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Article

Reproduction, transformation and public South African higher education during and beyond Covid-19

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has created new conjunctural conditions, but the unequal social structure of society and higher education in South Africa remains intact. Indeed, the pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated inequalities, social exclusion, and injustice in all arenas of society. Post-1994, universities were charged to promote social justice in and through higher education, including ‘political democratisation, economic reconstruction and development, and redistributive social policies aimed at equity’ (DoE 1997:1.7). However, as the pandemic has demonstrated, higher education continues to be a powerful mechanism of unequal forms of social reproduction and exclusion of students from working class and rural impoverished backgrounds. The post-pandemic ‘new normal’ in higher education could further entrench and create new barriers to transformation in and through higher education unless, learning from recent struggles, a coalition of social forces organises for radical reforms within and beyond higher education to lay the bridgeheads to social transformation.

Structure, conjuncture, and transformation

The new conjuncture created by Covid-19 is heralded as a catalyst for significant change; however, the nature of change and whether it challenges capitalism and its attendant inequalities remains to be seen. Colonialism gave ‘a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country’ and ‘create(d) a world after (the) image’ of the advanced capitalist countries (Marx 1848). The concept of ‘coloniality’ ‘denotes enduring

patterns of power (and) a way of thinking and behaving that emerged from colonialism but survived long after its seeming demise' (Bulhan 2015:241). It draws attention to the wider corollaries of colonialism: the division of 'the world according to a particular racial logic' (Bhabra 2014:119), and the diffusion of the 'Eurocentric epistemology, ontology, and ideology' (Bulhan 2015:241) that underpinned European domination and knowledge with its 'colonial epistemic monoculture' (Santos 2015:xxxii), and marginalised the knowledges, cultures, languages, and experiences of colonised people. Bulhan writes that 'more insidious and potent ... than use of lethal arms' was the coloniser's 'power to name the world and the self, interpret the past, and preserve memory of it' (2015:241).

Covid-19 has affected all aspects of society, including capital accumulation, production and labour processes, work and employment, state functions, revenue and finances, social services, and modes of interaction and communication. Its impact has followed the contours of class, 'race', gender, age, health and geography, exacerbated the precarity of livelihoods and work, intensified poverty and inequality, reinforced inequities in access to social services and information and communication technologies, and has graphically illuminated the fissures and consequences of neo-liberal capitalism. Covid-19 has given rise to a new *conjuncture*, the short-term and immediate terrain of struggle that is shaped by both deeper, underlying structural conditions and the actions of the state and capital, upon which 'the forces of opposition organise' (Saul and Gelb 1986:57). The new conjuncture does not constitute new *structural* conditions, which remain indelibly capitalist. Hall and Massey argue that

history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed. ... Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. It may be that society moves on to another version of the same thing ..., or to a somewhat transformed version; or relations can be radically transformed. (2010:57)

A crisis 'can last for a long time, and can be very differently resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by passive transformism' (Hall 1988). Can the current 'worst of times', 'winter of despair', 'season of Darkness', with dominated social classes and groups feeling that there is 'nothing before us', give way to an 'age of wisdom', 'spring of hope', and 'season of light' when we have 'everything before us'? (Dickens 1859:4). Or are

we condemned to remain the ‘age of foolishness’ in which avarice and capital accumulation trump human development and a just future, the pernicious ideologies of capital remain the ruling ideologies, and snake-oil charmers pedal the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ as the gilded ‘solution’ to humanity’s pressing problems.

The new conjuncture requires ‘formative action’ (Saul and Gelb 1986:211) – significant economic, social, political, and ideological restructuring. Yet, despite its rhetoric of ‘radical economic transformation’ the African National Congress (ANC), with its neo-liberal prescripts, crisis of authority, and inability to excise corruption and intra-party factionalism, seems incapable of ‘formative action’ towards a new more equitable order; and the malaise will not in the short-term be resolved through social revolution from below, despite ‘the rationality of a political revolution with a social soul’ (Marx 1844). Of course, one does not have to choose between reforms and fundamental social transformation, or to ‘counterpose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reform’ (Luxemburg 1970:8). Instead, ‘the daily struggle for reforms ... within the framework of the existing social order’ is a means of working towards the ‘final goal’ (Luxemburg 1970:8). There was ‘an indissoluble tie’ between ‘social reforms and revolution’; the ‘struggle for reforms is the means; the social revolution, its aim’ (Luxemburg 1970:8). Higher education cannot transform society but, equally, society cannot be transformed without higher education, which is a critical terrain for struggles related to reproduction, reform, and revolution.

Higher education pre-Covid

The discourse on higher education ‘transformation’ has revolved largely around equality, equity, and redress. It was argued that an exclusive focus on equity ignored the pressing diverse development needs of a new democracy and the difficult dilemmas, choices, and trade-offs entailed by a transformation project that had to advance, *simultaneously*, equity, quality (appropriately defined) and development (economic, social, cultural, intellectual and political) (Badat, Wolpe and Barends 1994). Not confronting the tensions would result in policies that advanced effectively neither equity, quality, nor development, within or outside higher education. Policies had to *balance* the pursuit of equity, quality and development goals, and this *balancing* had to frame policies for transforming higher education and individual universities as part of any new development path (Badat et al

1994:3). Wolpe held that ‘resources which would be required to redress the effects of the apartheid-capitalist system’ in higher education were ‘not immediately available and are extremely unlikely to become available, except in the long term’ as many other pressing needs would require attention (1991a:7). In the absence of additional resources, the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations cautioned that a new system ‘would be more democratic ... and more equitable’, but with increased enrolments and ‘increases in student-to-staff ratios ... could lead to a drastic reduction in quality and might contribute little to economic development’ (Cloete 2002:95). Post-1994, there have been inadequate resources for comprehensive higher education transformation with consequences for equity, quality, and development.

The 2015-2016 student protests unlocked significant state funding for greater equity of access to universities, without resolving the questions of the quality of provision, the contribution of universities to development, and the roles of individual universities. The protests highlighted that post-1994 policy discourse engaged inadequately with the *purposes* of universities in a post-colonial/apartheid society. It was taken as a given that universities created knowledge through research, disseminated knowledge through teaching and learning, and engaged with communities through community engagement. However, there was little substantive engagement with the ‘legacies of *intellectual* colonisation and racialization’ (du Toit 2000:103) and patriarchy, and the epistemic inequities, ‘colonial epistemic monoculture’ and Eurocentrism that suffused scholarship and curriculum. Du Toit had noted, ‘the enemy’ in the form of colonial and racial discourses were ‘within the gates all the time’ and were significant threats to academic scholarship (2000:103).

The problem of European epistemology is its unilateral stipulation of what is knowledge, how it is produced, and the idea that its ‘scientific truths’ are universal and ‘are valid across all of time and space’, a universalism that holds that ‘progress’ and ‘development’ in Europe is not just ‘applicable everywhere’ but also ‘good’ and the ‘face of the future everywhere’ (Wallerstein 1997:24, 25). This Eurocentrism is ‘constitutive of the geoculture of the modern world’ and has powerfully shaped science and knowledge in universities in South Africa (Wallerstein 1997:21). Said demonstrated how European claims to normative universality functioned to simultaneously erase its particularity, was ‘sustained through the exercise of material power in the world’, and how ‘relations of power underpin both

knowledge and the possibilities of its production' (Bhabra 2014:120). Eurocentrism impedes human understanding and precludes 'the possibility of catholic inclusiveness, of genuine cosmopolitan or internationalist perspective, of intellectual curiosity' (Said 2004:53). For Said, Western canonical thought that erased the traditions of the Other had to 'be jettisoned or at the very least submitted to radical humanistic critique' (2004:53). A key goal has been 'epistemological access' (Morrow 1993:3) for the historically disadvantaged, but with little interrogation of the hegemonic epistemologies, knowledges, theories, and methodologies, whose decentring is a critical condition for higher education transformation. The liberation of the curriculum from orthodoxies that devalue certain modes of knowing and impede knowledge-making is long overdue and must be part of strategies for transforming universities.

Student access, opportunity, and success exemplify the ambiguous outcomes of post-1994 higher education. Despite considerable expansion of enrolments and greater equity of access, there has been continued low participation, high attrition, low completion, and variable quality, especially among African and Coloured students.¹ Compared to an overall participation rate of 21 per cent (the percentage of 20 to 24 year olds enrolled in higher education), and a white participation rate of 56 per cent, only 18 per cent of Africans and 15 per cent of Coloureds participate in higher education (Essop 2020:23). Just 45 per cent of three-year diploma students and 58 per cent of three-year degree students at contact universities graduate after six years (Essop 2020:32). Notwithstanding significant deracialisation at some historically white universities (HWUs), white students remain concentrated at the HWUs and the historically black universities (HBUs) are almost exclusively black.² A substantial improvement in opportunity and outcomes for black, and especially working class, students has yet to be realised. If access, opportunity, and success were previously shaped by 'race', they are now largely conditioned by social class. These realities undermine the expansion in enrolments and indicate that higher education 'is unable to effectively support and provide reasonable opportunities for success to its students' and that there is 'inefficient use of the country's resources' (DHET 2013:2). They also compromise equity, social inclusion and development. Interventions necessary include 'modifying the existing undergraduate curriculum structure' (CHE 2013:16), decolonising the curriculum, improving provision at HBUs, enhancing black student success, and 'enhancing the status of teaching and building educational expertise' (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007:73).

There has been progress in the social composition of academic staff. By 2017, black and women permanent academic staff comprised 54.5 per cent and 47.5 per cent of the total staff respectively (Essop 2020:42, 43). However, the distribution of academics follows the historical lines of ‘race’ and ethnicity, with black academics poorly represented at senior levels and at most HWUs. The proportion of permanent academic staff with doctorates has improved since 1994 to 46 per cent (Essop 2020:39). The more representative and qualified academic workforce does not mean that the academic capabilities for transforming universities are in place, or greater engagement with questions of knowledge and epistemic justice. Also of concern is that 63 per cent of academics are temporary staff (Essop 2020:41), a process of casualisation that has increased over the decades alongside increased workloads and a creeping culture of performativity. It is also debatable whether the promotion of equity has been conjoined sufficiently with development opportunities for new generations of academics through postdoctoral, early career, and similar programmes. This has consequences for the quality of academic provision, the capacity to produce high quality graduates and knowledge and, ultimately, for higher education transformation and economic and social development.

The likely ‘new normal’

There are two kinds of ‘new normal’ discourse. One kind refers to the ‘new normal’ to simply *describe* new realities under the Covid-19 pandemic – like ‘social distancing’, the wearing of masks and the digital turn. Another kind of discourse notes various developments that the pandemic has triggered, and those that find favour are *normatively promoted* as the ‘new normal’. This is reminiscent of 1980s South Africa, when a discourse of ‘skills shortages’ became a metaphor for paving the way for economic and social restructuring favoured by large capital. A research dean claims that ‘the world of science and academia has been radically changed by the pandemic and much of this will stay with us’ (Bogle 2020). What precisely has changed ‘radically’ and whether and why it should ‘stay with us’ must surely be interrogated. ‘Good outcomes’ from the pandemic are said to include ‘more open online scientific meetings and a renewed recognition of the value of distance learning’ (Sharma 2020). While the former should be deployed to reduce carbon emissions, the latter must be questioned. There are good reasons for both caution about online distance learning by traditional contact universities and for its effective regulation.

If the 2015-2016 student protests stimulated the ‘decolonial turn’, Covid-19 has been the catalyst of the ‘online turn’. The efficacy of universities’ efforts has been conditioned by institutional digital infrastructure capacities, staff capabilities, student living conditions and access to resources, available finance, and the like. Despite the commitment and efforts of universities, academics, and support staff, online learning has been a challenge for equity of opportunity and success – as well as for quality and epistemic justice. The pandemic has ‘illuminated and amplified the existing inequalities in South African society, with the poor, marginalised, precarious and under-resourced disproportionately experiencing its fallout’, and there must be recognition ‘of the different learning environments of students and their access to learning resources, appropriate devices and data’ (Osman and Walton 2020). The reality of students ‘congested urban apartment blocks, shanty towns, small town peripheries and rural hinterlands’ must temper glib celebration of digital online learning (Schreiber, Bardill Moscaritolo, Perozzi and Luescher 2020).

Despite this, much talk about the ‘new normal’ references online learning. With newly acquired experience of distance online provision, as opposed to online learning as part of blended learning in contact face-to-face provision, some conceive distant online learning as an instrument of access and equity. One university official observes that ‘a fair number of our students come from poor communities’, but still proclaims that ‘what will take us forward is digital transformation’; he adds that ‘we had always been planning for how we respond to a VUCA [volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity] world’, and that Covid ‘has become a catalyst to bring about the transformation we’ve been talking about’.³ It is suggested that ‘a morphed business model, Resident and Distant Delivery, may become the new normal’ (Leonard 2020).⁴ This elides the sociality of learning and the psycho-social and affective aspects of learning. Despite the talk about access and equity, online distance learning, especially for black working class and impoverished rural students, is unlikely to succeed.

Universities have the responsibility to enhance learning and success by students from diverse backgrounds. Assembled ‘on campuses a supportive environment is possible, but when students study on sporadically working laptops in unstable Wi-Fi hotspots, with power outages and in congested, noisy home environments’, online distant higher education compromises opportunity and success (Schreiber et al 2020).

Student success is conditional on ‘safe homes, clean water, reliable

electricity, healthcare and social support’ and on the ‘overall provision of a (personal, social and physical) micro and macro environment conducive to learning’ (Schreiber et al 2020). Online learning can provide ‘cognitive learning, information and credentialing but not full sociability with other students, in-place student-teacher interaction, physical facilities, the full suite of extra-curricular activities and academically nested work experience’ (Marginson 2020; see also Mafolo 2020 and Mathebula 2020). Kupe (2020) rightly avers that ‘everything should not remain online indefinitely because education is a social activity that connects people and humanity. The pandemic has reinforced the simple, human value of being on campus and the face-to-face interaction it provides’. There are good reasons, related to cultural capital and social capital, why students from wealthy backgrounds enrol at Ivy League (United States), Russel Group (United Kingdom), and historically white universities (South Africa).

The probability of reduced state funding post-Covid will deepen universities’ financial challenges (Naidu and Dell 2020, Phakeng, Habib and Kupe 2020). Additional National Student Financial Aid Scheme funding means more income and lower bad debts for universities, but does not reverse declining core block grant funding that is critical for maintaining or enhancing the quality of academic provision. The ‘Fees must Fall’ protests created greater awareness about rising tuition fees, but universities turned to higher fee increases because of reduced state funding and, sometimes, third-stream income. Except at a few well-endowed universities, the norm post-Covid could be annual deficits and austerity measures, including postponing new staff appointments and reducing temporary staff appointments. Given universities’ dependence on contract staff, there are bound to be repercussions for learning and teaching, student opportunity and success, and research. The precarity of work in higher education, as elsewhere, could increase with consequences for academic autonomy and academic rule, already under threat in some instances.⁵

In these circumstances, much-needed grappling with big questions like the purposes of universities and their contribution to social justice is likely to be marginalised, with institutional survival the priority and the danger of further corporatisation, managerialism,⁶ and commodification through ‘entrepreneurial’ partnerships. The ‘new normal’ could witness greater obsession, for reputational and financial reasons, with global rankings, despite their perversities, the dubious social science that informs them, and the fact that they detract from the equity and development goals that are

central to higher education transformation in South Africa (Badat 2010a, 2010b, McKenna 2020). A recent article contends that ‘Covid-19 has fast-tracked the fourth industrial revolution in terms of online education’; its talk of ‘traditional universities must adapt or die’, and the need for ‘brave, bold actions’, exemplifies the avoidance of critical academic and social questions and the technocratic bent to recreate universities as skills factories (Smit and Serfontein 2020).

Roadblocks to change

Wallerstein notes that both liberal and socialist political movements coming to power in the late twentieth century ‘set themselves the double policy objective of economic growth and greater internal equality’ (1991:115). For those movements ‘development’ had a ‘double answer’: ‘greater internal equality, that is, fundamental social (or socialist) transformation’, and ‘economic growth which involved “catching up” with the leader (ie the US)’ (Wallerstein 1991:115). In the coexistence of development as equality and growth, the ‘organizational cement’ was the notion that the twin goals were correlative. Both liberals and many Marxists asserted that ‘growth leading to catching up and an increase in egalitarian distribution are parallel vectors, if not obverse sides of the same coin, over the long run’ (Wallerstein 1991:116). Experience, however, shows that ‘social transformation and catching up are seriously different objectives. They are not necessarily correlative with each other. They may even be in contradiction with each other (Wallerstein 1991:115-6). Wallerstein concluded that we must ‘analyze these objectives separately and cannot continue blithely to assume their pairing, which developmentalists ... as well as many of their conservative opponents, have for the most done for the past 150 years’ (Wallerstein 1991:116). The rhetoric of development ‘has masked a contradiction that is deep and enduring ... , and we are collectively being required to make political choices that are quite difficult and quite large’ (Wallerstein 1991:117).

ANC rhetoric aside, post-1994 the party has marginally eroded inherited inequalities, poverty, unemployment, and myriad social deprivations, insufficiently deepened the ‘national democratic revolution’ and failed to implement radical reforms to create bridges to fundamental social transformation. It has presided over a stunted political revolution without a ‘social soul’. Macroeconomic policies and the state under the ANC have put significant brakes on radical change in higher education. Racial

capitalism, patriarchy, and embrace of neo-liberal orthodoxies have resulted in a highly truncated ‘non-racial and non-sexist system of higher education’, constituted severe impediments to ‘equity of access and fair chances of success’ for subaltern social classes, and have constrained ‘eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination’ and ‘advancing redress for past inequalities’ (DoE 1997:1.14).

Post-1994 South Africa illustrates the pitfall of according higher education too ‘immense and unwarranted weight’ as an agent of social justice, in isolation from the conditions in society at large, ‘which may either facilitate or block (its) effects’ (Wolpe and Unterhalter 1991:2-3). Weiler, likewise, emphasises the limits of institutions to realise social justice ‘as long as society is under the influence of a relatively intact alliance of economic wealth, social status and political power which is interested in preserving the status quo’ (1978:182). This illuminates the question of *political interests*, in contrast with political will; ‘ostensibly consensual and unifying radical visionary policy frameworks often obfuscate the reality of power and historically entrenched privilege’ (Motala 2003:7). Equity cannot be achieved ‘without purposeful [even aggressive] and directed strategies, which set out deliberately to dismantle the core of historical privilege, disparities in wealth, incomes and capital stock’ (Motala 2003:7). However, the state has shown little interest to be ‘directive and interventionist’, institute far-reaching pro-poor ‘positive discriminatory measures’, muster the ‘political courage in the face of administrative challenges’, and to defy public discontent from highly articulate and organized interests’ (Motala 2003:7).

Wolpe argued that the ‘core structural conditions of apartheid’ would ‘over a long period ... continue to place severe constraints on the pace and possibilities of any programme pursued by a new regime’, and urged care in formulating policies if they were ‘to contribute to the construction of a new South Africa’ (1991b:3-4, 6). He warned that otherwise universities could ‘reproduce powerfully entrenched structures generated by apartheid’ instead of ‘serving as instruments of social transformation’ (Wolpe 1991b:1, 16). The state has failed to address difficult dilemmas: its attempt to balance equity, quality, and development imperatives has produced largely historical rectification for individuals rather than fundamental institutional structural transformation.⁷ Concomitantly, uninterrogated and dubious notions of ‘quality’ and ‘standards’ hold many universities captive, constraining the transformation of the academic workforce, curriculum, teaching and

learning and other domains.

A US university president argues that ‘we have a moment in which we can change – we have an opportunity to really rethink to what degree are we leading to social mobility and not social ossification’ (Sharma 2020). The intentions are laudable, but the extent and nature of ‘social mobility’ is determined ultimately not by universities but by the wider political economy. Universities service a capitalist labour market predicated on an (unequal) social structure shaped by class, racism, patriarchy, and other social fractures. While greater ‘social mobility’ must be a part of struggles for reforms, it does not erode or eliminate structural inequalities. Sandel contends that social mobility linked to ideas of meritocracy and rewards through ‘dint of effort, talent, hard work’ is part of the ‘rhetoric of rising’, which has become ‘an article of faith, a seemingly uncontroversial trope’ on the part of liberals (Coman 2020). Yet ‘the fabled “level playing field” remains a chimera’, ‘social mobility has been stalled for decades’, and those who don’t succeed are condemned to ‘carry the burden of their own failure’ (Coman 2020). The result is ““a competitive market meritocracy that deepens divides and corrodes solidarity””; the ““populist backlash of recent years has been a revolt against the tyranny of merit, as it has been experienced by those who feel humiliated by meritocracy and by this entire political project”” (Sandel, quoted in Coman 2020). If social mobility is not to be part of *reformist* programmes that leave social relations unchanged, the goal of higher education transformation must be different.

Realising change

Maylam (2020) provides a sober analysis of the prospects of social justice in a post-Covid world. Noting the dominance of ‘corporate power’, ‘the continuing rise of right wing, populist nationalism’ and ‘anti-internationalism’, he argues that capital and political elites ‘will strive for ... a return to pre-pandemic “normality”’, and that a more egalitarian world ‘looks to be as remote as ever’ (Maylam 2020). I concur, noting that the ‘new normal’ is a euphemism for untrammelled technocratic restructuring and the consolidation of capital accumulation and elite power. Universities are likely to witness intensified corporatisation, managerialism, commercialisation and commodification of knowledge, with ‘transformation’ reduced largely to changing student and staff demographics.

Such a scenario is not inevitable in South Africa but thwarting elite restructuring requires those committed to social justice to forge a new

imagination that forsakes current economic and social logics and prioritises social transformation based on environmentally sustainable economic development, social equity, and democratic participation beyond its stunted parliamentary form (see Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 1992). Bobbio contends that the measure of ‘democratic progress’ is not who has the right to vote, but ‘how many more spaces there are where citizens can exercise the right to vote’, and by ‘the number of contexts outside politics where the right to vote is exercised’ (1987:56). He draws attention to ‘two great blocks of descending and hierarchical power, ... big business and public administration’, and notes that while ‘these two blocks hold out against the pressures from below, the democratic transformation of society cannot be said to be complete’ (Bobbio 1987:57). Learning lessons from the 1980s popular anti-apartheid struggle, fundamental change depends on building a popular democratic movement of workers, the rural impoverished, the unemployed, women, youth, students, and professionals that is rooted in mass democratic organisation. The ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings and their aftermaths indicate that collective mobilisation aided by social media is insufficient; strong and durable democratic organisation is indispensable.

Deeply embedded unacceptable legacies in higher education will not dissipate post-Covid because of the greater awareness of the realities of impoverished students or because ‘there has been a welcome renewed interest and commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion’ (Bogle 2020). As large, complex, loosely coupled and fragile institutions, universities experience a triple challenge: they must deal with the immediate challenges of Covid-19 for their core functions, operations and finances; the consequences of reduced public funding; and the big transformation issues raised by the student protests (see Sharma 2020). Successful higher education transformation requires building strong radical student and staff organisations, alliances between those formations, and coalitions with wider social forces that contest social relations in and beyond higher education. Organised radical movements can reveal the ‘stakes’, make ‘power visible’, struggle for radical reforms and ‘make society hear their messages and translate these messages into political decision making, while the movements maintain their autonomy’ (Melucci 1985:815). However, they cannot confine themselves purely to particularistic concerns that are unconnected with the wider political economy. This raises vital questions of how ‘the particular interests of civil society are taken beyond themselves

and lifted to the general interests of the state', of the 'universalisation of the particular' (Fine 1992:30), of the mechanisms that can make social movements, political parties and the state more mutually constitutive, and of political and state power. If there were four key pillars⁸ to the anti-apartheid struggle, a critical issue is what are the core pillars today in the context of a constitutional democracy and of a parliamentary road to social transformation.

The aftermath of the 2015-2016 student protests has demonstrated the limits of student political action. While critical as a catalyst for reforms and transformation, deep reflection and change is needed about the nature and content of student political activism. There are serious illusions about universities in class societies as engines of social transformation and, despite talk of 'intersectionality', there must be doubts about the transformative potential of focusing on personal pain, trauma, and identity in ways that are unconnected with the question of political power and the material conditions required for social justice (see Kelly 2016). Student organisations created a new higher education terrain and agenda, but since then have exemplified little creative, consistent, and concerted national and institutional-level engagement with that agenda. Institutional transformation and the strategies and tactics of change and its resourcing have been ceded to university administrations, the state, and committed academics. New generations of student leaders must build effective alliances among student formations and between them and other non-student class, popular, and professional organisations and movements. Without achieving a confluence with other social forces, student movements are in danger of becoming characterised by 'brief brush fires and relapses into passivity by the majority' and by 'frenzied ultra-left gestures' (Hobsbawm 1973:265). If students, who have a history of initiating if not always sustaining change, are an important force, equally critical are academics, even if post-1994 they have failed to contest ideologies and administrative power that have eroded critical academic values and academic rule. The absence of strong radical academic and support staff organisations that mobilise around academic issues is a major gap and poses the questions of the consciousness and agency of academics and of the task to 'educate the educator' as part of a transformative praxis within institutions and the world more generally (Marx 1845).

Notes

1. The use of the terms 'African', 'Coloured', 'Indian' and 'white' does not mean an acceptance of these categories. The ossification of these terms and deployment by chauvinists can have dangerous consequences. Their use, however, is unavoidable if one wishes to measure progress to overcome historical inequities.
2. 'Black' is used to collectively refer to African, Coloured and Indian South Africans, who were denied full citizenship under apartheid.
3. Dhaya Naidoo, chief information officer at Tshwane University of Technology, cited in 'South African higher education's opportunity to embrace digital transformation. New models for online learning can help reduce inequality and improve access, say experts'. Available at: <https://www.tut.ac.za/news-and-press/article?NID=386>
4. Note, as part of an all too familiar contemporary discourse in higher education, the talk of 'business model'.
5. On 'academic rule', see Moodie (1996).
6. In contrast with effective, efficient, and accountable management and administration, which are critical for the optimum function of universities and institutions.
7. By institutional structural transformation I mean concerted processes of reshaping social relations in higher education (and concomitantly in the wider society) in ways that erode dominant capitalist, neo-colonial and patriarchal social relations that ground racism, inequality and impoverishment, displace the hegemony of Eurocentrism in higher education, enable the construction of an egalitarian and inclusive society, and the creation of universities that are equitable, diverse and inclusive, pursue knowledge and excellence, and are relevant in terms of place, context, social and educational purposes, curriculum, epistemologies and different kinds of scholarship.
8. Mass extra-parliamentary mobilisation and struggle, international campaigns to isolate the apartheid regime, underground organisation, and armed struggle. Available at: <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031v02167/041v02264/051v02303/061v02304/071v02305/081v02311.htm>

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Addendum

Reviewer comment

The piece ... is interesting. I think it could have delved more deeply into the very nature of relationship of the university with society – which has come to the fore in terms of a significant amount of reimagining (even amongst the vice-chancellors). The future of higher education is considered to be under very serious threat globally with projected declines in enrolment, the shift towards the notion of the 'blockchain' higher education and terrifying levels of unbundling. And what wasn't picked up at all was the extent to which these stodgy institutions repurposed themselves so rapidly – in particular in sciences, engineering and biomedical sciences (of course). And then to ask: what happened to the social sciences?

The most interesting point for me was the debate around distance learning and how this highlights the under-resourced gap. ... What *is* needed to imagine a different scenario going forward?

Author response

The matter of the relationship between universities and society is important but is part of the critical wider question of the educational and social purposes of universities in society. Those purposes must be defined in relation to a constantly changing world and an increasingly diverse world of higher education. The threats mentioned are real, higher education could mutate in spectacular ways, and universities could, as I suggest, become more corporatised, commercialised, and commodified. I am sceptical that universities rapidly ‘repurposed themselves’. Academics have played a vital role in developing a Covid-19 vaccine and in advising governments, but this is undertaking the knowledge creation and sharing functions of universities. With great commitment and effort, universities have also ensured the continuity of teaching and learning, research, and institutional operations. But this is less *repurposing*, as much as effectively harnessing existing information and communication technologies.

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered arts, humanities, and social scientific (AHSS) research, but its contribution is harder to judge as compared to that of the sciences and engineering, especially in areas related to the Covid-19 virus. The adequacy and creativity of the AHSS response should be debated. Online learning at a distance acutely exposed the connection between ‘race’, class, and place and inequitable access to the resources required for access, opportunity, and success in higher education. Moving ahead, ‘what is needed’ is not glib talk about technology as the panacea for equity and access but serious grappling with what are the necessary conditions for social justice in higher education and struggling to institute those. This is a matter that is intimately connected with the question of the educational and social purposes of higher education.