



Higher Education in South Africa: Market Mill or Public Good?¹

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Abstract

This paper argues that current trends in higher education entail a disincentive for universities to enrol students from poor backgrounds and the continuing reproduction of a highly elitist system. The perception of success in the marketplace, shrinking allocations to education, and a discourse of efficiency and competitiveness have sidelined previous commitments to access, equity and genuine transformation. These developments follow a global market utopia which sees higher education as a commodity, emphasising a new managerialism spurred on by 'by market-driven notions of competition, privatisation and consumption that adopt corporate models of management in order to reduce costs and maximise profits' (Baatjes 2005:29). I draw our attention to the urgency of tasks necessary to prevent the further corporatisation of higher education institutions. Unfulfilled promises by the state and the enormity of tasks ahead can result in a temptation to despair on the part of those who perceive of a different higher education system. The inroads of neo-liberalism, of markets and individualism over social justice, community and solidarity, create new moral imperatives. It is 'part of a more general re-working of education as a sphere of ethical practice – a commodification of education and values which allows us to systematically neglect the outcomes of policy and practices – a demoralisation of society' (Ball 2003:25). In this situation, education degenerates into a lucrative market opportunity for capital. However, drawing on my keynote address to the 12th World Congress on Comparative Education in Havana, Cuba, I argue for the cultivation of hope in conjunction with the conviction that there is space for social action. I conclude by arguing that this is essential, since education for the commonweal is too important to be left in the hands of business, and the whims and vicissitudes of the market place.

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Résumé

Cette étude soutient que les tendances actuelles de l'enseignement supérieur n'incitent pas les universités à inscrire les étudiants issus des milieux pauvres et entraînent la reproduction continuelle d'un système très élitiste. La perception de la réussite sur le marché, l'amenuisement des fonds alloués à l'enseignement et le discours sur l'efficacité et la compétitivité ont mis sur la touche les engagements antérieurs pris en faveur de l'accès, de l'équité et d'une véritable transformation. Ces évolutions suivent une utopie du marché mondial qui considère l'enseignement supérieur comme une marchandise, en insistant sur un nouveau modèle de gestion encouragé par «les notions de concurrence, de privatisation et de consommation imposées par le marché qui adoptent les modèles de gestion des entreprises afin de réduire les coûts et de maximiser les profits» (Baatjes 2005:29). L'attention est attirée sur l'urgence des tâches nécessaires pour empêcher une transformation plus poussée des établissements d'enseignement supérieur en entreprises. Les promesses non tenues de la part de l'État et l'importance des tâches en perspective peuvent se traduire par une tentation au désespoir de la part de ceux qui conçoivent un système d'enseignement supérieur différent. L'empiètement du néo-libéralisme, des marchés et de l'individualisme sur la justice sociale, la communauté et la solidarité engendre de nouveaux impératifs sur le plan moral. Cela rentre dans le «cadre d'une reconsidération plus générale de l'enseignement en tant que domaine de pratique éthique – une marchandisation de l'enseignement et des valeurs, ce qui nous permet de négliger systématiquement les résultats de la politique et des pratiques – une démoralisation de la société» (Ball 2003:25). Dans cette situation, l'enseignement se transforme en une possibilité lucrative pour le capital offerte par le marché. Toutefois, s'inspirant de son discours-programme prononcé lors du 12ème Congrès mondial sur l'Enseignement comparé à la Havane, à Cuba, l'auteur plaide en faveur de la culture de l'espoir conjointement avec la conviction selon laquelle il y a de la place pour l'action sociale. Il conclut en affirmant que ceci est fondamental, puisque l'éducation pour le bien de tous est trop importante pour être laissée entre les mains des entreprises, et soumise aux caprices et aux vicissitudes du marché.

In the face of recent high profile developments in South Africa's higher education institutions, Davies' (2005) evocative essay titled 'The (Im)possibility of Intellectual Work in Neoliberal Regimes' has special resonance. She challenges the dry discourse of managerialism in higher education. It is a language that 'kills off conscience'. It is a jargon to which universities in South Africa have increasingly succumbed. They are dangerously accommodating a practice that demonises social responsibility where critique has become a risky endeavour. Davies concurs with the view that you cannot 'tell a joke in this language, or write a poem, or sing a song. It is a language without human provenance or

possibility' (2005:1). More concretely, academics, particularly those who dissent, are constantly surveyed. It is a surveillance premised on distrust, individual advancement and the devaluing of a commitment to the public good. It is also a climate where rampant individualism and competitiveness are encouraged for the sake of economic survival. Monitoring mechanisms for producing 'appropriate' behaviour are vigorously adhered to and consume limited funds. Some of the starker, recent headlines in newspapers underline a clear trend in this direction. For example, an article titled 'New Probe into Negative Media Publicity' comments on developments at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (*Sunday Tribune*, November 19, 2006). Another article, 'Private Investigators Fingerprint Staff and Take Computer' tries to 'find out who circulated an internal document revealing vast salary discrepancies among staff' at the University of Fort Hare (*Daily Dispatch*, November 17, 2006).

Piqued by one of those perennial memos that exhort cost-cutting measures, in this case impacting on his assistance to students from poor communities, a colleague at the University of KwaZulu-Natal wrote sardonically:

Let's simply and more profitably replace our Deans and Heads of Schools with business consultants and our vice-chancellors with CEOs (not much of an adjustment considering the millions they already earn as well as how some of them singularly and embarrassingly show scant intellectual leadership). Let's embrace the language from higher up suffused with phrases such as efficiency, cost effectiveness, cost-benefit analyses, numerically epigraphic 'streams of funding', and supply and demand. We really cannot afford collegiality or 'ornamental' research discussing critical theory, ethics, feminism and racism. Let's dispense with participatory action research and epistemological questioning, it's too expensive. Let's pursue distance learning and all become technicised (I. G. Baatjies, email comm., September 20, 2005)!

Individual and social agency in our universities, as well as access to institutions, are defined largely through market-driven notions, fiscal parsimony, corporate values and corporate planning frameworks. There exists a rarely questioned assumption that the market is an appropriate model for education. In the face of mass unemployment, aligning skills to the competitive global 'new knowledge economy', as ASGISA (Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative – South Africa) and JIPSA (Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition) attempt to do, is compellingly seductive and has become the obsession of our national education department. Learning that addresses the self in relation to public life, social responsibility and democratic citizenship is marginalised and ridiculed in favour of a culture of crass commercialisation.

In the interim, a 'death sentence' is passed on most historically black institutions, and as Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2006) have shown, a sizeable number of students are annually pushed out of higher education through financial exclusions and lack of academic support, while courses and whole departments are summarily shut down largely because they are not profitable. In a written reply to a parliamentary question, the National Education Minister conceded that half the country's undergraduates drop out without completing their degrees and diplomas (*Campus Times* supplement to *Mail & Guardian*, November 17, 2006). This alarming situation is not limited to 'historically disadvantaged institutions'. The University of the Witwatersrand, for instance, admits that 33 percent of students drop out (*ibid.*).

When former Minister Kader Asmal described the landscape of higher education in 1999 as one which was largely dictated by the geo-political imagination of apartheid planners, many academics and students eagerly anticipated a new imagination upon which the academy would be reconfigured, one which, some ambitiously proclaimed, would even inspire a continental renewal (Chisholm, Motala and Vally 2003:623). Changing the 'institutional landscape' was widely perceived as promoting the regional sharing of resources including academic staff and libraries, eliminating duplication and encouraging synergies between disciplines, universities and communities. Some did express disquiet when the erstwhile Minister's 'tirisano' or 'call to action' list of priorities did not adequately deal with the predicament of dwindling resources, the projected costs of reconfiguring higher education, cuts in state subsidies, and escalating student debt (Chisholm, Motala and Vally 2003:623).

Despite the concerns of the earlier National Commission on Higher Education, higher education is increasingly placed beyond the reach of students from poor backgrounds. The financial aid loan scheme is inadequate, retrenchment of staff continues, and bridging courses as well as support for students have largely ended. Innovative aspects of the National Qualifications Framework such as the Recognition of Prior Learning, which held much promise for trade unions and aimed at challenging exclusionary practices of formal institutions by breaking down barriers to access and routes of progress, were not extensively implemented.

Today, on the back of ongoing technocratic reform and the impact of corporate globalisation, changes are best described as desultory and ordinary. South Africa has not escaped the debasement of higher education, a process which recasts public space as a commodified sphere with students as consumers and staff as sales consultants. Seasoned academics and student activists now highlight the rapid moves to make universities into 'assembly lines for production'

and ‘lean but very mean’ institutions. Decades ago, Ernest Mandel referred to the danger of *Fachidiotismus* or ‘professional cretinism’ (1972:23). At the behest of the accountants of education, this has now given way to organised incompetence. Observers of higher education planning in South Africa over the past decade should be forgiven their bewilderment, numerous White Papers, commissions and committees notwithstanding. Higher education policy has failed, often on its own terms, as bureaucrats renege on the lofty ideals of numerous discussion papers and scramble to reconfigure the landscape—now suggesting a cap on student numbers, then revising this proposal, then suggesting a ‘differentiated’ university system.

The book edited by Richard Pithouse (2006), *Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, is one of the few attempts at examining recent events by reclaiming an independent critical discourse in higher education. Many of the essays in this book speak to how the university in South Africa is transformed ‘from ivory tower to market place’ in the words of the symposium organised by UNISA’s College of Human Sciences and currently hosted in this issue of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*. The corporate model, contrary to the hegemonic discourse, is neither efficient nor effective and, most importantly, has little to do with sound pedagogical practice. The *Asinamali* essays in various ways call for a defence of higher education as a public good and an autonomous sphere of critical and productive democratic citizenry, as well as resistance to the imposition of commercial values to subvert the purpose and mission of our institutions.

A number of essays in Pithouse’s book relate specifically to the themes discussed in this article, namely, the transition from autonomy to managerialism and the marketisation of the university. In his article ‘Restructuring South African Universities’, Andrew Nash (2006), for example, studies class re-alignment in the transition from apartheid to democracy. He argues that we should not assume that a restructured university system will be more coherent than the apartheid one it displaced. In his article ‘Accounting for Autonomy’, Jonathan Jansen (2006) employs the taxonomy formulated by T. B. Davie—who shall teach; what should be taught; how this is done; who should be taught—and succinctly describes nine ways in which the state since 1994 has made significant inroads into institutional autonomy through funding formulae and legislative intervention. This loss of autonomy, for Jansen, needs to be contextualised in the new state’s subservience to the diktats of the global economy. Jansen believes a ‘university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energises its scholars, and inspires its students’ (2006:19). Academic freedom and institutional autonomy can only

be defended and secured when the intellectual project defines a university's identity. Jansen examines when the university ceases to exist:

[It] has been transformed into a commercial centre ... in which every 'management' meeting is consumed with balancing the budget in the light of impending subsidy cuts... [T]he response to external intervention is one of compliance... [T]he accumulation of larger and larger *numbers* of accredited publications is pursued with relentless vigour... Just about everyone in such a place is in the business of (ac)counting (Jansen 2006:19).

Roger Southall and Julian Cobbing (2006) extend Andre du Toit's critique of the T. B. Davie formula by focussing on the threats to academic freedom as internal to universities, in a chapter entitled, 'From Racial Liberalism to Corporate Authoritarianism'. These threats, they believe, are on the rise in a situation where the university is run like a corporation whose managers 'are becoming increasingly intolerant of robust internal dissent' (Southall and Cobbing 2006:23-4). In an article entitled 'Neoliberalism, Bureaucracy and Resistance at Wits University', James Pendlebury and Lucien van der Walt (2006) analyse the deleterious effects of restructuring Wits into a 'market university' for support service workers, students from working class backgrounds, and a significant section of academic and administrative staff. They show how centralisation of power and cost-centering are linked to an increase in surveillance where collegial governance is replaced by managerialism based on business models. In his piece, 'World Bank Thinking, World Class Institutions, Denigrated Workers', Jonathan Grossman (2006) points to continuities with the politics and economics of the restyled World Bank in the way its thinking is translated into specific attacks on workers at the University of Cape Town (UCT). By examining the effects of, and responses to, Mamphela Ramphele's reign as UCT Vice-Chancellor (later a senior manager of the World Bank), Grossman shows how UCT as an intellectual project has become poorer. The question he poses is apposite: 'When the textbook Economics 101 package of retrenchment, outsourcing, and marketisation has itself become a sacred cow of the university, not just of the broader society, then what scope are academics leaving for vigorous critical social engagement?' (Grossman 2006:102).

Higher education has to be understood and situated in the context of global processes. Stromquist (2002) argues that we need to develop wider and deeper understandings of the processes of globalisation and of the full reach it is attaining through both the market and the state. She argues that private firms and international financial institutions are now the key players, and that their influence on education policies is maintained through 'persistent circulation of ideas, provision of and promises to fund reforms that move in desired directions'

(2002:1). Individualism, competition and consumption are the dominant values within academe as elsewhere. Stromquist laments the fact that in this situation there is 'little space left for contestatory and liberatory thought' (ibid.). The challenge for us is to expand the space that exists. Some suggestions toward this end will be made later in this article, but first a few points on the impact of corporate globalisation on education, or rather the insidious war on public education. Educators and students are cajoled 'to ultimately see all meaning in terms of what can be bought, sold or made profitable' (Shumar 1997:5). Meanwhile socially constituted and produced educational processes are reified as measurable things (Canaan 2002:4). Writing on the global homogenisation of education, Maude Barlow and Heather-Jane Robertson argue, '[The] corporate model of education based on head-to-head competition and survival of the fittest has become the prototype for most governments and education institutions' (1996:61).

Institutions submit to government funding formulas that penalise students from less affluent backgrounds, cut academic support programmes, and privilege programmes that have greater purchase in the marketplace while many arts and humanities courses are being phased out. Lack of state support drives institutions to seek corporate sponsorship with all the negative consequences that adhere to this. Barlow and Robertson quote an extract from an article entitled 'Universities for Sale' in *This Magazine* that captures this transmutation:

Knowledge that was free, open and for the benefit of society is now proprietary, confidential and for the benefit of business. Educators who once jealously guarded their autonomy now negotiate curriculum planning with corporate sponsors.... Professors who once taught are now on company payrolls churning out marketable research in the campus lab, while universities pay the cut-rate fee for replacement teaching assistants... University presidents, once the intellectual leaders of their institutions, are now accomplished bagmen. In exchange for free merchandise, universities offer exclusive access to students for corporate sponsors. A professor's ability to attract private investment is now often more important than academic qualifications or teaching ability (Barlow and Robertson 1996:67).

In the university where I work, to add insult to injury, my staff card was embossed with the Coca-Cola logo, and this after more than 600 support staff were retrenched or outsourced to private companies. I assure you, 'things did not go better' with Coca-Cola. Financial exclusions of poor students and other cuts continue.

As funds for public services are generally becoming scarcer, the commercialisation, capitalisation and privatisation of education gains momentum, aided and abetted by the corporate lobbying machinery. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) facilitates this process by insisting on the opening up of 'education markets' to international capital and foreign service providers. Governments are pressurised to loosen constraints in the 'trade' by lifting subsidies and grants, labour and consumer protection laws, qualifications and local content provisions. The key WTO agreement for this purpose is the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (see GATS Watch 2002; Rikowski 2002). GATS covers every service imaginable, including sectors that affect the environment, culture, natural resources, water, health care, education and social services. The chief beneficiaries of this new GATS regime are companies who are determined to expand their global reach and to turn public services into public markets globally. According to the organisation GATS Watch, 'Not only are the service industries the fastest growing sector of the new global economy but also health, education and water are shaping up to be the most lucrative of all services' (2002). Healthcare is considered to be a roughly U.S. \$3 trillion market worldwide, while education is a \$2.2 trillion market annually (Sinclair and Grieshaber-Otto 2002:74).

Rikowski writes, '[G]overnments attempt to justify opening up education to corporate capital on the grounds that private sector management methods are best, and that business people are needed to "modernise" education for a "knowledge economy" based on information technologies' (2002:1). There is widespread concern that this justification begins with companies' involvement in commercial, accounting and information technology courses, and then fans out to encroach on the education sector as a whole. For example:

It was reassuring that former Education Minister Asmal asserted that he would continue to oppose such commodification of higher education in forums such as the World Trade Organisation, where some member states are promoting the notion of 'education and training as a service' to be bought and sold across national boundaries. One of the potentially serious threats to transformation is the unfettered growth of transnational higher education institutions which have little regard for national and regional needs and priorities (*Sowetan*, November 11, 2002).

Whether the Ministries of Finance and Trade and Industry, which have to date surpassed the expectations of the Washington-based institutions, share Minister Asmal's views, remains to be seen. Minister Trevor Manuel was the Chair of the IMF/World Bank Board of Governors in 1999–2000, and Minister Alec Erwin brokered the November 2001 WTO deal in Doha, Gulf State of Qatar,

opening the way for privatisation. For public services such as education, the Doha Summit was a stepping-stone towards the consolidation of the trade that opens up public services to corporate capital.

So how do we intervene? Dave Hill implies that the influence of ‘big business and their governments’ has already compromised university research (2004:14). There is a paradox: the funding of research is often linked to commercial interests; therefore, the potential for critical pedagogy, or for alternative perspectives in official spaces as a bulwark against these times, is severely constrained. I am more sanguine about the spaces and possibilities that exist in formal institutions. Once again, these relate to strategies involving issues of contestation, of agency, of ‘whose knowledge counts’, and of resistance. These issues confront us more starkly than before, and areas of intervention are certainly possible, in fact necessary, if comparative education is to be effective in these times.

Hill (2004), interpreting Paulo Freire, correctly claims that not enough academics are working as critical pedagogues who orient themselves toward concrete struggles in the public and political domains. Even among those educators who want to transform education to serve democratic ends, reservations abound concerning the importance of going beyond institutional spaces. Hill argues, ‘To engage as critical cultural workers would require academics to politicize their research by becoming social actors who mobilize, develop political clarity, establish strategic alliances...’ (2004:16).

Academics must lead the defence of higher education as a public good and an autonomous sphere of critical democratic citizenry, and resist commercial and corporate values to shape the purpose and mission of our institutions. The emphasis on technical rationality, simplistic pragmatism and undemocratic managerial imperatives must be countered. Proactively, initiatives should include linking programmes and projects to community needs and struggles, as well as preventing the exclusion of poor students.

A priority for us should be a comparative investigation of neoliberal projects and the inequalities that arise out of these projects in different parts of our country and of the world. Genuinely collaborative teams of researchers linking the North and South have a role to play here. Culture and context do have particular provenance in these joint initiatives and should not be ignored (see Crossley and Jarvis 2001). Areas requiring much more work include environmental justice, the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, indigenous knowledge and collective human rights. Much research and activism is required to illuminate not only the ideology and symbols of discrimination but also the structural inequalities that are perpetuated. Crucially, an interdisciplinary approach

that recognises the contributions of history, politics and economics as well as art, literature and drama should be pursued.

Methodologies of research that embrace participatory action and popular education can become a 'transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness' (Kincheloe and McLaren 1998:264). Burbules and Torres comment that from 'these critical perspectives might emerge new educational models ... including education in the context of new popular cultures and non-traditional social movements; new models of rural education for marginalized areas and the education of the poor; new models for migrant education, for the education of street children' (2000:19).

Upon being awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1993, Toni Morrison presciently warned, 'There will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute; language glamorized to thrill the dissatisfied and bereft into assaulting their neighbors; arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness' (quoted in Davies 2005:7). These iron cages can be dismantled, collectively and cooperatively. There are alternatives to the current dystopia which can be re-imagined.

The veteran Tanzanian academic-activist, Issa Shivji wistfully recalls how the university, once an essential core of the right to self-determination, has been undermined by the neoliberal offensive:

Universities were dubbed white elephants. We did not need thinkers, asserted our erstwhile benefactors. We only needed storekeepers and bank tellers and computer operators and marketing managers...Universities are not cost-effective, decreed the World Bank. Education, knowledge must be sold and bought on the world market. The idea of providing free education, which really meant using citizens' money to educate their children rather than to buy guns to suppress them, was Nyerere's bad joke (Shivji 2005:35).

Shivji does believe that the gains of the past must be reclaimed and transcended, so that 'we should not lose the centrality of the struggle of ideas and the university as the centre of ideas of struggle' (2005:35).

Note

1. A short section of this article appeared as a review in 'Beyond Matric', a supplement to the *Mail and Guardian* on September 14, 2006.

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