



The contribution of Higher Education to society's development

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1 Introduction

Let me start off by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Spring Lectures Organising Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for the invitation. I am indeed honoured to come back to the Spring Lectures Series this year after many years of absence. These lectures allowed me during my formative academic years at this university to experiment with scholarly ideas and thoughts as a student, and remain an important platform for students and lecturers to have frank dialogues and engagements on key issues of scholarship in a range of disciplines in the humanities. The Lectures sharpened our tools of analysis; our abilities to mount arguments and counter-arguments, to embrace doubt and scepticism as important processes in knowledge production and acquisition; to "suspend" or even "postpone" judgements in the absence of data and evidence; and enabled us also to embrace diversity of views as a key hallmark of scholarly orientation and development. These Lectures are also a greatest leveller or equaliser in the sense an accomplished Professor can be challenged by a first year student.

2 Higher Education and national development

The title of my input is *The contribution of Higher Education to society's development*. In this input, I proceed from the premise that all successful nations in the world have one common ingredient as part of their success mix: a well-functioning Higher Education system, able to perform a range of functions in society. For an example, the United States, and other members of the Group of 8 countries have, for a prolonged period of time, invested heavily in Higher Education. The United States in particular is continuing with its long history of robust investments in research and development in the increasingly interconnected fields of physical sciences, computational sciences, life sciences, social sciences, and engineering (Pool & Erickson; 2012.) This investment in public research has increased the US's global competitiveness manifold. It somehow propelled the US economic growth fortunes to a higher trajectory of development. It is not by accident that the US is currently a global leader in terms of research output although other emerging countries such as China and Brazil are beginning to make significant progress in this regard. In spite of this body of evidence relating to the correlation between a nation's economic and social progress on the one hand, and investment in higher education on the other hand, from time to time the Treasury officials in charge of the national fiscus in many countries will question the role and of Higher Education in the name of relevance and responsiveness. In some cases, some technicist and utilitarian phrases such as *Return on Investment*, *Value for Money*, *Service delivery*, *Knowledge economy*, *Cost-benefit analysis*; etc., would be used to justify decisions not to invest adequately in Higher Education.

In our own country, the National Treasury has been asking similar questions about the return on investment for the budget allocation given to education in general and higher education in particular. The Director-General of the National Treasury, Lungisa Fuzile, had this to say when introducing the Medium Term Expenditure Framework for 2013/14; 2014/15 and 2015/16 budgets:

In response to difficult global economic circumstances, we have expanded government's contribution to the economy. ... Financing this expansion at the same time as declining government income has meant a significant increase in borrowing. Since 2008/09, our stock of debt has more than doubled, and with it, the cost of servicing our debt has also accelerated. Higher borrowing and interest costs have meant that fiscal space is being eroded and our economy will have to finance a relatively larger government interest bill for many years. This means less money will be available for other purposes.' (2012 Medium Term Expenditure Framework Guidelines) Indeed, departments and spending agencies do have to learn to do more with less.

In the context of the pervasive budget squeeze from governments all over the world, it is incumbent upon our Higher Education system to defend its relevance and appropriateness to the nation's challenges, and those of the region in which it is located. It should continuously demonstrate its contribution to economic and social development of our country, lest resources will be diverted to other perceived important sectors and priorities. It is for this reason that I thought we should have a discussion on the role of Higher Education in society's development.

3 Policy drivers for Higher Education in South Africa

In South Africa, the role of Higher Education in the development of society is acknowledged and well documented. The Education White Paper 3; A programme for the transformation of Higher Education in South Africa (1997) puts the role of Higher Education as that of providing for individual aspirations for self-development, supply high level skills for the labour market, generate knowledge that is of social and economic benefit; develop critical citizens; and promote the pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry (Department of Education, 1997).

In addition, the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) has identified 16 "system-wide targets and goals" (NPHE, 2011: 10) for Higher Education, including increased participation rate; increased graduate output; broadened social base of graduates; increased recruitment of students from the SADC region; changed enrolments by fields of study; enhanced cognitive skills of graduates; improved staff equity; research concentration and funding linked outputs; increased graduate enrolments and outputs at Masters and Doctoral levels. It should be indicated that progress has been made in some outcomes, whilst slow progress is still being experienced in a number of these outcomes. The NPHE acknowledges, through the outcomes it has prioritised for implementation, that Higher Education has a critical role to play in addressing the past inequities in our society.

In the recent period, a number of other policies have acknowledged the role of Higher Education in society. The New Growth Path (2010) intends to create 5 million jobs by 2020 and bring about a new more inclusive, labour-absorbing and efficient economy. The Plan acknowledges that a skilled labour force is a crucial ingredient for economic growth; and has identified the following as important building blocks for the creation of jobs:

- a. Infrastructure, in the areas of energy; transport (especially rail), water, communications and housing.

- b. Main economic sectors: 300 000 opportunities for agricultural smallholders, 145 000 jobs in agricultural processing, 140 000 additional jobs in mining, 350 000 manufacturing jobs not accounted for elsewhere and 250 000 jobs in tourism and business services.
- c. The new/green economy: The NGP 'targets' 300 000 additional jobs to green the economy (80 000 in manufacturing and the rest on construction of environmentally friendly infrastructure). Additional jobs in public employment schemes to protect the environment. Also 100 000 new jobs in 'knowledge-intensive sectors of ICT, higher education, healthcare, mining-related technology, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology.
- d. Social capital and public services: The NGO sector is envisaged to grow and to create 260 000 jobs (the government is to provide a co-op support agency and possibly a training academy) and the public sector will create 100 000 new jobs in health, education and policing.
- e. Spatial development: Public investment in housing and infrastructure to foster 'sustainable communities' in rural areas and to boost rural development and 'achieve a measurable improvement in livelihoods for 500 000 households and stimulate employment elsewhere including supporting small-scale agriculture, service co-operatives and community food gardens.

The National Development Plan (2011) developed by the National Planning Commission in The Presidency acknowledges the role of Higher Education in national development. The Plan puts it as follows:

"Higher education is the major driver of the information-knowledge system, linking it with economic development...Universities are key to developing a nation. They play three main functions in society. Firstly, they educate and train people with high-level skills for the employment needs of the public and private sectors."Secondly, universities are the dominant producers of new knowledge, and they critique information and find new local and global applications for existing knowledge. Universities also set norms and standards, determine the curriculum, languages and knowledge, ethics and philosophy underpinning a nation's knowledge-capital. South Africa needs knowledge that equips people for a society in constant social change."Thirdly, given the country's apartheid history, higher education provides opportunities for social mobility and simultaneously strengthens equity, social justice and democracy. In today's knowledge society, higher education underpinned by a strong science and technology innovation system is increasingly important in opening up people's opportunities." (p262)

The Plan aims to have 10 million university graduates in the country with a minimum of a bachelor's degree by 2030. It also calls for the expansion in enrolments in both universities and further education and training colleges to ensure that South Africa produces the required mid-level skills to support a growing economy. To this end, the student enrolment in public universities is set to grow from 950 000 students in 2013 to 1.6 million in 2030, and the enrolment in the college sector as a whole is planned to grow from just over 500 000 students in 2013 to 4 million in 2030. This projected growth is predicated on an assumption that an educated and skilled workforce is an important ingredient of economic and social development of our country.

The implementation of these policies, depend largely on a skilled workforce largely produced by our universities, and require of all our universities to play a critical role in the production of knowledge and skills with a view to spurring our research and innovation output.

However, policy makers and political principals broadly have been questioning both publicly and privately the inherent capacities and capabilities of our Higher Education system to live up to this challenge. Some have evoked notions of transformation to pour scorn on the capabilities of our system of Higher Education to respond to the national development

agenda, however defined. Some have mooted that science councils, which are largely state-owned institutions, should be strategically reoriented to respond to some of the issues relating to knowledge production and research output that universities have been failing to provide. Some have started to position vocational and professional education as more important than formative programmes in humanities and social sciences for instance. A greater emphasis is being put on career-related programmes, and the quality of both undergraduate and post-graduate programmes is judged on the basis of the extent to which graduates find employment after completing their studies. In the context of the current challenges and demands, what is the role of Higher Education in society?

It is important for one to reflect on the broad challenges facing the Higher Education system in South Africa. The following remain some of the key systemic and structural challenges:

- 34% of academic staff holds a PhD;
- South Africa produces approximately 1500 PhD graduates per year;
- Graduate outcomes and outputs are woefully low;
- The most productive researchers in our system will retire in a decade's time;
- A larger percentage of our A-rated researchers in the system remain white and male;
- Phenomenon of underprepared learners from the schooling system is still pervasive; and
- The South African Higher Education system is largely an undergraduate system.

A key dependency for the realisation of these policy objectives is the extent to which the challenges are addressed.

4 The purposes of Higher Education in society

There are six purposes of Higher Education I would like to focus on in this input: (i) knowledge production; (ii) ideological apparatuses; (iii) production of a skilled labour force; and (iv) selection and socialisation of dominant elites; (v) Social and cultural transformation; and (vi) Advancement of citizenship and social justice.

4.1 Knowledge production

It is generally accepted that the first purpose of Higher Education is the production of knowledge, in its broadest sense. Boulton and Lucas aptly put it as follows:

... universities operate on a complex set of mutually sustaining fronts – they research into the most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge and yet also seek the practical application of discovery; they test, reinvigorate and carry forward the inherited knowledge of earlier generations; they seek to establish sound principles of reasoning and action which they teach to generations of students. Thus, universities operate on both the short and the long horizon. On the one hand,... they work with contemporary problems and they render appropriate the discoveries and understanding that they generate. On the other hand, they forage in realms of abstraction and domains of enquiry that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit (2008:3).

What is clear from the above, is that Higher Education must help society understand its challenges better. It must also question orthodox views, and bring forth alternative forms of knowledge to deepen society's understanding of issues and their complexity. It should problematise what is considered a generally accepted knowledge, and demonstrate its limits and possibilities, unpack its weaknesses and implications for society and humanity broadly.

In other words, the knowledge that Higher Education generates (whether basic or applied) should be used for the advancement of humanity, and should forewarn us about the dangers of the choices we make, either in the name of development or even democracy. Therefore, Higher Education should not pre-occupy itself only with knowledge for the here and now, but also with knowledge for decades and millennia to come.

4.2 Higher Education is a place for the battle of ideas

The second major purpose of Higher Education, as Manuel Castells (2001) put it, is that it has historically played a major role as ideological apparatuses, expressing the ideological struggles present in all societies. The point Castells makes here is that Higher Education is in itself a site of ideological struggles, and a place where society's ideological contradictions are either reproduced or reasserted. Therefore, Higher Education can be a home for both Neoliberal and Marxist scholarship without fear of contradiction. In fact, one can argue, that it should create appropriate conditions for the two seemingly opposed ideological strands to develop and flourish, and where possible, feed each other, with a view to exposing each other's limitations, and thereby affording society the ultimate benefit of such ideological collusion or even collision. At the heart of Higher Education should be circulation of views and ideologies, and their refinement over time, as they collide with other new ones discovered through scholarship and research (both basic and applied). To cite an over-used phrase by Mao Tse Tung, it is a place where "a thousand flowers bloom", and "one thousand schools of thought contend".

4.3 Educating and training of a skilled and educated workforce

A third, the most traditional - and today the most frequently emphasised - function of Higher Education is the training of a skilled labour force. In an era of quantitative easing, bail outs, market volatility, nations and governments are looking at Higher Education for salvation, particularly in the context of global economic recession like the one our generation is faced with. In other words, universities should respond to society's needs for a skilled workforce, and should produce graduates who are able to take up their rightful place in the commanding heights of our economy (Yesufu, 1973: 40). A number of studies have shown that if South Africa is to leapfrog its economic growth stagnation challenge, we have to produce a skilled workforce for our economy, in order to address shortage in a number of professions, including medicine, teaching, accounting, caring professions such as social work, nursing and so on. One should however, caution that although this is an important purpose of Higher Education, it should not be seen as the only and most important function. It is indeed disturbing to hear political principals elevating this purpose almost to the exclusion of others. In explaining this, Bernstein (2000) notes that there has been a change in the way we think about knowledge and the value we attach to knowledge, and to this end, the intrinsic value of knowledge, found largely in humanities and social sciences, is not acknowledged as much as its extrinsic value. It should be indicated that if we allow this purpose to overshadow all the others we have spoken about, the very *raison detre* of a university will be lost, and humanity will be poorer thereafter.

4.4 Selection and socialisation of elites

A fourth controversial purpose of Higher Education is the one that is advanced by Manuel Castells (2001: 230), who opines that, universities are a mechanism of selection and socialisation of dominant elites. Although this might not be morally defensible, it is my view that a university which is a product of elitism, should not shy away from advancing the interests of elites, as long as those interests are inherently progressive, and are in the interest of broader national development. Stripped of all ideologies and persuasions, universities must and should pride themselves as protectors and promoters of elitist thoughts, because without an appropriate home for these thoughts, human civilisation as we

know it will stifle, stumble and later fall. Even though our own country is caught up in the discourse of transforming universities to be accessed by all, it should be mentioned that a professor, associate professor, senior lecturer, lecturer, are not ordinary employees in the pecking order of a university employment hierarchy, but are important people who have been exposed through their scholarship and research to elitist views, and who are wittingly and unwittingly reproducing that form of elitism through the students they teach to graduate from the university into society. As they try very hard to become politically correct, it is my view that a university cannot be seen the same way as a Further Education and Training College, whose curriculum is developed centrally and examinations set at a central government department for all the 50 or so of them. Therefore, universities should protect, defend and promote their elitism. Out of our universities flow graduates who end up becoming the dominant elites in society both in government and in business. As universities, we are both a product of elitism and purveyors of elitist thoughts and orientation.

4.5 Social and cultural transformation

Higher Education has always been an agent of social change in societies. This university and many others, played an important role in the fight against the system of apartheid, and contributed immensely to the socio-political changes our country witnessed in the early 1990s. It placed on the agenda of our country and national discourse broadly, the importance of equality of opportunity, and has always been advocating the creation of a just and egalitarian society, eschewing any form of inequality and unfair discrimination. In the current era, in which market forces, have attained a preeminent role in (re)ordering and (re)arranging society's social relations, this role is being grossly undermined in the name of advancing knowledge economy imperatives, crudely put commodification of Higher Education (Levin, 1997; Jandhyala & Tilak, 2009). To this end, increasingly, however, universities seem to have been called on to play a rather more active and interventionist role, related to the delivery of wider social goals and even to the transformation of society.

4.6 Advancement of citizenship and social justice

Higher Education is a place where values of good citizenship should be moulded and transmitted to students who are poised to be graduated into society and the professions. If this is an important role for a university; where was the University of Limpopo when a number of follies took root in the politics of this province to an extent that about five departments ended up been placed under administration? Was this university complicit by act or omission to act? I am raising this because a university is meant to be the conscience of this region, and should continuously strive to advance good citizenship and social justice in whatever it does, and should be a proponent of democracy in service of the people. When school learners do not get school textbooks on time, the quality of democracy is weakened, in the sense that these learners will directly or indirectly be denied opportunities to study at universities or other post-school institutions. When political and administrative leaders in this province, feed at the trough, the quality of public services is adversely impacted upon, with dire consequences for the poor.

Having sketched these six purposes of Higher Education, I am really tempted to cite at length an observation made by Paul Newman (1852) about universities, which remain relevant to this day:

It is the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. It is the place where the professor becomes eloquent, and is a missionary and a preacher, displaying his science in its most complete

and most winning form, pouring it forth with the zeal of enthusiasm, and lighting up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers. It is the place where the catechist makes good his ground as he goes, treading in the truth day by day into the ready memory, and wedging and tightening it into the expanding reason. It is a place which wins the admiration of the young by its celebrity, kindles the affections of the middle-aged by its beauty, and rivets the fidelity of the old by its associations. It is a seat of wisdom, a light of the world, a minister of the faith, an Alma Mater of the rising generation. It is this and a great deal more, and demands a somewhat better head and hand than mine to describe it well.

The challenge for every Higher Education Institution is to strike a balance between these and many other competing and sometimes contradictory purposes. In whatever we do and say, we should always remember to "... rehabilitate and preserve the notion, and to fight to reclaim the reality, of a university as a place of learning, reflection, and debate... it is indispensable that these spaces must be retrieved, nurtured and defended (Akilagpa Sawyerr, 2004: 45).

5 Conclusion

In this input, the point I underscored is that Higher Education has multiple purposes. The six I have identified today should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as tributaries of a great river of Higher Education. Some of these purposes are more tacit than explicit, some more intangible than tangible, some more qualitative than quantitative. Some are being questioned in the names of relevance, responsiveness, transformation; appropriateness knowledge economy and so on. It is the responsibility of scholars like you to defend these purposes, and to reconnect them to the broader socio-economic development imperatives of South Africa. The Spring Lectures Series your Faculty has been organising since the early 1990s remains an important platform to reaffirm the correctness of a view that all disciplines are important for the advancement of human civilisation; and for society's development broadly. I wish you success in your deliberations and look forward to receiving a conference proceedings publication.

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