



# THE 'IDEA OF ENGAGEMENT' AND 'THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY': SOME REFLECTIONS

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## THE TITLE HAS ...

Two broad ideas

The idea of engagement

The idea of an African University  
(in the 21st century)

## WHY A CONCERN ABOUT 'THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY' AND ENGAGEMENT?

- The effects of structural adjustment programs of the World Bank on higher education in Africa
- African higher education's role in a knowledge society/economy
- Effects of globalization, neo-liberalism and related discourses on higher education in Africa
- In South Africa, a struggle of universities to (re)define themselves in post-apartheid South Africa
- A need for universities to respond to the African condition

## THE STATEMENT OF VALUES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

**In its statement of values, the University of Cape Town (South Africa's oldest university) states:**

- 'As a value-based community, we aspire to an encompassing ethos which: promotes academic excellence and the attainment of the institutional goal of becoming a **world-class African University...**'
- But, it has six academic faculties and a separate Centre for African Studies – so what studies are done in the academic faculties?

## STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY'S VISION 2012

### Stellenbosch University:

- Is an academic institution of excellence and an respected knowledge partner
- Contributes towards building the scientific technological and intellectual **capacity of Africa**
- Is an active role-player in the development of the South African society
- Has a campus culture that welcomes a diversity of people and ideas
- Promotes Afrikaans as a language of teaching and science in a multilingual context

## THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

### Idea/theme provokes a discussion on several matters:

- It suggests that we can think about African universities in some unified sense.
- It implies that the African University is an entity distinct from, e.g. the American University, and so on.
- It proposes that the African University produces history and is a product of history.
- It elicits a discussion of fundamentals – what is the African University's reason for being and ...
- How might it be (re)imagined differently?

## WHAT MIGHT WE MEAN BY AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY?

- It is an idea that is not final but still in the making – it is an attempt to refine the university in postcolonial Africa
- The African University is one that adapts to the social structure and cultural milieu of Africa (Mamdani 1997)
- It produces knowledge that takes the African condition and African identity as its central concern
- Contributes to a world corpus of knowledge in the same manner in which Harvard, Oxford and St Andrews does, whilst remaining unmistakably American, English and Scottish respectively (Makgoba & Seepe 2004)

## AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY IN CONTEXT

- African universities experienced the brutal impact of colonialism which destroyed Africa's academic traditions
- With the exception of one university all African universities have adopted Western models of organization
- Expansion of higher education was curbed by colonial authorities
- Expansion occurred just before or after independence so post-independence universities are young institutions
- Nationalist aspirations of post-independence universities were thwarted by changes in world geopolitics/economics + structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank

## WE CAN'T TURN BACK THE CLOCK

- We cannot recover what is lost – we must move on!
- Africanization/Africanising can't be achieved by invoking old formulas that worked when world was different place
- We need to look at current events as new carriers of possibilities for africanization/africanising
- As Pindar and Sutton (2001:9) write:  
*“It isn't a question of exchanging one model or way of life for another, but of responding to the event as the potential bearer of new constellations of Universes of reference. The paradox is this: although these Universes are not pre-established reference points or models, with their discovery one realizes they were always already there, but only a singular event could activate them”.*

## THE IDEA OF ENGAGEMENT

- In 2001 the ACU published a consultation document in which they propose engagement as the core value of the University
- Coldstream (2003:6) argues that engagement embraces a great deal more than mere links to the outside world, that it is a matter of inter-penetration of universities and the wider society.
- A debate about whether engagement is a new idea
- For Watson (2003) the nature of engagement is changing with universities' participation in the evolution of a knowledge society

## INSIDE-OUT AND OUTSIDE IN PRESSURES

- The inside-out developments refer to intrinsic pressures concerned with a set of epistemological challenges.
- It refers to the theoretical intervention of Michael Gibbons and his colleagues – the shift from mode 1 (pure, disciplinary, homogeneous, expert-led, supply-drive, hierarchical, peer-reviewed, and almost exclusively university-based) to mode 2 knowledge (applied, problem-centred, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, hybrid, demand-driven, entrepreneurial, network-embedded and so on).
- Outside-in developments refer to social concerns. Extrinsic pressures for change include aspects such as socio-economic of participation including who gets access to education.

## WHOSE TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT?

- Would be problematic if engagement is reduced to narrow corporate understandings of engagement
- It should be recognized that higher education has multiple ends and purposes
- Singh (2003) argues that the only “notion of engagement that makes sense in the complex terrains of higher education in different parts of the world is a multidimensional one whose internal tensions and often unpredictable consequences require adroit steering and negotiation
- Globalization and other social processes are the holding spaces and opportunities for different outcomes



## WHAT TO ENGAGE ABOUT?

- Inadequate financial resources, the legacy of colonialism, longstanding economic and social crises, civil wars, the scourge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other diseases, environmental degradation ....



## ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF RESEARCH

- Quite simply I understand the question of what knowledge is included/excluded to mean curriculum and knowledge production to mean research
- The shift from mode 1 to mode 2 knowledge production
- In a knowledge society the university is no longer upheld as the sole institutional location or agency for the production of knowledge – knowledge production is socially distributed and engagement crucial in knowledge production processes

## UNDERSTANDING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

- All knowledges have localness in common – further that all knowledges are located/situated
- Knowledge production is rhizomatic rather than arborescent
- That knowledge production links people, skills and places
- The basis of knowledge is not verification/falsification but the social organisation of trust.
- This understanding disrupts binaries such as global/local, Western/Indigenous, universal/relativist
- Conceiving of knowledge as local decentres all knowledges and provides space for seemingly disparate knowledges to coexist – the terms of engagement are negotiated

## THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF TRUST

- “(R)ather these traits are effects of collective work of the knowledge producers in a given space. To move knowledge from the local site and moment of its production and application to other places and times, knowledge producers deploy a variety of social strategies and technical devices for creating the equivalencies and connections between heterogeneous and isolated knowledges. The standardisation and homogenisation required for knowledge to be accumulated and rendered truthlike is achieved through social methods of organising the production, transmission and utilisation of knowledge. An essential component is the social organisation of trust” (Turnbull 1997:553).

## KNOWLEDGE ASSEMBLAGES

- “Some traditions move it and assemble it through art, ceremony and ritual; [Western] science does it through forming disciplinary societies, building instruments, standardisation techniques and writing articles. In both cases, it is a process of knowledge assembly through making connections and negotiating equivalencies between the heterogeneous components while simultaneously establishing a social order of trust and authority resulting in a knowledge space” (Turnbull 1997).

## AN EXAMPLE FROM AUSTRALIA

- In Australia Aborigines in Australia's Northern Territory have for many years through their own performative modes mapped their country by identifying every tree and every significant feature of their territory.
- Today some Aborigines are doing the same using the latest in satellites, remote sensing and Geographical Information Systems (GIS). By representing their local knowledge on digital maps they are able to make their ways of knowing visible in Western terms, - *“a new knowledge space which will have transformative effects for all Australians”* (Turnbull 1997:560).

## EMERGING KNOWLEDGE AREAS

- The field of **ethnobotany** that involves botanists working closely with indigenous communities in the collection, documentation of plants for medicinal remedies. Ethnobotany involves moving beyond traditional scientific inquiry, deploying qualitative research methods such as interviewing community experts, observing practices, and developing word banks and other resources
- **Sustainability science** is: *“a new [trans]-disciplinary approach to science that recognizes the limitations of traditional scientific inquiry in dealing with the complex reality of social institutions interacting with natural phenomena”*

## CONCLUSION

- I am arguing for a socially distributed knowledge system in Africa that is different from the one Gibbons and his colleagues proposes, one where the African University engages with indigenous communities so as to help solve Africa's problems.
- Such engagement requires the creation of new knowledge spaces that is the result of negotiation between university academics and indigenous peoples, whereby disparate social strategies and technical devices are employed to produce new knowledge.

