

Colonial legacies and the decolonisation discourse in post-apartheid South Africa

A reflective analysis of student activism in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a wide range of factors that arguably underwrite South Africa's higher education institutions' governance crisis. It highlights overcrowding, infrastructure deficiencies in the form of inadequate accommodation, shortfalls in knowledge resources such as libraries as well as Information and Communication Technology, inequitable access, racial inequality and weak funding mechanisms as the primary causes of violent student protests. Since 1994 attempts towards transformation of the South African education system within the developmental state approach continued under complex socio-economic, political and legal contexts. In spite of the ambitious new policy framework that espouses progressive quality education for all citizens, evidence shows that the state has demonstrated its limitations in mobilising requisite operational resources and creating the conducive settings to fulfil this mandate in higher education. Currently, universities are experiencing violent and disruptive student protests, reminiscent of the pre-democratic student uprisings of the 1970s and 1980s. This trend has the potential to erode institutional viability due to vandalism and related forms of insurgencies in the affected universities. Elitist commentaries have highlighted the contradistinction of government's grand transformational intentions against the material conditions that obtain at the various campuses in South African universities. This article argues that, while there could be several major limitations towards effective transformation, the absence of a comprehensive and sustainable systems-level policy framework is paramount. This has led to piece-meal isolationist implementation of institutional strategic initiatives that, in most instances, have continued to harbour remnants of an inequitable apartheid education system. The article concedes that recurrent collapsed stakeholder negotiations have legitimised untenable circumstances



of heavy-handedness on the part of security agents and student violence. Notwithstanding its starting point, it turns to corroborate the notion of stakeholder mandates and façade transformation as the primary governance conundrums for South Africa's higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of freedom and formation of the Government of National Unity in South Africa in 1994 marked a revolutionary transformation process that featured stable institutions and guaranteed constitutionality with resemblance of democratic and representative governance. However, while the new framework was tailored to ensure that the erstwhile apartheid tendencies were replaced with a new social order through institutional and social structural redress, this article advances that remnants of the past era still remain evident, especially in higher education. This is despite the promulgation of a number of transformative policy positions and strategies that were encapsulated in the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP) as part of an integrated reform programme to meet citizens' basic needs particularly education and sustained economic growth (Wolpe 1995). Subsequently, this posture has had implications for all sectors of society to re-think and engage towards advancement of the developmental goals initially meant to enhance the quality and living standards of all citizens.

As a fundamental priority, higher education would play a critical role in the reconceptualisation of human rights, empowerment and other related social configurations eroded by apartheid nuances. For this reason, the quest for quality higher education has remained at the epicentre of the contemporary social transformation package in the form of e.g. radical trade unionism, agitated student unrest, service delivery protests and human rights advocacy. The urgency of this debate therefore, emanates from the numerous constitutional derivatives, specifically the recommendations of the *National Commission on Higher Education* (1994:113) which informed the *Policy Framework for Education and Training* tailored to ensure that:

a well-planned and integrated, high quality national system of higher education...linked to national and provincial reconstruction, in particular to human resource development and production of scientific and other knowledge to service the economic, cultural and intellectual development of our communities and nation.

Basically, the implication of the above recommendations was to announce a conscious shift resulting from acknowledgment that the entire education system required to be transformed. Subsequently, the South African society has been compelled to interrogate the role of institutions of higher learning, particularly universities as supposedly champions in leading the transformation discourse regarding the existing social conditions obtaining in the new democratic dispensation. Nonetheless, this responsibility has been hamstrung by its strong links to the colonial past and institutional operations are therefore shaped by specific

historical conditions (Wolpe 1995). In addition, the social structure in terms of ownership and control of other role players such as the corporate sector has remained overwhelmingly dominated by former apartheid monopolies. As a result, the Higher Education and Training sector has continued to reflect, to a large extent, the old institutional order and falls short of providing conducive conditions for sufficient transformation. Currently, most of the universities are battling with infrastructure deficiencies in the form of inadequate accommodation and overcrowding, and limited knowledge resources such as libraries and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This is compounded by inequitable access, racial inequality and insinuations, and weak funding mechanisms that often lead to the financial exclusion of the *kith and kin* of the dominant order.

Subsequently, the prevailing circumstances are a stark display that constitutional obligations and requisite policy framework towards the right to quality education for all, continues to be an elusive concept. In Keet's (2005) view, this discourse can be understood in terms of a contradistinction in the provision of education services as a public good in an age of market viability. This transpires in a context where there is hardly any evidence of a meaningful relation between transformational aspirations and the material and financial capacity of the state to deliver on its promises. Thus, the current approach has served to maintain a neo-liberalist superstructure that essentially helps to sustain increased commodification of education and other basic rights to the detriment of the underprivileged citizens.

In light of the above, the process of radical transformation of the education system has relatively failed to deliver on its mandate more than two decades of post-apartheid and has landed South African universities on the *knife's edge* (Cloete 2016:6). This has rendered the system susceptible to a barrage of attacks from both internal and external stakeholders, particularly students whose social media *#FeesMustFall* outrage has resembled a renewed *onslaught* against neo-liberalist features of the past regime. Indeed, South African universities remain trapped in a situation where their relevance to the new social order will, to a large extent, be determined by the degree to which they espouse the values of a post-colonial developmental state amid conflicting aspirations. Therefore, the main pre-occupation of this study is to present a reflective analysis of student activism in the context of widespread contemporary transformation challenges facing the country.

STUDENT ACTIVISM IN APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

As in many other anti-colonial settings in the African continent, the apartheid education system evolved from the construction of a framework in which racial insinuations of the separatist structure perpetuated differentiated educational services between black and white students. Its central feature thrived on inequalities derived from these differences where white tertiary education emerged at the behest of the socio-economic and political demands of a superior section of society. On the contrary, black tertiary institutions came as an offshoot of racially motivated planning to serve the disenfranchised majority of the population (Wolpe 1995). This created two sets of educational institutions which carried different mandates and operated on the basis of systemic imbalances. Black people's education was tailored towards the production of conformist intellectuals and agents for

Bantustan bureaucracies in order to occupy subordinate positions in the occupational structure. Cumulatively, it was this environment that inspired the student resistance protests against the apartheid project that led to a myriad of insurgencies between the authorities and broader citizenry during the 1970s and 1980s (Wolpe 1995). Hence, student activism as it came to be known, was a response to the entire apartheid education system which existed to support the socio-economic, political objectives, policies and planning of the apartheid state.

At the height of the apartheid period, one of the most distinctive characteristic features of anti-colonial resistance was the prominent role of students and student organisations. Universities and schools became hotspots of political contestations targeted at racial superiority and injustices beyond the university community to include all South African citizens (Jansen 2004). During this period, the struggle for freedom necessitated the growth of a unique social mobilisation component that witnessed the emergence of a conflated student movement with party politics. In the period after the 1960s, an attempt to understand student activism was compounded by the presence of partisan political clubs for students as well as campus-based student branches of national parties which acted as pawn linkages between student politics, the institutions of higher learning and the national political system (Magume & Luescher 2016). Campus branches of the national political parties competed for student support in an effort to influence university governance and to have effects on national politics. Thus, the dynamic relationship between student activism and national politics was beneficial to both student leaders and party leaders as most of the political leaders in government today rose to prominence through student activism in the 1970s (Jansen 2004).

Another outstanding milestone of student activism during the apartheid era, regardless of the premises and academic level at which it occurred, was the historic 1976 student uprising in Soweto. Although the protest was initially a reaction against the use of Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction, this reaction symbolised the holistic expression of dissent against oppression beyond mere linguistic colonialism. This fuelled widespread protests elsewhere in the country with students burning property including the then University of the North library and other infrastructure perceived to be symbols of oppression and injustice (Cloete 2016). Furthermore, students played an important role within the institutions as they had the capacity to mobilise mass resistance and to direct the attention of their comrades on social and political issues of the day. They worked closely with the broader union movements including those run by staff and academics “as a common battlefield against government and unsympathetic administrators” (Jansen 2004:303).

These events left the institutions in a quagmire of violent student protests leading to unstable governance, increased student dropouts, high failure and weak financial standings. Most importantly, as these insurgencies continued, they found resonance with national political activities in the broader community as an intricate ingredient to the anti-apartheid movement. While the turmoil engulfed the local context, mass media institutions also externalised the magnitude of these developments by displaying the gruesome pictorial representations of the authoritarian response to protesters by the apartheid police. Arguably, this helped to solicit worldwide sympathy and further legitimised the need for an immediate collapse of the oppressive apartheid government.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF STUDENT ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Student activism is a prevalent phenomenon in most universities worldwide. In most instances, the concept is often applied interchangeably with student protest, yet both are used to express discontent against social, economic, political, cultural, and personal injustices (Teferra & Altbach 2004; Luescher-Mamashela 2013). The above variables often directly or indirectly relate to student services such as demand for reduction of fees and provision of student benefits contrary to rationalisation of resources by universities. More often than not, students protested fiercely to maintain the status quo or resist increase in tuition rather than improved academic performance as a solidarity gesture to unpleasant material conditions of society. In its broad sense, student activism, local or international, has been part of any university's *hot bed* and will continue to feature as part of the epicentre of transformational discourse. In Altbach's (1992:1444) remarks, this phenomenon is "in the inherent nature of the academic community ... as a powerful force" to reckon with both within the internal and external environments of institutions of higher learning.

In the colonial era, student activism could be understood as part of both the informal and extraordinary political activities of students, as opposed to the current formal student representative bodies in higher education governance and lower structures. Whereas the latter entails the boardroom politics reflective of a formal political engagement with authority, the former (activism) forcefully invoked the idea of political engagement through public action to express new ideas or to facilitate public debate on a topical subject matter (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). Nowadays, such engagement is enhanced through numerous platforms in the form of academic publications, public speech, advocacy campaigns, mass media including social networks and more elaborate means such as agitated demonstrations synonymous with service delivery protests.

Proponents on the theorisation and international conceptualisation of student activism such as Altbach (1992) whose scholarly works span from 1961 to date have explained the scope of student movements in terms of their activities, political impetus and ideological orientation. Altbach (1992) notes that "variations in student politics and the effectiveness of activism were closely related to the level of political development, responsiveness of the political system, and the appreciation of the peculiarities of the student community which both facilitate and hinder student movements" (Luescher-Mamashela 2013:5). Therefore, student activism tends to thrive within fettered political systems and modest democracies where the governments or those in authority lack representative legitimacy or are less responsive to the plight of certain sections of society. Under such contexts, student activism often "provide articulation for much more widely held views and concerns ... and are frequently the conscience of at least the educated segment of the population" (Altbach 1992:142). Therefore, as a relatively young democracy, the South African experience with student activism can be understood in terms of the historical *political legitimacy* that students' earned during the successful anti-apartheid campaign. For this reason, their erstwhile association with the revolutionary liberation movements has bestowed a form of entitlement that allows them to *speak truth to power* with adamant authority (Altbach 1992).



STUDENT ACTIVISM IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA: A TRANSFORMATION PARADOX

Notably, there is extensive acknowledgement that student activism, particularly among black students weighed in as a critical and strategic alliance factor both within and outside higher education as a social force for change (Reddy 2004), during the struggle against apartheid. Hence, owing to this significant contribution in the resistance and eventual collapse of the regime, the post-apartheid South African society can only ignore contemporary students' sloganeering and subsequent aspirations at its own peril. This is apparent because, in spite of the goals of the struggle for freedom aimed at dealing with the legacies of racial superiority and exploitation of the black majority, unfortunately the democratic dispensation has evolved into another seemingly, unintended landscape of contestations over similar values espoused during the liberation struggle. Ideally, this emanates from the contradistinction between the post 1994 government's grand transformation aspirations against the current material conditions obtaining at the various campuses of South African universities, a rationale for this interrogation. Despite the numerous challenges that universities face in South Africa, this analysis reflects mainly on the nature of the broad categories that feature significantly as part of the current transformation discourse linked to the *#FeesMustFall* campaign by *infuriated* students in the higher education sector.

Inequality and Limited Access to Higher Education

Despite the clear prescripts contained in the Bill of Rights in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 and accompanying statutory organisations such as the *South African Human Rights Commission*, there are fundamental social differences among South African citizens. These socio-economic variations are more visibly biased to the detriment of the working class, a majority of whom are based in the townships or rural settings. This category of the population is important to this article because urban townships and rural communities form the core catchment area as well as the bulk of universities' enrolment statistics. For most young people, the right to quality education especially at the tertiary level has remained unattainable and this often limits opportunities for learners from poor families to escape the poverty trap. Poverty in its broadest sense has both a direct and indirect relationship with continuing inequality (including access) even in the face of democratic reforms (Spren & Vally 2006). Due to these conditions, South Africa currently faces a significant challenge of providing adequate access to higher education for the majority of its young population who aspire for post matric study opportunities in local universities.

While it was hoped that, in democratic South Africa, the focus of student organisations would shift from protests against apartheid towards "unrestricted access to higher education" (Jansen 2004) and subsequently, equal job opportunities, these benefits have not been fully realised yet. Instead, demand for access to higher education has continued to grow with an overflow of students being admitted to institutions initially meant to accommodate a minimal number of students. This has led to over-stretched systems with a negative impact on institutional delivery *inter alia* insufficient laboratories, residential accommodation and lecture halls. Thus, as a consequent outcome of the reality that "access is not a mere moral issue but a fundamentally material one" (Akojee & Nkomo 2007:396), institutional

transformation processes have fallen short of achieving the intended democratic gains of redress, equity and delivery of quality education. This is owed to lack of sustained investment of resources into the transformation project, which eventually reflects apartheid trends that were tailored to limit the training of African professionals.

Inadequate Financing Systems and Material Resources

Although virtually all African universities suffer from the effects of scarce financial resources (Teferra & Altbach 2004), this tends to vary from one country to another since the bulk of their revenue is derived from state resources. In South Africa, this funding model has left these institutions opting to engage external sources such as partnerships and donor agencies as means of meeting their budgetary needs. While the government's financing systems such as the *National Student Financial Aid Scheme* (NSFAS), the throughput-based subsidy and other bursary offerings are expected to provide financial relief to universities, this contribution hardly meets the institutions' operational demands. This has pushed universities to apply stringent fee-collection measures which have further compounded poor students' financial conditions. Annually, more and more students fail to re-register in the successive years due to institutional financial exclusion where they eventually drop out and become victims of the educational *sorting* and class reproduction patterns (Koen, Cele & Libhaber 2006). This further complicates their fate by delaying them from graduating, a tendency that also inhibit opportunities for potential students to enrol. In addition, the differentiated fees regime between former white and former black universities has continued to be a source of transformational contestations which are marred with racial insinuations and class privilege. In the former black universities, the majority of students are indigent and accordingly, the fees structure is cheapest, yet material resources constantly becoming scarcer and student debt is highest (Koen *et al.* 2006).

In view of the above, much of the institutional reform programmes of former black universities have focused on how best to manage an overflow of students absorbed at the behest of politicians (Koen *et al.* 2006) amid a diminishing financial base. This has created a complex task for management to delve into stringent strategic planning, cost-cutting, dire appeal for subventions and external donors from the corporate sector and alumni. Thus, institutions devote most of their time trying to find creative ways to supplement their income in order to remain viable at the expense of core values such as curriculum development, pedagogy and research (Sawyer 2004). In the light of the above, poor students are at the receiving end due to their vulnerable socio-economic conditions. This evolves from chronic shortage of resources that should facilitate teaching and learning, and research development (Teferra & Altbach 2004). In a desperate bid to express their frustrations about slow education reforms, students have directed their protests towards the very scarce material resources by burning laboratory equipment, lecture halls, furniture and other valuable accessories.

Racial Integration and Language Issues

South African universities have an inherent tradition of playing host to both cultural and identity politics. This stems from the historical discriminatory policies of the White (superior) versus Bantustan (inferior) education system associated with the apartheid project. This situation evolved into the emergence and sustenance of some form of *institutional cultures* (Jansen 2004)



aligned to the historically white institutions' pre-occupation with the apartheid educational deliverables. Nowadays, the controversy is more evident with respect to alleged marginalisation of the Afrikaans language in particular and racial integration in student residences country wide. The racist video debacle at the University of the Free State produced by white students in 2008 presented an overt disregard for respect of the dominant black race and served as an unprecedented timely offshoot to the racism discourse in higher education. Characteristic of the collective response to the colonial legacy by students was the *#RhodesMustFall* campaign where the monument of Cecil John Rhodes, the British colonial mastermind, was brought down for its symbolic inferences to the past at the University of Cape Town. This demand for a *memorial blackout* sparked outrageous disruptions across the entire sector with students demanding cultural and linguistic transformation for their constituencies including curriculum review. Following another outcry for a *bail out* from fees arrears, contestations emanating from the so-called *black-debt* rose against the historically white universities' privilege of *healthy financial reserves*. This demonstrates vivid racial footprints inscribed in South Africa's colonial legacy which continue to feature dominantly through traditional symbols of the past. Hence, it is clear that patterns of racism and white privilege still remain despite the broader transformation changes that have characterised the post-apartheid higher education landscape.

While language remains a volatile social issue in African universities (Teferra & Altbach 2004), the possibility of the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in African universities remains a pipe dream and an uncomfortable terrain for most academics. This is demonstrated by the fact that no African university has effectively changed the medium of instruction at university level from a colonial to an indigenous language as yet. Often, it is the languages associated with the colonial legacy and their accompanying socio-economic inferences that dominate instructional delivery in institutions of higher learning. In South Africa, although Afrikaans is arguably an indigenous language, its historical resemblance with the racist apartheid policies, particularly in education, evokes nostalgic reminiscences, notably the 1976 student uprisings. For this reason, angry students tend to lump their frustrations against university authorities and a failing education system with resentment for lack of linguistic transformation especially in former Afrikaans medium institutions such as University of Pretoria and Stellenbosch University.

Out-sourcing of Services

Despite the fact that most universities operate with scarce financial resources, the need for efficient administrative systems to ensure good governance and accountability remain imperative. However, due to some peripheral yet significant ancillary responsibilities as well as a disproportionate number of non-academic administrative and support staff, universities have attempted to reduce the amount of financial resources apportioned to non-core functions. This has seen the emergence of sub-contracted labour at universities through an outsourcing of services such as cleaning, gardening and waste removal. Arguably, some stakeholders view this exercise as taking away the resources needed for the provision of basic functions of the universities; that is, teaching and learning (Teferra & Altbach 2004). Contrary to this debate, the recent protests by students and the affected employees seem to have advanced an economic and human resources argument about outsourcing of services to sub-contractors. They have questioned the social impact of privatisation as a mechanism

that continues to exploit the poor working class. As such, through solidarity actions including the *#FeesMustFall* bandwagon, students have demanded that subcontracted personnel in universities be placed on permanent employment with accompanying benefits. This action and its accompanying assortment vividly reflect aspirations of the past struggles and further confirm that student activist campaigns generally mirror the grievances and the material conditions of the wider community, particularly the poor.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE POLICY REVIEW

Although public aspirations about transformation in the South African higher education sector are based on the notion that quality education is a constitutional obligation and a basic human right, it is important to acknowledge the complex environment within which the intended reforms take place. First, the dynamic needs of the new forces that have risen as offshoots of the new democratic dispensation need immediate recognition. Second, the current socio-economic and intricate political processes obtaining in the country also tend to preoccupy the progressive space, a tendency that often affects prompt delivery on services. This paradox lies in the contradistinction where erstwhile comrades who were firmly located within the nationalist front against apartheid are now compelled to apply similar tactics to pressure the ANC led government to be more socially responsive to the demands of society. Ironically, these forces operate in solidarity with other sympathetic social formations also expressing their displeasure about the increasing gap between policy and practical material conditions of citizens.

This conundrum is attributable to a broad national policy that has given way to autonomous institutional governance with differentiated transformation plans underpinned by specific goals, values and visions of institutional cultures (McKinney & Pletzen 2004). This has caused them to respond to imperative transformation challenges in variant and discordant ways with selective application and emphasis of national policy. Owing to the indistinct national policy framework, individual institutions' initiatives have produced and implemented isolationist tendencies that have further propagated exclusionary practices of the apartheid system. In certain instances, instead of enhancing equitable educational conditions, individual institutional responses to transformation challenges have further exacerbated inequalities. As such, current policies have shied away from openly confronting the core discrepancies between the various components of the sector leading to a distortion of the promised democratic education values. Under these conditions, it is now opportune for both government and universities to realise that reactive responses to student protests and individualist practices are none other than self-serving short-term antics. They tend to create a fertile ground for further student protests and also set universities into a competition mode at the expense of addressing the acute problems facing the sector.

CONCLUSION

Suffice to say that, for the post-apartheid government, implementation of transformation reforms has taken a snail's pace within equivocal processes where gains of the struggle have continued to remain alongside old patterns reproducing themselves within higher education



and the broader society. Consequently, there is a need for the re-conceptualisation of a systems-level policy framework (Sawyers 2004) driven by political imperatives located within the sphere of both dominant internal and external stakeholders to guide a collective strategic decision-making process. This process should be premised within a multistage context with room for wider societal participation, vibrant dialogue and appreciation for public critique to embrace inclusivity. To a large extent, this may help to appease the different sections of society from galvanising into national scale mass organisations similar to those in the 1980s (Alexander 2010), which may be hijacked into the path of opportunistic and extremist political formations with dire consequences. Summarily, the resurgence of somewhat *animated* student activism should be seen as a new social accountability mechanism meant to reconstitute continuity with the emancipatory struggles of the past. More significantly, it serves as a reminder that changes into the new political dispensation, constitutional applause and progressive policies are not sufficient guarantees to the realisation of equitable delivery of socio-economic benefits.

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