

# Universities in a time of change\*

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## The idea of the university

A casual glance at universities around the world quickly reveals that they are actually not at all as universal as the term 'university' might imply, as universities show enormous differences in ethos, standards, cultures, systems, reputations, and so on.

## Critical thinking

But central to university training is the concept of critical thinking. In its research, in its scholarship, in its teaching and in its community engagement, a good university nurtures critical, independent thinking in all of its disciplines and in all of its facets.

Critical thinking is vital for the development and progress of society—from government, to industry, to commerce and to the academy itself, we need more critical, independent graduates for South Africa. We need such graduates for innovation, for creativity and for new solutions to old problems. We need critical, independent thinkers for the organs of democracy such as the judiciary and the press. It is through more lateral critical thinking that we are able to address the many social and economic challenges that we face in our country, ultimately for the good of society.

Skills are also an essential part of university training, and our students need to master the basic discipline-specific skills in order that they have the basis to develop critical, independent thinking in their chosen fields. It is very necessary that universities impart skills—not in a mechanical fashion but in ways that instil critical, independent thinking. This is what distinguishes university training from, say, artisan training, the latter being so important for keeping the cogs of our economy moving.

A good university academic should publish in internationally-accredited journals, and be an active member of his or her local, national and international community of scholars. A good academic provokes critical thinking in his or her teaching and supervision of research students, and actively contributes to the academic functioning of the university.

A good academic also engages critically with society: I don't think that we can

leave it only to government agencies, technocrats and bureaucrats to make decisions that have a profound effect on our lives. Society needs independent, credible and technically competent voices to pay attention to issues of safety and the environment, and to protect its general interests. Society also needs to be protected from uninformed voices (remember the AIDS dissidents?) on projects of national importance. Who should society rely on for the truth—or the best version of the truth? Or better still, how can society make up its own mind on matters that concern it?

I want to make it clear that it is not simply a matter of having expert scientists adjudicate on matters under consideration. Many of the Nazi scientists were probably expert scientists. What we need are expert scientists who are *also* critical and independent, and who are socially conscious and compassionate. We need credible voices that are unstinting in seeking the truth; who are morally and ethically bound to telling the truth; and are courageous enough to act on the truth.

Academic freedom enshrines our protec-

tion to seek the truth. Academic freedom is not a special privilege accorded to academics, but it is a responsibility and obligation of academics to be critically engaged with society—being public critical voices is a part of our job. This is our contract with society.

## The importance of collegiality

Disagreements develop very quickly within university settings because independent thinking encourages questions and counter-questions, and arguments and counter-arguments. Dogmatic views are quickly thwarted, and dictatorial attitudes are hastily shunned.

Collegial relationships and mutual respect are vital in the decision-making processes within universities, and this ensures that the university holds together despite disagreements, no matter how fundamental these disagreements might be. Scholars rely on the independent views of their peers to help make decisions. No single individual holds unlimited power. In this way, universities operate in ways that cannot be more different from the commercial world.

Ideas and decisions emerge from cogent, logical and consistent arguments within an open, transparent and democratic ethos. Ethical behaviour and impartiality in judgement are the basis for university deliberations. Universities are principled places and are guided by the pursuit of



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Nithaya Chetty signs the book of T.B. Davie lectures at the University of Cape Town before delivering the 50th T.B. Davie lecture in August.

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the truth rather than by expedience. These basic elements distinguish intellectual discourse from political discourse, which are often at variance with each other. Perhaps this is why it is so important that good universities strive to be essentially autonomous and apolitical in a democratic state?

#### The fragile state of universities

Universities are rather fragile places, as it can take many decades to build a 'great' university—in a reputational sense of the word—but only a little while to cause reputational damage to an institution.

Reputation and public perception are harsh realities with which universities must deal, and good universities work hard to earn their reputations. Universities with good reputations are able to attract the best staff and students, and they are able to bring in private funding such as endowments. Their graduates are well sought after. Universities find it very difficult to recover from a damaged reputation. Despite myriad university restructuring plans and vast sums of money thrown at some universities, history shows that it is very difficult to change the course of a failing university.

Beyond the bricks and mortar, there is something ethereal that is the university—it is the culture of the place. University culture helps create a stable framework within which universities operate, and stability is necessary for the optimal functioning of good universities.

Universities develop traditions over time, and each university is unique in its traditional ways. It is because of their traditional ways that universities are often construed as being conservative places. Universities are often accused of being inflexible to change. And yet it is precisely because of the security afforded by stable academic environments that free intellectual thought flourishes, and new ideas emerge, ultimately for the advancement of society. Universities are very delicate and very complex in this way as they are paradoxically conservative cultural places of lateral and even radical thought.

#### The evolving nature of universities

Universities are not unlike living organisms that need to adapt to the changing environment in which they find themselves. This means that good universities are always evolving as they try to redefine themselves. Universities are constantly in a state of flux, and here I explore some of the factors currently impacting on the idea of the university.

### University governance

#### Internal threat

In South Africa, institutional autonomy is less of an issue than in the past, as universities are free to set their own entrance criteria based on academic performance, although government continues to lend a meddling hand, and I believe that this is set to grow under the stewardship of Dr Blade Nzimande. The main threats to academic freedom today appear to come from within the university with increasing managerialism and institutional corporatism; and the emergence of neo-liberal policies in higher education.

#### Marginalisation of the academic voice

As an academic, I am most concerned about the marginalisation of the academic voice on matters that concern the academic functioning of our universities. Nowhere is this exemplified more than in the manner in which university senates are losing their status of being the authority of the academic voice within the university.

New university statutes have vested more power in the hands of university councils. This, together with the emergence of the managerialist and corporatist university, in turn has led to a rise of union activism—and the environment for rational academic discourse has become even more squeezed. I refer to this as the emergence of the 'blue collar university'.

Academics thrive on open discussion and debate, and so it is hugely debilitating for academics to increasingly find themselves in an undemocratic environment where they are not being consulted on matters that directly affect their work, and in some instances they are being bullied into submission.

Increasingly now in South Africa, powerful university managers find it convenient to foist change on their institutions in autocratic ways. The crass use of power trumps intellectual discourse as political rhetoric and populist beliefs are increasingly holding sway within our universities. Academic systems are being bypassed by technical and legalistic procedures.

Universities need to return to democratic values or run the risk of entrenching an anti-intellectual culture that threatens the very idea of the university. Change will take firmer root within our institutions when all sectors actively participate in the process of change. Academics need to get more involved in all aspects related to the academic functioning of the university. Senates need to re-assert their authority on the academic functioning of universities,

and this can happen only if their processes are open, consultative, democratic and transparent.

#### The increasing litigious nature of universities

The increasingly managerialist ethos has bred a more litigious environment, for how else can compliance with the quagmire of intellectually offensive rules and regulations that have come to govern our universities be enforced? Managers are abdicating their responsibilities to the courtroom, often with devastating consequences, and with a brutal legalistic interpretation of what a university should be. This is giving rise to what Dr Jane Duncan, former director of the Freedom of Expression Institute, has referred to as the 'disciplinary university'.

University subsidiary policy and regulations very often run counter to constitutional norms, and in so doing contribute to an intellectually repressive environment, for example electronic communications policies that enable managers to monitor e-mail exchanges of their staff; or the inappropriate use of confidentiality requirements that have the effect of closing down discussion and debate. Confidentiality within a university setting should be kept to an absolute minimum and then only with careful justification. The university should encourage a free-flow of information and open discussion and debate. There should be freedom of association.

The university should find more collegial and internal ways of resolving conflicts. External lawyers should be kept out of the university disciplinary processes. A university ombudsman should prove helpful in easing tensions and preventing the escalation of problems, especially during this time of change.

I can understand why somebody might be disciplined for, say, vandalism, or assault or for showing up drunk for work, but I cannot fathom the need for charging somebody for what they say. I think that no thought or utterance should be banned from a university, no matter how repugnant that view might be. The constitution, of course, stipulates conditions under which freedom of speech is not protected, such as inciting violence, hatred, racism, etc.

'Bringing the university into disrepute' is not a justifiable charge, for what does it mean? Its nebulous nature has meant that it is a catch-all for getting at people who might be considered to be undesirable.

I think that we should avoid defamation charges if at all possible, and we should all

perhaps be a little more generous when attacked on a personal basis — if only to reduce the spiralling climate of conflict.

### Transformation

Why do we need to talk about transformation in the context of academic freedom?

There are several reasons why we need to talk about transformation in the context of our quest for academic freedom. Of significance, here, are the remarks made by Dr Blade Nzimande in the April 2009 issue of *Umsebenzi* (the online newsletter for the South African Communist Party), just before he was appointed Minister of Higher Education:

In such situations academic freedom, in practice, means the continuation of a racialised, patriarchal and elite forms of knowledge production; that is, academic freedom in favour of the continued reproduction of a colonial-type intellectual landscape. Unfortunately it still happens that at the head of this project are minorities who have continued to dominate our academia and intelligentsia.

This view—that the quest for academic freedom is a front to perpetuate racist behaviour, to resist transformation, and to argue for the *status quo*—has also been expressed by many other black African academics. Scholars need to engage with these ideas, however much they might disagree with them. Whether this is a real or a perceived view is almost irrelevant if we indeed want to find a way to go beyond the immediate impasse that has been created. It is sufficient to know that this view exists and that it needs to be engaged.

Another reason why we need to consider transformation in the context of academic freedom is that in a growing number of cases, the emergence of autocratic, managerialist behaviour has its roots in the pursuit of transformation. Also, I believe that the shift in the power relations, especially with respect to university councils and senates, has its roots in transformation. The breakdown of some university systems can also be traced to the pursuit of transformation. The rising politicisation and gradual erosion of institutional autonomy in our universities is due largely to transformation. So universities need to seriously engage with transformation if they care at all about academic freedom.

### What is transformation?

'Transformation' in this context is not formally defined anywhere, but there is a

general understanding of the need for racial and gender redress, increasing access for the previously disadvantaged; changing the university culture to make it more inclusive; responding to the multi-lingual nature of our society; strengthening the culture of human rights as enshrined in our constitution; making the academic curriculum more relevant to the South African context; creating more academic support for students; making university systems work more optimally; and so on.

I believe that all South Africans who care about our future are committed to the broad principles of transformation in our higher education system, but there is strong disagreement on how transformation should be accomplished, and on appropriate time-frames for transformation.

We are still a long way away from achieving the ideals of transformation. However, I think that there is a lot more goodwill amongst academics in favour of change and for addressing the vestiges of apartheid than is often recognised and appreciated. There is also little recognition of how far we have come thus far. I think that a general lack of trust seems to be getting in the way of reaching a better understanding amongst the differing parties. In some instances, universities are in a state of war over these issues.

This continues to be the biggest challenge facing our universities today. These disagreements are potentially catastrophic and threaten to divide and even destroy our universities if careful attention is not placed on addressing them in a more constructive way.

### The means and the end

I believe that it is hugely counterproductive and simplistic to pose transformation and academic freedom as irreconcilable opposites. We must find a way to ensure that both these agendas support each other and coexist in better harmony. This calls for much more debate and dialogue, not less, and for much creative thought—the very stuff of which universities should be made.

More importantly, I believe that the *means* to a transformed higher education system is as important as the *end goal* of a more equitable and representative system. Who is to say that intellectual freedoms are not important in a transformed university? We undermine the very goals of transformation if we do not pay sufficient

attention to democratic and participatory ways of changing the system.

### The Soudien Report

The Soudien report released only a couple of months ago paints a dire picture of racism and discrimination within our universities. It concludes that:

It is clear from this overall assessment of the state of transformation in higher education, that discrimination, in particular with regard to racism and sexism, is pervasive in our institutions.

The report proposes a number of corrective steps. The recommendations are actually very broad and touch on many different facets of the university life such as staff development, learning, accommodation and governance. Many of the interventions that are recommended are top-heavy, and this will continue to fuel the view that university autonomy is being eroded, as a consequence of more centralised university managerialism.

I feel that academics can counter this by taking the lead on many of the issues raised in the report. Rather than responding in a reactionary manner to its findings, I believe that the academic body has an important opportunity to claim ownership of this process by engaging directly with it rather than by shunning it. I would like to see senates discussing and debating the contents of this report. There will be some aspects with which I am sure they will agree strongly, and some aspects with which they may well have strong disagreements. But let this be the beginning of a new process in which academics take a lead in imagining a new society free from discrimination.

### Conclusion

In the end, those institutions which stand tall among South African universities will be those which take the goals of transformation seriously, effected change by democratic means and worked tirelessly to protect the intellectual freedoms that are the very basis of the university. If academic freedom is on the decline at our universities – and I believe it is – then it is up to us academics to keep the idea of academic freedom alive. When society finally wakes up to the importance of an independent, critical and credible academy, let it not be that we look about and cannot find that which we can call a university.

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