

# REIMAGINING UNIVERSITY–COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article is based on a keynote address to the second Higher Education Conference in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the environmental and inequality crises confronting South Africa and the world. After an examination of the societal context of universities, the article discusses critical issues in relation to university-community engagement. It attempts to address these issues by firstly providing an overview of the long-standing debates in our country concerning the academy's responsibilities and accountability to various constituencies beyond the universities gates and the imperative to rethink scholarship to engage communities meaningfully. Secondly, it will provide an appreciation of the overarching political economy of higher education and the corporatisation of universities before drawing conclusions about the processes that impede or allow the university to be responsive to community engagement. The article will provide a few historical and contemporaneous examples of the work of university-based researchers with various communities. The research of those who have an orientation toward working class communities and aim to democratise knowledge production will be highlighted. It will be argued that the latter's "praxis epistemology" (Amini 2017) assists us in reimagining university-community relations.

**Keywords:** universities, community engagement, political economy, praxis epistemology, academic capitalism, ratings and rankings regimes, EdTech.

## INTRODUCTION

The Second Higher Education Conference convened jointly by Universities South Africa (USAf) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) provided the space to reflect, collectively and critically on the notion of "The Engaged University". The context and challenges of the pandemic has – as the conference concept document insisted – "fundamentally compelled us to reconsider foundational questions regarding what our universities are as social institutions and who they are meant to serve". The conference conveners called on delegates to reflect on the "unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 while contemplating the university of the future".

It has been a dreadful period for many of us and it is difficult to find solace for our collective and irreplaceable losses. Yet, the challenges allow us to focus on the urgency of our

tasks. The environmentalist and activist George Monbiot (2020) designated the pandemic “nature’s wake-up call” and the writer Arundhati Roy (2020) entreated “... during this terrible despair (referring to the consequences of the pandemic), it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality”.

At a rudimentary but fundamental level, many of our colleagues around the world are also grappling critically with how the pandemic offers us “the opportunity to rethink not only new digital, online, and pedagogical possibilities but more importantly, the basic purposes of higher education, and how a renewed vision of education might be harnessed to develop more democratic and just societies” (Peters and Rizvi 2020, 717). This re-imagination is what I understand informs the eight sub-themes from which USAf hopes to formulate an action plan. Understanding the context, issues, challenges and the imperatives of the times is essential to inform an adequate action plan.

This article will argue, firstly, that if “community engagement” is to be taken seriously, it cannot be reduced to a perfunctory activity nor should it be akin to the business and financial world’s social responsibility public relations exercises. Will the discourse of “community engagement” be relegated to mere “political symbolism” (Badat 2022) or a corporate branding strategy consistent with market competition, rather than reflecting actual practice and institutional change? (Giroux 2002; Breeze, Taylor, and Costa 2019). Secondly, analogous to the related challenges of climate catastrophe and the pandemic, responsive and transformative higher education cannot be imagined without confronting the power of neoliberal market-driven policies and their effects.

### **What is the context facing universities now?**

The pandemic exacerbates the fault lines of inequality and its tragic consequences on people, their communities and institutions and highlights many of the cruel and dystopian absurdities of the present global system. In the context of the pandemic alone, these include pharmaceutical companies apportioning vaccines initially to the highest-income countries, the vaccine apartheid or vaccine nationalism practiced by the governments of rich countries in hoarding vaccines, protecting the profits of their pharmaceutical corporations and their appalling conduct in the World Trade Organisation in preventing the waiver on vaccine patents and related technologies (Okereke 2021).

The manifest lesson of the past few years underscores the point made by Klees (2020, 127) about capitalism’s insatiable appetite for maximisation and economic growth and its disregard for “the balance that is necessary in all ecological systems”. The new Sixth

Assessment Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022) tells us that humanity is on a cliff's edge. Many believe that the spread of zoonotic diseases will continue – a consequence of the economic destruction of critical ecosystems and the interface of this with agribusiness monocultures and global commodity chains. Similarly, alarmed by the chain of environmental catastrophes resulting from global warming (IPCC 2022) – including record heat waves, persistent droughts, out-of-control wildfires, megastorms, unprecedented floods, torrential rainfall, glacier melts, and sea level rise – Klees (2020, 125) exhorts us to challenge capitalism's culpability and to confront both the denialism of conservatives and the facile technological fixes and market incentives put forward by liberals. Some of the latter “posit mad scientist solutions like terraforming Mars or spewing chemicals into Earth's atmosphere to block the sun's heat” (2020, 127). For Klees, “this is dangerous hubris, all in the interests of protecting a system that promotes profits over life” (2020, 127).

In South Africa today, these global challenges are compounded by the blind faith in neo-liberalism, austerity and marketisation and aggravated by flagrant kleptocratic behaviour, patronage and desperate violence largely against the vulnerable in society. Eskom is the world's most polluting power company (Myllyvirta 2021) and South Africa's just transition to renewable energy is mired in problems (Lenferna 2022). These dire conditions result in a Hobbesian nightmare of despair and cynicism which impacts on university-community relations and which the action plan cannot ignore as we attempt to turn the situation around.

### **What role for universities in response to these dire circumstances?**

Speaking on the first day of the conference, the Vice-Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University, Prof Muthwa (2021) challenged academics to answer the question, “What are we good *for*?”; she emphasised the need for “undoing the university as we know it” and changing the orientation of universities toward pursuing social justice through “a deliberate receptiveness and openness to the knowledges of our communities and the education contributions they offer”. I wholeheartedly agree but suggest that the pursuit of social justice in education and transformation must contend with an era of unprecedented economic, political, social and ecological crises. Extending Prof Muthwa's urging we need to grapple with Stefan Collini's (2012) question, “What are universities really for?” To put it starkly, can the academy oriented to run along corporate lines foster an understanding of transformation and deliver on the promise of social justice, transformation and community engagement in an era of unprecedented economic, political, social and ecological crises.? How do we avert the trend toward academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), to positively play a systemic role to support and engender genuine community engagement, a sub-theme of the conference.

## Re-imagining scholarship for community engagement

It is imperative that we prevent the discourse of “community engagement” from suffering the same fate that has befallen “decolonisation” and “transformation” – interpreted narrowly, reduced to a “tick-box” exercise and contradicted in part by the relentless and rapid development of the entrepreneurial and neoliberal university in South Africa that will be discussed later.

Transformation for instance, is often narrowly interpreted through the ordinances of the Employment Equity Act. Representation at our universities along racial, class and gender lines in an intersectional way to address historical and ongoing oppressions is necessary and has clear salience. Yet, the cavalier use of apartheid-era racial nomenclature is obfuscatory, perpetuates stereotypes and in fact undermines the stated intention to address social justice and equity. As argued elsewhere, there are more meaningful and consequential ways to address disadvantage today (see Vally and Motala 2018).

A limited understanding of transformation also often excludes substantial issues of power and social relations, institutional culture, managerialism, meaningful curricula reform, the commodification of knowledge production, democratising decision-making and relations between the university and communities and the practices forged, issues I examine later. It is also about the nature of the society we aspire to and the role of the university and the intellectual and institutional implications for achieving such a society.<sup>2</sup> These are concerns both for the “internal” constituencies of the university but also in relation to its wider “external” communities. Identifying such communities for the purposes of “engagement” is itself an important part of the process of democratising decision-making and the accountabilities associated with that. It must, for instance, examine the priorities and choices to be made in respect of the communities to be engaged with, set out the criteria for the choices made, examine the actual possibilities, the intellectual and administrative and financial requirements to pursue such engagements and other related issues. In all of this the primary objective must be about democratising the process of knowledge construction and provide an insight into the role of the university in society – a question which has wider implications than one relating to “what is the university for”?

Engagement thus raises the critical question of choice. Badat (2022, 8) poses the question as follows: “What will happen when the ‘engaged university’ meets the increasingly corporatist, managerialist and commercialised university?” He argues that “engagement will be shaped by the university’s marketized character and the needs of the state and capital, with genuflections towards activist and critical scholarship” creating further contradictions since the university is

“already overlaid with notions of transformation, ‘engaged,’ ‘entrepreneurial,’ ‘research-led,’ ‘research intensive,’ ‘Afropolitan’ ...” (2022, 8). Inevitably therefore an orientation to the question of choice is essential to a principled approach.

### **University-Community engagement in practice**

In pursuing the objective of engagement, we do not have to assume a *tabula rasa* because a considerable amount of work and knowledge about this domain already exists and because many in the academy are genuinely keen on community engagement predicated on their commitment to social justice and equity.

South Africa has a long history of student involvement – often supported by academics – in community struggles. Instances include the Cape Peninsula Students Union in the late 50s (Alexander 2013) the Black Community Programmes initiated by members of the South African Students Organisation in the 70s (Rambally 1977; Hadfield 2017) and student involvement from “liberal” universities in establishing support groups for Black workers such as the Institute for Industrial Education in Durban and the Industrial Aid Society in Johannesburg (Vally, Bofelo, and Treat 2013).

From the mid-1980s, supporters of People’s Education were not only concerned with the transformation of schools; they also provided the impetus for the formation of hundreds of non-government education organisations and also actively challenged academics and the academy around three key areas: 1) accountability within the university and communities around them; 2) implementing People’s Education in the universities themselves and 3) support for developing People’s Education in schools through the production of alternative courses and teaching methods (Motala and Vally 2002, 183).

Prior to 1994 and during the transition, this strong tradition of university academics and students working closely with civil society and grassroots structures continued (Motala and Vally 2002).

The concept of “engagement” must itself be subjected to critical examination, since it has been interpreted in a variety of incommensurable ways having diverse and contradictory effects on practice as I will show in the brief discussion of these competing interpretations below.

The university-community nexus has given rise to concepts such as “engaged scholarship” (Boyer 1990), the “engaged university” (Watson et al. 2011), “community-based research” (Strand et al. 2003 and “community–university research partnerships” (Hall 2011). The Global University Network for Innovations Higher Education (GUNi) report “Knowledge, Engagement and Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change” provides a useful summary of the key features of the theory and practice of university engagement with communities

(Escrigas et al. 2014).

The editorial of the report makes the point that community-university engagement is a multifaceted, multidimensional portmanteau concept applicable to a vast range of activities although the literature on community-university engagement is drawn nearly exclusively from the perspective of the university side of the engagement agenda. It takes issue with the connotation of “service” and “outreach” which in any case has less value and prestige than the teaching and research functions of the university and question the patronising assumption that “service” relates to “knowledge and expertise available to HEIs that will be transferred to communities and will thus help them to address their problems” (Escrigas et al. 2013) instead of seeing community engagement as mutually beneficial to universities and communities alike. Likewise, scholar-activists such as Richa Nagar (2019) cautions that “Experts often assume that the poor, hungry, rural, and/or precarious need external interventions. They frequently fail to recognize how the same people create politics and knowledge by living and honing their own dynamic visions.”

The GUNi editorial supports the concept of engagement suggested by De Sousa Santos (2006) in his notion of “ecologies of knowledge” – a framework which is centred on knowledge from the “other side of the line” linked to values and active citizenship. Similarly, the editorial promotes the importance of knowledge production and creation “carried out in civil society structures or social movements in the context of acting on critical issues in communities ...” (Escrigas et al. 2014, xxxvi) and expresses the hope that “community-based research can help to bring the capabilities and aspirations of communities and universities together through partnership practices that integrate community–university interests” (Escrigas et al. 2014, xxxvi).

An examination of the typologies of engagement is inseparable from the work of social movements. The organisational forms that arise from the collective life and struggles of communities are intrinsic not only to the mobilisation of community for socio-political and cultural purposes but also as expressions of the modalities of learning and knowledge development that takes place in them. This knowledge production occurs in mostly unseen and academically unrecognised ways through non-formal, informal and incidental education. Often such learning is essential to build skills and understand the need for solidarity – vital aspects of community resilience. Knowledge about power, possibility and social change is developed during daily struggles to make their realities. Appreciating the knowledge production and learning that occurs in such communities through forms of activism is key to understanding the relationship between academic work and community engagement. Our late colleague Choudry (2015, 1) has suggested that such insight:

“... can greatly enrich, broaden, and challenge dominant understandings of how and where education, learning, and knowledge production occur and what these look like. It argues that these are resources that can provide critical conceptual tools with which to understand, inform, imagine, and bring about social change. It contends that the success of organizing to fight injustice and create a better and fairer world depends on taking such knowledge and learning seriously. But this also requires being able to reflect critically, build spaces where people can come together to act and learn collectively, and appreciate the unfinished nature of popular struggles for social and political change.”

From our experience there is little clarity about how ideas about the “co-construction” or the “co-creation” of knowledge is understood (Motala and Vally 2022).

Motala (2019) identifies other major obstacles which cohere around the conventions of academic research and publications. For instance, there is scant evidence of empathy or understanding of the intricacies and limitations of “community engagement” as academic practice. There is a limited conception – of the “extra-curricular” demands of engagement, its subjectivities, and the unpredictable conditions over which there is no academic control. And it has little awareness of the existential angst associated with such work. Moreover, engagement work, properly done, is time consuming and often does not have the heft and value in the agreement on an academic’s workload as do research for “accredited” publications and teaching. Onerous funding arrangements, the nature of short-term donor funding and the lack of sustained university funding for community research is also a fundamental barrier to the aspirations of systemic approaches to community engagement. Motala (2019) identifies these obstacles as emanating from the methodological and conceptual limitations of the “academic-industrial complex where particular forms of power and knowledge are privileged relative to knowledge that is socially useful and drawn from community experience and struggle” (2019, 15).

He argues that although these issues are real, they should not paralyse socially conscious and engaged intellectuals and identifies various caveats including the power dynamics between academics and communities and how these might be mitigated. He concedes too that research and enquiry is often imprecise and “messy” but argues against the view that “only members of the working class and marginalised can do useful research about issues affecting ‘their’ communities – and conversely that middle class intellectuals have no right to enter that domain” (Motala 2019, 16) emphasising that:

“... since social issues are not only about the lives of marginalised communities but are about all of society – since all of society is compromised (for instance) by social inequality and rampant poverty – all of us are equally obliged to think about it; to act in ways to understand and enquire

about it and to collectively find approaches to deal with these issues. Intellectuals have a moral obligation because their intellectual attributes are based on the historic and ‘congealed’ social savings – the productive and reproductive labour of working classes over time. The implication of this approach is that academics as intellectual activists from middle classes have a historical, moral, political and social role in the co-construction of knowledge for social justice. Social injustice is antithetical to the long-term stability and interests of all society, including academics, and not only of the interests of marginalised communities.”

These views accord with others such as the Tanzanian scholar Issa Shivji (2019) who argues for the social responsibility of intellectuals to build counter-hegemonies, Neville Alexander (2012, 32)<sup>3</sup> who insisted on the moral obligation of the intelligentsia to “go into emergency mode”, the assassinated Guyanese historian, and popular educator, Walter Rodney (2019) who emphasised “groundings” with communities and a group of scholars who call for the fusion of activism and scholarship or “scholactivism” – far deeper than “socially-responsive scholarship” (Amini 2017).

In the past decade, researchers from the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the Centre for Integrated Post School Education and Training (CIPSET) at the Nelson Mandela University (NMU) both of which are part of the SARCHI Chair on Community, Adult and Workers’ Education (CAWE) and their research networks and students have collectively worked with many communities to co-construct knowledge production. Working closely with social movements, community organisations, labour education organisations, community colleges and trade unions we have attempted to develop research capacity and implement education initiatives through building long-term relationships. Research areas in which our transdisciplinary endeavours are crucial, include pedagogies for community education and training including the community-school nexus, adult education, worker education and their relationship to skills for sustainable livelihoods and socially useful work; youth unemployment; society and work; the solidarity economy; climate change and education, training and employment, and marginalised and migrant communities. Critical social theory provides our networks with an interdisciplinary and humanistic approach drawing on sociological, historical, political economy and philosophical approaches to examine the class, racial and gendered aspects of our work with communities.

Much of the work is embedded in the educational ideas and practices of communities and social movements and is of a non-formal and informal nature encompassing a range of activities such as community reading clubs, worker co-operatives, literacy, food gardens and community health (CERT 2022). In the course of our work with communities we have attempted to develop methodologically innovative approaches to the co-production of knowledge. Often our research entails a “praxis epistemology” (Amini 2017) to understand community problems and we



attempt to design activities together with communities through for example accessible booklets on education rights and broadcasts through community radio stations. These co-constructed efforts have allowed some communities the tools to inform, direct, own and use research to claim a space in the formal policy arena and to demand accountability from state actors.

Accessible mediums, modes and forms are demanded by the very process of engagement. In addition to the production of written work for the research process itself (training and induction of researchers, to clarify the objectives of the research for relevant communities) there is a raft of writings emanating directly because of the research. These reflect, moreover, the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of such research which are no less an expression of the conflictual and contested relations that exist in wider society. Some of the work with communities and the issues raised here have been documented over several years and published in academic articles of which only a small but representative selection is included here: Motala 2015; Vally 2016; Halim 2017; Halim 2018; Hlatshwayo 2017; Baatjes et al. 2018; Choudry and Vally 2018a; Choudry and Vally 2018b; Choudry 2020; Hlatshwayo 2020; Senekal 2020; Hlatshwayo 2021; Motala and Senekal 2021; Black 2021.

The intention here is not to romanticise the capacity of communities to conduct research and produce knowledge, undoubtedly, it is sometimes fraught with complications and contradictions, nor do I gloss over resource constraints, which limit capacities and impedes progress. Yet, our experience has shown the very real possibilities for social and institutional transformation through expanding and deepening the nature of the relationships with working class communities and support for their struggles. We need to think of how the university might properly support such socially responsive scholarship augmenting the value of academic and publishable work. More discussion concerning creative and nuanced criteria are required to include various forms of scholarly engagement beyond the formulaic and orthodox conventions of the academy.

Partly based on the praxis of CIPSET/CERT and the community organisations they work with, Motala (2019) consolidates key areas of concern around scholarship and community engagement which I summarise below:

Firstly, present conceptions of engagement are often premised largely on the linear transmission of preconceived ideas from academics to communities leaving little room for the critical evaluation of such knowledge about the forms of academic validation of their scholarship – based largely on “accredited” writing in scholarly academic journals.

Secondly, approaches to engagement are often silent about the predominant interests in the “engaged” activities of universities directed at supporting big business and to a lesser extent the government and less regard is paid to the knowledge developed in communities and the

potential role that universities can play there. The dominance of corporate entrepreneurial values and business-led orientations in universities has often led to peculiar interpretations of “community engagement”.

Thirdly, the obligation to pursue universities public good mandate is largely negated by the reach of powerful interests in shaping the work of academic institutions – the subordination of the public uses of knowledge and its production to the direct interests of a particular company for profit – including through the privatisation of intellectual property produced largely through the collaboration of ostensibly public good research. Several South African universities have formed companies.

Fourthly, there is no strong and systemic obligation on universities to respond to what should be their core mandate to use their intellectual and other resources to support those communities that are historically and socially marginalised. Most academics are unaware, and sometimes dismissive of the considerable amount of non-formal and unaccredited educational research and practice taking place in such communities.

Fifthly, many attempts at engagement so-called are often characterised by the paternalism and condescension that passes for knowledge co-construction – we need to critically examine this orientation to engagement.

Our work, linked to a rich tradition of praxis in pursuit of the co-construction of knowledge and meaningful relations with communities is based on the need to use intellectual resources in support of mobilisation, organisation and education for social justice, transformation and democratic citizenship. Simultaneously, we attempt to lay the basis for an alternative vision in which knowledge and skills are not perceived in purely instrumental terms but as intrinsic and indispensable to the creation of an inclusive and transformed society. Issues relating to the role of education and training in the creation and promotion of a democratic citizenry; meeting the aspirations for social justice; human rights and the promotion of the cultural life of communities are regarded as a distraction from the goal of economic growth and international competitiveness. It speaks to the broader purposes of education and training, not reduced to narrow economic ends or contingent on the labour market requirements of business or solely on its “entrepreneurial” role. Crucial to these perspectives is the view that human capital development has no other role than the narrowly described techno-economic aims to which it is attached. Our research has critiqued Human Capital Theory assumptions and the simplistic claims related to the link between education and economic growth (Vally and Motala 2014). We examine these issues in the next section.

## POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The second broad issue discussed below relates to the perspective that responsive and transformative higher education cannot be imagined without confronting the power of neoliberal market-driven policies and their effects. As early as 1999, the late George Subotzky (1999) and others at the University of Western Cape’s Education Policy Unit delved into some aspects of this issue. In an article entitled “Beyond the entrepreneurial university the potential role of South Africa’s historically disadvantaged institutions in reconstruction and development”, Subotzky argued that there were two tendencies affecting higher education in South Africa. On the one hand, universities and colleges under pressure to become more market oriented and to respond to rapid changes in information technology and knowledge production, and on the other hand, a growing concern that they should work for the benefit of society, promoting social equity and responding to community needs.

Neville Alexander (2006) too in a commentary in what seems like another era during the debate relating to academic freedom and institutional autonomy between John Higgins, Roger Southall, Andre Du Toit and others forcefully argued that the university is accountable to the collegium but also the various constituencies beyond its walls:

“The moat that secured the university from outside interference has been filled up by capitalist development and the inmates must soil their feet by venturing outside beyond their comfort zones in order to address issues of immediate and ongoing concerns to people out there. I doubt that there are many who would not agree that this is most welcome. However, the answer to the question of who the constituencies are and what power they must influence what goes on inside the walls is crucial.” (Alexander 2006, 41).

Alexander goes on to explain that this is not a simple matter of effective pedagogy, but it involves the very character of the system of reproduction, that is, whether it is meant to “replicate generation after generation the same inequities or whether it is calculated to flatten these out” (2006, 47).

A useful concept in this regard is “academic capitalism”. It aims to explain the integration of the university into the global economy, more specifically how faculty, students, administrators and academics use “a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions (HEIs) to the new knowledge economy” (Slaughter and Leslie 1997, 210). This refers to the encroachment of the profit motive into the academy and represents “a shift from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime” where students become consumers and institutions the marketers (Ibid). The idea of higher education as a public good is surrendered to the logic of the bottom line and antithetical to the vision of an engaged university.

As Jessop (2018) argues, there is an increasing global trend toward academic capitalism and profit-oriented entrepreneurial practices in the fields of education and research. Universities, are now increasingly subjected to greater or lesser financial, administrative, and ideological pressures, acting less like centers that could exercise some degree of autonomy in the pursuit of “disinterested” education and research and more like economic enterprises that aim to maximize their revenues and advance the economic competitiveness of the spaces in which they operate. Seduction by commercial interests can often compromise the freedom to critique as academics are encouraged to “think more and more like entrepreneurs” (Press and Washburn 2000). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) refer to academic staff being channeled into entrepreneurial ventures as part of the university’s income-generating ethic and their embedding within the logic of academic capitalism.

Increasingly in South Africa too, in the light of annual deficits and student debts we see universities pressured to pursue entrepreneurial activities through third-stream funding ventures modeled on businesses.<sup>5</sup>

For Richard Hall and Kate Bowles (2016): “In this volatile international marketplace for educational services, both research and, critically, pedagogy are now governed by a language rooted in productivity and organisational development. Universities deliver return on investment through brand, portfolio and product; and with other large corporations they have refocused their strategic planning.” This development weakens, instrumentalises and commodifies community links and resources for research to advance the ideals of critical citizenship and democracy in favour of corporate interests – including that of the increasingly corporate university itself (Baatjes, Spreen and Vally 2012).

The once venerated role of the public intellectual speaking courageously to a public discourse around critical societal issues (Said 1994) or collaborating with progressive social movements is now frequently mocked and deprecated. As Fraser and Taylor (2016, 11) sardonically remark, academics “... are increasingly expected to fund-raise research resources and solicit media attention to enhance our ‘profile’. If this happens to incorporate social justice or social change goals – all the better – because that too can be marketable ... helping to create a veneer of respectability; one that covers over commercial interests to portray more palatable images of universities as noble places of knowledge and learning.” While this trend to reduce academics to “commercial agents” has not reached full-blown proportions, the foundations are being developed. In some South African universities, academics are paired with faculty “business partners” and accountants with oversight functions beyond their admissible role to prevent malfeasance.

Science, technology, engineering and mathematical subjects and disciplines that have a

purchase in the marketplace are valued more highly and research publications are in the hands of a handful of wealthy transnational corporations. Solidarity and learning that addresses the self to public life and social responsibility to robust public participation and democratic citizenship is marginalised.

### **Business models, rankings and 4IR**

No doubt most universities are under severe financial strain and face inordinate pressure. The huge increase in student numbers is not matched by the recruitment of academic staff and close to 60 per cent of academic staff are on temporary contracts (Essop 2020, 36). Badat (2022, 11) warns

“The Minister’s message at the recent USAF/CHE/DHET conference was essentially you will have to do more with less resources. Except at a few well-endowed universities, the norm going forward could be austerity measures, including postponing new staff appointments, fewer permanent staff and a reduction in temporary staff appointments and success. Moreover, the precarity of work could have negative implications for academic freedom, intellectual autonomy and academic rule, already under threat in some instances.”

Some university managements justify the establishment of business modelled, profit-seeking enterprises to support students unable to pay fees. Apart from being reminiscent of trade unions forming investment companies to support their members with all its negative consequences (Smit 2022) this too exemplifies a reliance on the vagaries of charity and philanthropy instead of addressing systemically the commodification of education and the costs of university education. In this respect Black (2021, 3) refers to,

“The second threat to our ability to imagine our future universities beyond extensions of what they currently are is a kind of schizophrenia wherein we believe we can somehow have ‘the best of both’ – that somehow universities can be the darlings of private capital’s insatiable techno-appetite and behave like profit-seeking enterprises, while also being autonomous places of thinking and questioning. This schizophrenia is exemplified in a recent op-ed by the vice-chancellor of another prominent South African university (Marwala 2021), which insists that universities are simultaneously to embrace logics and values of private enterprises and yet not. Such schizophrenia ignores the innate tendency for the pursuit of profit (or ‘savings’, as it is framed in neoliberalised public institutions) to consume all else in its wake ....”

The questions I pose are whether we can work together with students, staff and communities, in a united front to find ways to confront budgetary austerity? Have we squandered the possibilities that existed on a mass scale during the fees must fall and decolonisation moment? (Vally, Motala, and Maharajh 2018). Instead of a united front with students, workers and many academic staff, most university managements chose a confrontational course (Choudry and

Vally 2020, 14).

## CONCLUSION

Progressively, the relevance of academic work is linked to productivity as measured by rating and ranking scales and what Gonzales and Nunez (2014) call the “rankings regime” which reinforces the managerial culture in higher education (Ordorika and Lloyd 2015). Moosa (2018) discusses how this regime perpetuates historical inequalities between universities and within universities. She writes, “... some South African universities are pursuing a global presence which may be to the detriment of national priorities such as the call for decolonisation of institutions and the curriculum, the student fee crisis, considerations of free HE, student success and improving teaching and learning” (Moosa 2018, 52).

Entrepreneurial forms of techno-utopianism, robotics and blind faith and evangelising in educational technology are often uncritically embraced by university administrations as Mirrlees and Alvi (2020, vii) write:

“Every day, we are inundated with stories of how market-facing digital technologies applied to education – what we call ‘EdTech’ – must be the forefront of a social change that is both inexorable and promising. Parents, students, policy makers and the general public are informed that EdTech’s applications and affordances constitute the way out of the current social crisis. Yet, the crisis is an economic and political one, not a purely ‘technological’ one. Nonetheless, EdTech is frequently a congealed form of the flawed idea that education plus new technology is the primary and best solution to social problems.”

The importance of technology and the development of technological skills is a necessary social objective though not at the expense of an uncritical approach to the existing global political economy. Critical questions need to be asked about the political economy of technology itself, and its pedagogical and social implications. “Beware of the Bot” (Baatjes 2020, 7) states that “at present, the 4IR is presented as the new development that operates like a force of nature – we cannot argue with it any more than we can argue with the inexorable laws of gravity ... In South Africa many activists, scholars and critics have raised critical questions about the promises of the 4IR. Can it address the triadic problems of inequality, unemployment and poverty? How can it deal with the issues of ‘race’, class and gender? How will it address the ecological crisis and global warming?”

In similar vein, Badat (2022, 3) argues that “... lest we imagined 4IR as the harbinger of a (technocratic) utopia, we had to confront the fact that the first three industrial revolutions did not create a just and humane world. Why did we imagine that the 4IR would do so. Some aspects of 4IR could *potentially* enrich people’s lives – but *which* people, disaggregated by

‘race’, class, gender, disability, age, geography and nationality.”

In convening the second higher education conference, the conference organisers understood that the present context fundamentally compelled them “to reconsider foundational questions regarding what our universities are as social institutions and who they are meant to serve”. I argue that one of these foundational questions should consider whether our institutions should serve the interests of big business which have amply demonstrated their inability to be the saviors imagined by various leaders. They have demonstrably failed to meet the social priorities implied in meaningful community engagement and have compromised the public good ideals of the university. Universities have a pivotal role to use its considerable intellectual resources to creatively address the enormous range of real-life issues affecting all of society, renouncing the tendentious and privileging orientation that support the existing epistemological and political regimes. Some of these issues include sustainable livelihoods as well as social housing, public transport, food sovereignty farming projects, environmental rehabilitation, sustainable energy, universal health, human rights centred work, arts and culture and many other programmes and vocations beyond aligning with and meeting the labour market requirements of corporations.

Similarly, despite the negative developments globally of the corporatisation of higher education, progressive spaces do exist in the academy and individuals in many universities are demonstrating these possibilities especially by connecting with community organisations and social movements to advance critique and counter-hegemonic work. These must be expanded through a vigorous defence of higher education as a public good and a sphere of critical democratic citizenry, while resisting the commercial and corporate values that seek to place their imprimatur on the form, purpose and mission of our institutions.

## NOTES

1. This article is partly based on my address to the Second Higher Education Conference: 2021, “Reimagining University Engagement within the Context of a Responsive, Responsible and Transformative University”, 6–8<sup>th</sup> October, Future Africa Conference Centre, University of Pretoria. Thanks to Enver Motala for providing important suggestions.
2. Motala (2022) in fact argues that the question of “what the university is for” is a subsidiary question – subsidiary to “what kind of society do we aspire to”? He emphasises that the latter is a prior question, and that the role of universities cannot be examined without that prior question.
3. The full quote reads: “The tidal wave of violent crime and abuse, which is the direct consequence of the structural inequality and the mental structures that characterise post-apartheid South Africa, demands of the radical intelligentsia that we go into emergency mode. And, while we must consider seriously the pertinent effects of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid in this context, it is time that we stop justifying our intellectual timidity and lack of historical imagination with this threadbare mantra.”
4. Some universities have established companies such as the University of the Witwatersrand’s “Wits

Enterprise”, University of Pretoria’s “Enterprises UP”, the University of Johannesburg’s “UJ Invent” and the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s “Innovations”. Establishing technological entrepreneurial centres is also a recent trend such as the University of Johannesburg’s “Technopreneurship Centre” <https://www.itweb.co.za/content/KBpdg7pmPKOMLEew> and the University of Western Cape’s “Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation” <https://www.uwc.ac.za/campus-life/special-units-and-programmes/centre-for-entrepreneurship-and-innovation>.

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