

Reimagining the curriculum in a postcolonial space: Engaging the public good purposes of higher education in South Africa

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I was really honoured early this year to get an invitation to do this keynote. At that time it was clear that if the conference was focusing on curriculum in South African higher education then a departure point for this keynote needed to be the crucially important 2013 report by the Council on Higher Education entitled “A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure”. This report built on earlier work by Ian Scott and others but for the first time in our post-apartheid history we had a national picture which drew together two important metrics on our system: the proportion of the youth cohort that is enrolled in higher education, and the proportion of these students who complete the degrees that they started – I don’t need to rehash those statistics, you know them, and the picture is not encouraging.

And then 2015 happened in South African higher education. The view that all is not OK in our system was no longer confined to nicely written reports – but burst onto centre stage in a series of protests that recently coalesced in a national student uprising centred on the issue of fees, but also drawing in related issues around the failure of our society to meet the aspirations of so many of our young people and to deal with its colonial and apartheid legacy. There is so much important work to be done in grappling with this moment, what it means, and how we go forward. I am mindful of the huge complexity in the moment, of the many layers, of the particular local formations, and the danger of trying to interpret things through your own institutional lens – and maybe your own fears and hopes. Today I want to aim for a small contribution that doesn’t so much look at the practicalities of protesting and institutional responses, but rather to come at things from a slightly different direction, to try and understand the moment, revisiting the purposes of higher education in the light of our current situation, and working this through to a position on curriculum.

My starting point will be to argue that a focus primarily on efficiency in the system – as particularly exemplified in the CHE report, while understandable, is taking us in the wrong direction. It is understandable that we are a bit obsessed with efficiency, and there is no doubt that we need to be challenged by the situation of each student whose academic efforts in the year do not contribute towards the attainment of a degree. The personal consequences of academic failure cannot be ignored. However, if we confine our gaze too narrowly to throughput we are missing an opportunity for asking potentially more important questions about higher education in contemporary South Africa. Our captivation with throughput links into a number of broader trends that are not only South African. In countries like the USA and UK which have seen their political systems dominated these last few decades by neoliberalism, the demand for so-called ‘evidence-based research’ is related to a shrinking public resource, a demand for a certain kind of accountability, and an underpinning logic which sees society largely in terms of the functioning of the market.

Thus we have seen a broad public consensus on a view that the primary purpose of education is an economic one. In South Africa, with an economy that hasn’t grown fast enough, and a population that enjoys too little education and of too low a standard, the attraction of these arguments are obvious, and one strand of the ideas informing #feesmustfall also rests on this assumption. And on an individual level we can hardly knock the logic of the student who knows that getting a degree is going to offer the possibility of helping her and her family dig

their way out of poverty. Indeed, while the first world has seen a decline in the so-called ‘graduate premium’ in which graduates’ financial investment in their studies is seen to be repaid by the certainty of higher paying jobs, in contexts of emerging economies, the graduate premium still holds.

So it is indeed to swim against the current to suggest that our focus on efficiency in graduate throughput and our primary assignation to this of an economic purpose is a limited way of thinking. But here I think that it would be simplistic to say that the current protests are *only* about economic matters or academic failure, and here I want to suggest that at a deep level they actually point us towards this same critique. I will come back to this shortly.

So if education isn’t all about providing the skills and knowledge that will give you a job, about producing graduates to grow the economy, then what is it for? And here there is an important scholarly movement growing that is taking us back to foundational discussions on education – on the intrinsic purposes of education and how these link to what we can call the ‘public good’. These are debates that run from antiquity all the way into the 20th century work of educational thinkers like John Dewey. It is only very recently that we lost the way. Partly I suspect that this is because the spectacular economic growth in the first world in the post-war period allowed for an expansion of higher education that had hitherto not been imaginable. We made the mistake of imputing causality; that it was these higher levels of education that had driven economic growth, while in fact it seems if anything that the causality was the other way around – economic growth had made possible something inherently desirable to society, the possibility to taking learning to higher levels for much larger proportions of the population. The wave of expansion that European higher education saw in the 1960s (following an earlier expansion in the USA) has been followed by an extraordinary expansion in participation particularly in Asia over these last few decades since the 1990s. Commentators such as Martin Carnoy - in a recent important article in the journal *Higher Education*, analysing the funding of higher education across the BRIC sector - associate the increase in higher education participation with increased affluence in larger sections of the population as these countries have seen significant economic growth in recent times, coupled with strong public policy. If anything, the democratic government, argues Carnoy, has to make sure that it makes possible the educational provision that can satisfy the aspirations of its voter base – rather than this being driven primarily by inherent needs of the economy.

To argue for the public good purposes of higher education is not to deny that there might be individual benefits to be derived and that these might at least in part relate to job prospects, but it is to say that if this is ALL that higher education is for, that we are selling it very short indeed. Rather than “homo economicus”, we need to start with a more grounded notion of what it is to be human – and here I have found a rich resource in the work of the sociologist Andrew Sayer, especially in his recent book “Why Things Matter to People”. We are inherently social beings and we derive our sense of what matters to us in the context of living amongst others. We are curious and we want to learn, we seek to do things that are interesting and fulfilling to us. We are always evaluative - ‘things matter to people’. Why should we not simply embrace the possibility that maybe a large majority of our population might desire education, might thirst for knowledge and intellectual challenge? And that the wellbeing of society at its core might rest indeed on the possibilities for individual people to live lives that are fulfilling in terms of things that matter to them. Hannah Arendt pointed out how modern social and economic changes have elevated the labouring function way out of its

inherent significance, with a consequent diminishing of the public space and public functions in society, for her the domain of ‘action’.

So what might it mean to bring these enriched understandings of individual and social life to a consideration of higher education? Jon Nixon offers what is possibly to date the most elaborated visions in this regard, in his book “Higher Education and the Public Good”. If education involves recognition by others, then by definition it is a public activity – here Nixon productively works with the levels of the social – the local context, the civic – in our context the national, and the cosmopolitan – so significant in our times of massively enhanced global connections. The specific aspects which make *higher* education able to contribute in a unique way to the development of the public good, are spelt out by Nixon at a powerfully practical level. In a wonderful contrast to the sterile language of employability, skills and marketability, Nixon offers us capability, reasoning together and purposefulness. Human capability, coming from the work of the Nobel laureate and economist Amartya Sen, is conceptualised by Nixon as enabling students ‘to gather their abilities and achievements, their gifts and talents, their failures and disappointments, and make of them lives that are worthwhile both for themselves and others’. Collective human reasoning is going to become increasingly important as a capacity for the survival of our species in the context of a resource crisis, yet we can note that higher education as currently constituted focuses almost exclusively on individual achievement. With regard to purposefulness, Nixon notes our current ‘back-to-front’ ontology, where school leavers are required to work out ‘what they want to be’, and then almost work backwards from that projected future. In its stead, Nixon emphasises figuring out what you want to do with your life, an ongoing process of ‘working our lives forward’.

Nixon’s starting point was to note that while the argument about education and the public good can be traced back to antiquity, it needs to be reworked afresh for each generation, since the meaning of the public changes. In this regard then I am indebted to Sue Clegg for the challenge to think what the public good arguments might mean in an inherently unequal society, where not all have access to the public. And so I would like to suggest that we need to do a further layer of reimagining if we want to think about higher education and the public good, in the context of the postcolony. Here 2015 has been a very fruitful wake-up year, if at times more than a bit frayed at the edges.

Fanon and Biko might continue to provide the rallying calls for this contemporary discontent, but arguably the most significant thinker for helping us understand the condition of the postcolony is the Ugandan political economist Mahmoud Mamdani – and, with regard to South Africa, Mamdani is clear, apartheid merely advanced the structures that were already well established in indirect colonial rule – significantly the establishment of a bifurcated state with an urban context focused on citizens enjoying rights similar to those in the mother country, and a large rural space to be governed by the dictates of tradition. One of the underrecognised tragedies of the democratic settlement in South Africa is that we did very little to change this structural set up. Thus the democratic understanding that we should all enjoy access to rights spelt out under the constitution is not the lived reality for the majority in the country.

I am particularly grateful to the work of Achille Mbembe and Kathy Lockett, who, working from different intellectual traditions, bring Mamdani’s understanding of the postcolony to bear on the contemporary situation for higher education in South Africa. Significantly, Mbembe’s starting point is to locate part of the contemporary malaise in our fixation with the

market and considerations of efficiency, which I alluded to earlier. He argues that an urgent task is for us to rehabilitate the public space, and that this crucially includes public universities. We are talking access but we are also talking belonging. What Mbembe states implicitly, in noting that many black students and staff do not feel their presence to be visible on our campuses, Luckett takes one step further, to suggest that the bifurcated postcolonial setup means that we might have two different classes of students in our universities – those who have learnt to enjoy the rights of being a citizen, and those whose subjected identities result from a family upbringing in the subjected margins of our society, those who have learnt through experience that rights are the domain of privileged others.

If we want to develop an educational response to these structural realities, it might be worthwhile here to refer to the sociologist of education, Basil Bernstein’s notion of pedagogic rights, laid out in the introduction to his final work “Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity”. These are:

- The right to individual enhancement – “Enhancement is not simply the right to be *more* personally, *more* intellectually, *more* socially, *more* materially, it is the right to the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities”.
- The right to be included... “socially, intellectually, culturally and personally. ... [this does not necessarily mean] to be absorbed... also the right to separate.
- The right to participate... “in procedures whereby order is constructed, maintained and changed” (p. xx – xxi)

Bernstein had schooling in mind when he formulated these pedagogic rights, but I think they provide a useful framing also for higher education, and are in line with Nixon’s vision outlined above, drawing in the levels of the social, the civic and the cosmopolitan, even if slightly differently formulated. The tough South African question, if we follow Luckett’s analysis, is what does it mean to make attainable these rights – at least for those students who we have admitted into the university (at great cost to themselves and to society) but whose backgrounds have not provided an experience of free access to such rights? I am going to stick my neck out and offer a few suggestions, towards reimagining curriculum – for the public good. A crucial starting point of course is that curriculum entails an engagement with knowledge, and at the level of higher education we cannot avoid the specialised nature of different knowledge traditions and forms. Recontextualisation of knowledge into curriculum always involves selection, and here we have correctly been prompted to think seriously about *what* knowledge and *whose* knowledge is important for institutions located on the southern tip of Africa. But here I am not going to sit in engineering and tell someone in health sciences what to do. What I would like to focus on here are some structural issues and related matters around degree forms.

1. We cannot have bifurcated curricula

As tempting as it might be to think that some students should have a specially tailored programme to match their particular deficits from schooling, in the broader context of what has been sketched above I think this possibly introduces more problems than it solves. We have striking fresh evidence on this from a recent PhD study by Disa Mogashana, who closely analysed the experiences of a group of senior students who had entered engineering through a foundation programme. Although they were the survivors and were on track ultimately to graduate, this had come at an enormous cost personally. The experiences of marginality consequent on being in a different programme served ironically to constrain their personal growth – not only through the marker of ‘other’ but also through the complexity of navigating a curriculum route

that was different to the majority. At each step along the way, being on this programme reinforced a sense of otherness and ultimately left them just hanging on and counting the days to leaving the institution. I know that the CHE proposal argues that it might be possible to make the foundation programme the norm and the accelerated programme only for a small minority, but here we need to think a bit about where white students will be concentrated and where we will find the black majority, and then think seriously again about what this means for identity and belonging in the institution.

This said, if the DHET was prepared to pay for us to extend our bachelors degree to four years then that would be a great opportunity. If we are following the US (and recently Hong Kong) model in this regard then this would imply that we incorporate the honours year – I know that this is not part of the CHE proposal – and that the bachelors gives direct access to the masters. Here I also want to note what I think is a further important point in the CHE proposal – which is the suggestion that curriculum coherence at the senior levels of many of our programmes could do with a rethink. If we accept that South African students do not leave schooling generally with adequate literacy or numeracy for higher education, then there is no programme anywhere that is going to magically ‘fix’ this in one year. Many students will carry with them throughout their studies the challenges of building confidence in these areas, and we need to make sure that our mainstream courses take this responsibility seriously – more on this shortly with regard to the academic calendar.

2. So what then? #1 – Choice of what to study is important

We need to do everything to counter the instrumental views of higher education that are prevailing. If you are led to believe that you must do engineering or accountancy in order to get a good job but you know that your strengths don’t lie in the domain of mathematics, then you should be encouraged to make a better choice. This is if we take human flourishing seriously. I have been interested in recent interviews with young people to note how the notion of a ‘gap year’ is being recontextualised for a very interesting range of uses that are more to do with student agency and less with privileged rites of passage. The ‘gap year’ when I grew up had associations of the kind of privilege that made it possible to travel overseas and work – I didn’t come from that kind of family so was rather envious of those who did. But now I hear a broad range of young people, rather than saying “I had to spend a year at home...” saying “I chose to take a gap year...” We need to encourage and where we can make it possible for young people to spend a year volunteering, working, creating, doing youth internships (!), recognising that many are not ready at the conclusion of schooling to make a sensible choice; you can’t really make this choice unless you have thought a bit about who you are, what are your strengths and your aspirations. Even still, we need to build into our systemic thinking a recognition that some students will not get it right on first go. We need readmission and funding solutions that do not excessively penalise students for this but recognise that even being at university is where profound self-knowledge can develop. Again, in the same interviews I have noted the extraordinary narratives of the group who ‘dropped out’ after first year but then found a way forward that nearly always involved picking up studying again, but in a different direction. This is especially important for students who do not have the resources of the middle class home in terms of parental advice or a schooling experience that helped them to develop an attuned sense of their interests and talents.

3. So what then? #2 – The value of a formative first degree
Another consequence of our market fixation is an over valorising of professional degrees – and I say this being someone who has spent just under 20 years working in engineering education! For some school leavers this is a great choice and the professional degree is helpfully oriented very directly towards the career. But the relatively fixed curriculum can be a real trap, especially for those as noted above who are still working out their interests and their strengths. In an ideal world I would like to see us move towards a system as in many US colleges where the first degree is a liberal arts degree and the professional degree comes at postgraduate level. I know we are not in an ideal world by any stretch of the imagination but I think we have underplayed the huge role of these degrees for addressing precisely the challenges of South African higher education that have been alluded to above. With the ongoing limitations of our school system there is a strong argument for the value of a bachelors education that offers breadth, choice, conceptual challenge, and requires a student to craft their own set of interests, their majors. The value of the open structure of the formative degree is that there is lots of scope for students to explore things they think they want to, to reformulate these interests, and to pick up additional input where they recognise that they need it.

4. So what then? #3 Curriculum reform for the professional degree
For those students who do come into the constrained curriculum of the professional degree, and given that in contemporary South Africa there are going to be considerable inducements for students to go in this direction (and of course I also recognise the need we have for doctors, engineers etc) – there is both a need but also a serious possibility of curriculum reform. When the programme is ‘owned’ by a department and has a cohort moving through it in a relatively predetermined manner, then if we take seriously that we want to avoid a bifurcated solution, we need to work closely on the coherence of the curriculum offering to make sure that it requires consistent work of students and provides close and regular feedback. I have been privileged over the last 6 years to work closely with colleagues in chemical engineering at UCT to effect such changes. All (!) it requires is will, dedication, and intellectual scholarship – but should we expect any less from ourselves as academics?

5. So what then? #4 Revolutionise the academic year
I had hoped that the student protests would pick up on the colonial inheritance of the academic year particularly in the historically white English medium institutions like UCT. At 120 teaching days in the year – two semesters of 12 weeks - there are few *international* comparators that work in this kind of zone – when I last checked I think it was Princeton and the like. Most state institutions in the US work with a couple more weeks as do many other institutions around the world. If we are serious about transformation in South African higher education, this is an area for desperately needed reform. My proposal would involve an increased number of weeks for the regular semester, coupled with a system whereby students can stay in residence, should they elect to do so for good academic reasons, for the full calendar year. I would like to see a costing of what this would mean and I have not been not happy to date with the refrain that it is simply unaffordable. In a country with our educational challenges I just think it is iniquitous that libraries and computer rooms are empty for so much of the year. At UCT where we have given students the option to do electives during the vacation, to do our own tailored ‘boot camps’ to catch up on work not quite mastered in the semester, these have been extremely well received by students. By

good academic reasons I also mean the possibility of staying on during the vac to put together a project for Habitat for Humanity, to spend the time reading and exploring the cultural richness of a city like Cape Town, to do a free online course, whatever. I think we need to take seriously that first pedagogic right of the right to individual enhancement and we need to take our students much more seriously in terms of their capacities for growth and development.

In conclusion, I want to return to the position laid out at the start of this talk; that we need to recover more complex ways of thinking about education and, while recognising the need for some metrics, know that our evaluative judgements need to go way beyond these. While many graduates will use the knowledge and skills acquired in higher education in their workplaces, this is never an instrumental matter – even in my work with engineering graduates it is not the specific content of the degree that has mattered, or even the procedures that have been mastered, but it is the way of thinking about the world and thinking about oneself that are significant. Philosophically my position is based on a view around human flourishing exemplified by the work of Sen, recognising that the structural realities of our postcolonial condition mean that this poses particular challenges. If we are trying to formulate a different imaginery for higher education, one based on the public good, then we are going to have to realise the prescriptions for good teaching or coherent curricula are not going to be sufficient. Here I think that more needs to be said on Bernstein’s rights of inclusion and participation. As noted earlier I do think that curriculum structure can serve to promote a sense of inclusion or exclusion – if one has a cohort type structure as in a professional programme then I think there are massive consequences if you have two parallel routes, with no prizes for guessing which is the desirable one. Inclusion is an important challenge for every South African lecturer in their daily practice – who asks questions in class, and how can you shift these dynamics? (answer: quite easily especially with smart use of technology), who comes to you after class to ask for help and how do you signal your availability? What happens when you get students to work in groups – how do you disrupt the patterns of dominance and submission that are too easily read off of society’s rules? We can have a beautiful curriculum structure but if this doesn’t reach down to an inclusive pedagogy and upwards to a welcoming institution, then it is not be worth the bother.

We need to have a depth of intellectual leadership in higher education that will allow us to build institutions that are truly public spaces and build emergent citizenship and belonging for all students. In this regard Sarah Mann’s book “Study Power and the University” offers a challenging and important vision – that the university might be a place offering solidarity to young people in the challenges of working forward their lives, that it might be a place of hospitality in what is often a hostile world, and centrally a place for growth.

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