

**THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOCIETY:
VALUING HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Stagnant universities are expensive and ineffectual monuments
to a *status quo* which is more likely to be a *status quo ante*,
yesterday's world preserved in aspic (Ralf Dahrendorf, 2000:106-7)**

Introduction

The Chairperson, HER-SA officials, colleagues from South African and other African universities

Thank you for the privilege of addressing you on the theme of *The Role of Higher Education in Society*.

In as much as the South African *Constitution* is predicated on a politics of equal recognition, the Constitution is also acutely aware of the legacies of racism, patriarchy and sexism and therefore provides for equity of opportunity and redress for historically disadvantaged social groups. The HER-SA Academy is an important institution in facilitating equity of opportunity for women and in contributing to the more equitable representation of women in senior position in higher education. I wish you a stimulating and productive 2009 Academy.

Arthur E. Levine, President of the Teachers College of Columbia University, writes that

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

Levine goes on to add that questions related to higher education “have their deepest roots in that fundamental question” and that “faced with a society in motion, we must not only ask that question again, but must actively pursue answers, if our colleges and universities are to retain their vitality in a dramatically different world” (ibid.)

I propose to speak about three issues.

- The first is about our changing world.
- The second is about the three purposes of higher education.
- The third is about what I consider to be the five key roles of higher education.

Finally, I want to conclude by making some observations on the sometimes unrealistic expectations of higher education.

A changing world

Our world is, indeed, “dramatically different” from that of a few decades ago and even just a year ago.

For one, we live in the epoch of *globalisation*, which is characterised by “an expansion of economic activities across national boundaries” as manifested in “international trade, international investment and international finance”, by the “flows of services, technology, information and ideas across national boundaries” (Nayyar, 2008:4), and by the global organisation of production through transnational corporations. The driving forces have

been huge increases in the speed of travel and “the technological revolution in communications, the internet and large-scale computerized information systems”, which have resulted in the compression of time and space and “make it possible to conduct business on a planetary scale in real time” (Berdahl, 2008:46). The new “world market...is beyond the reach of the nation state” and also means a reduced agency on the part of nation state (ibid:47).

Driven by market forces and the technological revolution, globalisation has exercised “an influence on the nature of institutions that impact higher education”, and on the “ways and means of providing higher education” (Nayyar, 2008:7). It has also come to shape “education both in terms of what is taught and what is researched, and (has shifted) both student interests and university offerings away from broader academic studies and towards narrower vocational programmes” (Duderstadt et al, 2008:275).

For another, since 2008 we have been living under the severest *global financial crisis* that the world has experienced in over seventy years.

One reason for the crisis is that despite globalization and greater contact across regions, nations, cultures, religions and languages, during recent decades there has been an all too evident closing of minds and hearts and negation of important human values. The negation of core human values – respect for human dignity, difference and diversity, human rights and the oneness of humanity – and the closing of hearts have promoted destructive fundamentalisms of various kinds, intolerance and prejudice, and have made the world a much less just, safe and secure place.

The closing of the mind has been evident in economic and social thought and policies that have prevailed during the past twenty years. Wisdom derived from vigorous intellectual debate, knowledge, and understanding has been disdained. Instead of the idea of the public good and ethical leadership, self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests have triumphed. The result has been dubious and pernicious economic and social orthodoxies that have coalesced in the ideology of neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberal thinking and ideas, whether embraced willingly or imposed through the coercive or disciplinary power of powerful international economic and political institutions, have reshaped economic and social policies, institutions and practices. I wish to note just three of the numerous effects of neo-liberalism. For one, instead of development as “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen, 1999:3), the concept of development has been economized and reduced to economic growth and enhanced economic performance as measured by various indicators. Not surprisingly, “the logic of the market has...defined the purposes of universities largely in terms of their role in economic development” (Berdahl, 2008:48). Public investment in higher education has come to be justified largely in terms of economic growth and preparing students for the labour market.

For another, neo-liberalism has come to define universities as “just supermarkets for a variety of public and private goods that are currently in demand, and whose value is defined by their perceived aggregate financial value” (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:17). As a

recent monograph notes, “to define the university enterprise by these specific outputs, and to fund it only through metrics that measure them, is to misunderstand the nature of the enterprise and its potential to deliver social benefit” (ibid., 2008:17).

Neo-liberalism has also brought in its wake a rampant “culture of materialism”, which has transformed “a reasonable utilitarianism...into Narcissist hedonism” (Nayyar, 2008:5), and a celebration of unbridled individualism and greed. In these regards, neo-liberalism has effectively incubated the seismic and grave financial and economic crisis that envelopes the world today.

The purposes of higher education

My purpose in referring to Levine is to make the point that the question of *the role of higher education in society* cannot be abstracted from the “fundamental question”: “What is the purpose of higher education?” The roles that institutions or individuals play in society are shaped by the purposes and goals that they have defined for themselves and/or that have come to be defined for them by society.

“Faced with a society in motion”, we must indeed “actively pursue answers, if our colleges and universities are to retain their vitality in a dramatically different world”. Yet, as we, as higher education and as universities, as governments and citizens, actively interact with our dynamic and changing world and changing societies and search for answers to historical and contemporary challenges, it is vitally important that we also hold on to the “fundamental question”: “What is the purpose of higher education?”

The former Principal of Edinburgh University, Lord Sutherland, writes that we need to define our identity in the changing and ‘new diverse world of higher education’. ‘The most essential task’, he suggests, is to create ‘a sense of our own worth’ by fashioning ‘our understanding of our identity’ – our understanding of what it means to be a university (cited in Graham, 2005: 155).

However, as the philosopher Gordon Graham notes, we ‘cannot have a satisfactory sense of (our) worth if (we have) no sense of what (our) purpose is’ (Graham, 2005:158). How, then, do we create ‘a satisfactory sense of (our) worth’? In what purposes are we to root our ‘understanding of our identity’ and what it means to be a university?

For good reasons, national higher education systems evince highly differentiated and diverse institutions, with universities characterised by different missions, varied social and educational purposes and goals, differing size, different configurations of academic programmes, differing admission requirements, and varying academic standards as appropriate to specified purposes and goals.

The meaning of higher education and universities cannot be found in the content of their teaching and research, how they undertake these, or their admission policies. Instead, the core purposes of higher education and universities reside elsewhere.

The first purpose of universities is the *production of knowledge* which advances understanding of the natural and social worlds, and enriches humanity's accumulated scientific and cultural inheritances and heritage. Boulton and Lucas pithily summarize the myriad responsibilities of universities in these regards:

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).

The second purpose of universities is the *dissemination of knowledge* and the formation and cultivation of the cognitive character of students. The goal is to produce graduates that ideally: “can think effectively and critically”; have “achieved depth in some field of knowledge”, and have a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves”. Our graduates should also have “a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times”; be “able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it”; have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems”; and be able to “communicate with cogency” (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

The final, if somewhat newer but increasingly accepted, purpose of universities is to undertake *community engagement*. We must make a distinction between a university being responsive to its political, economic and social contexts and community engagement. Being alive to context does not mean that a university is necessarily engaged with communities, however we may define these. That is to say, in much as sensitivity to economic and social conditions and challenges is a necessary condition for community engagement, it is not a sufficient condition.

At different moments, in differing ways and to differing degrees, community engagement has encompassed community outreach, student and staff volunteer activities and more recently what has come to be termed ‘service-learning’. Further, community engagement has tended to be approached in two different ways.

One is where teaching and learning, research and community engagement have been conceived of as essentially distinct activities. In this instance, they have been pursued as separate and independent activities and there has been little or no connection between these activities. Another approach has been to view teaching and learning, research and community engagement as related and intersecting activities, with their intersections constituting the specific activity of service-learning.

Service-learning has sought to build on the core knowledge production and dissemination purposes of the university. Instead of being an add-on, disconnected from the University's core activities, as community outreach and volunteerism have been, service-learning seeks to become a "curricular innovation" (Stanton, 2008:2) infused in the teaching and learning and research activities of the University. As has been noted,

Service-learning...engage(s) students in activities where *both the community and student* are primary beneficiaries and where the primary goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance student *learning* through rendering this service. Reciprocity is therefore a central characteristic of service-learning. The primary focus of programmes in this category is on integrating community service with scholarly activity such as student learning, teaching, and research. This form of community engagement is underpinned by the assumption that service is enriched through scholarly activity and that scholarly activity, particularly student learning, is enriched through service to the community (CHE, 2006:15).

Necessarily, the idea of learning through community engagement has implications for curriculum, for the processes of teaching, learning and assessment, and also for knowledge production with respect to the purposes, aims and objects of research. In as much as specific disciplines or fields may shape the form and content of community engagement, such community engagement may also affect the form and content of teaching and learning and research in disciplines or fields.

To effectively undertake its diverse educational and social purposes, a university must have a commitment "to the spirit of truth" (Graham, 2005:163), and must possess academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary conditions, they are also rights in which duties inhere (Jonathan, 2006). In the African context, we must recognize, as Andre du Toit urges, "the legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation as threats to academic freedom" (2000); and that "the powers conferred by academic freedom go hand in hand with substantive duties to deracialise and decolonize intellectual spaces" (Bentley et al, 2006). Other duties on the part of universities, academics and administrators include advancing the public good and being democratically accountable. They also encompass bold engagement with economic and social orthodoxies and resultant public policies that may seriously misunderstand and distort the purposes of universities, stripping them of their substance and leaving them "universities only in name" (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:6).

Concomitantly, an enabling policy framework that encompasses thoughtful state supervision, effective steering, predictability in policy and adequate public funding is vitally necessary for higher education to realize its social purposes. However, while an enabling policy framework is vitally important, it is on its own not enough. Such a framework must be also supported and reinforced by wider economic and social policy frameworks; otherwise the promise of higher education will be undermined by inadequately supportive economic and social environments and financial constraints. For example, an Education Ministry's commitments to increasing enrolments and participation rates and to access, equity and redress may be handicapped by the inadequacy of the state budget devoted to higher education. Similarly, equity of

opportunity and enhancement of quality may be retarded by the absence of or limited funding for programmes of academic staff and student academic development at institutions.

The role of higher education

The role of higher education in society must take as its point of departure its fundamental purposes and also give concrete expression to these purposes. However, the role of higher education cannot be formulated in isolation from the context and conditions in which it must play its role.

The role of higher education must necessarily intersect and effectively engage with the economic and social challenges of local, national, regional, continental and global contexts. These challenges include the imperatives of economic growth and development; the ability to compete globally; job creation and the reduction/elimination of unemployment and poverty; the effective delivery of social services and the threat of HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The challenges also encompass the imperatives of equity and redress; social justice; the democratisation of state and society, the building of a culture of human rights, creating a vibrant civil society, and promoting a culture of vigorous and critical intellectual public discourse. At the same time, in playing its role higher education must also be guided by and embody specific *principles* and *values*. These include: equity and redress, quality, development, democratisation, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, effectiveness and efficiency, and public accountability.

In my view, higher education must play at least 5 key roles.

1. Cultivation of highly educated people

The first key role is to cultivate highly educated people. In order to undertake this function, universities must provide imaginatively, thoughtfully, and rigorously conceptualised, designed, and implemented teaching and learning programmes and qualifications that take into account two issues.

One is the kinds of knowledge, competencies, skills and attitudes that our graduates require to function in a rapidly changing society, continent and world. Our programmes must enable our students to graduate as professionals who can think theoretically and imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives and communicate effectively orally and in writing. Our task is not simply the dissemination of knowledge to students but also the induction of our students into the making of knowledge.

A second issue we must consider is the social and educational experiences of students who, because of the imperative of social equity, must come from increasingly diverse social backgrounds. Our students must be afforded not simply equity of access, but also equity of opportunity and success, through effective teaching and learning and academic

development and mentoring programmes. Prof. Brian O' Connel, Vice Chancellor of the University of Western Cape, is pertinent here when he states that universities

cannot rest on their laurels...and simply teach the same curricula...year after year with minor changes and presume that this is sufficient. If the demands made on students by a fast-changing world are greater, so too are the demands on lecturers and researchers. We have constantly to unpack the assumed constants in our respective fields to encourage students to interrogate what we and they have learned to take for granted (2006).

2. Democracy and democratic citizenship

The second key role of higher education is to contribute to forging a critical and democratic citizenship.

Our societies require graduates who are not just capable professionals, but also sensitive intellectuals and critical citizens. Our academic programmes together with our institutional culture and practices must therefore ensure that we keep ethical questions in sharp focus, and that we advance a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights conducive to critical discourse, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, just, non-racist and non-sexist social order. As Prof. O' Connel puts it, we are "tasked with the arduous formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry. Nothing less will suffice" (2006).

Increasingly the trend has been to approach higher education and investments in universities from the perspective largely of the promotion of economic growth and the preparation of students as productive workers for the labour market and economy. It is not disputed that higher education must cultivate the knowledge, competencies and skills that enable graduates to contribute to economic development, since such development can facilitate initiatives geared towards greater social equality and social development. Nor is it disputed that in many cases there is need for extensive restructuring of qualifications and programmes to make curricula more congruent with the knowledge, expertise and skills needs of a changing economy. However, an instrumental approach to higher education which reduces its value to its efficacy for economic growth, and calls that higher education should comprise of largely professional, vocational and career-focused programmes and should prioritise 'skills' is to denude it of its considerably wider social value and functions.

For one, higher education has an intrinsic significance as an engagement between dedicated academics and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances (in the form of books, art, pictures, music, artefacts), and around our historical and contemporary understandings, and views and beliefs regarding our natural and social worlds. Here, education is the pursuit of learning of nature and society, which is undertaken as part of what it means to be human (Oakeshott, cited in Fuller ed., 1989).

For another, higher education also has immense social and political value. As Martha Nussbaum argues, education is intimately connected to the idea of democratic

citizenship, and to the “cultivation of humanity” (2006:5), and she suggests that “three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity” (ibid:5). “First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions....Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement” (ibid:5). The “cultivation of humanity” also requires students to see themselves “as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern” – which necessitates knowledge and understanding of different cultures and “of differences of gender, race, and sexuality” (ibid:6). Third, it is, however, more than “factual knowledge” that is required. Also necessary is “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (Nussbaum, 2006:6-7).

The contribution of higher education to democracy and citizenship is, however, not exhausted by the “cultivation of humanity”. There are at least three other ways in which higher education can contribute to the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights, active democratic participation and critical citizenship.

First, issues of rights, democracy and citizenship are important objects of research and knowledge production for universities. Second, as Stanton suggests, community engagement and service-learning is a “means for...building democratic commitments and competences in all concerned (2008:2-3). Finally, beyond teaching, research and community engagement related to citizenship and democracy, universities can through their own ethos, structures, processes and practices serve as models for the respect, defence and promotion of human rights, and of democracy and democratic participation.

It is important to avoid conceiving higher education in purely political and instrumental terms for this may miss its potential cultural, expressive and symbolic contributions. While higher education may have visible effects such as helping bring about institutional changes and cultural innovation relating to new forms of behaviour and social relationships, much of its activities may take place on a symbolic plane (Melucci, 1989).

The symbolic contribution could take three main forms. The first is “prophecy”, the proposition that alternative frameworks of meaning, in contrast to those that are dominant, are possible. The second is “paradox”, which consists of exemplifying in exaggerated form that which may be termed “irrational” by dominant social groups is actually very true. The final form is “representation” which makes use of art, drama and visual forms to show the contradictions of the social system. All of this helps render “power visible” (Melucci, 1989:76). In this sense, beyond being a challenge to cultural codes, higher education could also be a laboratory of social innovation.

3. Development needs and challenges

The third key role of higher education is active engagement with the pressing development needs and challenges of our societies.

Through teaching and learning, universities can develop a consciousness of myriad economic, educational, health, environmental and other problems, and through research they can confront and help contribute to their management and resolution.

Alongside, community engagement and service-learning can serve as a “means for connecting universities and communities with development needs” and “for higher education staff and students to partner with communities to address development aims and goals” (Stanton, 2008:3; 2). Carefully conceptualised and planned mutually respectful and reciprocal partnerships with communities have the potential to create opportunities for economic and social advancement, while at the same time enriching and enhancing research and learning and teaching.

4. Engagement with the intellectual and cultural life of societies

The fourth key role of higher education is to proactively engage with our societies at the intellectual and, more generally, cultural level, and to contribute to the intellectual and cultural development of a critical citizenry. This entails a ‘cognitive and political praxis’ (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991:62) undertaken through social commentary and critique and that is related to the shaping of world views and ideas, and social relations, institutions and practices.

Beyond communicating with peer scientific communities, universities have the responsibility to also, in the words of Stephen Jay Gould, “convey the power and beauty of science to the hearts and minds of a fascinated, if generally uninformed, public” (2006). As Gould notes, there is a ‘long and honourable tradition of popular presentation of science’, and we should not make the ‘mistake’ of ‘equating popularization with trivialization, cheapening, or inaccuracy’ (Gould, 2006). He rightly states that ‘the concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any compromise, without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all...people’ (ibid:2006).

The issue of communicating beyond the confines of universities and scientific communities poses whether our universities and scholars engage sufficiently with the public and serve adequately as catalysts of critical public education and intellectual debate, as part of higher education’s rationale of advancing the public good.

What is involved here is more than simply transmission of some established body of knowledge to users in the wider society, but a matter of the involvement of scholars in reflexive communication - an argumentative, critical and thoughtful engagement that shapes the very constitution of knowledge (Delanty, 2001:154). Moreover, such public engagement permits scholars, in the words of Edward Said “to speak the truth to power” with the goal being ‘mainly to project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles - peace, reconciliation, abatement of suffering - applied to the known facts’ (cited in Asmal, 2005). Universities need to give attention to creative strategies and mechanisms to promote and facilitate such public engagement.

5. Research and scholarship

The fifth key role of higher education is to imaginatively and creatively undertake different kinds of rigorous scholarship - discovery, integration, application and teaching - (Boyer, 1990) and rigorous research, which has different purposes (fundamental, applied, strategic, developmental), aims and objects.

The rise of an economy in which knowledge increasingly plays a critical role and is prized for the economic advantage that it can confer on businesses and countries means that knowledge production and the development and application of knowledge takes on a new significance. Carnoy contends that a key feature of the global economy is that the accumulation of capital is 'increasingly dependent on knowledge and information applied to production, and this knowledge is increasingly science-based' (1998:2). The implication is that "if knowledge is the electricity of the new informational international economy, then institutions of higher education are the power sources on which a new development process must rely" (Castells, 1993). Universities clearly take on great importance in this context. Although universities are increasingly not the sole knowledge-producing and research and development institutions, they remain important sites, especially of fundamental research.

However, the competition for and concentration on economic advantage inevitably means that largely certain kinds of knowledge and research, especially that generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering are privileged, to the detriment of the arts, humanities and social sciences. As Mkandawire argues, "attempts to improve Africa's prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford" and "it is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place...if Africa's development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed" (2009:vii).

Research must engage with the diverse developmental challenges of our societies and globe, but it is important that we do not judge the value of research in solely instrumental and utilitarian terms, and that we do not sacrifice basic scholarly research at the altar of 'relevance', defined in a parochial manner and reduced, ultimately, to market or economic relevance.

Conclusion

Higher education tends to be accorded numerous and often diverse roles. In the face of this, it could, indeed is likely to, play contradictory roles.

Its contributions could be simultaneously radical and transformative and reformist and conservative. That is to say, it could, simultaneously, reproduce, maintain and conserve, as well as undermine, erode and transform social relations, institutions, policies and practices. For example, under certain circumstances higher education may play a vital role in the dissemination of anti-racist ideas and thinking, eroding racism, racialism and racial prejudice and building a non-racial culture. Yet, concomitantly, it could play no or little

role in the undermining of patriarchy and sexism, homophobia and xenophobia. Indeed, it could even contribute to reinforcing patriarchy and sexism and other kinds of prejudice and intolerance through its own institutional culture and practices.

One reason for this, as Manuel Castells writes, is that universities do not stand outside of society; they are subject to “the conflicts and contradictions of society and therefore they will tend to express – and even to amplify – the ideological struggles present in all societies” (Castells, 2001: 212). Moreover, “universities are social systems and historically produced institutions, (and) all their functions take place simultaneously within the same structure”. The “real issue”, he suggests is “to create institutions solid enough and dynamic enough to stand the tensions that will necessarily trigger the simultaneous performance of somewhat contradictory functions” (Ibid.: 212).

Higher education and its institutions are buffeted by the cross-currents of the state, the market and civil society. A common experience of institutions is ‘demand overload’: that is they must cope with a vast array of varied goals, imperatives, expectations and demands, economic pressures, public expectations and institutional stakeholder demands. They must often do so: with difficulty in securing and retaining specialist personpower, which is increasingly attracted to the better remuneration offered by the public and private sectors; without adequate public finances; with limited scope for increased finance from tuition income, and with various difficulties posed by income from other sources. Simultaneously, they must remain faithful to the ‘public good’ ideals of higher education.

The fact that multiple expectations and demands are voiced more stridently and frequently is perhaps an indication of the wider and deeper understanding of universities as important engines of economic and social development. It is vital that universities address and mediate the ‘demand overload’ in principled, creative and strategic ways. On the one hand, universities must recognise the legitimacy of certain claims on them and address these as part of policy- and decision-making. On the other hand, universities must also refute, through the force of argument, reason and persuasion, other claims that could undermine their core identity and purposes and reduce them to something other than a university.

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