REIMAGINING THE SOCIAL COMPACT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: FROM IMPLICIT PROMISE TO DELIBERATE PARTNERSHIP

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- I WANT TO BEGIN WITH A SIMPLE PROPOSITION:
- **SOUTH AFRICA CANNOT RENEW THE SOCIAL COMPACT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION WITHOUT PLACING STUDENTS AT THE CENTRE OF ITS DESIGN—NOT MERELY AS BENEFICIARIES OF THE SYSTEM, BUT AS PARTNERS AND CO-AUTHORS OF ITS FUTURE.**
- FOR STUDENTS, THE SOCIAL COMPACT IS NOT AN ABSTRACT POLICY CONCEPT.
- IT IS EXPERIENCED EVERY DAY:
- WHEN A YOUNG PERSON RECEIVES AN ADMISSION LETTER BUT CANNOT AFFORD REGISTRATION.
- WHEN A STUDENT IS ACADEMICALLY CAPABLE BUT STRUGGLES TO FIND ACCOMMODATION.
- WHEN FUNDING IS APPROVED LATE, ALLOWANCES DO NOT KEEP PACE WITH THE COST OF LIVING, OR A STUDENT SPENDS MORE TIME TRYING TO RESOLVE AN ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEM THAN FOCUSING ON THEIR STUDIES.
- WHEN STUDENTS ASK WHETHER THE UNIVERSITY, GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY GENUINELY UNDERSTAND THE REALITIES THEY FACE.
- SO, WHEN WE SPEAK ABOUT REIMAGINING THE SOCIAL COMPACT, I BELIEVE THE FIRST QUESTION SHOULD BE:
- **WHAT KIND OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM ARE WE PROMISING SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS, AND WHAT ARE ALL OF US PREPARED TO DO TO HONOUR THAT PROMISE?**

1. STUDENT SUCCESS MUST BECOME A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

- WE OFTEN SPEAK ABOUT STUDENT SUCCESS AS THOUGH IT IS PRIMARILY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STUDENT.
- OF COURSE, STUDENTS HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES:
- STUDENTS MUST ATTEND CLASSES.
- STUDY.
- RESPECT INSTITUTIONAL RULES.
- PARTICIPATE CONSTRUCTIVELY.
- TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR ACADEMIC PROGRESSION.
- BUT RESPONSIBILITY MUST BE RECIPROCAL.
- **UNIVERSITIES HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES.**
  GOVERNMENT HAS RESPONSIBILITIES.
  SOCIETY HAS RESPONSIBILITIES.
  AND STUDENTS HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES.

- A GENUINE SOCIAL COMPACT THEREFORE CANNOT BE BUILT AROUND A ONE-DIRECTIONAL EXPECTATION THAT STUDENTS MUST SIMPLY PERFORM.
- WE MUST ASK:
- WHETHER INSTITUTIONS ARE SUFFICIENTLY RESPONSIVE.
- WHETHER SUPPORT SYSTEMS WORK.
- WHETHER CURRICULA REMAIN RELEVANT.
- WHETHER STUDENTS ARE ADEQUATELY PREPARED FOR THE WORLD OF WORK.
- WHETHER THE SYSTEM RESPONDS QUICKLY WHEN STUDENTS ENCOUNTER BARRIERS BEYOND THEIR CONTROL.
- **STUDENT SUCCESS SHOULD NOT BE UNDERSTOOD MERELY AS A STUDENT'S ABILITY TO SURVIVE THE SYSTEM. IT SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS THE SYSTEM'S ABILITY TO ENABLE STUDENTS TO SUCCEED.**

2. WE NEED TO REBUILD TRUST

- PERHAPS ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES FACING HIGHER EDUCATION IS NOT SIMPLY FUNDING.
- **IT IS TRUST.**
- TRUST MUST EXIST BETWEEN:
- STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES.
- UNIVERSITIES AND STUDENTS.
- STUDENTS AND GOVERNMENT.
- GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONS.
- SOCIETY AND UNIVERSITIES.
- SOCIETY MUST BELIEVE THAT UNIVERSITIES REMAIN INSTITUTIONS SERVING A LEGITIMATE PUBLIC PURPOSE.

- WHEN DECISIONS AFFECTING STUDENTS ARE MADE WITHOUT MEANINGFUL STUDENT PARTICIPATION, TRUST DETERIORATES.
- WHEN STUDENTS FEEL THAT CONSULTATION HAPPENS ONLY AFTER DECISIONS HAVE ALREADY EFFECTIVELY BEEN MADE, PARTICIPATION BECOMES PERFORMATIVE.
- AND WHEN INSTITUTIONS ENGAGE STUDENTS ONLY WHEN THERE IS A CRISIS, WE MISS THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE THE CRISIS OCCURS.
- **CONSULTATION SHOULD NOT BE AN EMERGENCY MECHANISM. IT SHOULD BE AN ORDINARY FEATURE OF GOVERNANCE.**

3. STUDENTS MUST BECOME PARTNERS, NOT SIMPLY STAKEHOLDERS

- I WANT TO CHALLENGE ONE PARTICULAR FRAMING.
- WE FREQUENTLY DESCRIBE STUDENTS AS **"STAKEHOLDERS".**
- THAT IS USEFUL, BUT I BELIEVE IT IS INSUFFICIENT.
- **A STAKEHOLDER HAS AN INTEREST IN A SYSTEM.**
  A PARTNER HAS A RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SYSTEM.
- IF WE GENUINELY BELIEVE THAT STUDENTS ARE PARTNERS, THEN STUDENT PARTICIPATION MUST EXTEND BEYOND:
- SRC ELECTIONS;
- CONSULTATION MEETINGS; AND
- OCCASIONAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENTS.

- STUDENTS SHOULD PARTICIPATE MEANINGFULLY IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT:
- INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY.
- TEACHING AND LEARNING.
- STUDENT FUNDING.
- ACCOMMODATION.
- INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE.
- CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION.
- DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION.
- GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY.
- MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING.
- RESEARCH PRIORITIES.
- THE BROADER PUBLIC PURPOSE OF UNIVERSITIES.
- THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT EVERY INSTITUTIONAL DECISION MUST BE SUBJECTED TO A REFERENDUM AMONG STUDENTS.
- IT MEANS THAT WHERE DECISIONS SUBSTANTIALLY AFFECT STUDENTS, STUDENTS MUST HAVE **STRUCTURED, MEANINGFUL AND CONSEQUENTIAL PARTICIPATION** IN SHAPING THOSE DECISIONS.
- **PARTICIPATION WITHOUT INFLUENCE IS NOT PARTNERSHIP.**

4. WE MUST ALSO SPEAK ABOUT INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

- THE SOCIAL COMPACT IS NOT ONLY ABOUT MONEY.
- **IT IS ALSO ABOUT BELONGING.**
- A UNIVERSITY SHOULD BE:
- A PLACE WHERE STUDENTS ARE INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGED, BUT ALSO RESPECTED.
- A PLACE WHERE DIVERSITY IS NOT MERELY TOLERATED, BUT UNDERSTOOD AS AN ASSET.
- A PLACE WHERE STUDENTS CAN DISAGREE WITH INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP WITHOUT BEING TREATED AS ENEMIES OF THE INSTITUTION.
- EQUALLY, STUDENT LEADERS MUST UNDERSTAND THAT REPRESENTATION COMES WITH RESPONSIBILITY.

- WE CANNOT:
- DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY FROM INSTITUTIONS WHILE REFUSING ACCOUNTABILITY OURSELVES.
- DEFEND STUDENT INTERESTS WHILE UNDERMINING THE INTEGRITY OF THE INSTITUTIONS IN WHICH STUDENTS STUDY.
- REDUCE STUDENT LEADERSHIP TO PROTEST.
- STUDENT LEADERSHIP MUST INCLUDE PROTEST WHEN NECESSARY, BUT IT MUST ALSO INCLUDE:
- POLICY DEVELOPMENT.
- NEGOTIATION.
- ACCOUNTABILITY.
- INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATION.
- SOLUTION-BUILDING.
- **THAT IS THE KIND OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP THAT A RENEWED SOCIAL COMPACT REQUIRES.**

5. THE STATE MUST ALSO CONFRONT THE QUESTION OF SUSTAINABILITY

- GOVERNMENT CANNOT PROMISE UNIVERSAL ACCESS WITHOUT CONFRONTING THE FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF THE SYSTEM.
- UNIVERSITIES CANNOT CONTINUE EXPANDING EXPECTATIONS WHILE RESOURCES REMAIN CONSTRAINED.
- STUDENTS CANNOT BE EXPECTED TO CARRY THE CONSEQUENCES OF FUNDING UNCERTAINTY.
- AND INSTITUTIONS CANNOT BE EXPECTED TO SOLVE NATIONAL SOCIOECONOMIC PROBLEMS WITHOUT APPROPRIATE PUBLIC INVESTMENT.

- THEREFORE, THE RENEWED SOCIAL COMPACT MUST BE EXPLICIT ABOUT:
- **WHO PAYS.**
- **WHO DECIDES.**
- **WHO IS ACCOUNTABLE.**
- **WHAT EACH PARTY OWES THE OTHERS.**
- WE NEED:
- A FUNDING MODEL THAT IS PREDICTABLE.
- GREATER TRANSPARENCY AROUND HOW DECISIONS AFFECTING STUDENTS ARE MADE.
- STRONGER COORDINATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONS.
- MECHANISMS THAT ALLOW STUDENTS TO KNOW NOT ONLY WHAT DECISIONS HAVE BEEN TAKEN, BUT WHY THOSE DECISIONS HAVE BEEN TAKEN AND WHAT CONSEQUENCES THEY WILL HAVE.

6. WHAT SHOULD THE RENEWED COMPACT LOOK LIKE?

- FROM A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE, I WOULD SUGGEST **FIVE PRINCIPLES**.
- **FIRST: ACCESS WITH DIGNITY**
- NO STUDENT SHOULD BE ADMITTED INTO AN INSTITUTION WHILE THE SYSTEM EFFECTIVELY LEAVES THEM UNABLE TO PARTICIPATE BECAUSE OF CIRCUMSTANCES THAT COULD REASONABLY BE ADDRESSED.
- **SECOND: SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUCCESS**
- STUDENTS, UNIVERSITIES AND GOVERNMENT MUST EACH CARRY DEFINED RESPONSIBILITIES FOR PROGRESSION, COMPLETION AND GRADUATE OUTCOMES.
- **THIRD: MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION**
- STUDENTS MUST HAVE INSTITUTIONALISED MECHANISMS TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISIONS AFFECTING THEIR EDUCATION AND THEIR FUTURE.

- **FOURTH: TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**
- THE SOCIAL COMPACT MUST BE MEASURABLE.
- WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO ASK:
- WHAT WAS PROMISED?
- WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE?
- WHAT RESOURCES WERE COMMITTED?
- WHAT WAS DELIVERED?
- **FIFTH: PARTNERSHIP RATHER THAN PATERNALISM**
- STUDENTS MUST BE TREATED AS CITIZENS AND EMERGING PROFESSIONALS WHOSE IDEAS, EXPERIENCES AND LEADERSHIP MATTER.

CONCLUSION

- LET ME CONCLUDE WITH THIS.
- **HIGHER EDUCATION IS NOT SIMPLY AN ECONOMIC INVESTMENT.**
- **IT IS A DEMOCRATIC INVESTMENT.**
- WHEN WE EDUCATE A DOCTOR, WE ARE NOT ONLY PRODUCING A DOCTOR.
- WE ARE PRODUCING SOMEONE WHO WILL SERVE COMMUNITIES.
- WHEN WE EDUCATE A TEACHER, WE ARE NOT ONLY PRODUCING A GRADUATE.
- WE ARE SHAPING THE EDUCATION OF THE NEXT GENERATION.
- WHEN WE EDUCATE A SCIENTIST, ENGINEER, LAWYER, RESEARCHER, ENTREPRENEUR OR PUBLIC SERVANT, WE ARE INVESTING IN THE CAPACITY OF SOCIETY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS THAT WE CANNOT YET FULLY ANTICIPATE.
- THAT IS WHY THE SOCIAL COMPACT AROUND HIGHER EDUCATION MATTERS SO DEEPLY.
- BUT A SOCIAL COMPACT CANNOT SURVIVE ON PROMISES ALONE.

- IT REQUIRES:
- **TRUST.**
- **RESOURCES.**
- **ACCOUNTABILITY.**
- **AND ABOVE ALL, PARTNERSHIP.**
- STUDENTS SHOULD NOT BE INVITED INTO THIS CONVERSATION SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY ARE AFFECTED BY THE DECISIONS WE MAKE.
- THEY SHOULD BE HERE BECAUSE THEY ARE PART OF THE CONSTITUENCY FOR WHOM HIGHER EDUCATION EXISTS—AND BECAUSE THEY WILL INHERIT THE SYSTEM WE DESIGN TODAY.
- SO, IF WE ARE TRULY MOVING FROM AN IMPLICIT PROMISE TO A DELIBERATE PARTNERSHIP, THEN LET US MAKE ONE COMMITMENT:
- **LET US NOT DESIGN THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WHILE EXCLUDING STUDENTS FROM DESIGNING IT.**
- THE RENEWED SOCIAL COMPACT MUST THEREFORE BE ONE IN WHICH UNIVERSITIES, GOVERNMENT, SOCIETY AND STUDENTS DO NOT MERELY NEGOTIATE WHAT EACH PARTY WANTS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION.
- **THEY MUST COLLECTIVELY DEFINE WHAT SOUTH AFRICA NEEDS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION—AND WHAT EACH OF US IS PREPARED TO CONTRIBUTE TO MAKE THAT FUTURE POSSIBLE.**

- **THANK YOU**