

Ahmed C. Bawa

South African Higher Education: At the Center of a Cauldron of National Imaginations

IN 1963, CLARK KERR WROTE *THE USES OF THE UNIVERSITY*, IN which he reflected on the roles of institutions of higher education in the broad landscape of education and society. He wrote this at a time of great foment in the United States, as it struggled to come to grips with a gentle but irreversible revolution that was sparked by the struggles of the 1960s. His university, the University of California, Berkeley, was very much at the epicenter. Every society and perhaps every generation have need for events and upheavals that give rise to such reflections so that at the very least there are notions of (social) understanding of what universities mean to societies.

We have some sort of understanding that universities and the higher education systems in which they are embedded are places where social reproduction and reinvention occur—and where the codification of such occurs. They are social entities that help societies shape the way in which they think about themselves and how they relate with the rest of society and how societies relate to other societies. They are therefore, by definition, places of deep contestation.

And as societies grapple with the effects of globalization, the knowledge economy in all its constructions, the violence of fundamentalism, the rampage of globalized social diseases like HIV/AIDS and extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis, the re-creation of geopolitics

and geo-economics, the explosion of the influences of technology, they must also grapple with the nature of the knowledge project at their universities. Some of this happens organically. Some not. These have to be opportunities for shifting understandings—even re-imaginings—of the roles and purposes of higher education. In more recent times the writing of the late Bill Readings in his *The University in Ruins* (1996) is a powerful invocation of such a reflective process even if his conclusions are contentious.

In this paper we explore the South African higher education landscape and the ways in which it is influenced by short-term political thinking. This is perhaps not so surprising if we take into account the fact that it is a new political system that is yet to settle into some form of steady state. Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe the impact of this on universities and perhaps have some opportunity to understand how universities respond to political pressures where such pressures are still brought to bear on them.

On April 27, 2012, South Africa celebrated 18 years of democracy. It has been an extraordinarily interesting period of time, with some of the promises of the transition coming to fruition and others not. So while there has been tremendous formal political stability, we also witness unprecedented levels of trade union and civil society action aimed mainly at issues of the nondelivery of services. In 2011, by the end of July, some 30 million workday equivalents were lost to strikes due to wage strikes and service delivery strikes. This was already more than the total number of days lost in all of 2010.

South Africa's higher education system was one of the most contested sites of struggle during the battle against apartheid. And it continues to be so today—a battleground with multiple dimensions and levels of sophistication. It is one of the most contested terrains in post-apartheid South Africa, spanning across a broad spectrum of interests and imperatives. Why is this the case nearly two decades after South Africa's peaceful transition to democracy? The South African higher education landscape, like other aspects of the fabric of this society, has

changed dramatically over the last 18 years but how has it changed and what underpins those changes? And why does its status as a contested terrain persist?

In 1995, President Nelson Mandela announced the establishment of a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) and a Science and Technology Policy Process. These recorded a number of fundamental issues that were deemed to be incompatible with a higher education system of the “new South Africa.” What were some of these issues? First, the system of higher education was riddled with race and gender imbalances in terms of the academic and support staff structures. Another issue was the fact that just 16 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds had access to higher education and that this too was racialized in character. A third was the fact that the system was deeply fragmented—historically white universities, historically black universities, Afrikaans-medium institutions, English medium institutions, technikons, urban universities and rural universities and that this was not really a “system of higher education.” The South African higher education system is a massified one for white South Africans, where the participation rate among 18- to 24-year-olds is comparable with those in the developed world at about the 60 percent level. For young African South Africans the rate is 13 percent. The racial distribution of students among the institutions is also skewed, with some having few white students and others in which white students are in the majority. This skewedness is also represented in the way that resources are found distributed in the higher education system. Interestingly, the gender distribution of students has changed quite dramatically between 1999 (49 percent male and 51 percent female) and 2009 (44 percent male and 56 percent female), in line with changes with most countries in the developed world.

Another was a statement of disarticulation—a disjuncture—between the needs of a reconstructing, developing society and the existing knowledge project (both learning/teaching and research) of the system. We shall return to this later in the paper. There were other issues as well. None of them have been addressed in any serious way in

the 18 years since the change. Let's follow for a moment the nature of this (perceived) disjuncture.

Perhaps the most important matter is that there is little belief among leaders in the government and public spheres in the capacity of the universities to give effect to institutional and systemic changes necessary for addressing some of the issues raised above. In the main, the understanding is that universities do well at maintaining their privilege in society and the privilege of race elites—and more recently the new deracializing class elites. This is essentially about distrust. Often one hears from politicians and bureaucrats that black students are deliberately excluded from universities or that the universities militate in terms of their access and admission policies against the poor.

The UNDP's Human Development Report for 2011 rates South Africa 123rd in the world in terms of its human development index (HDI). If we take the 50 countries ahead of South Africa in terms of the HDI, fewer than 10 have gross domestic products (GDPs) per capita that are higher. Forty-four or forty-five countries, which are poorer than South Africa in terms of GDP per capita measures, have a better quality of life for their citizens on average. Perhaps it is more important to consider some of the data that appears in the report. The South African maternal mortality rate is approximately 410 per 100,000. Iran, which has approximately the same GDP per capita as South Africa, has a rate that is approximately an eighth of this figure. The figure for Ireland is 3 per 100,000. This is obviously important. Why it is of such great importance for the purpose of this paper is that this same health system, of which the university-based medical schools are such fundamentally important elements, has been able to achieve the first heart transplant in world, is designing vaccines for HIV/AIDS, does groundbreaking research on microsurgery, and so on. Yet, it has not been able to address some very basic public health issues. Cholera is still an issue from time-to-time. Tuberculosis is rife and of course South Africa remains the global epicenter of HIV/AIDS.

There may well be good reasons these public health challenges have not been addressed. But it is also quite easy to see how this must

be a source of deep distrust in the university system. We shall return to this later. So it should not come as surprise that while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are entrenched in the South African constitution, there have already been concerns expressed in the recent past about their erosion by government departments and government ministers.

THE RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) came into being as the ticket on which the African National Congress (ANC) with its alliance partners entered the election fray in 1994. The RDP was a substantial program of transformation underpinned by three key projects. The first was growth in the economy, primarily through a decisive shift away from an extractive economy (mining, for instance) to a modern manufacturing industrial base and the erosion of unemployment. The second was the addressing of the reconstruction challenges facing South Africa—the provision of adequate housing, running water, sanitation, and electricity to South African households, along with health security. The third was to deepen and strengthen South Africa’s young democracy, to intensify civic participation in decision making, and to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations.

This provided a strong connection between the ANC as a vote-seeking political party and the ANC as the vanguard of the anti-apartheid/anti-colonial struggle. At its heart the hope was that the former would draw on the strength of the latter: community-based struggles. The orientation of the RDP was people-centered. In the first cabinet of democratic South Africa, Jay Naidoo—a former trade union leader—was handpicked by Nelson Mandela as minister without portfolio in charge of the RDP. In 1997, Naidoo reiterated:

The challenge is to meet the basic needs of our people and at the same time stimulate economic growth. These chal-

allenges are critical but the real issue that needs attention most is human development.

The RDP was the “new South Africa” project. Its purpose was to address human development. Who could have foreseen at the time that in the next 18 years South Africa would develop one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world—going beyond Brazil in the process? (The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality among income levels.)

On his return from exile, Harold Wolpe, one of South Africa’s foremost sociologists joined the University of the Western Cape (UWC) as director of its Education Policy Unit. During this time Wolpe was very heavily engaged in rethinking South Africa’s education policies. In 1995, before his work on the National Commission on Higher Education began, Wolpe reflected on the impact of the RDP on the strategic orientation of universities:

A number of new mission and other statements have already appeared, all of which commit the institutions to the implementation of the RDP and more or less follow the prescriptions of the ANC policy document regarding redress and equality. It is, of course, open to UWC to follow in the path of this new conventionalism and, indeed, within the university this view has been expressed in the debate over specific degrees and programmes (1995, 275).

His argument here is that universities responded to the RDP as a national program of development—what the ANC refers to as the emergence of a *developmental state*. He was obviously concerned about the too easy alignment of universities with state-driven policies and programs.

Reflecting on debates under way at his university, University of Western Cape, Wolpe has the following to say:

Another example of a similar contestation occurred over a proposed degree in information technology. Here too, a “technicist” view of a degree in information technology stresses technical skill, while the contrary view inserts technical knowledge into the broader framework of social purposes. This is not meant merely as an “add on” but, rather, as integral component of the course.

The difference between the two approaches is that the one rests on a technical rationality, which leaves unquestioned the extant social relations and, hence, the social purposes of technique; the other puts in question the social relations which are being or are intended to be served by technical knowledge.

It is essential to be absolutely clear in this regard. The importance of technical excellence cannot be sufficiently stressed. This is necessary if UWC’s graduates are to compete in the labour market and offer high-level skills to the reconstruction process *and* do so in such a way as to contribute to social transformation. This places major new demands on the university both to develop new strengths—that is, both new disciplines and high levels of technical competence and, at the same time, to link this to social concerns. This is obviously a difficult task full of tensions for both teaching and research, yet in the best traditions of the university—in particular, its commitment to being an intellectual home of the left—and deeply ingrained in the RDP (1995, 275).

Again he warns against the “technicist” approach of responding to the skills demands of the RDP. Wolpe’s reflections have to be understood in the context that the RDP was seen to be a 20-year national program. The response of universities to align with the education and research needs of the RDP was expected in the euphoria of the post-1994

transition—a form of national zeal for a program that had universal approval.

GROWTH EMPLOYMENT AND REDISTRIBUTION PROGRAM (GEAR)

The RDP gave rise to an RDP White Paper under the guidance of Vice President Thabo Mbeki. The publication of the RDP White Paper was a clear indication that an intention existed on the part of a government to pass new legislation. Vishnu Padayachee was one of the leading economists linked to the ANC in the run-up to the development of the RDP as a program of action. He was a member of the Macro Economic Research Group (MERG) referred to in the quotation below. Together with Asghar Adelzadeh, he describes the publishing of the White Paper in the opening paragraph of an article in the journal *Transformation*.

In the middle 3–4 months of 1994, interested observers and an expectant electorate were treated to regular accounts of progress in finalising the RDP White Paper (WP). Originally scheduled for release in mid-July, the WP was finally published on September 21 after many last minute differences, both within the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the ANC-alliance were ostensibly settled. We were treated during this period to rumours of conflict and tensions between “pragmatists” and “socialists” allegedly battling for the “soul” of the ANC; of policy differences between “conservatives” and “interventionists” in the GNU; of deep methodological and ideological differences between the two sets of economic modellers used by the government (the “supply-side” Development Bank of Southern Africa/Central Economic Advisory Service (DBSA/CEAS) team on the one hand and the “demand-led” Macro-Economic Research Group/National Institute for Economic Policy (MERG/NIEP) team on the other) etc. After all the

build-up, the WP itself turns out to be a major disappointment (Adelzadeh and Padayachee 1995).

There are two points to be made here. The first is the clear discrepancies (changes) between the underpinnings of the White Paper and those of the RDP. The second and perhaps more important point is that ANC-aligned economists in one group and not the other were excluded from the process of the production of the White Paper, a deviation from what was an all inclusive process that led to the construction of the RDP. This was a shift to the right.

What are some of the key changes between the RDP (“Basic Document”) and the RDP White Paper? These are explored because they have implications for the way in which thinking about universities transpired. First of all, Padayachee and Adelzadeh confirm that there are changes:

While some of the individual principles, policies and commitments are sound, the RDP as a co-ordinated, integrated core investment programme, linking reconstruction, development, growth and redistribution (along the lines set out in the Base Document Vision) has been significantly changed. The current WP is incoherent and fragmented (Adelzadeh and Padayachee 1995).

And then they accurately predict the likely outcome if the core ideas of the RDP White Paper were converted into policy.

An essentially neo-liberal RDP strategy, which is what we are left with, may well generate some level of economic growth: should this happen, the existing mainly white and Indian bourgeoisie will be consolidated and strengthened; the black bourgeoisie will grow rapidly; a black middle class and some members of the black urban working class will

become incorporated into the magic circle of insiders; but for the remaining 60–70 per cent of our society this growth path, we venture to predict, will deliver little or nothing for many years to come (Adelzadeh and Padayachee 1995).

The economy has grown steadily. The unemployment rate remains stubbornly around 25 percent (in terms of the restricted definition of unemployment). The Gini coefficient is now at 67.4, the highest it has ever been. The service delivery protests are at unprecedented levels.

GEAR became the formal economic policy of the new South Africa in 1996. The Department of Finance described the new macro-economic system in the following way:

- ▶ a faster fiscal deficit reduction program to contain public debt and debt-service obligations, counter inflation, and free resources for investment;
- ▶ a renewed focus on budget reform to strengthen the redistributive thrust of expenditure;
- ▶ a reduction in tariffs to contain input prices and facilitate industrial restructuring, compensating partly for the exchange rate depreciation;
- ▶ a commitment to moderate wage demands, supported by an appropriately structured flexibility within the collective bargaining system;
- ▶ an exchange rate policy to keep the real effective rate stable at a competitive level;
- ▶ a consistent monetary policy to prevent a resurgence of inflation;
- ▶ continued gradual relaxation of exchange controls;
- ▶ speeding up the restructuring of state-owned assets (including privatization);
- ▶ tax incentives to stimulate new investment in competitive and labor absorbing projects;
- ▶ an expansionary infrastructure program to accelerate delivery on

the backlog of social infrastructure;

- ▶ a strengthened tax and incentive system to finance training programs on a scale commensurate with needs (Department of Finance 1996).

In reality this was an alignment with the Washington Consensus—a self-inflicted structural adjustment plan. At the time that the RDP White Paper and GEAR were being developed, the rumor mill was busy within South Africa. The new post-RDP directions, in terms of South Africa’s macroeconomic policies, were hatched in meetings between South African technocrats under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki, still vice president in the Mandela presidency and on his way to being president, and the World Bank, IMF, and powerful academic proponents of neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus. As we saw earlier, a certain group of left-leaning South African economists in the broader ANC were systematically excluded from this conversation. Very quickly the language and machinery of neoliberalism became embedded in the language of development. This change in 1995–1996 had a profound impact on the university system from a number of perspectives. As we shall see, the emergence of GEAR eroded, perhaps even destroyed, the possible emergence of a social compact between higher education and a society that was encapsulated by the RDP—a social compact that stemmed from a consensual approach to the emergence of that program.

Moreover, the university system was struck by a barrage of new policies and procedures requiring a variety of measurements—of impact on society, on the economy, on social equity, efficiency and effectiveness. Perhaps most important of all was the idea that good business principles were naturally good for the way in which higher education had to be managed. Embedded in the Higher Education Act of 1997 were a number of such requirements. Sections 26 and 27 of this act define the governance system of universities, with the Council of the University as apex of that governance system. The Council comprises of

both external (60 percent) and internal (40 percent) members. Section 28 then defines the constitution and roles of the Senate. The key point here is that the Senate is accountable to the Council and it performs functions delegated to it by the Council—lifting the ultimate responsibility for academic decision-making from the Senate and placing it in the Council.

The act creates the Council on Higher Education, which assumes by the definitions contained in the act the responsibility of measuring the quality of the higher education offered by institutions through a process of quality audits. This results, at the institutional level, in the creation of systems of quality management, quality promotion, and quality assessment—with concomitant levels of surveillance and bureaucracy.

While academic freedom and institutional autonomy are prescribed in the national constitution of South Africa, there are deep concerns that these are being undermined by the managerialism inherent in the GEAR-inspired Higher Education Act and other kinds of interventions, both legalistic and political. The most recent step, announced in March 2012, was an edict announcing the auditing of universities by the auditor general of South Africa—as if they were government departments. These audits will measure the performance of the institutions against what are called predetermined objectives to be negotiated between the government, the higher education institutions, and the auditor general.

At the academic level there has been considerable emphasis on the creation of a National System of Innovation, of which the universities are a part. The key driving impetus of this system is to build the capacity of South Africa to drive an industrial innovation agenda—to fill what is perceived to be an innovation chasm between academic research and industrial innovation. Under the banners of the knowledge economy and international competitiveness, a number of powerful funding drivers have been instituted aimed at shifting the teaching/learning and research agendas of universities to meet this demand.

This is potentially an important and interesting intervention but it is the quantum of the intervention that distorts the academic profiles of the institutions, forcing them toward increasingly applied and product-related agendas.

Perhaps the most corrosive element of the neoliberal agenda is the way in which it has been adopted within institutions, the way in which vice chancellors (the principals of universities) and their teams have not just learned this new language but have overseen the emergence of new forms of university management, often referred to as managerialism. Among other powerful representations of this is the treatment of departments as business units that must at least break even. This is now quite common, introducing new kinds of pressures on "at risk" academic disciplines. Several South African vice chancellors are referred to as chief executives and with this we have seen the emergence of a growing gap between the salaries in the administration systems compared to those in the academic ones.

At the heart of the GEAR strategy is the imagination of South Africa as a knowledge economy, which has had a powerful influence on the discourse of the way in which higher education is organized. Just one example is the challenge of addressing the tension in the role of the university system to address social inequity on the one hand and build a knowledge economy on the other. This is by no means a trivial debate if the entrenching of social inequity is considered a serious threat to long-term social cohesion. This also leads in a rather simplistic way to a debate about the need for a differentiated higher education system, one part of which will contribute to the knowledge economy, while the other will work away at building equity—which is code for research-intensive institutions and teaching-intensive institutions. In the name of reorganizing the higher education landscape, one major change that occurred to address this issue of building a knowledge economy was the conversion in 2006–2007 of several technical institutions into universities of technology.

THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE PROJECT

On May 8, 1996, on the occasion of the presentation of the Constitution bill to Parliament, Vice President Mbeki made his now-famous “I am an African” speech. It was a defining speech for a nation trying to understand what its postcolonial imagination was and how to reshape its rather tenuous relationship with the rest of the African continent and its peoples. In this speech he drew into his heritage all of South Africa’s rich diversity:

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape—they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perished in the result.

Today, as a country, we keep an audible silence about these ancestors of the generations that live, fearful to admit the horror of a former deed, seeking to obliterate from our memories a cruel occurrence which, in its remembering, should teach us not and never to be inhuman again.

I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still, part of me.

In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture a part of my essence. The stripes they bore on their bodies from the lash of the slave master are a reminder embossed on my consciousness of what should not be done.

I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe

and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom.

My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert.

I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St. Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eye and suffers the suffering of a simple peasant folk, death, concentration camps, destroyed homesteads, a dream in ruins.

I am the child of Nongqause. I am he who made it possible to trade in the world markets in diamonds, in gold, in the same food for which my stomach yearns.

I come of those who were transported from India and China, whose being resided in the fact, solely, that they were able to provide physical labour, who taught me that we could both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that human existence.

Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion, I shall claim that—I am an African (Mbeki 1996).

Mbeki's now legendary speech speaks to the construction of the nation: the rich sources of its origins, the diverse influences on it, and its fundamental connections to the rest of the continent. We are African not just because South Africa happens to be on the African continent. It is because we are connected through multiple colonial heritages and struggles and the challenges of building peace and well being. More important, he draws on these sources of the origins as being important to his own development—building thereby inextricable linkages

across race and cultural boundaries—creating fuzzy boundaries. This was deeply in line with the ANC’s commitment to building a nonracial society.

This speech added impetus to the idea of an African Renaissance posited earlier in the century by other African leaders—a prophetic renaissance. Together with the New Partnership for Africa’s Development and other infrastructural advances such as the African Peer Review Mechanism, the African Renaissance project provided a substantive new framework for thinking about the continent.

In the post-1990 period, the lifting of the academic boycott and various other changes opened the way for South Africa to connect or reconnect with institutions across the world. In the initial rush most linkages in the early years were with universities in the global north—primarily those in Europe and the United States.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal sees itself as “The Premier University of African Scholarship.” The University of Cape Town has in its mission statement:

UCT aspires to become a premier academic meeting point between South Africa, the rest of Africa and the world. Taking advantage of expanding global networks and our distinct vantage point in Africa, we are committed, through innovative research and scholarship, to grapple with the key issues of our natural and social worlds (UCT 2001).

And so it is with all South African universities. Each has some way to address its connection with the rest of Africa. It would be impossible for these 23 institutions to ignore that they had been charged by the South African government to be part of the redefining of the notion of South Africa in Africa. The substantive challenge is: What does this produce in terms of “on the ground” collaboration and intellectual production?

The African Renaissance project provided a substantial—though under-intellectualized—framework for the emergence of a discourse

on indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems. The key issue here is that there was and is continuing distrust of a higher education system in which the knowledge enterprise is so heavily dominated by white intellectuals. And so there is suspicion that this system has suppressed, underproduced, undercoded local knowledge, knowledge embedded in local contexts and local social systems. This is not so farfetched. There is validity in the expectation that South African universities must shoulder the bulk of the responsibility for producing knowledge about the South African context. How else will universities in South Africa be South African universities? A good example is that of the African languages, which remain seriously understudied and underdeveloped as languages of academic production. It has to be said that there are a few attempts by universities to understand how to deal with the challenge of indigenous knowledge production, particularly in the areas of traditional health systems but these are very limited.

The concerns of the most skeptical of the African intellectuals in South Africa go way beyond the production of indigenous knowledge. They focus also on the preeminence of the scientific method in the production of scientific knowledge as a Western methodology that may not be suitable for the production of the kinds of embedded knowledge. They hope to find new systems of knowledge that are antithetical to the scientific method. What these are, what forms they take, and whether this is a serious conjecture are not at all clear but there is serious discussion going on.

The challenges facing universities in this regard are complex. For instance, how does a higher education system in which white South Africans dominate the production of knowledge overcome perceived and real prejudices—taking into account the history of apartheid, of racism, of difference? Second, in real terms, how do researchers in the social sciences and humanities produce knowledge about contexts so heavily dependent on nuanced and sophisticated usage of local languages and other social constructions? Adam Ashforth's excellent book about witchcraft in Soweto tells this story vividly (2005). This

book emerged from Ashforth's immersion in the community of Soweto over a period of seven years, a time during which he began to use the local languages.

Distrust is deep. Again, I must use an instance from our recent past that relates to Thabo Mbeki. As has been well documented, Mbeki had a particular and peculiar position about the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He presented intellectuals both within and without South Africa with what would have been a fascinating engagement at the nexus of science, power, and politics had it not involved the lives of millions of South Africans. Ultimately, this hampered the rollout of a lifesaving antiretroviral program at the very epicenter of the global pandemic, which brought him into direct conflict with the science community. At the prestigious inaugural Z. K. Matthews Memorial Lecture at the University of Fort Hare in October 2001, Mbeki, then president of the South African republic said:

And thus does it happen that others who consider themselves to be our leaders take to the streets carrying their placards, to demand that because we are germ carriers, and human beings of a lower order that cannot subject its passions to reason, we must perforce adopt strange opinions, to save a depraved and diseased people from perishing from self-inflicted disease.

These have no possibility to derive inspiration from what Pixley Seme said almost a century ago, that Africa is like some great century plant that shall bloom in ages hence.

Convinced that we are but natural-born, promiscuous carriers of germs, unique in the world, they proclaim that our continent is doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust.

There are some who thought that Fort Hare would become a place of mis-education that would produce Africans who would "have the attitude of contempt toward

their own people.” Z. K. Matthews proved them wrong (Mbeki 1996).

This is a powerful representation of the multidimensional distrust that the political elite has in science. Mbeki is a serious thinker and so this cannot be seen to be the words of somebody speaking words in anger. This quotation raises questions about a science system that is considered by the political elite to be racialized, colonially inspired, insensitive to the challenges of decolonization. The premature departure of Mbeki from the presidency resulted in the unfolding of the world’s largest antiretroviral program.

THE SKILLS DEFICIT AND THE RESPONSE

In recent years, a powerful set of concerns has been raised in South Africa about a structural form of skills deficit. The largest gap between supply and demand appears to be in the technician category, where there is an estimated deficit of about 450,000 artisans and technicians. The gap refers to the number of vacancies versus the number of applicants. Such gaps, though smaller, exist throughout the employment spectrum except among unskilled workers. Economists agree that this skills shortage places severe risks on the South African economy, and analysts at ADCORP, a South African human resource agency, say that

most economists agree that South Africa’s skills shortage poses a significant limitation on the country’s long-term economic growth potential. Due to a lack of needed skills, including managerial, professional and technical skills, viable economic opportunities cannot be productively tapped. Many existing economic activities are, given pervasive skills shortages, conducted inconsistently and, apparently, inexpertly, which is probably a more significant factor in South Africa’s low labour productivity by global standards than is widely thought (Sharp 2011).

To the credit of the new administration of President Jacob Zuma, this is being treated as an emergency.

And so since 2008–2009, skills development became the new mantra. A new ministry was created: the Ministry of Higher Education and Training. The weight that the new minister, Blade Nzimande, brings to this agenda is formidable as he attempts to develop a coherent post-school national education system comprising the usual higher education elements, along with the further education and training colleges, the adult basic education system and the artisan training system. He says in a policy statement: “The strategy (to develop skills) promotes partnerships between employers, public education institutions such as further education and training (FET) colleges, universities of technologies and universities, private training providers and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs)” (DHET 2010).

This is extremely reasonable—on the surface. The problem is that except for the higher education parts of this new ministry, the rest of the system does not work well and so there is an increased leaning and pressure on the higher education parts—the universities—to move into the skills development arena. In fact, the minister has on occasion reminisced that had he had his way the technical institutions would not have been changed into universities of technology.

There is a kind of glibness that has taken hold in the way in which the skills development project is considered, particularly in terms of the nature of the enterprise. What has emerged are a number of rather technicist approaches. How do we include industry? “Each workplace a training place” is the new motto. Very little is being said about education—what is it that comprises the learning programs that young school-leavers will be expected to receive in the postschool education system, whether they are becoming artisans or are headed to university education? The discourse is a technical one. Following the signing of a National Skills Accord, the Department of Higher Education and Training put out a statement, the introductory part of which read:

Following on from the ground-breaking National Skills Accord which was signed by the Minister with representatives of organised Business, Labour and community-based structures at the Union Buildings in Pretoria on July 13, the road-show is aimed at discussing key aspects of the national programme for skills development and the widening of access to post-school education for the youth.

In addition, the objective is to ensure that the parties continue to work collaboratively to achieve the eight commitments that they had identified in the National Skills Accord. The commitments the parties signed up to are:

- ▶ to expand the level of training using existing facilities more fully;
- ▶ to make internship and placement opportunities available within workplaces;
- ▶ to set guidelines of ratios of trainees to artisans and across technical vocations;
- ▶ to improve the funding of training and the use of funds available and incentives to companies to train;
- ▶ to have annual targets for training in state-owned enterprises;
- ▶ to improve Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) governance, financial management and stakeholder involvement;
- ▶ to align training to the New Growth Path and improve Sector Skills Plans;
- ▶ to improve the role and performance of FET Colleges (GCIS 2011).

The word “education” does not appear in these eight bullet points. The question we must really ask is what kind of education should we design for young South Africans as they embark on a period of learning—whether it is artisan training, vocational education or more general education, and what are the implications of the fact that the vast majority of these young learners come from severely underper-

forming schools. They would probably never have had a decent course in mathematics, history, and literature. This question is lost in the technician detail. Once again, universities are drawn into a new project—that of skills development.

AT THE CENTER OF A CAULDRON OF NATIONAL IMAGINATIONS

The milieu within which this fairly successful higher education system operates is fascinating in its complexity on the one hand and, oddly, its linearity on the other. It is complex because there are internal systemic issues in the higher education system and there is the constantly shifting political and economic fabric that is South Africa post-1994. These strands interact with each other, producing this fascinating complexity. It is perceived to be linear because the government, which continues to be a major funder of public higher education, is of the view that the system can easily change tack as new national imaginations emerge.

The RDP represented an imagination with broad social consensus, a consensus that universities could easily buy into. It is not surprising then, as Wolpe pointed out, that universities rushed to align themselves with the RDP. Perhaps more important, and as was observed earlier in this paper, during this period there was an opportunity to develop a social compact between higher education and the broad social environment spanning the spectrum from large business and industry all the way to communities in remotest parts of the country. Subsequently, as new administrations came into being and new ways of thinking about development emerged, the universities found and continue to find that they are unhinged.

Two lines of inquiry ought to be considered to find some way to think about this. The first has to do with what must be thought of as an unstable political climate, one that fluctuates on the basis of changing conditions and changing figures in political leadership. Perhaps there is need for patience and understanding—a characteristic of a developing democracy. Notwithstanding the massive support

that the ANC enjoys in the electorate, it has failed to penetrate the deep inequities that so characterize this society. With an election every five years, new solutions—silver bullets—are sought and are tried, new approaches adopted to address these inequities. But none of these challenge the core elements of the macroeconomic policies. They play at the edges.

The second has to do with the reaction of the universities to these political changes with what seems to be a high level of sensitivity to what may be considered swings in tendencies in development theory or, perhaps more aptly, in development vogue; and then their propensity to align their missions and objectives with them. This is not as crass as it may seem, not so subservient if we think of it as the response of institutions to align themselves with the challenges of development and nation building. But it may also be a reflection of the multiple political uncertainties experienced by these institutions—some real and some perceived. Or is it a reflection of fear that stems from the kinds of distrust referred to above—fear of alienation from the centers of power, from progressive social forces, from “the struggle”? If nothing else, it does indicate their dependence on state funding. And as has been referred to above, the slide toward managerialism is clearly a dominant feature of the universities having assumed some of mantle of potential leaders in institutional efficiency and effectiveness within the framework of a neoliberal macroeconomic policy.

While these institutions at the southernmost tip of the African continent perform well as a system, they are in existential crisis. And it is the issue of their identity, the challenges they (perceive to) face in terms of their social and political legitimacy that forces them into a defensive mode.

There is need for a new social compact between higher education and society, a cultivated one, one that grows out of engagement. The universities, even the liberal ones, were in fact firmly ensconced in a social compact with the apartheid state. They were afforded high

levels of institutional autonomy during the darkest years of oppression and the academics were largely afforded the rights associated with academic freedom. But these came at a cost, of course.

Will a new social compact emerge organically? This is unlikely. South Africa is still too divided with deep distrust. There are also tense bands between the challenges of equity and development, equity and excellence, the university in a developmental state, the race and class basis of the universities. These tensions have to be unraveled or at least teased out in such a way that a decent conversation can be had. In 2010 the minister of higher education and training called a Transformation Summit. This is not the kind of forum to provide the opportunity for this kind of conversation. It will require a thorough engagement between universities and broad social formations on an open footing with a view to developing some level of consensus on the future of universities—a future that is shaped on a common understanding of what South Africa aspires to as a nation in the future.

Arthur Levine, former president of Teacher’s College at Columbia University, in an article titled “The Future of Colleges: 9 Inevitable Changes,” explores the pressures being brought to bear on higher education globally and how institutions may respond to this. In this article he reflects on the following:

In the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the Yale Report of 1828 asked whether the needs of a changing society required either major or minor changes in higher education. The report concluded that it had asked the wrong question. The right question was, What is the purpose of higher education? (Levine 2000)

To my knowledge, this question has never been asked in South Africa in an attempt to engage higher education, government, industry, commerce, and civil society. It has to be the key question that forms the basis of the kind of engagement required for the emergence of a new social compact.

There is no land-grant university tradition in South Africa and the existing universities were very much created in the image of those in Europe. In coded languages, they aspire still toward universities in the global West. The deep concern must be the question: Do South African universities have it within their fabric to engage in this kind of conversation? This is an open question. Perhaps more than anything else they require courage and strength of purpose.

REFERENCES

- Adelzadeh, A., and V. Padayachee. 1995. "The RDP White Paper: Reconstruction of a Development Vision?" *Transformation*. 25: 1–18.
- Ashforth, Adam. 2005. *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Department of Finance. 1996. "Growth Employment and Redistribution. A Macroeconomic Strategy." <<http://www.treasury.gov.za/publications/other/gear/chapters.pdf>>.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. 2010. "National Skills Development Strategy 3." <<http://www.dhet.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=nnfc2uv8OFI%3d&tabid=92&mid=495>>.
- Government Communication and Information Service. 2011. "Higher Education Minister, Dr Blade Nzimande, Commences National Skills Development Road Show in Durban." <<http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=23279&tid=49195>>.
- Kerr, Clerk. 1963. *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Levine, Arthur. 2000. "The Future of Colleges: 9 Inevitable Changes." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27.
- Mbeki, Thabo. 1996. "I Am African." Presidential Speech.
- Naidoo, Jay. 1997. In D. A. Prinsloo, "The Human Development Index: Where South Africa Stands." *UrbanStudies*(2004). <<http://www.urbanstudies.co.za/mar-mayjun04.html>>.
- Readings, Bill. 1996. *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sharp, Loane. 2011. "South Africa's Extraordinary Skills Shortage."

<<http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=235542&sn=Detail&pid=71619>>.

University of Cape Town. 2001. Mission Statement. <<http://www.uct.ac.za/about/intro/>>.

Wolpe, H. 1995. "The Debate on University Transformation in South Africa: The Case of the University of the Western Cape." *Comparative Education*. 31 (2): 275—292.