

# Equity, Diversity and Stewardship

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## **EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND STEWARDSHIP**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Depending on the writer or commentator transformation in the higher education sector has either been proceeding at a rapid pace or not proceeding at all. Perhaps the reason for the vast differences of opinion is because there does not always seem to be agreement about what transformation of higher education should be. There is some general agreement that it should entail changes to staff composition, student composition, curriculum and the historical institutional arrangements. Some argue that the reason higher education has not progressed fast enough in the area of transformation is because the sector has not acknowledged and honestly come to terms with its role in the propping up of the apartheid system, hence the sector is unable to move on or appropriately define its role in a transforming society.

Other writers blame the slow pace of transformation on the fact that South Africa chose a negotiated political settlement and compromise, which has 'left the profound social and economic inequalities of the apartheid era in place'. (Neville Alexander, 2009)

The negotiated settlement arrangement delivered the constitutional platform for correcting the imbalances of the past. This is how the notions of equity and substantive equality became a part of our legal framework, in order to ensure that there is a legal, just and transparent system to deal with the inequalities that were left in place.

In the words of Nelson Mandela as quoted by Judith February, one of choices made for dealing with the inequalities was affirmative action:

'Affirmative action must be rooted in principles of justice and equity. Affirmative action is a principal means of dealing in as just and realistic a manner as possible with the progressive eradication of the guilt created by the past discrimination. It must be seen as an alternative ... to waiting for centuries for the market on its own to eliminate the massive inequalities left by apartheid.' (Judith February, 2009)

Or to put it in the words of a United States Supreme Court Justice, Justice Kennedy, '...the simple postulate that the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race... is not sufficient, ... fifty years of experience

since Brown v. Board of Education ... should teach us that the problem before us defies so easy a solution’.

For South Africa and for higher education, the Constitution lays the basis for equity and redress, the Employment Equity Act, the White Paper on Higher Education and the Higher Education Act, all followed on the basis laid by the Constitution in directing us towards equity and redress imperatives.

A good starting point for the purposes of the Rhodes Imbizo might be asking the question what is the role of a public higher education institution in a transforming society and a young democracy, and how does Rhodes want to embrace this role for itself? By answering this question even if it is by merely reminding ourselves of what the policy and legislative framework calls for, we might then fully appreciate what is required for undertaking such a role, and for playing it in the most credible way that does not smack of hypocrisy.

What is clear is that there have been a lot of changes in higher education since the 1990’s, and these have in one way or another impacted on transformation, and its pace. These changes happened within and were influenced by a changing political, social and economic climate, outside of and in higher education domestically and internationally.

The higher education landscape since 1994 has been described as characterised by:

“Relative stasis in certain areas, such as decolonisation, deracialisation, and degendering of inherited intellectual spaces and the nurturing of a new generation of academics who are increasingly black and women....

Ruptures and discontinuities with the past resulting in

- A recasting of higher education values, goals and policies
- A new legal structure and policy framework
- New institutions to govern and steer higher education
- The emergence of a new institutional landscape and configuration of public universities.” (Saleem Badat, 2008).

As regards the economic and social inequalities, which impact on equity of access, participation, and success in higher education, these are characterised as: “continuities in conditions and institutions”. This is supported by the statistics of social composition of academic staff, the intersection of race, class, gender, geography and schooling and the prevailing institutional cultures which continue to hamper the achievement of equity and redress especially for the working class and rural poor. (Saleem Badat, 2008).

## DIVERSITY

Discussions about Equity have to move beyond numbers, targets and goals, these are important, but tend to get us stuck in the compliance mode of doing things. The Constitution and the Employment Equity Act introduce the concept of redress and equity in order to achieve substantive equality. Substantive equality cannot be achieved by mere compliance, especially if pursued begrudgingly, and as no more than an imposition. An alternative basis by which the very same goals to achieve a more equitable representation can be pursued can be based on the appreciation and pursuit of diversity for its benefits.

The appreciation of diversity on its own is probably not enough, but it can be a useful ingredient in the pursuit of the purpose and values of higher education in a transforming society and a young democracy. This kind of framing could make it possible for the benefits of diversity to be one of the significant driving forces that moves the changes in composition of staff and students forward, thereby improving equitable representation and hopefully also helping to break down barriers between people.

Such framing could work if institutions are able to find value and quality in people of diverse backgrounds, where they historically did not believe it existed. This may be a challenge for those who still hold beliefs and notions about superiority and inferiority, capability for knowledge production, white excellence and black failure, and a myriad of other stereotypes. Such restrictions do not enable the appreciation of the fact that diversity of backgrounds may also bring diversity of knowledge and worthy contributions to enrich the knowledge making enterprise.

There are other factors which contribute to the complexity of the issue such the shortcomings of our basic education system, the continuing inequalities in our society, the limited resources for higher education, the myriad of demands and expectations on the system, and the inequalities in the higher education system itself at institutional level.

The inequalities between institutions still exist, even after institutional mergers and incorporation and are reflected in the views and perceptions about 'black institutions' and 'white institutions'. These beliefs and perceptions are revealed in the narratives of staff and students from Fort Hare University, the former Rhodes University East London satellite campus and the Rhodes Grahamstown campus, in a study entitled, 'White excellence and black failures: The reproduction of racialised higher education in everyday talk.' (Donovan Robus and Catriona Macleod, 2004)

The fact that racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination were not only perpetuated through formal means such as policy and legislation, and that they continue to be replicated and perpetuated in thinking, talk and practices points to the complexity of the issues.

Social science research has been called for in order 'to refine our appreciation of diversity's value and to enable us to balance the value of diversity against the costs of achieving diversity through race-conscious programmes'. (Sandra Day O' Connor and Stewart J Schwab, 2009) This call, made in a paper co-authored by a former US Supreme Court Justice and the Dean of Cornell Law School, shows that country's reliance on diversity imperatives as a legal basis for affirmative action programmes, especially as it relates to student admission criteria. This is different from the South African system for which redress and equity are firmly countenanced by the Constitution.

A number of American cases involving challenges to student admission policies have relied heavily (and succeeded), on the basis of arguments in favour of taking race into consideration as part of the exercise for achieving greater student body diversity. The courts took the view that prohibiting considerations on the basis of race would intensify rather than eliminate that nation's racial problems.

"Effective participation by members of all racial and ethnic groups in the civic life of our Nation is essential if the dream of one Nation, indivisible, is to be realized." From the majority decision of a court decision dealing with the affirmative action programme of the Michigan Law School. (Sandra Day O' Connor and Stewart J Schwab, 2009)

Interested parties outside of higher education in America filed 'friends of the court' briefs supporting the diversity argument as necessitating minimum race consciousness in admission criteria. Support also came from private sector companies arguing the benefits of diversity as experienced by these companies including benefits related to the rise in productivity and the fact that 'today's workforce must be prepared to work with colleagues and customers from a wide variety of backgrounds'.

In the Michigan Law school case, the court also made the point that the improvement of grades and test scores of minority applicants, and the elimination of racial disparities in high school performance, would in time eliminate the need for the affirmative action programmes, but that higher education was currently powerless to alter the basic profile of the applicant pool. Affirmative action was seen as an effective option in the absence of other effective alternatives to promote 'student body diversity and excellence'

At least five American states have now been mandated to ignore race in their public university admission criteria, and this has led to declining numbers of enrolment of minorities, especially of African American students in public universities in those

states, over a five to ten year period. The statistics indicate drops of up to 46 percent in some instances, and definite setbacks in demographic representation, which seems to indicate the important role that affirmative action measures had played in ensuring higher enrolment figures. This decline happened even though there were alternate strategies aimed at ensuring targeted recruitment of African American students and other minorities, including pipeline improvement efforts through high school interventions programmes. The efforts included targeted recruitment focusing on low-performing high schools, financial aid packages, college preparatory classes, mentoring programmes and using a mix of criteria that took into consideration socioeconomic disadvantage.

The American problem is one of including minorities; the South African problem is one of including the majority. The South African problem is exacerbated by the failure of the schooling system to increase the pool of working class and rural areas based students able to enter higher education and benefit from the equity and redress measures. The problem is compounded by growing socio-economic inequalities, a growing youth population, a growing proportion of unemployed and uneducated youth perceived increasingly as a 'ticking time bomb'.

The benefits of a diverse learning environment would hopefully accrue, not only to the previously disadvantaged, nor only to students but also to academics, and to the very goal of knowledge production and the quality and usefulness of such knowledge. The benefits are not only about the availability of role models, but could help address deeper problems in our society. The possible benefits of a diverse environment extend to the learning that could happen outside of the classroom.

The cultural diversity of students and staff would be of great benefit, but only if the institutional culture allows for the different cultures to live side by side and does not try to mould all entrants into the institutions into some homogenous group in accordance with the dominant homogenous culture. Most institutions miss this opportunity, especially in relation to students, for whom acceptance to the institution is on terms that they leave their cultural identity and all aspects of their 'otherness' at the gates and assimilate in order to be tolerated and hardly ever accepted. This kind of conditional admission of people from different backgrounds robs the institution and people of the benefits of learning about diversity, and embracing the enrichment that it could bring. Higher education is missing the opportunity of being a leader in this regard, a leader that could model for society the benefits of diversity as a possible catalyst for improving social cohesion.

Progress in respect of the representivity, especially of academic staff has been very slow in the higher education sector compared to staff changes in other sectors. Factors that have propelled rapid transformation of staff in other sectors or industries are absent and some are not applicable to higher education. There are other challenges that complicate the matter further such as the length of time it takes to train an academic, the struggle to attract new entrants to the academy, and the

opening up of other career options outside of the academy, for the previously disadvantaged.

## **WHY STEWARDSHIP**

Another way to look at equity and redress as more than just a compliance issue is to look at it within a framework of stewardship. Those who make decisions and hold the power in higher education institutions are exercising such power on behalf of the institution, and not for personal interest or gain. The interests of such public institution must therefore take precedence.

The concept of stewardship presupposes:

- Notions of sustainability
- Handing over to the next generation at some point
- Development of those to whom we will handover as part of our leadership role
- Leadership not for narrow, selfish, expedient reasons, leadership with integrity and accountability
- No abuse of power in decision making
- Making decisions with a long term view
- Self-regulation
- Long-term preservation and protection of a resource, balancing short-term gains against long-term care and stewardship

Using stewardship in our conversations about equity would allow us to:

- Assess the risks of not quickening the pace and achievement of our transformation goals.
- Make equity part of the conversation about the sustainability of the institution, what do we want to preserve about Rhodes for the Future, Rhodes 2020, Rhodes 2030? (Quality, excellence, success rates, stability, maintaining an enriching and triumphing educational institution...) can we do that and still not achieve the equity goals?
- Assess the lost opportunity of not making diversity a part of our learning and teaching environment.
- Interrogate whether our strategic thrusts and priorities will aid the achievement of our transformation goals or not. (For instance; what can the Post Grad growth plan do for equity? How do we address the fact that over 40 percent of academics at associate professor level upwards is above the age of 50, how do we address this in a way that incorporates equity imperatives? What measures do we need to put in place to ensure that the efforts to recruit students from

rural Eastern Cape schools leads to good participation and success rates for these recruits?)

- Understand and accept our individual roles and contributions towards the achievement of equity imperatives and being accountable in relation thereto.
- More experienced academics and administrators identifying and embracing a role for themselves, as individuals, to contribute to the equity goals, through specific mentoring, development and succession initiatives.
- Have the will to do what is required, and do different things in order to produce different results.
- Put required resources in place and accept that things will not happen on their own. (Students' academic and other support mechanisms, staff recruitment, development and retention efforts, how do we balance and prioritise?)
- Agree on a long term vision for the institution and its equity imperatives, and avoid decisions and actions that will compromise the attainment of that vision, consistency and loyalty to the agreed vision.
- Give the institution the chance to 'normalise', and to move beyond talk of racial and gender composition of staff or students
- Moving the conversation beyond the language of "we cannot do this because" towards the language of "we have to do this because"
- Is the Rhodes Employment Equity plan 2010 -2015 adequate? What else could or should we doing?

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I think it is time that we accept that we cannot continue in a 'business-as-usual' way of doing things and hope to get different results. We have to unlock and use opportunities to improve our staff composition and institutional culture. We have to be bold and commit resources – time and money - to the achievement of the equity goals because the alternative is likely to cost us more in the long run, and cause us to lose the very things we think we are trying to preserve.

As we reflect over the next two days here are some questions to ponder:

1. What specific strategies could we use and what resources could we commit to these strategies. (scarcity allowances, supernumerary posts, development posts, absorption of development candidates, premium payments for some skills)
2. How do we improve accountability for implementation of equity goals?
3. Do we freeze posts if we cannot find candidates from designated groups? When and which posts? How do we deal with the implications of such decisions?
4. How do we improve our recruitment efforts in order to improve results?
5. Should we use selective early retirement in order to free up some posts, and in what circumstances?

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