

## Guest Editorial

# On the state of South African universities<sup>1</sup>

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Not since the traumatic reorganisation of South African higher education with the cynically named *Extension of University Education Act* of 1955, has university education stood at such a precarious crossroads.<sup>2</sup> It is not only the uncertainty of the effects of mergers and incorporations that would reduce the number of higher education institutions (universities and technikons) from 36 to 21 entities, but the effects of a changing climate for higher education operations which threaten the very essence of what a university education stands for in this emerging post-apartheid democracy. In parallel work published elsewhere, I have described the major factors that contribute to this new global and local climate in the post-secondary sector: the changing size and shape of higher education; the changing meaning of autonomy and accountability; the changing nature of higher education providers (private higher education); the changing character of student distribution and characteristics in higher education; the changing organisation of university management and governance; the changing roles of student politics and organisation; the changing models of delivery in higher education; the changing notion of higher education – between free trade and the public good; the changing value of higher education programmes (the rise of the economic sciences and the decline of the humanities); and the changing nature of the academic workplace (Jansen 2003; see also Altbach 2000).

In this invited article, however, I wish to dwell less on what the state has done to create these contexts – state action has been analysed with alacrity elsewhere (Cloete *et al* 2002; Jansen 2002) – but on a sensitive and less articulated subject, namely, how institutions have responded to accelerate what I refer to as the declining state of universities in South Africa.

My first concern about institutional behaviour has to do with *the declining status of the South African professoriate*. I refer to the growing malpractice in especially technikons and some universities to create a new class of (mainly) black professors in response to two different sets of pressures. For the technikons, this pressure comes from an unseemly haste to propel

these institutions, overnight, into university status – such as the so-called universities of technology – on the back of professorial appointments made, in the main, to young black academics. For the universities, this pressure comes from the growing disquiet, raised once again in public position statements such as the National Plan for Higher Education of the Department of Education (Department of Education 2001), and the National Research and Development Strategy of the Department of Science and Technology (Department of Science and Technology 2002), about the dominance of an ageing white population of South African science and scientific output. For both technikons and universities, the common additional pressure is employment equity – and the need to advance black scholars within these institutions rather than lose them to the much more lucrative public and private sectors. The instrument of choice, under these conditions, has been to give away professorial status and salary-levels to these young and ambitious black academics. The problem with such reaction to pressure is to advance to professorial status a class of young black academics without any record of scholarship, without any track record in research, and without any credibility in the competitive world of research journals, research conferences and research programmes. These young academics make up the equity numbers, but the destructive effects of such practices on the higher education system are incalculable, and the country will pay a heavy price for such irresponsible behaviour. Why? In the first place, this young academic now has no motivation to develop the kind of scholarship profile and productivity that steadily composes her for high standing in the academy; a young and promising academic career is summarily destroyed. In the second place, this promising academic now assumes responsibility for supervising masters and doctoral students, but without the intellectual depth or academic sophistication to build a strong cadre of new scholars; in short, successive generations of students now suffer as a result of a poor professorial decision, thereby ensuring another long period of mediocrity and the gradual withering away of the thin layer of academic credibility that adorns a few institutions of higher education. This practice is not new; South Africa is

only just emerging from a practice – rampant especially in the historically black universities and some of the Afrikaans institutions – of creating a class of professorial appointments since the 1960s made on the basis of ethnic and political loyalties rather than scholarly credentials and academic outputs. The malaise in higher education at the end of the 20th century is in no small part a consequence of such practices under *apartheid*. The system-wide effects of this dumbing down of the professoriate are devastating and can reverse hard-won scholarship gains through the painfully slow and systematic building of capacity in institutions. The strategic question needs to be asserted in the public domain: “what does it mean to be a professor in a country seeking to build internationally competitive institutions of higher education?”

The second concern I wish to raise has to do with *the declining quality of the student body*. It is a well-recorded fact that the number of students graduating from high schools has dropped sharply – and unexpectedly – in the past seven years, with dramatic consequences for South African universities. And since universities are funded on the basis of student enrolment and progression rates, the smaller pool of available students for higher education impacted negatively on all institutions. The drop in the pool of potential students happened at about the same time as students migrated towards technikons in historically unprecedented numbers, and white universities eased their entrance requirements in order to build a more equitable profile of students. The black universities were hardest hit by these trends, and the concept of “senate discretionary students” became the instrument of choice. Universities would routinely appeal to their senates to ignore the fact that students did not meet the standard entry requirements, and seek special dispensation for such students. In a short period of time, an estimated 15–25% of students admitted came through the route of senate discretion. In the process, universities lowered the aggregate quality of students enrolled in their programmes. More and more, academic development became the strategy for alleviating the effects of 12 years of poor schooling. It is very difficult to find a university in South Africa that places its undergraduate resources at the disposal of outstanding university teaching – such resources being whittled down to the lowest common denominator.

The third concern has to do with *the declining credibility of academic leadership*. The series of disruptions that immobilised many universities and technikons in the course of the 1990s had catastrophic consequences for higher education. Such upheavals and disruptions found many university and technikon leaders (mainly vice chancellors) removed from their jobs and replaced by government appointed “administrators” – the result of hastily prepared legislation to deal with the downward spiral

of violence in institutions. The appointment of leaders by councils explains much of the unravelling of stable institutions: persons were appointed because of their political credentials in many places, because of ethnic loyalties in others, and because of sheer corrupt practices in a few. As a result, higher education got what it deserved: a brand of mediocre managers without the three characteristics that distinguish world-class university leaders: the credibility of personal scholarship, the capacity for people management and consciousness of the global knowledge economy. After 2000, universities and technikons – stung by the experiences of corrupt and incompetent university and technikon leaders – opted for the safe and silent managerial appointments (like government bureaucrats); managers who would reduce chronic budgetary deficits, run risk-free institutions that stayed out of the newspapers, and operate in ways that did not disturb entrenched cultures or privileges. In short, before and after 2000, institutions lack credible academic leaders.

The fourth concern relates to *the declining volume and quality of our research outputs*. The National Research and Development Strategy of the Department of Science and Technology (2002) was disturbing for two pieces of data. One, it demonstrated that the knowledge producers in higher education remain largely white and male. Two, it affirmed that there has been no observable shift in the aggregate outputs of the small cohort of black researchers (Department of Science and Technology 2002:53). What is striking about this report is not only that it resembles a profile of research and researchers of a decade ago, but that it comes despite millions of rands of investments in so-called “capacity building programmes” allocated by the National Research Foundation (also in its earlier form as the Foundation for Research and Development), the Human Sciences Research Council, the Tertiary Education Linkages Programme, the South Africa Netherlands Partnership for Alternative Development and a host of university-to-university initiatives originating in the North. It is clear to me that this money did not deliver on the promise of delivering to higher education a visible and productive cadre of black and women scholars. The strategy for capacity building was flawed: by making limited short-term investments in a large number of people, it was assumed that the institutional conditions were such as to nurture, support and promote these trainee scholars. It simply did not happen, but there are alternatives (see later).

The fourth concern has to do with *the declining prominence of teaching*. At the one end of the spectrum, in mainly black institutions, teaching has been reduced to remediation in the form of academic development. At the other end of the spectrum, in several white institutions, teaching has been equated with technological innovation. In both cases, the scholarship of teaching lost serious ground. By the

scholarship of teaching. I mean the higher level, intellectual engagement between university teachers and their students. Such teaching creates “a common ground of intellectual commitment” which, at its best, means “not only transmitting knowledge but *transforming* and *extending* it as well” (Boyer 1990:24, emphasis in the original). Complaints about weak students, about crowded classes, and about high drop-out and failure rates, have displaced elevated talk about the scholarship of engagement with students among university teachers. I am suggesting therefore that this declension in the prominence and elevation of university teaching is directly related to the downward spiral in the quality of students, and the new demands made on teachers to “get them through” the system.

The fifth concern worth sharing is *the declining voice of criticism* within higher education. During the anti-apartheid days, a strong and consistent voice was heard in universities against the *apartheid* state and education system. That critical voice has dissipated in the face of perhaps the greatest challenges to universities and technikons, ie, the fundamental restructuring of the higher education landscape through new funding formulas, new governance regimes, new institutional combinations and new policies on institutional applications, and so on. What has emerged to replace *the voice of criticism* – by which I mean the strategic intellectual engagement with state power – has been *the voice of complaint* – by which I mean the short-term preoccupation with institutional self-interests. To be sure, the dissemination of awards, the quest for promotion, displaced party loyalties and the fear of dissent combine to distinguish the voice of criticism and the vitality of intellectual life so indispensable to the future of the university.

In conclusion, the hard architecture of universities is about to change dramatically with the mergers and incorporations of higher education institutions. More critical, in my view, are the tangible changes in the soft architecture of our institutions – in which domain I include the declining research cultures, academic leadership and student characteristics within universities and technikons. What is to be done?

The most important intervention would be to make massive investments in the development of a new generation of young scholars – using a different model. It is a sobering and unpleasant fact that ten years of concentrated investment by national as well as international agencies, foundations and universities in research capacity building has not tipped the scales in favour of increased productivity or changed the racial (or gendered) character of research activity and output. This proposal represents a response to this coming crisis in national research capacity.

It is widely accepted that universities represent the

primary arena for the development of new researchers, academics and intellectuals through the medium of the PhD. The irony is that while doctoral degrees are being awarded with increasing frequency, the retention and quality of academic PhDs constitutes a major problem for institutions and, of course, for the nation. One of the reasons for the poor performance of academic PhDs is that the work environment is decidedly unattractive for young scholars. New academic appointments, fresh from doctoral studies, are typically loaded with large classes, growing administrative loads, mass assessment tasks – most without teaching assistance or support. Worse, these workhorses of the academy are still required, especially in the larger, competitive universities, to produce a steady stream of research and to contribute to scholarship. The pattern is familiar: after one or two years the new academic appointment either leaves for government or the private sector, or simply settles into a pattern of mediocrity in which research and scholarship are forced to take a back seat. Despite the occasional awards for research, this is seldom sustained or driven at a level of quality that changes and challenges the primary identity of the young scholar: a university teacher of large classes.

I propose a national institute for advanced studies to serve as a mechanism for redressing the institutional incapacity and for contributing to the development of a new cadre of leading post-PhD scholars in a range of different fields. It is proposed that a group of 100 new PhDs be taken out of their institutions for three months every year, for three years in a row, for a concentrated period of targeted capacity building. For this nine-month period, the young academic will be exposed to the best minds in their respective fields through seminars, workshops and intensive one-on-one development sessions. These “best minds” will include the top scholars in South Africa and abroad, including Nobel Laureates, leading literary theorists, the leading names in education, psychology or physics, all of whom are prepared to spend short periods of times in special sessions with these young academics. The young academic will learn the art of scholarship within a community of peers drawn from a wide spectrum of disciplinary (and indeed trans-disciplinary) endeavours. The young academic will be required to present current, completed and proposed new research to both peers and established scholars, and be guided towards successful publication. The young academic will learn the habits of reflection, research and reproduction through intense cycles over the three-year period – until the demands of personal discipline and intellectual character begin to settle in the life of the young scholar. The three-month internship is product based: every young academic commits to producing tangible intellectual products (two academic articles per annum, one major seminar per three-month period, one major respondent paper to peer papers, one comprehensive book review, etc). In short, everything that this young

academic does for the three-month cycles is focused on one thing only: undisturbed cultivation of the values, competences and attitudes that are known to be indispensable to the development of leading scholars, productive academics and respected intellectuals.

If South African higher education is to stand any

chance of reversing the trends described in this *Editorial*, it will have to be done through the medium of a new generation of scholars. But this will require an academic leadership that understands the nature of the higher education malaise in the first place, and a political leadership that is willing to commit to this investment in our single most prized national asset – the 21st century university.

## NOTES

- 1 An earlier version of this article was read as the keynote address at the annual conference of the South African Association for Higher Education Research and Development, convened at the University of Stellenbosch, July 2003.
- 2 This Act not only created the first black universities (apart from the University of Fort Hare) based on apartheid-constructed racial and ethnic identities, but it prevented black students from studying at the then white universities – except with ministerial permission.

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