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1

ID: 03178137-01 Source Page: 1

Political miscalculations now threaten all higher education, argues **Jonathan Jansen**

When does a university cease to exist?

I recently honoured a long-standing and generous invitation to speak at a rural university in South Africa. Shortly after I drove through the main gates of the institution, I literally tore up my prepared speech and started to think about the content of a "talk from the heart" to deliver within one hour of arrival.

As the crowd assembled, the chairperson for the event bent over and asked me for a title for the speech. He visibly panicked when I responded with: "The Case for Closing Down the University of X." The chair sat down: "I cannot do this," he pleaded, "there will be a riot." "Tough," I replied, "either you accept my title or I drive back to Pretoria." The talk went ahead with the unhappy title.

The signage proclaiming the name of this university dangled precariously on one nut over the gates. The grass had not been cut for months, if not years. The classrooms were dilapidated — in a worse state than I had seen in many township high schools around the country. The few good professors had left years ago.

The management of the university, such as it was, did nothing else than try to keep student outrage down and manage constant threats of staffing action.

There was non-stop uncertainty about meeting the payroll demands for each month. The library had not purchased any new books for years, and there was no periodical section to speak of; books were routinely

stolen or destroyed. Scholarly publications by academics hardly existed.

There was no intellectual life on this campus. The place, quite frankly, was dead.

As I pondered the pathetic state of this institution, a question came up in my mind that has been troubling me ever since: "When does a university cease to exist?"

My contention is that a university's existence is not determined by government decree, such as a gazetted declaration of some final date by which a university shuts down; or when a large institution engulfs and extinguishes the identity of a smaller one; or when new signage goes up declaring an imagined community. As you travel from the University of Venda to what was formerly the Giyani College of Education, there is a bright new sign on the road that says: "University of Venda: Giyani Campus."

When you get to Giyani there is not a soul in sight and the decay of this once outstanding teacher education facility is obvious to the eye. This decaying facility was in fact transferred to the provincial department of education. The sign on the way there insists otherwise.

It would be easy to be fooled by the symbolic functions and routines of university life, and mistake this for a university. Even at this rural site, there were annual graduation ceremonies led by lecturers dressed in full academic regalia with solemn music accompanying the procession. Diplomas and degrees were handed out routinely.

The financial squeeze had placed the ubiquitous "moratorium" on any new academic appointments. And lecturers would generally show up for classes to teach. At the end of the year there would be decisions about who passes and who fails. And

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1

ID: 03178137-02 Source Page: 1

then there is graduation, again.

But despite these routines of ceremony and administration, this so-called university had long ceased to exist.

In the second term of the African National Congress-led government, South Africa had a unique opportunity to reverse the damage of apartheid higher education and give to the nation a few excellent universities that could address national and continental challenges of development and, at the same time, secure a position for African higher education among the best institutions in the world.

It is worth recalling two proposals that sought to achieve this repositioning of higher education. The first proposal of the task team of the Council on Higher Education was to create a tiered system that recognised and affirmed the diverse functions of the higher education system.

This was a courageous proposal whose brilliance lay in the fact that it was also a recognition of the on-the-ground capacities of various kinds of institutions. The University of Cape Town was, quite simply, not the University of the North West or Natal Technikon or Giyani Teachers College.

But this proposal was trumped by a mindless black nationalist politics that preferred to labour under the serious misconception that (a) the standing of institutions is simply a function of the divisiveness and underdevelopment of apartheid and (b) with corrective action all institutions (technikons included) could be like Stellenbosch or Wits.

The second and less invasive opportunity was the original proposal for mergers. Under former minister of education Kader Asmal, one way of regrouping

institutions was to take on "the geopolitical imagination of apartheid planners" and replace this with what Terry Barnes memorably called "the geopolitical imagination of post-apartheid planners".

For Asmal this meant merging weak and strong institutions, on the one hand (such as the incorporation of Vista campuses into established universities), and closing or scaling down largely dysfunctional institutions under new and more modest missions as training facilities.

This radical plan for mergers was also reversed after intense and vociferous resistance from prominent black vice-chancellors organised under the banner of "disadvantaged institutions".

Once again, a historic opportunity was lost to at least create some semblance of the university in the higher education landscape.

What was missing in these debates was an honest concession that South Africa did not (at the time) have 21 universities. At best, it had six institutions distinguished by their seriousness about scholarship of discovery and teaching and through their recognition by the international academy.

The restructuring of higher education provided a unique opportunity to make massive investments in these six universities as the leading centres of intellectual and scholarly life on the continent; as the primary producers of high-level skills for a global economy; and as the

A university's existence is not determined by government decree

primary sites for the generation of new knowledge that could address and redress the serious challenges of development — such as poverty, HIV/Aids and education.

To be sure, the problem of racial identities of these institutions, the unequal production of scientists by race and gender, and the still unequal representation of black and women staff in these institutions remain serious concerns. But the way to redress these problems was not to keep "historically white" and "historically black" institutions as separate political entities. The governmental task, in my view, should have been to accelerate the deracialisation of these six institutions.

The dominant discourses in South African universities are completely out of touch with the demographic changes sweeping the former white universities and the demographic realities of this African country. We deploy language appropriate to the North American context, where black persons are and will remain a demographic minority, to create defensive institutions (historically black) that simply do not merit distinction in what is effectively a black-majority country.

However, pretending that all institutions could become the same thing, and that by shifting increasingly smaller pools of governmental funding among 15 new institutions, equally strong universities could be created, is the kind of political miscalculation that now threatens the entire system of higher education in South Africa. One of the strangest and costliest mistakes made in this country was to declare technikons as universities (of technology) — this after decades in which the sector

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1

ID: 03178137-03 Source Page: 1

made the case for institutional distinctiveness.

Central to this pretence that all universities could be re-created equal is the enormous leverage that resides in the new funding formula for higher education. Since all other policy instruments (such as employment equity and qualifications reforms) appear to have had, at best, muted effects on institutions, the one device with most potential for change — whether disruptive or constructive — appears to be financial instruments.

The one reality is that there will not be more money from the Treasury to capacitate disadvantaged institutions and in the process to redress past inequalities; about this fact there is little disagreement. What the government is, therefore, left with is to find means for redistributing the small pool of available resources from the white, privileged institutions (as the case is put) to the black, disadvantaged institutions.

At a political level, I have no problem with redistribution. At a strategic level, this is extremely dangerous.

First, the historically white institutions remain — for the moment at least — the most viable option for creating world-class African universities that can compete with leading universities elsewhere and

that could deploy their significant resource base to resolve urgent problems of development.

To systematically erode this capacity in favour of a racially motivated policy of redistribution is shortsighted in the extreme and will, for sure, drag all institutions down to the lowest common denominator — a situation in which we all lose. Where, I often muse, will Cabinet ministers send

their children in 20 years' time? At the rate we're going, the answer is: outside of South Africa.

Second, the historically black institutions have been so devastated by a combination of apartheid underdevelopment and post-apartheid corruption that any simplistic notion that these entities could be salvaged to become universities is naive at best and, in effect, pernicious,

given the long-term development potential of the country.

I have studied, taught and led in historically black universities, and the one thing that is clear is that massive injections of sustained, multi-year funding would be necessary to build adequate libraries, recruit and retain world-class professors, attract outstanding graduate students, and develop the kind of intellectual life that distinguishes universities from other kinds of institutions — like prisons, hospitals and mental asylums.

By which I mean: we hold students against their will when they feel they are entitled as post-apartheid beneficiaries to pass, we entertain all manner of social illnesses under the guise of promoting the academic project, and the madness of managerialism has displaced the power of intellectual community as the distinctive feature of university life.

It is appropriate at this juncture to reflect on the disturbingly poor quality and credibility of higher education leadership after apartheid.

In the historically white universities we have a leadership which, with few exceptions, has yet to find ways of acting credibly by building a strong and diverse academic and intellectual community of scholars.

In the historically Afrikaans universities there remains a serious contestation about the ownership of these institutions. Make no mistake, the disgraceful behaviour of reactionary academics on and around the University of Stellenbosch campus had very little to do with the late Bram Fischer and his communist affiliations. It had everything to do with what Jakes Gerwel insightfully called *besitterskap* — that is, who owns this public university called Stellenbosch.

What is equally disturbing is the behaviour of the leadership of historically black institutions. It is worth reminding ourselves that some of these institutions were — resources apart — thriving sites of intellectual production during the anti-apartheid years. It is also worth recalling that several historically black universities (HBUs) had attractive reserves during the 1980s and even the early 1990s.

But what happened in the years leading to and since 1994 is a testimony to corrupt and inept leadership — something amply documented in the series of special investigations commissioned by

the government and easily accessible on the Internet. My contention is that several promising HBUs, which at various historical moments stood on the brink of defying their origins to become strong academic entities with unambiguous developmental agendas, were slowly stripped by their leaders of both their

material and intellectual assets to become, well, non-universities.

But the future existence of the university is not only threatened by the lack of resources or the credibility of leadership; it is also undermined by the growing corporatisation of the university.

A university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energises its scholars, and inspires its students. It ceases to exist when state control and interference closes down the space within which academic discourse and imagination can flourish without constraint. The university ceases to exist when it imposes on itself narrowing views of the future based on ethnic or linguistic chauvinism, and denies the multiplicity of voices and visions that grant institutions their distinctive character. And the university ceases to exist when it represents nothing other than an empty shell of racial representivity at the cost of academic substance and intellectual imagination.

Whether South Africa has any universities (in the ways imagined) in the next 30 years will depend crucially on the decisions made today. The most critical and realistic scenario is to create a two-tier university system consisting of (a) a small group of high-powered research universities targeted to enjoy a substantially increased investment in research infrastructure and postgraduate education; and (b) a larger group of high-quality teaching universities targeted to create opportunities for a broad base of students within a programme that has strong academic development thinking infused into the undergraduate curriculum.

The first group should have an unambiguous mission of creating world-class research and scholarship focused on and deriving from the pressing problems of African development; the second group having an equally unambiguous mission of

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Topic: 25

Ref No: 633



1

ID: 03178137-04 Source Page: 1

offering high-calibre teaching to large masses of undergraduate students. The second-group should provide clear and well-funded channels of progression for the best students in these teaching universities to proceed to postgraduate studies and research in the first group; in other words, the research universities. It could be argued, of course, that such differentiation is already taking place — this is correct; the problem is, that without policy directive and planning impetus, such “natural differentiation” comes at enormous cost, socially and materially, with inestimable levels of wastage for a Third World country.

But new institutional configurations are not enough. What will also be required is a new generation of higher education leaders selected not because of political expediency and racial preference but on the basis of leadership credibility; in the 21st century, capability is simply not enough — as George W Bush is busy finding out.

The greatest challenge facing the post-apartheid university is that second-generation South Africans fail to find a compelling moral purpose in higher education beyond crass materialism and individual self-enrichment. It will require credible leadership to sustain the idea of the university through a restored idealism among students and teachers, an idealism that places our common humanity at the center of institutional endeavour in a very dangerous world.

Failing such leadership endeavour, it is not only universities that will cease to exist.

This is an abridged version of the 40th Hoernle Memorial Lecture, delivered at the South African Institute of Race Relations in November last year. Professor Jonathan Jansen is dean of education at the University of Pretoria