

Brave old world: Can today's university truly be 'home' to tomorrow's minds?

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Today, would you encourage your son or daughter to become an academic?

In the current international climate, I am not sure that I would. This confession is distressing, even heretical, coming from someone whose association with universities is lifelong and who is enjoying a very happy and reasonably productive academic career. What has gone wrong? I raise the issue because it matters. It matters not only for the future of South African universities but for universities everywhere.

It would be both simple and tedious to sketch the metamorphosis of universities internationally over the past 50 years. Key features are the increasing corporatisation, massification and managerialism of academic institutions; the routinisation and commodification of teaching and learning to accommodate growing numbers; the lowering of undergraduate standards in response to weak and struggling mass education systems; the suborning of the academic mission by disparate social factions seeking to influence society through other than intellectual means; the co-option of research by corporate, industrial and military funding agencies; and many similar developments. The outline is too well known to need repeating.

This is not a rant about returning to some mythical golden past. Universities around the world are as they are and have to cope, somehow, with the knapsack of challenges with which a mixed legacy of decision-making, good and bad, has landed them.

The real question universities face is whether they currently constitute the best – the most hospitable and effective – host institutions for those who wish to further human knowledge. Talented youngsters are voting with their feet. Can universities still confidently hope to attract and retain the best minds of succeeding generations, so that over time they advance the knowledge base of the societies which sustain them?

Frankly, if a significant percentage of an academic's time must perforce be devoted to teaching and assessing underprepared students who cannot even follow the material they ought to master; if the institution is weighed-down with bureaucracy; if decision-making processes are drawn-out and ineffective; if academic performance has to compete for scarce managerial attention with capital programmes, student protests and discipline, corporate fund-raising, community engagement, cultural transformation, institutional audits, performance reviews, and endless committee work, all hopelessly unrelated to that academic's research goals, why would anyone eager to shift the boundaries of human knowledge decide that universities are the appropriate place in which to do so? Looking around, the best and brightest may justifiably conclude that the university environment is no longer 'fit for purpose'.

As far as South Africa is concerned, I know of many high-calibre students (black and white) of recent decades, who have seriously considered an academic career, and then taken a cool, clear look at the prospects and decided against it. Some have headed for an academic career abroad (whether conditions there are better remains a moot point); others have decided that universities are no longer places conducive to the lives of intellectual innovation to which they aspire. This is a serious issue. Universities need talent – the talent in question no longer necessarily needs universities.

The world has changed. Today, multifarious social organisations compete for intellectual talent, some offering technical support and career prospects far superior to those available in an average university. Possibilities include migration from the university science park to state-of-the-art commercial and industrial development centres, which is a well-worn pathway for research scientists. Government-funded institutes offer attractive research prospects. Blue-sky think tanks absorb promising young researchers. Start-up companies are hungry for innovators. Moreover, it is not only the disciplines with obvious bausanic clout that proffer opportunities. A burgeoning array of national and international development agencies and NPOs offers appetising, hard-core research possibilities for humanities and social science graduates. Far from being 'unemployable', humanities majors have probably the greatest flexibility, earning power and variety of opportunity of any university graduate. Nothing compels them to choose a university career. Even those from that most marginal of disciplines (my own), literary studies, can build satisfying independent intellectual lives as writers, editors and media professionals outside the university. Writers of serious non-fiction earn very well, as do those producing school and university textbooks. For fine and performing artists, a university career remains only an uncomfortable fall-back position underwriting a financially insecure avocation whose ideal centre of gravity is elsewhere, in the public sphere – unless, that is, the university can win resources capable of sustaining a really first-rate environment for artistic creativity.

All these avenues point away from the university as the natural base for innovation and fresh knowledge-making in today's society. The alternative sites may carry their own risks and uncertainties, but they offer competitive rewards and 'lifestyle' attractions which few universities can match. None suffers the bureaucratic 'drag', confusion of aims, and institutional conflict characteristic of universities.

Not to be misunderstood: it is not politically motivated disruption I am complaining about. The increasing dysfunctionality of the university institution itself is what tends to work against effective research. It is often argued that the university talent drain is simply a matter of inadequate financial reward. Of course, academic remuneration cannot compete with government and industry. This is acutely the case in South Africa where a senior professor with several higher degrees, 15 years' work experience and much dedicated after-hours research may hope to earn about ZAR700 000 pa, the kind of salary freshly hatched graduates who score a deputy directorship in

government will earn from their first year. This is not wholly a bad thing. People whose main aim in life is to pile up personal wealth are not a natural fit with the academic enterprise.

But if universities cannot attract and retain budding research talent, their entire mission is at risk. There will always be warm bodies to fill academic posts, solid teachers who transfer knowledge and skills quite capably. As knowledge producers they are likely to deliver one research paper a year, often under protest. Real academic calibre is a very different matter. It is rare and unaccountable, and has to be nurtured and cherished in practical ways. These people are the game-changers. They thrive, not on being flattered and mollycoddled (the response of inept research managers who believe that prizes and financial reward are principally what encourages research), but on the opportunity of working in an intellectual environment wholly and intelligently focused on the knowledge enterprise. One cannot predict the arrival of such people, but one can provide for them when and if they appear.

What is to be done? One possible response, modelled on solutions adopted in the USA for an analogous predicament in the 1930s,¹ might be on the following lines:

1. Enhance graduate education by developing graduate schools, located in purpose-built buildings, offering taught modules by specialists shared nationally among graduate research centres.
2. Locate productive senior researchers primarily in these centres, with reduced teaching loads, to supervise graduates and pursue their own research. Staff could certainly include 'retired' researchers, but should consist primarily of high-achieving, mid-career researchers.
3. Build the scope of digital technology and technical support available to such researchers so that they can handle 'big data'.
4. Encourage the curatorial function of universities so that they house unique research material, and develop cohesive research investigations based on these data.
5. Cut through the confusion surrounding the roles of Deans and Research Managers. Deans are responsible for undergraduate education (to Honours level); Research Managers should mainly foster and support researchers and their students working in the graduate schools.²
6. Foster the kind of research environment where mentoring happens naturally through close collegiality, where research goals and ambitions are confidently articulated and shared, and where first-rate researcher-teachers are given the resources and explicit responsibility to develop the next generation of researchers.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? The trouble is, the change probably is not going to happen for some time, not in South Africa. Ideological exigencies aside, government subsidies are shrinking and will be used in the main to underpin undergraduate education. The economy is stagnating. Too many in South African society, quite understandably, view undergraduate degrees simply as a paper accreditation system, a lunch ticket. Student intakes are bulging with no signs of an increase in quality. There are no coherent moves to thoroughly educate would-be school teachers before they are trained as teachers.^{3,4} It follows that little improvement in university environments can be anticipated in the short-to-medium term, which is unfortunate, because in that time we will lose many who might have become future intellectual stars.

Universities started because students wanted to learn from the leading intellects of their day. In this context we must ask whether they can still hope to attract and develop first-class teacher-researchers, or are they in the main heading for mediocrity? Are they really taking up the challenge of future research excellence? With brave exceptions, the answer is increasingly obvious. Wreathed in their time-honoured mystique, universities in general, and South African universities in particular, are beginning to lose the competition for young talent, and they need to re-examine their operational rationale and focus if this trend is to be reversed. Otherwise they will not attract their fair share of the best and brightest, and will consequently fail the country.

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