

Review

Zethu Cakata

"The African University in the 21st Century", *South African Journal of Higher Education* 19. Special theme issue, 2005.

Higher education today has been greatly affected by major shifts due to economics, history, and politics, factors which reinforce current global-institutional reframing challenges. South African universities are also faced with the political urgency to be adaptive, more so in the face of colonial legacies and postcolonial challenges for transformation and redress. In terms of the latter, innovative but sometimes stifling debate and prescriptive arguments often characterise the intellectual discourse on the changing landscape of African universities.

South African higher education institutions have also faced many challenges since the legal demise of apartheid in 1994. Our higher education system has changed and is changing, and debates within these institutions regarding identity, pedagogies, knowledge production, teaching and learning have not always been productive in moving institutions forward. One of the most common themes by far, in debates within and among higher education institutions in South Africa, has been the question of identity: namely, what constitutes the African university? In as much as this is a political question, it is also a sociological, philosophical and historical investigation into what constitutes the "African university" and how the "African experience" is truly reflected within our higher education institutions.

While important, these questions, in my opinion, do not necessarily reflect a new trend sweeping all spheres of social, political and cultural life in South Africa today. The urgency for political change has long been a focus of South African politics (post-1994). Education under apartheid has always been a subject of debate, and both our schooling system and higher education landscape have seen many challenges in the wake of democracy, and calls to develop our universities into African institutions. Unfortunately these crucial issues are not taken up in any rigorous way in this edition of the *South African Journal of Higher Education*, an internationally-accredited journal published by the South African Association of Research and Development

in Higher Education. Interdisciplinary in approach, its purpose is merely to provide institutions of higher education and professional readers with scholarly information on major innovations in higher education, on research projects and on trends.

Long before it became the centre of academic debate, the meaning of “education in Africa” had already occupied the minds of ordinary people. Education had always been received with great ambivalence because a Western value system tended to undermine African realities (especially in the context of the colonial legacy). Despite this scepticism, the ideas and meanings regarding the African university featured here generate hope that higher education could produce scholarship and learning that responds to the specific “needs” of communities and in ways that make the continent an important producer of knowledge that rivals the West and the North.

It could be said that the arguments in this volume attempt to focus on the future prospects of what an African university may entail in the twenty-first century, but unfortunately, this is done in a circuitous way.

This special edition contains commissioned papers of conference proceedings of the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education held on 27-29 June 2005 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, entitled “The African University in the 21st century”. Articles tackle pedagogical and epistemological issues as they relate to (South) African higher education. This edition principally takes stock of higher education in South Africa (and in some cases elsewhere on the continent) and emphasizes that higher education in Africa cannot be separated from the continent’s history with the Western world. How knowledge is produced and disseminated has a lot to do with the past and current interactions with the West.

When we speak of an African university today (as reflected by these articles) we are encouraged to move beyond narrow geographical localities to more critical ways of becoming by engaging with insights from varied experiences across the continent. Several papers take stock of knowledge production claims (notably the reliance on Western models) and the apparent reluctance (in part also by African scholars) to take the African pedagogical context into account. A common thread in the articles is a focus on “teaching” and “learning” (and “scholarship”) as constitutive elements of an African university. Structurally the edition contains nine feature articles, excluding the sketchy editorial by Ramose on “The African university in the twenty-first century”. Sadly, the editorial is disturbingly thin: it could have framed the

edition in ways that addressed some of the broader thematic and conceptual issues related to the theme of the conference. In addition, Waghid's paper at the end could more appropriately have been a feature editorial article.

The articles in this volume address, in broad terms, the following issues: indigenous education to undergraduates in Nigeria (Kolawole); "Africanising" assessment through an understanding of *ubuntu* (Beets & Le Grange); the notion of "engagement" in relation to the African university (Le Grange); the use of educational biographies in teaching and learning (Leibowitz *et al*); a case study of postgraduate supervision of students from Lesotho (Mapesela & Wilkinson); Africa[n]-focused research (Mapesela *et al*); evaluation of tertiary institutions (Steynberg *et al*); assessment and needs of postgraduate learners (Van Tonder *et al*); and the possibility of an African university (Waghid).

The contribution by Waghid draws our attention to the need to craft a scholarship that incorporates principles of "criticism", "deliberation" and "relationship" (elements he outlines as necessary preconditions for cultivating a university of "excellence"). To him, education can be seen as a process that allows students to move beyond what is given, to interrogate subject matter and "engage" with information. He believes in a contested and negotiated scholarship. An African university, he argues, would mean veering away from the fascination with outputs, throughputs and outcomes and rather be concerned with building scholars who are critical of knowledge and are given spaces to interrogate knowledge claims. Waghid asserts that knowledge is neither given nor universal. Conceptually, his is one of the two strongest papers in this edition. He contests the notion of an African university by indicating that a reflective and critical interrogation of scholarship and learning is central to the naming and meaning of the African university.

There is an admirable attentiveness in Waghid's paper to the context of experience in the challenges facing students: "I specifically think of many South African university students who claim to be critical, yet do not even begin to wonder how their education could respond to [...] what must be done for those who remain tragically in need, who suffer deprivations such as family deterioration, neighbourhood decline, joblessness, illnesses such as HIV/Aids and addictions."

Le Grange's paper on "engagement" also takes up the issue of learning as a process in the making. For Le Grange the possibility of an African university requires new ways of engagement with knowledge production and dissemination. She speaks to the need to de-centre the process of

knowledge production in a way that sees no boundaries between Western and indigenous knowledge. For universities to be able to respond to African realities they need to make efforts that take into account local realities. In her view, this would mean engaging with wider society, ensuring that indigenous knowledge systems receive prominence in knowledge production, and that the dissemination process reaches various contexts. Le Grange argues for a space where boundaries between Western and indigenous knowledge are dissolved, saying that we should move towards producing new knowledge that helps to address Africa's problems.

Beets and Le Grange examine the extent to which the current shifts in assessment practice and theory fail to accommodate the socio-cultural backgrounds of African learners. They consider education as a site of transformation that in itself is in need of transformation. They also advocate new ways of looking at assessment, to incorporate the principles of "*ubuntu*" to enhance effective learning and teaching. To these authors, assessment is not an outcome, but a process. Educators, in their view, need to take into account what learners bring to the assessment process (this relates to an understanding of learners' socio-cultural backgrounds). Utilising the principles of *ubuntu* for these two authors would mean that the assessment process treats learners with compassion, understanding and empathy.

Van Tonder *et al* also believe in incorporating innovative assessment methods into teaching as part of a transformational learning approach for postgraduate students. The authors believe that innovative methods, such as the patchwork text, may yield positive results as this assignment format allows learners to play an active role in their own assessment. Developed in the Anglia Polytechnic University in the UK, the "essence of a patchwork is that it consists of a variety of small sections... gradually assembled during the course of a phase of teaching... a sequence of fairly short pieces of writing" that cover the educational objectives of a course.

Kolawole's article on students' perceptions of indigenous education is a useful contribution to the current debate on the value of indigenous knowledge as the basis for development initiatives. The paper addresses Nigerian university students' perceptions of the introduction of indigenous knowledge systems theory and practice in higher education. Kolawole concludes that respondents in his study had a positive opinion about the appropriateness of the incorporation of indigenous education into the national curriculum. The major limitation of the study was the small sample

size and the fact that the sample was drawn only from agriculture students. Perhaps his conclusion is unsurprising, as strong evidence demonstrates the almost immediate connections between agriculture and indigenous knowledge systems.

For their part, Mapesela and Wilkinson draw from their own experiences, as experienced postgraduate supervisors, and those of their students. They argue that shaping future researchers demands that supervisors are empathetic to students' socio-economic realities, understand their backgrounds and offer patience and support. These qualities are especially critical given the continuous demand to produce black academic researchers. Academic institutions, they maintain, need to be realistic, setting targets to ensure that supervisors are not burdened by constraints such as time, resources and relevance. Another important issue they interrogate is the notion of internationalisation of higher education, and they consider the challenges this poses to the provision of effective teaching and learning relevant to the multicultural realities of students. Steynberg *et al* also take stock of internationalisation, and highlight the fact that the concept is influenced largely by market ideology, which treats education as a commodity that can be traded among nations. They maintain that, increasingly, education is fuelled by globalisation and commercialisation, which could either harm higher education or possibly allow it to prosper.

In another article, Mapesela *et al* focus on the upliftment of rural or underprivileged communities. It is the result of work conducted by two masters' students who follow a community-focused approach that asks what constitutes Africa[n]-focused research. This paper reflects on the gap between knowledge acquired and the actual needs of communities. Two case studies from Lesotho are presented, describing how the authors attempted to introduce projects to communities but were met with challenges. Community development, as can be concluded from this experience, is a two-way process. The danger that researchers, academics and development agents need to guard against (as suggested by the authors) is the "expert" approach to community development, which results in barriers and impediments to effective learning. The authors suggest this should be a process in which dialogue is facilitated to ensure that community members are not just recipients but active participants in development.

Apart from the article by Waghid, the insightful views by Leibowitz *et al* on the use of educational biographies to inform teaching and learning stand

out as the key piece in this edition. Given that our personal identities and experience impact on what we bring to the teaching and learning process, Leibowitz *et al* argue for an honest reflection by scholars about who they are and/or, perhaps, who they want to be. Central to the meaning in this article is the value to be gained by reflection as well as disclosure within the dialogue towards transformation in learning. Our backgrounds are an integral part of the learning and teaching process, and according to the authors, honest reflection would help address the social and cultural injustices that plague African universities today.

Unfortunately, after reading this focus on the “African University”, I find I remain confused as to what the African university really is. While useful insights in the individual articles concentrate principally on teaching and learning (which is important), hardly any attention is given to institutional cultures that shape the development of an African university. While factors such as race, class, politics, and power are important, I was struck by the fact that scant attention was paid to gender, sexuality and culture – issues pertinent to the development of an African university. It would seem that none of the issues raised by this conference and the subsequent papers indicated a reflection on sexism within universities or the heterosexist bias still prevalent in institutional culture and in teaching and learning. Any serious consideration or imaging of an African university in the twenty-first century would require a serious engagement with women, so often excluded, as active participants in higher education. Beyond the numbers, the questions of how teaching, learning and scholarship continue to reflect gender bias in the way we construct an African university are worth critical investigation.