects resonates with the prevailing reality in a good number of other universities. The signal contribution of this work is that it not only provides a critique but, most importantly, also offers possible solutions to the entrenched traditions.

  * Another work that rattles established ‘wisdom’ in the legitimacy and primacy of ‘race’ is Crain Soudien’s *Realising the dream: Unlearning the logic of race in the South African school* (2012). Soudien bravely, rigorously and insightfully confronts the obduracy of this pernicious ideology. Beginning with a comprehensive critical theoretical analysis, he challenges, with compelling logic, what in many quarters has come to be reified and accepted as common sense. The complicity of the education process is also subjected to a meticulous scrutiny, employing empirical evidence. *Realising the dream* is a pledge to a transformative agenda, not only in the school sector but equally in higher education, where the act of knowledge creation resides.

  * Another important book, soon to be published by the HSRC Press, is entitled *Community, Self and Identity* (2012). A combined research project by academics at the Universities of the Western Cape and Stellenbosch, it addresses a major concern, namely, the need for epistemological and pedagogical transformation, as well as curriculum design, in South African higher education post-1994. Aside from the epistemological and pedagogical innovations, the bookforegrounds the deep personal transformation experienced by the student. Furthermore, it aims to ‘promote reconciliation, dialogue and healing’ among South Africans of diverse
backgrounds, offering an antidote to the divisiveness wrought by the apartheid dispensation (otherwise known as National Christian Education). The range of issues and strategies the volume engages is wide and includes critical assessment of pedagogical needs, course/curriculum design, inter-institutional collaboration, interdisciplinarity, reflexivity and the application of a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’.

* In 2009, the Dinokeng Scenarios exercise brought together a broad range of concerned citizens to engage with the question, ‘What will our country look like in 2020?’ In the ‘walk together’ scenario, they saw the great potential that education could offer if led by a visionary and decisive system. Similarly, the National Planning Commission (2012) pegs its sights on 2030; it envisions great possibilities, premised on the existence of a decisive and visionary leadership in all spheres of society, including, crucially, higher education.

* In the aftermath of the Ministerial Committee, there was a meteoric rise in academic journal articles which both critiqued higher education in South Africa and offered innovative ideas for its transformation. In particular, the South African Journal of Higher Education has played a signal role in this regard. There is, therefore, as illustrated above, a significant body of thought upon which to base the proposition of Phoenixian possibilities.

CONCLUSION

The current higher education system is not eligible for a clean bill of health. It is infected with the serious viruses of prejudice and discrimination, accompanied by corruption and ineptitude. These maladies impoverish the high aims of the academy, and, as a result, fetter the soul of the nation.

Exceedingly large numbers of the population live in wretched conditions of unemployment and underdevelopment, mainly as a consequence of prejudicial and discriminatory practices which exclude those who could potentially contribute to producing the knowledge, skills and innovation so necessary to resolving the country’s massive contemporary social problems.

The Achilles’ heel can only be redeemed by a Phoenixian transformative process, one which holds tremendous promise for meaningful human development. The physical or material and psychological costs are indeed real and monumental. So far, unfortunately, these have not been fully quantified, let alone broadly accepted. Opportunities to reclaim the desired beloved state of our humanity are most assuredly there and only require courage, foresight, will, and, as a last resort perhaps, faith in Makeba’s plea to exorcise the evils of prejudice and discrimination.

Evidence from research in various social and behavioural sciences suggests that, for change to be sustained, it is crucial that a leadership corps equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes be developed. Educational environments, like broader social systems, have become and will continue to be irreversibly complex. They require a set of knowledge/skills capable of effectively managing this ever-growing complexity. Institutional imperatives call for a transformative leadership with a deep understanding of the narrative of the constituent parts, the linkages to the
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macro-environment, and an acute sense of the points of intersection and the spaces that raise the level of consciousness. An authentic philosophical disposition, in tune with extant social realities and a commitment to stemming the transmission of the debilitating deficits is the challenge faced by higher education institutions.

Mastery of the varied narratives now occupying the academic space will enhance the chances of success in growing a socially literate citizenry and a cohesive society. A discourse of inclusivity is at the core of the challenge. Old knowledge based on simple and linear fixations has become dated. The single most important quest in the interdependent knowledge economies/societies of the 21st Century is for transformative leadership. More than anywhere else, this should be central to the educational enterprise in South Africa.

In its conclusion, the MCHET report (DoE 2008, 116) acknowledges that ‘significant policy development’ has taken place, and continues by exhorting that ‘the next important step of making those policies work, giving them life and nurturing the kind of academic communities that regard diversity as one of the country’s distinguishing virtues, has not been taken yet’. The final plea, then, is to take up the challenge. It is a Herculean challenge that, while it is about transformation within the academy, most certainly will not be successful without enlightened leadership on the part of the Ministry and Department of Higher Education and Training, and in society at large.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive analysis of the depth of the education crisis, see Van der Berg et al. (2011).
2. See, for example, I. B. Tabata’s trenchant critique (1959); E. G. Malherbe’s expansive indictment of complicity (1977); and F. Troup’s compact catalogue of infringements of fundamental rights to education (1976).
3. For a contemporary critique of conditions in education, see, for example, G. Bloch (2009).
4. See T. Keto (1990) for early missionary education during the colonial period; E. G. Malherbe (1977) on enrolments and expenditures for each population group; L. Chisholm and M. Cross (1990) on the early institutionalisation of compulsory education for whites (early 1920s), followed nearly 50 years later by qualified compulsory education legislations for blacks.
5. For enlightening analyses of the enervating effects of apartheid education see I. B. Tabata (1959) and F. Troup (1976). These are a few examples of many critiques of the crippling effects of apartheid education from which conclusions about the long-term debilitating effects can be drawn.
7. A whole issue of Social Dynamics, 1998, 24(2) was devoted to the curriculum debate at UCT.
9. In early October 2008, another episode involving a group of white students who made
racially prejudicial statements on a Facebook social networking website was reported in *The Citizen* (9 October 2009) entitled ‘University identifies 13 Students in Racist Group’.

10. For additional insightful analyses of conditions of blacks and females at the UCT and the University of the Witwatersrand, see K. R. Lewins (2006), B. K. Murray (1982; 1997); R. O. Mabokela (2000); G. Nkondo (1976); M. Nkomo (1984); and W. White (1997). For recent insightful accounts and deep reflections on the racial and social dynamics in previously whites-only universities see J. D. Jansen (2009) and N. Maake (2011).

11. The text in the mandate and process section is largely drawn from the Report, see pages 23, 27 and 28.

12. For an assortment of responses to the MCHET report from some vice-chancellors, see Higher Education South Africa’s special issue of *Insight*, April 2010.


15. For reference to some of the changes occurring in post-apartheid higher education see, for example, M. Nkomo (2012).

16. One of the core issues around higher education is the place of Africa in the curriculum. For an interesting and instructive debate from different perspectives see “Teaching Africa: The Curriculum Debate at UCT” (1998) a pamphlet produced by the Centre for African Studies at UCT with contributions from Mahmood Mamdani, Martin Hall, Nadia Hartman and Johan Graaf. A more expansive engagement on the subject featuring other scholars can be found in a special issue of *Social Dynamics* 1998, 24(2).

17. For further elaboration see, for example, the special issue of the *South Africa Journal of Higher Education* 24(6) 2010, which was devoted to varied aspects of transformation in higher education and included contributions by Bozalek et al.; February et al.; Firfirey and Carolissen; Francis and Hemson; Hemson and Singh; Niemann; Patmann; Soudien; Taylor and Taylor; Van Wyk et al.; Vandeyar; and Waghid.

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