A SYSTEM IN NEED OF TRANSFORMATION?

Crain Soudien

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The purpose of my input here this morning is to make some comments towards informing our discussions over the next two days. What I would like to do is to draw attention to key issues generated by the report and by the discussions in the wake of the report.

The brief given to the Ministerial Committee (MCTHE) was to look into: "The nature and extent of racism and racial discrimination in public higher education, and in particular university residences. While the emphasis should be on racial discrimination, other forms of discrimination based, on, for example, gender, ethnicity and disability should also be considered." It was given six months to report. I will not be discussing or reporting on the findings of the report except to say that in broad terms the Committee concluded that "in legal and regulatory terms, the higher education system is in a good state. There is no doubt that significant progress has been made in effecting transformation, when narrowly defined in terms of compliance" (DoE, 2009: 12). However, beyond this narrow definition, it was clear that significant problems remain.

The point about compliance is an important point to highlight because it emphasizes the real difficulty we have in this country in imagining a future for ourselves beyond our history. Compliance, like constitutionalism, is too often simply obedience to the letter of the law. It is about operating in a literal way, or playing the game. What is now called for in the country, and especially from us in the universities who have the priceless privilege of being able to reflect on issues affecting society, is the imagination of new ways of being South Africans. Against our history - and we have to believe that our histories, especially those racialised, ethnicised and gendered versions, and their now new class variations, which trap us in sentimental and irrational cages of self- and group identity have to be overcome. We have to be presenting to ourselves, relentlessly now, new models of what it means to be a person, a human being in the country and in the world. In relation to this challenge, compliance as a paradigm is fatally flawed. It is anti-intellectual. It is the antithesis of what the university is in the best sense of the word. It is about gestures, genuflections and, ultimately, a validation of the worst self-serving instincts that characterize our racialised history.

We have to think beyond the limits of our current frameworks which privilege ideas of superiority if we are to realize the real potential that is there amongst the diverse youth of our country, the rich and the poor, the pigmented and the less-pigmented, the abled and the disabled, the linguistically privileged and the linguistically marginalised. It is out of this daring, this courage that we position ourselves to become truly great and begin to fulfill the promise we as a country to this day offer to the world. We will fail, however, if we do not, each of us as individuals, as institutions, as a sector and as a broad community with and including government, radically confront the mentality that we will only do what we are told, and not begin doing what we are truly capable of. This meeting, today and tomorrow, is crucial in beginning or renewing what we as a community can do. While this is not a policy-making forum, we must take advantage of having all of us under the same roof and believe that from our deliberations can come new ways, new ideas and a new daring.

Thinking our way into the future means we cannot simply begin at any arbitrary space or point. There are two crucial issues I put forward here this morning. Both were pivotal for the Ministerial Committee. Both can of course be addressed in a framework of compliance. But we have to believe that we can look at them and think that through them we can demonstrate a sense of awareness of how the cages of history work and how we create a new non-racial and non-discriminatory university. The first issue is the urgent structural challenge that confronts higher education – the numbers question - and the second is that which can be described as the subjective, the arena in which we demonstrate our beliefs.

The Ministerial Committee found at the broad structural level that there remained deep issues of inequality. Markedly demonstrating this were, and indeed remain, widely different participation and success rates for black and white students in the system. The Committee drew the following conclusions from its structural analysis of student participation:

- (The participation rate) in higher education in 2006 was 12% for Africans, 13% for Coloureds, 42% for Indians and 59% for whites.

- The gap between the African and white success rate by a cohort analysis of first-time entering undergraduates in 2000 indicates that the average graduation rate for white students is double that of African students... by 2004, some 65% of African students in this cohort had dropped out and only 24% graduated, while 41% of white students dropped out and 48% graduated. (DoE, 2009: 69-70)

This data comes from our HEMIS. Decomposing these statistics even further, Ian Scott found that when one looks at the total 18-24 age group of African men and women only 5% have a reasonable chance of succeeding at university. By contrast, 65 out of every 100 young white people in the same age-group can reasonably expect to graduate from university. We have in this result the enormity of apartheid's legacy. The system, the figures show, is unable to meet the needs of 95% of young African men and women. It is structured *not* to include them – it cannot give them access - and, critically, when it does take them in, it is unable to realise their aspirations. It effectively conspires to exclude them. This issue of access is the first matter that this summit must urgently address.

How does the system exclude them? At the institutional level the MCTHE recognised that significant change, particularly with respect to institutional culture and curriculum change, had taken place. Progress was evident in a number of important practical interventions and policy innovations developed in several institutions. In terms of the former, several institutions had established programmes to address discrimination and prejudice. Important amongst these were the 'Courageous Conversations' at Stellenbosch, the Khuluma initiative at UCT. We now also know of the deeply important initiatives to promote non-racialism that have been taken at the Universities of the Free State and Nelson Mandela. In respect of the curriculum, we also have important developments such as the "Grounding Course" at the University of Fort Hare.

But large problems remained, the report indicated, and here is the second issue to which I wish to draw attention. Using the evidence, yes the evidence, of research papers, institutional reviews by the CHE, and, significantly, from consultations it conducted on campuses, the MCTHE heard of important developments in trust building between people and important breakthroughs in

relationships between students from different backgrounds, but there were many more complaints, across institutions, principally from black staff and students, including some members of Councils, that racism continued to operate in classrooms, meetings and the informal spaces in which people found themselves. The nature of these complaints suggested that academic members of staff, students and support members of staff in institutions across the country were going through direct and what was often described as indirect racism. At virtually every single hearing conducted across the country, including in historically black institutions, black members of staff spoke of their struggles. We heard appreciation from black students at almost every institution in the country for the opportunity that they were being provided but also deep disappointment about their inability to flourish. They were disappointed that they were so little respected. My own conclusion coming away from these painful encounters with students and staff, academic and support, is that there is a real sense of ambivalence and even confusion amongst many, particularly black, members of our higher education community. They have real difficulty in understanding what is expected of them. They have little help in making this clear. Against this, even our 5% success, it could be said, is a fragile achievement. In their ambivalence, students look upon us – we who are responsible for their futures – with cynicism. Many of our black colleagues are paralysed by anxiety: "will this ever be good enough?" Some lose their voices. Strikingly, and I don't have the time to talk to this, there is also a loss of confidence in some contexts amongst white members of staff. The situation is complex. We do not know – almost all of us - how to imbue people who are supposedly different from ourselves, and it is now critically more than a matter of race but also of social class, with a real sense of confidence, the confidence, as subjects of their own human destiny and the capacity to realize, as Amartya Sen says, the freedoms they theoretically have. We leave them with the kind of self-doubt that incapacitates them. The issue that we are having to confront is that as subjects of this three-hundred and fifty-year history, when we are on the campus, now together, we remain ineluctably the subjects and objects of racism. Each of us is, every day, implicated in the making and reproduction of superiority. We deny it at our peril. Our denial of it, like the denial of HIV/AIDS, means that we don't address it and so we subvert the potential of the university to be a space for building democracy both within and outside of it. Instead, we build resentment and distrust.

What must we do? We must do everything in our power to address the ways our legacy comes to us in our social, political and economic arrangements in the country – this is the domain of government in the main. It has to deliberately engage with the structural conditions that only yield 12% of the young people for the university. In our institutions we have to think deeply about how we conduct ourselves in and out of the classroom. Is it about manners and civility? Yes, but it is deeply more about the way we engage each other as human beings in the teaching, learning and thinking processes. Our old ways of doing these things are based on our past. Race is too deeply encoded within that past. We have to think anew now about what it means to teach our young people in their full and actual diversity. What does it mean for what we teach and how we teach? When does even an inclusive pedagogy still alienate? When, alternatively, does a focus on the 'relevant' really catalyse the interest of those whom we teach? Let us talk about this today. It is out of this that we confront some of the conditions that make our system a 5% system and so, hopefully, make it a 5% system no more.