Commentary: Sustained and Sustainable Transformative Actions Can Deliver Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Universities

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If the South African higher education sector were ever to be lulled into the notion that its transformation has reached an advanced stage, it is soon jolted out of this by recurring reports of incidents that are truly dismaying. The latest such incident concerns an allegation of gross mistreatment of a black student at one of the country’s university residences in the early hours of a Sunday morning in the middle of May.

At the time of writing this article, the details of what took place were still emerging, but one thing was already abundantly clear: even as universities take one step forward in addressing the inequalities of the past, they appear to collectively take two steps back every time a racially motivated scandal or an incident of gender-based violence occurs on any of their campuses.

To make matters worse, if that is possible, the kind of conduct we have seen happening sporadically over the years, predominantly at historically advantaged institutions, diverts attention away from the progress that is being made, however slowly and incrementally, in the transformation of higher education in South Africa.

Transforming the higher education system has been a national priority since 1994. As a microcosm of our society, the sector exhibits the exclusionism and is riddled with the inequalities that have historically characterised South Africa. Given the importance of universities in our society, both as generators of knowledge and skills and as potential catalysts for social change, the transformation of higher education has been—and is—a fundamental national and institutional imperative.

A number of transformation blueprints and initiatives to address underrepresentation of black people and women have been undertaken, in the last two decades of democracy. Over time, while the problem of underrepresentation has endured, new issues have emerged including forms of discrimination like homophobia, xenophobia and religious intolerance. There is also a realisation in the sector that forms of discrimination are intersectional and maintaining gender binaries is problematic.
Achieving “Modest Successes”

In 2017, Professor Bongani Majola, Chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), observed that some “modest successes” had been achieved in the transformation of the higher education sector. Speaking at the launch of the Free State Centre for Human Rights Transformation, on the topic of higher education transformation, Professor Majola acknowledged the growth in enrolments of black, coloured and Indian students and the establishment of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to provide financial assistance to poor students.

But he made it very clear that, while there had been increasing racial and gender diversity in universities, it was necessary to consider “what this diversity means for social integration with universities spaces”. A holistic approach to address the intersectionality of issues was needed, encompassing cultural inclusion, curriculum change, governance, management and leadership, progressive academic practices such as the development of African languages as academic languages, human resources policies and inclusive institutional cultures.

Changing institutional culture in particular has been a focal point of higher education transformation in recent years. It is now widely accepted that, unless people feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and comfort in an institution, no amount of demographic diversity will suffice. Demographic diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for transformation. Transformation must therefore include not only diversity and equity in numbers and demographics but also inclusivity in terms of the curriculum, research agendas, sports and recreation, symbols, multilingualism, culture, sexual orientation, nationality, faith and naming, the acceptance of differences and the absence of xenophobia and homophobia.

Progressive changes in all of these aspects hold the possibility of creating new institutional cultures where people of all backgrounds and walks of life feel that they belong. It also creates the potential for both staff and students to succeed and for a more enabling, nurturing and caring management and institutional structures and spaces.

The Longing to Belong

The levels of “belonging” felt in an institution, although subjective, can be measured to some extent through institutional culture surveys among staff and students, particularly if these are conducted with the sensitivity and confidentiality that enable people to air their views candidly. Most universities conduct such studies these days. Beyond surveys, what is needed is in-depth ongoing qualitative studies similar to ones conducted through the research done in centres like the Centre for Diversity Studies at Wits University. In such centres critical theory including Critical Race Theory are brought to bear on the whole gamut of transformation issues as systemic issues requiring wholesale institutional and societal change.

Through these studies that critically analyse systemic issues through critical theory we increasingly see the emergence of high-quality academic publications on the thorny question of institutional cultures, written from the point of view of black, women and LGBGTQI+ academics and students, among others, who have experienced exclusion and alienation at
public universities. These studies raise the question, which must be considered seriously in the higher education sector, whether all staff and students should not take critical diversity studies courses to sensitise them to conscious and unconscious bias, complicity and a lack of activism on issues of discrimination. Universities should act as disruptors of societal norms that sustain discrimination. Students should not leave the university with reinforced prejudices they brought from the broader society.

One publication is *Black academic voices: The South African eXperience*, which was published in 2019 by HSRC Press and recounts the lived experiences of black academics in the context of the debate for higher education transformation and decolonisation. Recounting their personal experiences of racism, sexism, patriarchy, LGBTQI+phobia and coloniality—with subtle or overt—they make the telling point that the problem is as much relational and structural. How people relate to each other at our institutions of higher learning is key in establishing inclusive practices and spaces.

Many other excellent works of diversity studies scholarship are beginning to emerge, dealing with pressing matters such as the decolonisation of knowledge, rape culture and sexual harassment in South African society, including universities, and the relationship between social innovation and the reimagining of the knowledge economy, to mention just a few.

We are also beginning to see academics publishing in isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi and Setswana, among other indigenous languages—and being recognised for the excellence of their work. Quite a number of the entries for the 2022 Humanities and Social Sciences Awards were in languages other than English, from poetry anthologies to short stories and fiction novels. In fact, two of these entries won awards: Ronelda S. Kamfer’s novel *Kompoun* is written in Kaaps while Atambile Masoma’s poetry volume *Ilifa* is in isiXhosa.

Such changes are important signals that South African universities are ready to expand to include new forms of knowledge production and scholarship—and of course to expand our view of transformation itself.

That view has already come a long way. Initially, transformation was synonymous with achieving racial and gender equity in higher education, then expanding to accommodate a non-binary understanding of gender. Disability, too, has become a critical aspect of equity, one to which almost all universities need to pay considerably more attention, based on the relatively low numbers of people with disabilities in their student and especially staff complements. At this point in time, there is near-universal consensus that the transformation of higher education must incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion, cutting through and across every aspect of university life.

There is also growing recognition that transformation is a constantly evolving concept that, rather than becoming more contained as time goes by, becomes ever more expansive and complex. That is not surprising. The changes thrown up around us during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, which has had an enormous impact on the way universities function, have exposed layer after layer of embedded inequality.
The Advent of Digital Inequality

The latest layer to have been revealed is digital inequality, fuelled by major technology shifts in a very short space of time, fundamentally changing the modes of delivering teaching and learning. Together with economic inequality, technological inequality has made it more challenging than ever for students from vulnerable groups to access—and succeed in—their tertiary studies.

During the pandemic, thousands of students living in areas with no internet reception or access to electricity, or without the means to purchase devices or data, would have been literally unable to continue their studies. Had it not been for the assistance provided by some universities and later the government, which provided free data and loaned laptops to students in such circumstances, there is no question that these students would have watched helplessly as their university studies came to a grinding halt—possibly permanently.

In 2020, the University of Pretoria alone raised funds to procure 3,000 laptops and other devices for economically challenged students, providing them with the technical means to continue their studies in an environment where online learning was the only avenue to do so. Many other universities offered similar forms of assistance.

Meanwhile, other areas of concern are emerging, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that these have long been in existence but submerged, like an iceberg, only now to become more fully visible in a society contending with so much inequality and a worsening economy.

Inequality and Graduate Unemployment

The question of graduate employability is of grave concern in South Africa, especially in light of rocketing unemployment levels. As the job market shrinks, and the level of graduate entrepreneurship continues to stagnate, it is invariably the graduates who are already the most vulnerable who will find it the most challenging to secure their place in the job market—especially in a job market embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In all probability, most of those who experience the highest post-university unemployment will be black graduates. Key interventions to address this issue include transforming curricula that enable students to be active citizens who are well educated and skilled, access to internships, work readiness programmes in partnerships with employers in all sectors and the creation of centres for the future of work as the University of Pretoria has done.

The pattern of racially differentiated success rates is well known in our country’s higher education system. There are multiple reasons for such variances, which are often driven by issues that arise before entry into university—sometimes long before. Only 69% of South African children aged 3 to 5 have access to early childhood development facilities, while in basic education schools, 40% of learners who start Grade 1 will drop out before they reach Grade 12.

Such statistics illustrate how vast and complex the question of transformation is, not only in higher education but across the education system.
Mobilising for Systemic Change

My experience is that, the more complex an issue seems, the more intractable it appears to be. Distilled down to the basics, though, a challenge may seem less impossible to tackle. When it comes to transformation in the higher education sector, the challenge can arguably be condensed into one simple notion: it must come from not just individual passion but also well-orchestrated institutional policies, programmes and arrangements. It requires ownership by everyone in an institution because you cannot address structural issues through individual efforts by those who believe in the cause.

Institutional arrangements for transformation should enable and nurture environments that are conducive to change. The establishment of transformation office or a diversity, equity and inclusion programme is a beginning and not the end. Galvanising the entire institution, hard as it is, requires difficult conversations. It should not be that the transformation programme is for those who will “benefit” but rather it is for all who believe in social justice as integral to quality education, transformative knowledge creation and social engagement.

Regulations and legislation mandating transformation in higher education and other spheres of society are, of course, necessary, particularly in dealing with unacceptable acts of discrimination, violation of human rights and assaults on human dignity. Bullying, for example, has become a serious problem in South Africa, whether at our schools, universities, workplaces or in cyber space. So widespread has workplace bullying apparently become in our country that the Minister of Employment and Labour recently introduced the new Code of Good Practice on the Prevention and Elimination of Harassment at the Workplace.

The Code describes harassment as any unwanted conduct that impairs a person’s dignity or creates a hostile work environment for one or more employees. This may include threats, shaming, hostile teasing, insults, constant negative criticism and judgement, and language that is racist, sexist or anti-LGBTQIA+.

It is saddening that, at this point in our journey as a constitutional democracy, it has become necessary to regulate people’s day-to-day relational exchanges. Yet, as people’s lived experiences demonstrate (think of the recent racial incident at a university residence), the way South Africans relate to each other is as important as the structures, policies, systems and laws that exist to regulate transformation.

The challenge of transformation, I believe, lies in the ability and willingness of each student and staff member at our universities to relate to their peers and colleagues as fellow humans and fellow South Africans, recognising that we all belong and all have a contribution to make. Utopian as it may seem, transformation that lasts and inspires must come from both the head and the heart. Should we succeed, the higher education sector in South Africa will become a force to reckon with. Failure will lead to ongoing failure, conflict and destruction. Let us put our heads and hearts into building equitable, inclusive, diverse universities.