Understanding Higher Education

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Evaluating change, looking forward

Introduction

In this book we have reflected on the rapid growth in higher education around the world in a period of increased divides between rich and poor and the resilience of structural inequalities within society and our institutions. We used a framework derived from the work of Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer in order to produce a theorised response to questions about the relationship between teaching and learning in higher education, and its role in reproducing the status quo.

We began this book by looking at the forces of globalisation and neoliberalism; as we draw it to a close, we need to point out that many of the claims we have made and the conclusions we come to, rest on a larger project of challenging the everyday assumptions that emerge from these forces.

As we have indicated and as we tell our postgraduate students, theory functions like a pair of glasses. Without them, you see the world in one way. Put the glasses on and you can see things you didn’t see before or you see them differently. As in real life, putting on theoretical spectacles involves choices. Anyone who has visited an optometrist to get a pair of prescription lenses will be aware of the array of ‘finishes’ available which will cut out glare, react to light and so on. Just as we can choose how we want to be able to see through the lenses of our glasses, so can we choose what and how we want to ‘see’ through theory.

We had originally chosen the framework using the work of Bhaskar and Archer to complete a piece of commissioned research looking at the impact of the first cycle of institutional audits on teaching and learning in South African higher education. Our theoretical choices in this case were informed by our desire to account for the enormous difference we could see across the system in South Africa and beyond. We believe that institutional differentiation is necessary and beneficial in a higher education system; however, the differences we have reflected upon are not always beneficial. In our own country, in spite of the fact that we were 25 years on from the first democratic election in South Africa, many differences still resulted from the constraints of apartheid and colonialism; systems which deliberately and consciously tried to shape higher education
to serve some more than others. As we have argued, the legacies of colonialism emerge in very similar inequalities across the continent. The framework developed from the work of Bhaskar and Archer allowed us to account for difference structurally, in respect of the way access to resources was organised, and culturally, in respect to the world of ideas. It did this by allowing us to explore the world through three ‘layers’ of reality, the Empirical, the Actual and the Real.

As we explained in Chapter Two, the Empirical and Actual layers are transitive and relative as they are accessed via the senses. Individuals experiencing and observing these two layers then ‘make sense’ of what they see and experience using what they already know. In contrast, the deeper layer of reality, the Real, is comprised of relatively enduring mechanisms which interact together to allow for the emergence of events at the level of the Actual and observations and experiences of these events at the level of the Empirical. Our aim was to explore this layer of relatively enduring mechanisms in order to account for what we could see.

Importantly, the framework (and more specifically, Archer’s morphogenetic cycle) allowed us to explore the way the interplay of mechanisms led to events and experiences over time whilst, at the same time, accounting for agency, or human action. Archer accords all individuals the personal powers and properties to draw on mechanisms and this leads to emergence. However, she is insistent that all individuals are conditioned by their own histories and, thus, that we are not completely free. We will all act in ways which are impacted by what we have previously experienced, what we already ‘know’ and what surrounds us in our present contexts. In the book, therefore, we have explored the social and cultural conditioning in place in a number of areas as individuals tried to bring about change in one higher education system. We then explored the ways they were able to act given the existence of the multiple mechanisms at play.

In this final concluding chapter, we arrive at what Archer terms $T_4$, a point where we assess whether or not change, termed ‘morphogenesis’, has emerged or whether things are much the same, a state Archer calls ‘morphostasis’.

The landscape at $T_4$

While the main focus of the book has been on teaching and learning, in this chapter we attempt this evaluation by looking at what are usually called the three core functions, or pillars, of the university: teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

Teaching and learning

Our argument in this book has focused on the need for what we call ‘social’ understandings of teaching and learning. In Chapter Four we posited a continuum of theoretical positions drawn on to understand student success in higher education. At one end of the continuum is what we call ‘the model of the student as a Decontextualised Learner’. This position holds that knowledge is unitary, that learning is uniform regardless of context, and that successful learning is dependent on factors inherent to the individual,
such as intelligence, motivation and aptitude. The model allows us to absolve learning institutions of any bias towards particular groups of learners since failures are attributed to inborn characteristics about which the institution can do very little. The problem with this position which, admittedly, exists at the extreme end of the continuum of positions, is that it will not allow us to make sense of, for example, South African student performance data without going into very horrible places, since black students bear the burden of failure in universities much more heavily than their white peers. While this position may be at the extreme end, ‘softer’ variations of it dominate accounts of higher education success across the continent and beyond. Common-sense explanations of student success consistently suggest that higher education is a meritocracy where hard work and intellectual capacity triumph. Despite a plethora of research that challenges this position, the everyday assumption is that students succeed or fail primarily on their own merits. The alternative to this position, ‘the model of the student as a social being’, which exists at the other end of the continuum, holds that there are many ways of knowing and, thus, many ways of learning. One way of knowing, for example, is craft knowledge. Craftspeople cannot necessarily explicate what they know as a set of principles. Some may be able to, but, in the main, the knowledge is ‘in their hands’. Another form of knowledge is academic knowledge, which, as we explained in Chapter Four, is specialised, principled, and often abstract. Academic knowledge, like all other forms of knowledge, is value driven. It is acquired through formal instruction and also through immersion in academic contexts where the values underpinning it are prevalent and can be acquired. Nonetheless, these values are not always made explicit to learners, with the result that some of the practices can be meaningless to those who have not been privy to this ‘inside’ information. Academic knowledge and knowing is not necessarily the same as school-based knowing since, in schools, knowledge is generally taught as uncontested, unlike in the universities, where the understanding is that knowledge is always open to challenge and is constantly subject to change and development. The point about the model of the student as a social being is that it acknowledges that only some students have been exposed to ways of knowing that have similarities to those privileged in universities. Students who have had experience of these ways of knowing, generally by virtue of their upbringing in homes where at least one person has benefited from higher education, come into our universities with a significant advantage. The ways of knowing, and indeed the very ways of being, in the university are more familiar to them so they may not feel as alienated from their learning identities. In contrast, students who have only had experience of very different ways of knowing encounter the university as an enormously confusing place and may even feel invalidated as individuals as the ways of learning that have brought them so far now appear to fail them in the new context. It is this, we would argue, that leads to a great deal of depression and anxiety for students.

We would argue that it is possible to teach towards epistemological access. We can learn to make the familiar strange to ourselves such that we, as academics, see exactly what it is that we are asking of students, how it is that knowledge is made in our fields, and what peculiar literacy practices are the means of communicating this. As we come to
understand the extent to which our fields ‘work’ and as we teach in ways that make this explicit, so will we also see the need to curriculate opportunities for modelling, practice and formative feedback. Taking on the social practices of the academy entails potential identity shifts and students need to be given ample opportunities to engage with these practices and their underpinning values and figure out what it will mean for them to become knowers in their fields of study.

We would also argue that simply acknowledging that becoming a successful learner requires many students to take on new identities would go a long way towards understanding what they say to us as individuals and in groups. The social, cultural and political struggles an increasing number of our students need to engage with are often ignored as their experiences are couched in psychologised terms or using understandings of higher education as meritocratic (Sobuwa & McKenna 2019). Acknowledging students’ experiences is but a first step but is, nonetheless, one that has the potential to open the way for change.

Crucial to this argument is a call for a critique of the values embedded in the academy. Those who battle to access the practices deemed necessary for success may feel unwelcome. The normalised nature of these practices keeps them opaque and obscure and thereby provides protection from accusations that many expected practices may be racist, sexist and so on. Making the practices explicit would not only enhance opportunities for success, it would also open the practices and underpinning values to scrutiny and, in some cases, to dismantling. The call for epistemological access must be held alongside the call for epistemic justice.

Our analysis of the impact of the first cycle of institutional audits in South Africa was that, although they resulted in changes to management of teaching and learning in the form of policies, committees, teaching and learning centres, and so on, and also in the appointment of key agents (deans, directors and even deputy vice-chancellors responsible for this management), the ‘domain of culture’ did not change sufficiently. In other words, people in specific roles sitting on committees, writing policies and working in teaching and learning centres often relied on the same ideas and theories (located towards the ‘student as a Decontextualised Learner’ end of the continuum), in spite of the fact that student performance data in South Africa and elsewhere, as we have indicated, simply does not support this position. At the same time, massification of higher education around the world means that the student demographics of universities continue to change, requiring more nuanced understandings of learning than those we saw in the data we analysed.

Changes in student demographics are not new. The reliance on the model of the student as a Decontextualised Learner endures, however, because of the allure of common-sense accounts of failure located in factors inherent to the individual. These accounts surround us on a daily basis, and those who draw on them are overwhelmingly unconscious of their implications and consequently are often well-meaning in their actions. The preponderance of these discourses and the practices associated with them means that they are very difficult to resist.

Regardless of all efforts to improve teaching and learning, the dominance of the Decontextualised Learner model means that structural inequality continues to be ignored.
By this, we mean that no cognisance is taken of the way inequality is structured into what we do as teachers and what we expect of learners and which is ‘hidden’ because of the normalisation of those expectations. For example, in some disciplines we think it is normal for students to write academic essays where they are expected to draw on multiple sources to take a position and thereby to build an argument, without any thought being given for the way the language and structuring of this form of text is more familiar to some than to others. This is not only because of the demands of learning in English but also because the form of the academic essay and its underlying value system has not been encountered in students’ previous experiences. When students cannot write such essays very well, we then attribute this to their status as speakers of English as an additional language and introduce courses, often bearing the misnomer ‘academic literacy’, that focus on the grammar and vocabulary of the language as well as on generic study skills.

When other mechanisms are introduced to try to improve teaching and learning, such as funding via the Development Grants in South Africa, individuals may draw on ideas associated with the model of the Decontextualised Learner when they use such funds. As a result, the grants are not consistently as effective as they could have been.

The dominance of the Decontextualised Learner model also means that even when academics are introduced to more productive ways of understanding students’ experiences in staff-development courses, they are not always able to apply those ideas because of the response of others in the university more widely. The huge focus on the development of staff as professional educators in higher education in recent years has been such that staff development runs the risk of being positioned as the panacea for all ills related to student learning. Making new academics aware of the ways they could contribute to change is but one mechanism, however, and it cannot make a difference without complementary changes elsewhere. Alongside staff development, what is needed is capacity to rethink teaching and learning at institutional levels to see student, staff and institutional development coherently by drawing on understandings of the ‘social model’.

As we have argued, the construction of students as ‘Decontextualised Learners’ is complementary to other discourses dominating our thinking about higher education. One such discourse involves the construction of students as clients. ‘Student as client’ discourses, characteristic of what could be termed the ‘corporate university’, construct higher education as an entity to be bought and sold anywhere in the world and, thus, as neutral. From this perspective, anyone who has the money can buy higher education and use it to gain access to more resources in the form of better employment and greater social status.

In South Africa, the subject of graduate unemployment is contentious, with some (see, e.g. Van Broekhuizen 2016) arguing that unemployment amongst graduates is relatively low and is, in any case, skewed when the institution awarding the qualification is considered. According to Van Broekhuizen (2016: 27), it is clear that attending a less prestigious institution ‘is negatively associated with employment prospects and positively linked to the probability of unemployment’. This observation, if nothing else, points to continuing inequality in the system overall and to the problematic nature of the focus on
understanding higher education as a private good in a hyper-capitalised world, especially since the 'private good' argument is often used to defend increases in tuition fees.

As we write, South Africa came very close to reaching the 35% unemployment in the general population forecast for December 2020 by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with an unemployment rate of 32.5% for the last quarter of 2020, albeit in the context of a global pandemic. Chances of accessing meaningful employment without further education are limited (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development 2019). Young people perceive the need to enter universities for future employment but are 'tricked' in doing so by discourses constructing success as equally open to all. The idea that, regardless of the amount spent on it, higher education success may be more accessible to some than to others, as we have argued in Chapter Four, is not taken into account. Rather, in a hyper-capitalist world it is simply something to be bought and sold, whilst at the same time students are constructed as 'clients' purchasing their tickets to great wealth and improved social status. In this context, the discourse of the student as a Decontextualised Learner makes sense. If higher education is a private good, in that it is understood to bring increased wealth and social status for the successful individual, it is uncomfortable to admit that the goods it provides are not particularly accessible to some because of the way society is structured. Sadly, in spite of all the efforts to transform South African higher education into a system that would serve all citizens, developments have drawn on globalised discourses with the result that the dream of equality, at least in relation to teaching and learning, continues to evade us.

This is not to say that no changes have occurred and that all spaces draw on such problematic understandings at all times. There are indeed a number of initiatives, in South Africa and further afield, which have attempted to address the concerns raised here, but they have often failed to be taken up in ways that bring about systemic change. As Badat (2016: 8) argues:

It is not that prior to the student protests there had not been critical voices that had raised issues of epistemology, curriculum and the like, but that they have gained little traction at universities and in higher education and have remained largely marginal concerns. It is also not the case that there has been either a uniform unwillingness or no efforts to tackle colonial, racist, patriarchal discourses and the culture of whiteness. The reality is that for reasons that are important to understand, initiatives to date have yet to succeed in uprooting inherited cultures and practices, and bringing about the far-reaching transformations that are necessary and long overdue.

But for system-wide shifts to occur, we argue that we have to call on more sophisticated understandings of teaching and learning in more coherent ways than we have done to date.

We believe that this is eminently possible but it will require an acknowledgement of the social nature of the university and the political nature of teaching and learning. Structural mechanisms such as the University Capacity Development Grant (Moyo &
McKenna 2021) and cultural mechanisms such as the strong student call for epistemic justice can enable significant shifts but only if they are harnessed and if constraining mechanisms, such as the three discourses of the Decontextualised Learner, the student as client, and higher education as a meritocracy, are directly identified and countered.

Research

The critiques we have offered in relation to teaching and learning can also be applied to research. With the emergence of the so-called ‘knowledge economy’ there has been a drive to increase postgraduate education and research-production. In many countries, including South Africa, research is especially rewarded in promotion systems and in national funding processes. Although research production has grown, with steady year-on-year increases across the entire continent of Africa, this success has not been unproblematic.

We would never argue that a university should not do any research even if the teaching of undergraduates is what occupies the time of the majority of staff. One reason for needing some form of research in all universities is that it is through research that academics become more and more aware of the disciplines they teach; awareness that is needed for the development of the curricula for which they are responsible. Unlike schoolteachers, who work with a curriculum that is typically centrally developed, all academics are responsible for curriculum development. Without an in-depth understanding of the norms, values and nature of knowledge in their fields, and the way it is changing, how can academics develop curricula which ‘open up’ that discipline to students in the ways we have argued are necessary?

Drivers in the form of international ranking systems, personal promotion and even individual cash incentives (Muthama & McKenna 2020) have pushed all institutions towards prioritising research regardless of their histories, their locations or their particular missions and visions. Although the various international, national and institutional incentives for publication have undoubtedly had an effect on the number of overall publications in South Africa, the impact has also been a privileging of quantity over quality (Mouton & Valentine 2017; Muller 2017; Thomas & De Bruin 2015). The focus is therefore often on the means, publication, rather than the ends, the dissemination of knowledge.

Many academics in universities across Africa are minimally qualified to conduct research. According to the Council on Higher Education (2020), about 48% of permanent academic staff in South African universities are qualified at doctoral level. This varies according to the university with some, in the small group producing the bulk of South Africa’s research outputs, now employing up to 60% of staff with doctorates. At other universities, the number of staff with doctorates is almost pitifully low. Alarmingly, data for 2018 (CHE 2020: 50) shows that nearly 1637 academics are permanently employed with only a certificate or undergraduate diploma or degree. The National Development Plan 2030, in recognition of the importance of research to economic productivity, sets the goal of 75% of all academic staff having doctorates by 2030. As indicated previously,
in Kenya, given the directive from the Commission for University Education that all assistant lecturers should have doctoral degrees by 2019 or lose their jobs, the goal appears to be 100%.

The South African funding formula is blunt in the way that it rewards research activity, with no nuances to take institutional difference into account in South Africa, which brings about problems of academic drift (Essop 2020). Universities with large undergraduate populations and relatively little research activity also tend not to attract students at postgraduate level. This means that more senior students who are able to act as tutors and mentors to their undergraduate peers are not available in sufficient numbers. As a result, undergraduate development can also suffer in those places where, arguably, there is the most need for increased efficiency and outputs. As the funding formula in South Africa also rewards outputs at undergraduate level, these institutions often bear a double burden. They cannot benefit from research funding in any significant way, even though it is lucrative, and at the same time they cannot maximise on funding for their work at undergraduate level.

A differentiated higher education system requires institutions to develop their own conceptualisation of the academic project that will drive them. Analysis of the mission and vision statements of all institutions showed that the nebulous idea of ‘excellence’ was a goal for many (Behari-Leak & McKenna 2017). The construct of excellence has been problematised by many, most notably Readings (1996: 32), who notes that:

> [e]xcellence is invoked ... as always, to say precisely nothing at all: it deflects attention from the questions of what quality and pertinence might be, who actually are the judges of a relevant or a good university, and by what authority they become those judges.

Barnett (2004: 64) follows up on Readings’ observation by noting that excellence stands ‘for no purpose, no ideal and no concept in particular’. Nash (2013) goes further to argue that the focus on excellence can be antithetical to being an ethical university.

Formal differentiation in the South African system has always been resisted because of the apartheid past, but it is also a problem in other countries as differentiation can rapidly translate into a hierarchy. Without a clear consideration of how differentiation can serve the multiple demands placed on higher education and attend to the varied desires of students, countries will not be able to foster the strong higher education systems required by the knowledge economy. In South Africa, until we summon the political will to genuinely engage with the issue of differentiation and develop a funding mechanism that equitably supports a variety of endeavours, institutions will be driven towards those activities that carry the biggest financial reward (Essop 2020).

Throughout this book, we have argued for what we have termed ‘social’ understandings of learning, learners, academics and the university. The model of the Decontextualised Learner we have cited so often in relation to teaching and learning can also be seen to apply to research, as people are inducted into understandings of knowledge-making in much the same way as they are inducted into understandings of learning, depending on
the contexts to which they have access (Boughey 2018). Values related to the need for and excitement of generating new knowledge all contribute to the emergence of practices conducive to research production. If an academic is immersed in contexts where such values are common and where research-based practices can be observed on a daily basis, it is more likely that she will access those values and develop mastery of those practices than someone whose work environment is very different.

While universities might try to increase research production by, for example, running research-design workshops or holding retreats for academics to go away and write for publication, such initiatives can be seen to be akin to the adjunct efforts to improve students’ skills that we have criticised in Chapter Four. Our argument would be that these initiatives need to be complemented by the development of research environments at departmental and faculty levels, if the conditions necessary for research production are to emerge. Versions of such environments already exist in the universities where research production is high. In others, they tend to exist only in pockets, with concomitant effects on academics’ own sense of who they can be and what they can do.

As we have indicated throughout this book, universities across the world have been affected by globalisation and the thinking around their role in the new knowledge-based economy. As producers of knowledge, much in the same way as manufacturers of material goods, universities are constructed as having the means of creating income for themselves. If a university can make money by doing research, then the need for the state to fund knowledge-making activities is less important. This sort of thinking may work for applied knowledge, though as we will argue below that is still problematic, but it does not work for ‘blue sky’ knowledge or knowledge aimed at making society a better place for all. Not all kinds of knowledge can be commercialised yet all kinds of knowledge are essential for the development and well-being of society.

Furthermore, it must be noted that many of the most readily commercialised knowledge products are ‘public bads’ in that they function to harm the planet and people for improved profit for industry and its shareholders. There is a certain irony that the university is simultaneously tasked with making knowledge that plunders the planet and making knowledge that can resolve the problems emerging from such plundering (McKenna 2021). We need to be willing to discuss the ethical implications of the knowledge we produce and to consider taking a stance that is explicitly planet and people focused and which rejects being party to knowledge production which is explicitly harmful. In some cases, harmful knowledge projects are self-evident, such as developing accounting and legal models to allow multi-nationals to work outside of any nation state and thereby avoid paying tax or being accountable for human rights violations. In other cases, deliberations about whether the knowledge project is a public good or public bad will be far more complex. But in all cases, we would argue, the university has a role to play in nurturing researchers who take on, as a fundamental part of their identities, a commitment to work for the good of people and the planet.

The privileging of such knowledge with commercial value and the emphasis on higher education as a ‘private good’ which developed from the early 1990s onwards has been
a particular threat to the humanities. Given the history of colonialism and apartheid, the potential to produce commercialised research is highly skewed. The small group of universities producing the majority of South African research outputs are more likely to be able to leverage such research. The universities of technology are potentially at an advantage as their key role is in producing research that is industry-focused and which thus can bring in income. However, their lack of capacity often constrains them, and traditional universities without strong research backgrounds are also unlikely to be able to benefit from the value of commercial research, yet these are the very institutions which tend to struggle the most financially and would thus most benefit from such an income stream.

In the second core function, research, globally we see that the universities that are least likely to have strong research cultures serve larger proportions of working-class students. The net effect is that such students have limited access to postgraduate studies and are less likely to be able to join in processes of knowledge-making.

It is very possible for universities to strengthen their research environments but we would argue that many current approaches try to insert performance management metrics and financial rewards to drive research at the cost of a focus on the inherent purpose and value of research. This may bring about short-term increases in outputs but might not bring about sustained knowledge creation. We argue that what is needed are consistent initiatives focused on the development of a public-good focused academic identity and institutional culture.

Community engagement

The final core function, community engagement, spans a range of activities as the following diagram, adapted from Furco (1996), shows:
Activities on the left of the continuum are intended to serve communities; those on the right are directed at furthering students’ learning. Key to understandings of community engagement is that activities should be reciprocal, in the sense that it is not simply that students serve communities and enhance their learning as a result of applying it in practical situations, but rather that the universities should learn from the communities with which they interact. This learning can involve the challenging of theory as well as practice. Given the decolonisation debates that have dominated higher education systems in recent years, the understanding of community engagement as reciprocal is key to taking the knowledge project further.

Our analysis of teaching and learning in all universities in South Africa found evidence of uneven engagement with wider communities. Commitment to community engagement was strong in some institutions within the cultural domain, particularly among rurally based institutions, with explicit references to the social and geographical context within which the university is embedded (Boughey 2011; Muthama & McKenna 2020). If community engagement is to be used to provide learning experiences for students and services to communities, however they are defined, it needs to be structured into institutional life through the development of policy and systems which recognise it. Policy, for example, could identify a minimum number of credits in a qualification which comprise service learning. Reward systems for academics could set criteria in relation to community engagement activity for the confirmation of appointment and personal promotion. In the data we studied for the research underpinning this book, such structures were in place in some institutions, while in others there was a contradiction between the references to community engagement in interviews and vision and mission statements on the one hand, and an absence of reference to community engagement in strategic plans, promotion policies, and budgeting on the other. Without complementary structures and cultures, community engagement remains ad hoc and dependent on the personal projects of individual academics.

Community engagement can take on many different forms in keeping with each university’s mission and vision and geographical location. We would argue that it holds enormous potential to strengthen an institution’s teaching and research. It would be possible to suggest that it is in the nexus between the university and the broader community within which it exists to serve that the African university could best take up its mantle.

**Bundling and unbundling the university**

Throughout this book we have reflected on numerous competing imperatives facing universities. Universities are being pulled by managerialist discourses towards performance management, and strategic decisions are increasingly undertaken outside of a concern for the academic project. At the same time, universities are being expected to take on roles that were not previously part of their mandate. For example, in a number of countries, the inability of the state to provide functional health systems and mental health support has resulted in universities having to increase their health and counselling
services. As the state has failed to address the need for job creation, affordable housing and efficient public transport, so universities are increasingly being expected to pick up the bill for bus tickets, meals and more. Providing meals and toiletries for students who are in desperate need is now an urgent and ongoing concern for universities in South Africa despite the need for economic cuts (Habib 2019). As the university is being expected to provide a range of resources and services that were once far beyond its mandate, it is possible to argue that more is being ‘bundled’ into the university’s realm of responsibility than ever before.

In such a context, the allure of unbundling is not surprising. Unbundling is a process whereby university programmes and experiences are disaggregated and outsourced (McCowan 2017; Czerniewicz 2018). Partnerships between universities and the private sector have proliferated in the last decade, with the emergence of a number of high-profile online programme-management companies. The outsourcing of materials development, assessment, course evaluations, institutional marketing, student admissions, and more has occurred in a number of universities around the world and many are in evidence in South Africa (unbundleduni.com).

Those in favour of this process point to the cost efficiency and the expertise brought to various tasks by external companies, particularly in regard to technology. Those opposed to it point out that the distinction between what is and what is not central to the academic project is difficult to judge, and that unbundling forces universities into a marketised context which does not serve its public good mandate well at all. We would argue that our universities are highly susceptible to the glitzy promises of online programme-management companies and their ilk because we have not sufficiently articulated for ourselves what the academic project is. Also of concern is the extent to which unbundling will privilege some institutions and some students over others. External companies are motivated by profit and therefore seek alliances with institutions and students who are most likely to be able to pay for their services. The affordances of technology need to be considered in relation to the growing marketisation of higher education within a highly unequal sector.

What is arguably needed is resistance to many of the globalised discourses which have resulted in many if not most of the universities in South Africa and beyond following what we have called hyper-capitalist models. We call for the espousal of what we will describe as the developmental university along with greater degrees of structured differentiation.

**A differentiated and developmental system**

As we have tried to indicate throughout this book, attempts to transform higher education on the continent have been conditioned by ideas related to globalisation in a worldwide system of universities. While it was always acknowledged in policy and other documents produced from the early 1990s onwards that South Africa needed to deal with equity in order to address the wrongs of apartheid, as well as to achieve efficiency in the sense of needing to join the global economy and thus, to some extent, a global worldview, in many
respects the balance can be argued to have swung towards efficiency in that much of what has happened has moved us closer to global models of a hyper-capitalist university.

As a result, students are increasingly pushed towards understanding higher education as a private good because it appears to be the one way of ensuring social mobility. Much of this situation does, of course, result from the wider economic environment characterised by high levels of unemployment. As this understanding of higher education as a private good has grown, and partly in response to it, state funding has decreased, which means that students have been increasingly required to contribute more to the cost of their education.

At the same time, however, higher education has not served students equally well: slow throughput and drop-out rates are experienced by some social groups far more than others. As participation in higher education has increased, so too has the number of graduates employed in low-paid work, for example, call centres or, possibly even worse, forced to take numerous postdoctoral fellowships and unpaid internships in order to have any chance of gaining more permanent employment. A lack of career guidance and family networks means that these outcomes are experienced by some more than others (Case et al. 2018). These patterns have been observed in countries even with high participation levels, such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America, but they are also becoming more and more evident in South Africa in particular. The situation is generally explained away by discourses that essentially blame the universities for not producing graduates who are ‘work ready’. As we have argued throughout the book, however, vocational qualifications are not necessarily the answer, because if they are designed without sufficient conceptual coherence, they ‘lock’ graduates into specific contexts by denying them access to powerful disciplinary knowledge (Muller 2000). Such powerful knowledge allows movement across contexts and, even more importantly, provides the abstractions and theories to imagine a future world which is different to the present.

The focus on work readiness is thus, we would argue, largely misplaced. As Allais (2014) and Ashwin (2020) point out, the construct of the knowledge economy has resulted in a narrowing of the purpose of higher education to the provision of skilled labour. According to the Universum Talent Research Report 2018 (Universum Communications 2018), the top career goal identified by all South African students was ‘to be dedicated to a cause or to feel that I am serving a greater good’. The second goal was ‘to be secure or stable in my job’ and the third, ‘to have work/life balance’. Nowhere does the private good in the sense of the accrual of personal wealth feature. While employability of graduates is key this cannot be at the cost of attending to the university’s role in furthering the public good.

Of even more concern, however, many students encounter the time spent in the university not as a time of growth but one of pain. As one student noted in a meeting we attended, ‘The universities are places of self-doubt, not self-development’. Over and over in our work, we have heard testimonies of suffering both because of the economic circumstances experienced by students and also because of their alienation from the academic project and from the very life of the university itself, an alienation which has been explained as the imposition of whiteness.
One of the problems with the notion of transformation is that it has arguably been used to mask other things. We have had the experience, for example, of calls for transformation being used to introduce regimes of accountability and monitoring which are linked with managerialism. Yet another problem is that meanings of the terms are not always shared and not sufficiently interrogated. We may all assume that we know what the term ‘transformation’ means, but do we? Determining what counts as powerful, decolonised knowledge and how best to produce and teach it becomes even more difficult because of a lack of definition of the academic project itself in many universities and then the failure to implement activities fit for the purpose of serving such a project.

What would seem to be the case, therefore, is that, in spite of the very best efforts of policy makers and many others working to transform the higher education system so that it truly is one that serves all, in South Africa we have arrived at a position where a combination of a very fractured past and an apparent lack of political will to achieve more clarity around differentiation has led to the creation of a complicated territory where universities, and the academics who work in them, are trying to be all things to all people and competing as they do so. Sadly, our reading of the literature, much of which is cited in this book, suggests that many of these problems characterise other countries on the continent too.

This book has been a reflection on our research in teaching and learning in higher education, mainly in South Africa, over the past two decades. The book is rooted in a belief that higher education has the potential to contribute to the well-being of societies through the production of research and of graduates who can contribute to critical discourse and, thus, to democracy itself. It is through a social understanding of the complexity of higher education that this might become possible.

As we have indicated in this chapter, it is our view that much needs to be done in the university sector. But if we are able to take up some of the alternative perspectives on offer, we can ensure that higher education offers knowledge and knowers who are committed to people and the planet. We are optimistic about the role that higher education plays and can play as a key structure in developing a more just society.