The Changing Idea of a University

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Introduction

Transformation at South Africa's universities has been an issue featuring in the news lately. The calls for the removal of statues and changing of names have been said to be reflective of a deeper seated set of issues that should be addressed by curriculum and other changes.

Universities constitute one of the oldest surviving types of social institutions in the world today. They have been described as fundamental to the modern world and yet universities are criticised frequently for being slow to change and even resistant to change. Indeed, the transformation of universities, or lack thereof, is now a headline debate in South Africa.

But, if we look back at their historical evolution, the university as we know it today has come a long way from the types of institutions that were seen as akin to ivory towers– isolated from the 'business' of industrial and economic life so that nothing would disturb the purity of immersion in the world of ideas. Universities have survived not because they have remained the same but because they have been responsive to changing times and contexts.

History

Although the university was primarily conceptualised around a core notion of the cultivation of the intellect and initiation into ways of thinking and understanding the world, the activities that constitute the 'core' business of a university have evolved with changing times. In the pre-industrialization era, the major form of teaching was through reading and 'conversations' which took place between the 'generations of mankind'. With the rise of industrialization, however, this idea of a university came into contestation as is evident in John Stuart Mill's inaugural address as Rector of St Andrews University in Scotland in which he argued that '[T]he proper function of an University in national education is tolerably well understood.... It is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood.'[1]

Much has changed since then. In the twentieth century as the linkage between high level skills and economic development became increasingly evident, governments took a keen interest in expanding access to higher education. Hence, from the 1950s and 1960s onwards in many countries there was an expansion in the number of universities. For governments, universities were expected to produce the scientists, engineers and professionals needed to advance economic development.

Expansion occurred through the creation of new institutions and through the transformation of technical and technological colleges into universities. With the

increase in the number of universities there was a dramatic growth in the proportion of students enrolled in higher education. By the year 2000, 100 million students were enrolled in higher education globally whereas at the turn of the 20th century it was only 500 000. Much of the expansion was in the form of increased enrolments in vocational and professional programmes which were viewed as having direct relevance to the individual's ability to be employed and also to national economic growth.

It is worth noting that in many parts of the world, universities were mostly teaching-focussed institutions with research as we know it today becoming a major focus of the academic mission in the twentieth century only. It was the twentieth century that really brought to the fore the notion of the research university. What is often referred to as the *Von Humbolt model* was based on the principle of unity of research and teaching as opposed to research being conducted in separate institutes that do not have the responsibility of educating young scholars.

By the late 1990s, being an excellent teaching and research university was no longer deemed sufficient. New conceptualizations of the role of universities were under debate. It was no longer a matter of universities just producing the right number of professionals for the economy: the debate had moved to arguments about the wider societal contribution of universities and the relevance of university teaching and research. This debate gave rise to concepts such as the 'entrepreneurial university', the 'engaged university' and the idea of universities being part of a triple helix relationship with industry and government. In the UK there was *the Dearing Report*[2] that referred to '… a new compact involving institutions and their staff, students, government, employers and society in general'. *The Dearing Report* spelled out a very different idea of higher education – one in which 'relevance', 'utility', 'social inclusion' and 'accountability to a wider public' seemed to predominate.

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The changes in the core mission of universities - initially teaching, then teaching and research and, more recently, community engagement, entrepreneurship and innovation - show that there is no universal and timeless essence in the nature of universities. Instead universities' missions change with changing times and context. As Richard Pring noted, universities are 'part of a wider network of social and educational institutions and this network will constantly be changing in recognition of or in response to changing economic and social factors'[3]. The contemporary international higher education landscape is shaped by a diversity of institutions named as universities. Some are dedicated almost entirely to professional and vocational education and training; others continue the tradition of intellectual pursuit organised by disciplines. In many universities old traditions based on the pursuit of truth and critical inquiry sit alongside the new, which are shaped by professional bodies that focus on competencies, customer relations and client services.

Universities in South Africa

The debate about transformation in South African universities can be viewed as part of a long trajectory of debate about the nature of universities as social institutions. Whilst much of the focus is on race and the symbolic legacies of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past, there is a deeper issue about the identity and role of a university in South Africa today and in the future.

What are universities for? is the title of a 2008 report by Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas in which they point out that almost universally the world has adopted a model of universities based on John Newman's and Wilhelm von Humbolt's principles and that this model has been a key factor in the development of the modern Western world.[4]

It is unequivocal in linking the purpose of universities to national development and it points to three main functions for universities: high level skills, knowledge production and application, and providing opportunities for social mobility and strengthening equity, social justice and democracy.

The question asked by Boulton and Lucas, 'What are universities for?' is one that is pertinent to the role of universities in a transforming South African society. The National Development Plan (NDP) envisions by 2030 'an expanding higher education sector that can contribute to rising incomes, higher productivity and the shift to a more knowledge- intensive economy'[5]. It is unequivocal in linking the purpose of universities to national development and it points to three main functions for universities: high level skills, knowledge production and application, and providing opportunities for social mobility and strengthening equity, social justice and democracy.[6]

Internationally there is a growing literature that poses questions about the future of universities with some suggesting that there is a fundamental change or revolutionary change ahead of us. Four features are prominent in these debates:

- the impact of globalisation;
- cross-institutional collaboration and networks;
- the changing nature of the academic job;
- and the impact of technology, specifically Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

What we must acknowledge is that the idea of a university is not uniform; instead it is becoming more diverse. Decades ago Clark Kerr used the term multiversity to describe what universities in the US had become: pluralistic institutions combining various functions and playing multiple roles.[7] Kerr referred not only to a diverse university system but also to single institutions performing various roles. 'The university is so many things to so many people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself', said Kerr.[8]

With respect to the multiple roles of universities, Manuel Castells in a seminar series in South Africa noted that universities also produce and reproduce values, and select and socialise elites in a society.[9] This could be said to be an implicit role of universities, conveyed in curricula: the how and what we teach, the how and what we choose to research and the sum of what makes up an institutional culture.

Boulton and Lucas have pointed out that the 'western' university as evolved from Newman and Humbolt's principles has been so successful that it is a model that is applied almost universally.[10] In a society like South Africa, still in the process of transitioning from an apartheid past with universities predominantly modelled on the 'western university' it is perhaps unsurprising that universities have become sites of contestation over values and ideologies. The idea of an African university transformed from its colonial and, in the case of South Africa, its apartheid past, is being debated widely, including at events such as the recent African Summit on Higher Education in Dakar.

It is a debate that happens at a time when a new model of a university seems to be on the ascendancy, with the notion of Global Research Universities or GRUs gaining currency. For universities, globalization means increasing mobility of ideas, technologies and people, both students and academic staff. Off-shore campuses, virtual networks and online delivery of academic programmes have challenged notions of national universities. The rise of ranking systems both contribute to and reflect this notion of a university through focussing mostly on research performance and then giving considerable attention to measures of internationalization. High level skills development, teaching and learning generally and community engagement as envisaged in the NDP are given scant, if any attention at all.

Conclusion

What we are seeing then is a version of what Clarke Kerr referred to as 'on-going tensions' between different aspects of universities seeking simultaneously to be distinctively national or regional and global.[11] The challenge for universities is to do what Simon Marginson says: 'continue to work in these dimensions' to be closely shaped by national policy but also closely shaped by global flows.[12]

It is worth reminding ourselves that the history of universities has been shaped by adaptability and flexibility and at pivotal historical moments the very idea of a university is subject to change. Universities can be sites of excellence in a myriad of ways including being a space that fosters both public and social good. Barnett[13] distinguishes social good as that which refers to the capacity of human beings to acknowledge and take account of each other and in the process show respect and sometimes understanding. This is perhaps, at the heart of the challenge for SA universities: that we become spaces where diverse and discordant views can be exchanged, debated and co-exist together respectfully.

FOOTNOTES

1 Mill J.S. Inaugural Address delivered to the University of St Andrews. London, Longmans. 1867, p. 5.
2. Dearing R. Higher Education in the Learning Society. Report of the National Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education. London, HMSO. 1997.
3 Pring R. The Changing Nature of Universities: economic relevance, social inclusion or personal excellence? Institute for the Advancement of University Learning, University of Oxford. 2001, p. 1. www.learning.ox.ac.uk/iaul/ProfPring.pdf
4 Boulton G. & Lucas C. What are universities for? League of European Research Universities publications. 2008, p. 3.
5 National Development Plan 2030. Our future – make it work. National Planning Commission. 2012, p. 48.
6 Ibid p. 318.
7 Kerr C. The Great Transformation in Higher Education 1960 – 1980. Albany, SUNY Press. 1991.
8 Kerr C. The Uses of the University, 5th ed. Cambridge (1st ed. 1963). Harvard University Press. 2001, p. 7.
9 Castells M. 'Universities as dynamic systems of contradictory functions' in Muller J., Cloete N., and Badat S. (eds) Challenges of Globalisation: South African Debates with Manuel Castells. Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman. 2001, pp. 206-223; Castells M. The Role of Universities in Development, the Economy and Society. Transcript of a lecture given at the University of the Western Cape, August 2009.
10 Note 4 above, p. 3.
11 Note 7 above, p. 11.
12 Marginson S. Global, multiple and engaged: Has the 'Idea of a University' changed in the era of the global knowledge economy? Paper delivered at 5th International Workshop on Higher Education Reforms: The Internationalization of Higher Education and Higher Education Reforms. East China Normal University (ECNU), Shanghai, China. November 2008, p.1. www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/people/marginson_docs.pdf
13 Barnett R. (ed) The Future University: Ideas and Possibilities. Routledge, New York. 2012.