Education (Im)possible: A Historic View on the Adequacy of Higher Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT--- *This paper highlights the historic foundations of the current higher education system in South Africa. The system has seen the application of restrictions from two successive oppressive systems: colonialism and apartheid. Neither of these allowed access to education to the majority of the country's people. Both systems left an impact that is making it very difficult to ensure that HE is able to be relevant in terms of curriculum, and accessible in terms of quality and number of graduates. While there is agreement that substantial change has to happen in HE it cannot happen at all costs. It is important for the youth to realise that what appears to be a system that does not want to change, is in fact a system with its foundations in almost 200 years of suppression of progressive contextual intellectual thought.*

Keywords – Higher education, Africanisation, Access to education, Colonialism, Apartheid

1. INTRODUCTION

The start of the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (SA) has highlighted the problems inherent in higher education (HE). It has put the South African HE system under pressure for not responding to transformation objectives in terms of representativeness (mostly staff objectives), affordability, rigid disciplinary boundaries and not providing sufficient graduates to support economic development targets.

Most African states were colonised by Western powers in the nineteenth century. Under colonialism, cultural diversity was contained through the exclusion of African traditions from education (Woolman, 2001: 27). In the case of South Africa, an oppressive segregationist regime followed decolonisation and extended the problems related to nation building, transformation and economic development. Exclusively Western education systems and curricula were implemented in order to address the education needs of people (both privileged and underprivileged). The recent events surrounding HE in SA bear testimony to the problems related to the inherited system. Makgoba (2015) paints a somewhat bleak picture in this regard:" The story has been with us since the dawn of our democracy and has been growing every year. It resonates with the nation and addresses the same three pillars mentioned in the National Development Plan (NDP): inequality, unemployment and poverty. The story is critical for students' future and indeed for the very survival of a healthy HE. It will also affect the future of the nation. It simply cannot be ignored and must be addressed."

The situation is even more desperate in relation to SA's global economic position. Historic imbalances have left the system inadequate with the advent of democracy in 1994. There is a definite need to reassess the possible contribution of the system in order to support current and future challenges. Like other emerging economies, South Africa has to adjust and restructure education systems in order to produce graduates able to cope in the new interconnected global economy and to address critical skills shortages that are restricting economic growth.With the #FeesMustFall movement, universities are now also focusing on fees and access. In the background, the issues of the representativeness of staff and the transformation and ownership of the curriculum – especially the latter – in most instances have not been at the top of the list of priorities.

We are at a point where we can hardly afford another round of stun grenades and rubber bullets to stem the tide. According to Msila (2016), #FeesMustFall is just the start of change. The issue of affordability of HE is strongly related to "far broader social and educational issues that we have hardly begun to address, such as the indigenisation of knowledge." These challenges have to be seen against the backdrop of our colonial and political heritage. We cannot forget our history as we can only move forward based on the lessons of the past. A new system expanded on the current foundations may be criticised for replicating the problems of the past.The question is really whether HE is adequate in

terms of quality (relevance) and quantity (access) at this point in time. The purpose of this discussion is to provide a better understanding of the history ofthe challenges facing the HE system in SA.

2.   HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

South African HE has seen the application of restrictions from two successive oppressive systems: colonialism and apartheid. Neither of these allowed access to education to the majority of the country's people. Both systems left an impact that is making it very difficult to ensure that HE is able to be relevant in terms of curriculum, and accessible in terms of quality and number of graduates.

2.1   Early South African education history

South African societies placed strong emphasis on traditional forms of education before the arrival of the Europeans. The Khoisan, Nguni and other societies had systems in place to transmit cultural values and traditional skills. Knowledge was transmitted through strong oral traditions and the practice of essential skills. Sustaining relevant traditions and skills were all-important to the survival of these earlier societies.

European influence started with the establishment of a governorate in the Cape by the Dutch East India Company in 1652. The earliest formal European schools in South Africa were established in the Cape Colony in the late seventeenth century by the Dutch Reformed Church LOC (nd) when the Colony was still under Dutch rule. These schools taught basic writing and math skills, but were focused on biblical instruction. In some rural areas, travelling teachers also taught these basic skills. The British officially took control in terms of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1814. British missionary schools were already established from 1799 onwards. The thinking was that it was much easier to convert indigenous peoples than to confront them with violence (Warneck, 1888, in SAHO, nd [b]).From 1820, the British were encouraged to settle in the Cape, which increased the demands for formal education. Most religious schools in the eastern Cape accepted Xhosa children who applied for admission, and in Natal many other Nguni-speaking groups sent their children to mission schools after the mid-nineteenth century (LOC, nd). In state-funded schools, teachers were required to promote Afrikaner acceptance of British Rule (Kamvangamalu, 2004: 202). Afrikaners resisted government policies aimed at establishing the English language and British values, but by 1827 about 24 English language schools had been established in the Cape Colony (LOC, nd). The British government also financed teacher training classes for Africans as part of its pacification campaign throughout the nineteenth century.

By the late nineteenth century, three types of schools were receiving government assistance–smallrural schools, district schools and a few secondary schools in larger cities (LOC, nd). HE was initially reserved for those who could travel to Europe. The University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH) was established in 1873. The UCGH was incorporated into the University of South Africa (Unisa), and the latter became the first examining university in 1918 (Unisa, 2013). A 'federal' system linked other university colleges to Unisa, which was responsible for examinations nationally. The affiliated university colleges broke away from 1921 to 1952 to become the independent universities of the Witwatersrand, Pretoria, Natal, the Free State, Rhodes and Potchefstroom (Unisa, 2013). The foundations of Unisa as a mass distance education (DE) institution were established in 1946 with the founding of the Division of External Studies, amidst great controversy.

The foundations of the education system in South Africa were modelled on British examples. The British wanted the education system to promote their colonialist visions in terms of who should be educated and what the content should be. Therefore, at the onset of British rule, the Afrikaner found him/herself in the same position as the current disadvantaged youth.

2.2   The Apartheid legacy

When the National Party (NP) came to power in 1948, there were ten government-subsidised institutions of higher learning – fourwith classes taught in English; four with classes taught in Afrikaans; one bilingual correspondence university; and the South African Native College at Fort Hare, in which most classes were taught in English, but where other languages were permitted (LOC, nd). Access to HE was severely restricted under Apartheid and outside of the confines of Fort Hare only a comparatively small number of the oppressed managed to graduate. At the time, Nationalist Afrikaners wanted the HEsystem to protect their ideals and vision.

The Bantu Education Act (No 47) of 1953 widened the gaps in educational opportunities for different racial groups (LOC, nd). Official attitudes toward African education were paternalistic, based on trusteeship andsegregation. Black education was not supposed to drain government resources away fromwhite education. The number of schools for blacks

increased during the 1960s, but their curriculum was designed to prepare children for menial jobs. Per capita government spending on black education slipped to one-tenth of spending on whites in the 1970s (LOC, nd). Black schools had inferior facilities, teachers, and textbooks. This inequality was sustained against the start of mass migration of mainly male workers to industries, mines and cities in search of a better life.

By 1976, the Apartheid education system was in crisis as dissatisfaction turned into turmoil that spilled onto the streets. Afrikaans as a medium for education was deeply unpopular since Afrikaans was regarded by some as the language of the oppressor. It was against this background that on 30 April 1976, students at Orlando West Junior School in Soweto went on strike and boycotted classes (Okwesili, 2004: 111–112; SAHO, nd [a]). This act preceded the Soweto uprising of 16 June of the same year. The National Policy for General Affairs Act (No 76) of 1984 provided some improvements in black education, but maintained the overall separation called for by the Bantu education system (LOC, nd).

Pre-1948 colonial segregation policies and post-1948 Apartheid saw education for the majority of people in the country manipulated and controlled by political interests. Curricula and access were restricted in order to enforce separatist ideals and superiority. Official attitudes toward African education were paternalistic, based on trusteeship and segregation (LOC, nd). The Extension of University Education Act (No. 45) of 1959 restricted access to public universities for black students (LOC, nd). With the advent of democracy in 1994, masses of South Africans needed access, improved quality and remedial training in order to address backlogs and prepare people for their place in democracy and the world of work.

The effect of the international sanctions imposed against South Africa in the 1980s was not as serious as generally accepted. According to Levy (1999: 6–12), the sanctions did not hurt the economy in the ways expected. The effect was stronger on the intellectual, psychological and political fronts. Intellectual and psychological isolation increased pressure from local academics. Ironically it was the very protected privileged intelligentsia who felt the pressure from sanctions and steered a change in reason. At the same time, increased international support for liberation movements provided the final straw for a change in the political dispensation. The end of international sanctions saw the opening up of economic and trade opportunities worldwide that put the country on the trajectory of an emerging economy.

3.   DISCUSSION

After two successive oppressive systems, the youth of South Africa, even though it seems to be a bit late (22 years after the end of Apartheid), now want HE to represent who they are and what they need. The history of marginalisation and international isolation left the South African HEsystem with tremendous challenges. In addition, the relevance of qualifications and courses based on historical legacy can be questioned. At the same time, there is also added pressure to rapidly address the needs of an emerging economy. With regard to current events Mokgaba (2015) states: "They (students) are tired of the current system that… continues to reproduce inequality by whatever measure you look at."

3.1   *Inherited disciplinarity*

According to the NDP 2030 (nd: 2), we need to take both our own context as well as the wider world into account when we define ourselves:

> *Who are we?*
> *We are Africans.*
> *We are an African country.*
> *We are part of our multi-national region.*
> *We are an essential part of our continent. Being Africans, we are acutely aware of the wider world, deeply*
> *implicated in our past and present.*
> *That wider world carries some of our inheritance.*

Authors like Soudien (2010: 4) argue that transformation of this kind is an ideological process that has to deal with domination and related discourses. According to Kahuni (2013), Africa's education systems are failing to nurture intellectuals, academics and scholars with an ideological grounding that makes Africa's economic revival and emergence a reality. This may be partly due to inherited education systems predominantly delivering curricula based on Western disciplines without sufficient opportunity to open these curricula up for African thought. There are many signs of SA universities diversifying delivery through centres, institutions and new departments related to research, and through that they promote African challenges and solutions, but for the most part the system is still based on neo-liberal Western thinking. Reform in HE will definitely have to impact institutions in terms of addressing disciplinary silos.

According to Msila (2016), we need to think carefully about what students are currently doing when they want to remove colonial symbols from campuses. The content that we teach may have strong links to these symbols. With regard to therelevance of knowledge taught in HE, the term *Africanisation* is used to describe the process of making curricula more relevant to the context. Local knowledge has been suppressed and therefore has no bearing on what is being taught. Discipline boundaries need to be addressed through adaptation and ownership of knowledge to make it relevant to local realities. It would seem that colonial symbols everywhere were never fully addressed after 1994 and the #RhodesMustFall campaign raised questions about the lack of discourse around this issue. According to Msila (2016), "the imperial nature of the curriculums in our institutions may be linked to the symbols that reign on campuses". The symbolism of Rhodes and all other imperialists and oppressors are now questioned afresh. These efforts are also finding their way into the relevance of Western colonial curricula. Therefore, in terms of the Africanisation and relevance of the curriculum, it will not be out of place to make the assessment that HE in SA is at a Rubicon. The curriculum should be released from past colonial baggage and it should not be influenced by current political agendas. In this regard, Letshekha (2013) recommends that the learning experience should be "free of academic dependency and ethnocentrism. The call for Africanisation is neither an advocacy to be anti-West, nor is it discouragement to learn from the West. It is rather an encouragement to learn from the West, but in a selective and constructive manner."

The burning or removal of paintings (Meersman, 2016) may not be effective to address the link to what we teach. Similarly, the removal of the Rhodes statue into "cold storage" may also not affect deep change, something which is of course important to both parties – students and university management alike. Universities will have to open up curricula to make them relevant to the context. Msila (2016) is of the opinion that: "The transformation in higher education should go beyond the name change of the institution's buildings and the mere hiring of more black staff. We need to go further by ensuring that faculties embrace the indigenisation of knowledge. Before we step into the global world and context as intellectuals, we need to understand our space as well." Students and citizens alike should feel that they are sending their children not only to learn about the world and to gain skills, but also to make a contribution to the knowledge that we transfer to future generations. This road will contribute to the optimism that is so sorely needed in South African HE at the moment.

3.2   The demand for higher education

HE has failed to produce sufficient and relevant experts to support a growing economy. On the one hand, this challenge is strongly related to the access debate which is about insufficient entry for the youth. On the other hand, we are not focusing on crucial technical skills that will support our development goals. According to the NDP 2030 (nd: 7), we have the following vision:

> *We respect ability, competence and talent. Now our economy is growing.*
> *Our prosperity is increasing.*
> *We are energised by our resourcefulness.*

At this point in time, the above vision is not likely to be realised. In the past, the Apartheid education system restricted access to skills, but now, as an emerging economy, South Africa needs to provide sufficient numbers of people with the relevant skills. As it stands, the majority of potential students may find a place at a public university unaffordable (Hall, 2016).

Spaull (2013: 3) identifies South Africa as having the worst education system of all middle-income countries that participate in cross-national assessments of educational achievement. The school and HE systems were expanded and made accessible to all since 1994, but criticisms have been levelled at the departments involved for not creating sufficient access to quality and relevant learning opportunities at all levels, with specific reference to tertiary education. The expectation is that much more should have been achieved in 20 years of democracy. Companies are increasingly feeling the effects of South Africa's failing education system as they are unable to find the personnel they need to ensure continued growth (Pinnock, 2013).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013: 8) reported in 2013 that education is a critical problem in terms of South Africa's emergence. There is not only a lack of skills, but there are skills mismatches and a lack of quality education. Unemployment amongst the youth is high and Perold *et al* (2012: 194) warn of the "youth time bomb" in this regard. Their recommendation is that, unless the government takes the perspective and circumstances of the poor as a starting point, policies regarding schooling and post-school education may fail. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (No 11, 15 January 2014) has the following objectives in mind: "To expand education and training in scarce skills areas and to restructure the system towards "building a developmental state with a vibrant democracy and a flourishing economy". Coupled with the growing recognition of the need to expand HE

enrolment, there are serious infrastructural constraints that contribute to the problem (Wilson-Strydom & Fongwa, 2012: 55). This was made apparent during the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall campaigns when students started to question the priorities assigned to student accommodation, for example.

Students are now challenging fees, access to university facilities and spending priorities (Van der Merwe, 2016). This has to be read against a backdrop of parents who were themselves prevented from accessing HE in the past and who were excluded from being significant earners in the economy. In this regard, Msila (2016) has the following view: "More than two decades after the fall of apartheid, the poor still struggle to send their children to higher education institutions. It is sad to find that only the rich will be able to educate their children because it has always been the hope of parents… that their children may be able to lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty." Children once again, as in 1976, have to represent the inability of parents to influence the relevant authorities to afford their children access to sufficient and relevant education.

HE as it currently stands plays a major role in socio-economic and human development and the establishment of democracy (Wilson-Strydom & Fongwa, 2012: 55), but according to Sawyerr (2004: 1), the state should take responsibility for the maintenance of the HE system. Continuing with an old system that replicates misaligned educational opportunities opens the state up to a fair amount of critique. Such an assignment should address the need for a proper focus on the public purposes of HE. The challenge of having to educate hundreds of thousands of students to take up their place in the economy remains. Reforming an education system gradually over an extensive period of time may not necessarily be an acceptable solution for immediate needs, but radical change can be destructive as well.

4.   CONCLUSION

While there is clearly a huge need for HE in the country, it cannot happen effectively in an HE system that is still operating within the parameters of the past. Though graduates may be adequately equipped in terms of generic disciplines, they may not be ready to relate their knowledge to the context effectively and to continue to expand on it.

Letsekha (2013) is of the opinion that HE courses in South Africa are often taught without due recognition of the historical context and cultural practices of the students enrolling. It is impossible to try to understand the complexities of South African HE at this point in time without visiting its historic foundations. These foundations appear still to be strong after more than two decades of democracy. Current student movements bear testimony to that. It also presents an opportunity to transform the HE system fundamentally. Solving this challenge will have to involve dealing with the complexities of the curriculum as enabled through the entire system. There will have to be a new "sensitivity to the local context, although its fundamental principles and tenets are universal." (Beets & Louw, 2005: 189).

An index of possibilities needs to be created in HE in order to address the access, representation and output. It is unlikely that the current number and type of institutions will be able to address the backlog. While current universities are blamed for not providing access to many disadvantaged students, it is the case that the current infrastructure cannot provide this access at affordable fees. It has simply not been designed to accommodate most of the students who need access. It is in need of a more diverse system with access to more students in many additional fields that can support economic development as targeted. The currently suggested system of community, TVET and other public colleges for South Africa (DHET, 2014: 20–25) for example, can make a significant contribution in addressing the need for HE in general. This can be similar to the community-college system in the USA that provides cheaper entry to HE and prepares students for the required level of academic English as well as degree studies (Gobel, 2012).A multiplicity of institutional types and variants of modes should support more varied offerings, thereby enhancing access, and the potential and relevance of the learning experience. The youth need to be able to see themselves in the image of the universities.

While there is agreement that substantial change has to happen in HE it cannot happen at all costs. Johnson (2016) is predicting that we will be watching from frontrow seats how a disaster unfolds in the place of transformation. The current 25 universities represent a mixed pool of institutions, some known for their progressive approach and others struggling to address foundational issues such as language. We also have a number of institutions of world-class standing. Although one can understand the current discontent with the HE system, destruction is not an acceptable strategy – a new system will take even longer to rebuild from ruins. It is important for the youth to realise that what appears to be a system that does not want to change, is in fact a system with its foundations in almost 200 years of suppression of progressive contextual intellectual thought.

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