Discussion Paper: Transformation Discourses and Universities in South Africa

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'Our vision is of a South Africa in which all our people have access to lifelong education and training opportunities, which will in turn contribute towards improving the quality of life and building a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society'. (Department of Education, *Vision Statement*, 2008)

'What is it about [higher education] which keeps alive our optimism in its socially transformative power and provides the preconditions for any socially transformative project, yet which also pulls in the opposite direction – towards an ethos of individual competition and the reproduction of a hierarchy of social advantage?' (Ruth Jonathan, 2001, p.48)

This paper explains some of the terminology used to describe South African universities, traces key shifts in access, and seeks to explain and identify issues around the transformation project in higher education. It constitutes a work-in-progress contribution to thinking in the research team on how we understand transformation discourses and practices in relation to policy and institutions on the one hand, and poverty reduction and pro-poor professional education on the other. Jansen et al (2008) raise the question as to what the reach and impact of changes in higher education have been on higher education practices, what changes mean to higher education practitioners, and how changes are shaped by both the national context and the global arena. How poverty reduction is framed by universities, by selected professional education sites in those universities, and how this framing is acted on, negotiated, understood by diverse actors and shapes professional education is central to the research project. Framings of transformation and human development discourses and practices in relation to professional education by universities and diverse actors are then also at issue.

Historical Terminology

The university system in South Africa comprises what are described as historically white (HWI) and historically black (HBI) universities, based on a legacy of apartheid segregation from the 1950s in education at all levels. Sometimes the terminology of historically disadvantaged/advantaged is also used. These descriptors signal not only colour of staff and students, but also broadly, social class origins and institutional ethos, level of resourcing for the institution, and research capacity and outputs. They are not obviously descriptive of quality in teaching and learning but one might assume that large numbers of under-prepared black students, emerging from poor schooling provision, might strain quality in teaching.

HWIs can be divided again into those in which the medium of communication and instruction was/is English and those which are/were Afrikaans. However the division on language lines while significant, is less important than the political divide signalled by language, between those universities that supported the National Party Government and its apartheid university policies, and those that

did not (Bunting, 2006). In this study, the University of Stellenbosch (SUN) falls into the former camp, and the University of Cape Town (UCT) into the latter.

The white Afrikaans medium universities prior to 1990, which saw the unbanning of the ANC and the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, 'saw their support of the apartheid government as being essential to their survival as institutions' (Bunting, 2006a, p.), training staff for the civil service and the professions. Knowledge, argues Bunting (2006a) was regarded instrumentally in terms of its social, economic or political purposes, exacerbated by an academic boycott which cut universities off from an international academic community until 1994. Their intellectual agendas, Bunting says, 'were by and large determined by the perception that they had a duty to preserve the apartheid status quo', undertaking work with a local and national focus often for government, government agencies and the armed forces. Writing of the University of Pretoria, one of this group of six Afrikaans universities, Jonathan Jansen, former Dean of Education, argues that he found 'a lack of critical discourse in the disciplines as well as in more public spheres with respect to pressing social and human problems' (quoted in Bunting, 2006a, p.40). In this project SUN is an historically white Afrikaans medium university.

The four historically white English-speaking universities took a strong anti-government stand, accelerating during the turbulent 1980s. As universities they saw the need to maintain a critical distance from government and to locate themselves as part of an international academic community, albeit constrained by the impact of the academic boycott Bunting, 2006). They educated students for the professions, but also saw themselves as knowledge producers (Bunting, 2006). Bunting (2006) suggests that they approached the post-1994 period 'with confidence', having seen their anti-apartheid stance vindicated. However, Mamdani (1998) has also argued that historically these universities were never major agents for radical social and political change in South Africa; rather they were islands of white social privilege closely linked to capitalism and big business interests. For this project UCT is one of the historically white English medium university.

The HBIs comprised a group of four African universities, a university for Indians and one for Coloureds, either in rural or peri-urban ('bush') locations. All of these universities were established to operationalise apartheid policy in higher education and the distorted notion of equality of opportunity within a racial or ethnic group. They were meant to train students for roles in the apartheid state and schools (Bunting, 2006a). Their histories have been diverse, although all broadly became sites of struggle against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s. In this research project UWC is one of these historically black universities. In the early days it was staffed predominantly by conservative Afrikaner academics supportive of apartheid ideology. By the 1980s this had begun to seriously unravel, culminating in the appointment in 1987 of Jakes Gerwel as the Rector, openly committed to transformation and UWC's role as an engine of social change. He dubbed UWC the 'University of the Working Class'. The identity of a coloured university was firmly rejected and by 1993 only 55% of students were classified Coloured, the rest being African (Bunting, 2006a).

The three universities in this research project therefore bring diverse histories.

Overall, by 1994 there were gross discrepancies in the participation rates of students from different population groups. In 1993 9% of university students were African, 13% Coloured, 40% Indian and 70% White. The average participation rate was 17% (Bunting, 2006, p.106).

Post-1994 and equity challenges

Following the shift to democracy in 1994, the 1997 *White Paper* mapped out a broad transformation agenda underpinned by core principles of equity (of access and the distribution of success along lines of race, gender, class and geography), and redress of past inequalities. Higher education was expected to be more responsive to social needs and the demands of a high skills technologically-oriented economy in global times (Cloete, 2006a). The White Paper declared that higher education was to be 'transformed to meet the challenges of a new non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society committed to equity, justice and a better life for all'. It was further stated that 'ensuring equity of access must be complemented by a concern for equity of outcomes. Increased access must not lead to a 'revolving door' syndrome for students, with high failure and drop-out rates' (DOE, 1997):

> [An] enabling environment must be created throughout the system to uproot deep-seated racist and sexist ideologies and practices that inflame relationships, inflict emotional scars and create barriers to successful participation in learning and campus life. Only a multi-faceted approach can provide a sound foundation of knowledge, concepts, academic, social and personal skills, and create the culture of respect, support and challenge on which self-confidence, real learning and enquiry can thrive (DoE, 1997, quoted in Badat, 2008a, p.12)).

The figures below reflect the changes in student enrolment that have occurred since 1993:
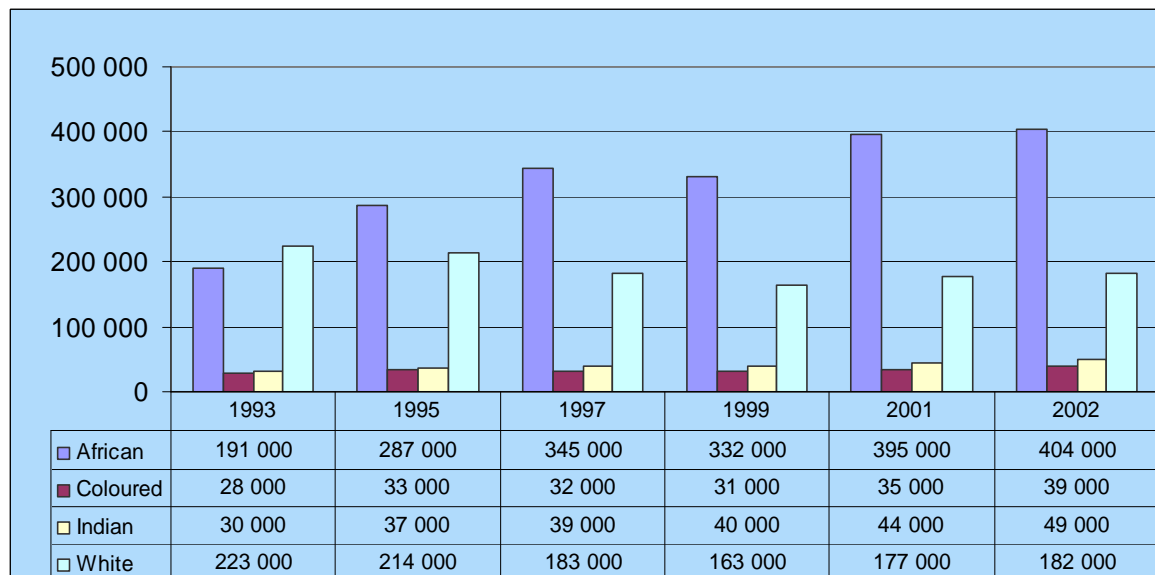
	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001	2002
African	191 000	287 000	345 000	332 000	395 000	404 000
Coloured	28 000	33 000	32 000	31 000	35 000	39 000
Indian	30 000	37 000	39 000	40 000	44 000	49 000
White	223 000	214 000	183 000	163 000	177 000	182 000

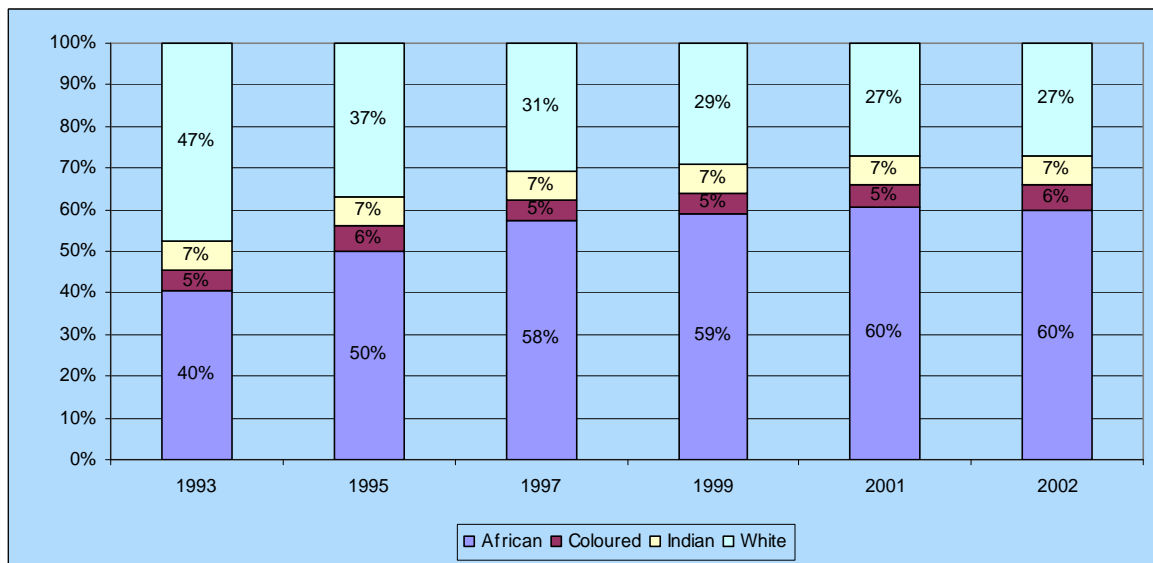Figure 1: Students Enrolments by 'Race', 1993 – 2002 *(*CHE, 2004, p.6)

Figure 2: Proportion of Higher Education Student Enrolments by 'Race', 1993 - 2002 (CHE, 2004, p.67)

By 2005, African students comprised 60.2%, Coloured students 6.8%, Indian students 6.7% and White students 26% of a total enrolment of 482, 595 enrolements (DoE, 2006).

There was also progress in terms of gender equity:

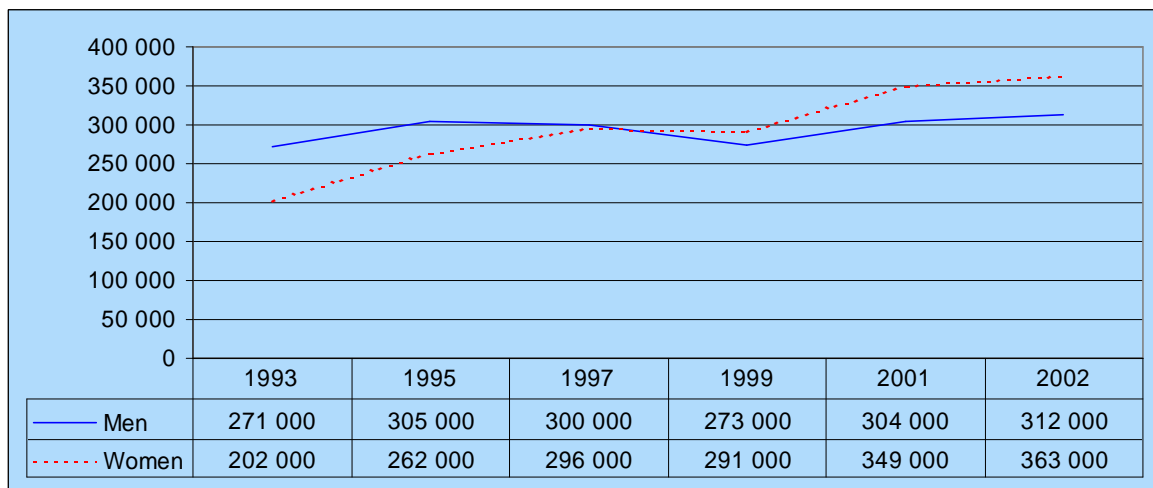|	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001	2002
Men	271 000	305 000	300 000	273 000	304 000	312 000
Women	202 000	262 000	296 000	291 000	349 000	363 000

Figure 3: Student Enrolments by Gender, 1993 - 2002 (CHE, 2004, p.68)

By 2005 women constituted 54.5% of the student body (DoE, 2006).

These broad student numbers are encouraging and show significant progress towards transforming universities in relation to student equity and redress.

Transformation in trouble?

However, South Africa's overall gross participation rate is low: 15% in 2001, rising only to 16% in 2005. Of this 16%, whites made up 60%, Indians 51%, Coloureds 12% and Africans only 12% (Scott and Yeld, 2008, p.24). (The gross participation rate is based on a percentage of the 20-24 age group enrolled in some form of higher education.) To this must be added a worrying drop-out rate between 2000 and 2003 of 50% (Letseka and Maile, 2008, p.5). The overall graduation rate stands at only 15% (Letseka and Maile, 2008, p.1).

Thus Cloete (2006, p.271) suggests that the 'equity improvements' (for the student population) are 'not unambiguous':

> The equity objective in the post-1994 period was not met. Instead changes resulted in more elite public higher education system: while the student population became dramatically blacker, this was against an overall decrease in participation rates. Effectively this meant that while the complexion of the elite had changed, the gap between 'those with and 'those without' higher education had not decreased. (Cloete, 2006b, p.273).

More individuals were gaining access to higher education, but overall inequality was increasing, and little had been achieved to 'redress the systemic imbalances between historically disadvantaged and historically advantaged institutions' (Cloete, 2006b, p.274). Relative levels of resourcing were unchanged. Moreover discourses of development start to shift from the early emphasis on equity to 'effectiveness and efficiency challenges' articulated by the Council on Higher Education (an independent statutory body that advises the Minister on higher education policy) in 2000 followed by the emphasis on 'human resource development' in the National Plan for Higher Education in 2001 issued by the Department of Education (Cloete, 2006b). This is further accompanied by a requirement for greater accountability to the state as primary funder (Jansen et al, 2007).

Some key commentators have suggested that the transformation project in higher education has 'come to be widely seen as a disappointment' (Muller et al, 2006, p.289), with an 'apparent loss of virtuous course'. That there have been far ranging changes is not in doubt, but there have also been 'disconcerting continuities' for example in continued domination of senior appointments by white men, uneven research productivity, and institutional cultures which still bear their historical traces (Jansen et al, 2007). Muller and his fellow critics point to what is seen as a the common cause, the shift to the macro-economic Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, away from earlier more egalitarian redistributive measures in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).

But, they suggest, this is misleading in explaining the derailing of the project of transforming higher education, as if policy would have produced the required transformation result if only this deficit could have been remedied. The picture is more complex, they argue, with limits to the transformation project shaped by: (i) the need for trade-offs in policy priorities; (ii) different types of institutions; and (iii) diverse governance regimes at universities. They point out that transformation of universities was never envisaged as radical, given the 'sophistication and fragile nature of higher education' according to Sibusiso Bengu, the first Minister of Education (quoted Muller et al, 2006, p.293). Policy

was envisaged more as a symbolic break with the past and the signalling of new direction:

> The need to declare a break with the past implied that the main items on the policy agenda had to reflect political priorities. This implied that the new policy issues with respect to higher education in 1994 were mainly concerned with the need to create more equity and democracy in the sector. But at this time the political imperative towards transformation acted to obscure both the nature of the necessary trade-offs that might have to be made to realise policy intentions, as well as their possible divergent effects. (Muller et al, 2006, p.293)

A key trade-off has been that a heterogeneous sector continues to be stratified along lines of colour and class. Against a global backdrop of economic growth and prosperity in the 1990s which has benefited South Africa (and globally has only recently begun to falter), market-led values of efficiency and productivity came to supersede participation, equity and justice and 'pushed higher education into the market' (Muller et al, 2006, p.306). Once GEAR was in place 'as the premier instrument of finance policy in South Africa, it was only a matter of time before its hegemonic effects would be felt in all other domains of policy and governance', argue Muller et al (2006, p.306). Higher education policy came to 'buy symbolic legitimisation and consensus, whatever had been the undoubted good intentions of its proponents' (p.306). Weaker institutions (arguably none of the three in this study) complained that 'they were left dangling in the wind of the market' while stronger institutions (arguably UCT and SUN, and UWC but to a lesser extent) 'invoked university autonomy' (p.307) against state interference and steering of higher education.

Transformation challenges

Saleem Badat (2008b), Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University (an HEI), has further pointed to the lack of 'visibility' of South African universities in relation to problems of economic and development challenges and contributions to social transformation. He argues for the importance of critical scholarship in investigating a range of crucial issues, including poverty, unemployment and other inequalities so that universities live up to 'the responsibility our Constitution has given the country's universities' (2008a, p.2). Badat (2008a) affirms the continued importance of equity and redress, while pointing out that the arrival of democracy is not in itself 'a sufficient condition for the erasure of the structural and institutional conditions, policies and practices that have for decades grounded and sustained inequalities in all domains of social life' (p.5). But, he writes, 'It is precisely this reality that gives salience to the idea of redress and makes it a fundamental and necessary dimension of higher education transformation and social transformation in general' (p.5).

Citing the World Bank/UNESCO Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000), he rehearses the importance of what it is that universities ought to do in the formation of students so that they learn to: think effectively and critically; achieve depth in a field of knowledge; have a critical appreciation of the ways in which they gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of themselves; have a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times and are able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it; have some understanding of and experience in

thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems; and can communicate with precision, cogency and force. At stake, says Badat, is the importance of producing graduates who can contribute to the economic and social development of South Africa. He reminds us the importance of inclusive institutional cultures and quality in teaching and learning environments, which are all vital if diverse students are to succeed and graduate with the relevant knowledge, competencies, skills and attributes that are required for any occupation and profession, to be life-long learners and function as critical, culturally enriched and tolerant citizens.

Yet academics are arguably increasingly subject to a corporate managerialism (following similar trends internationally) shaped, argues Stewart (2007), by a constrained funding policy (having to do more for less); strong demands for institutional accountability to government; the rationalisation of the sector through mergers; the introduction of outcomes-based education, and the focus on practice-based and applied Mode 2 (Gibbons et al, 1994) knowledge production. Alongside these shifts is the claim that students are increasingly choosing study on the basis of what is going to bring the greatest financial rewards and status (Chetty and Webbstock, 2008). Nithaya Chetty and Denyse Webbstock (2008) from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal raise deep concerns about 'the taming of the intellectuals'. They explain that 'universities are finding it more and more difficult to create an environment for its students in which free and independent thinking can flourish within a moral and ethical framework' (p.2). They suggest that students (and staff) ought to be addressing challenges other than those of money and prestige:

> How can we create a more caring and compassionate society, one that is more responsive to the needs of the poor and less fortunate, one that is more efficient in the use of limited resources, one that is more respectful of our delicate environment, and one that is committed to leaving this world in a better state than we found it? How can we build an ethically and morally binding society? How can we use our skills in our niche area to achieve this? (2008, p.2)

More recently the notion of 'institutional culture' (Higgins, 2007) has emerged as a key element of transformation, pointing in this case to the overwhelming 'whiteness' of South African higher education. Institutional culture is then figured as 'a shorthand term for the powerful currents of racial feeling still active in South African society' (Higgins, 2007, p.97), capturing the alienating and disempowering sense of not belonging and the subliminal racism still circulating. Yet, as Higgins, argues the notion is both complex and contested. He develops his critique of a seminal paper by Melissa Steyn and Mikki Van Zyl (2001), which explored student perceptions and experiences of institutional culture at the University of Cape Town. The authors came to the conclusion that 'whiteness' still defines the core of UCT's institutional culture. For Higgins, the study underestimates social class as an element in the dilemmas and experiences described by students and pedagogical encounters which might be understood in Bourdieu's terms as struggles for distinction where the 'naturally distinguished [privileged] 'merely need to be what they are in order to be what they have to be' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.11 cited in Higgins, 2007, p.111). Higgins further notes Zimitri Erasmus's warning about the dangers of equity policies that may perpetuate 'race thinking' (2005, p.20 quoted in Higgins, 2007, p.116). The challenge as she explains it 'is to find ways of recognising race and its continued

effects on people's everyday lives, in an attempt to work against racial inequality, while at the same time working against practices that perpetuate race thinking' (2005, p.30 quoted in Higgins, 2007, p.116). Taking this into account and mapping it against the problematic of social class, Higgins proposes a more modest focus on institutional culture which foregrounds pedagogical culture and its transmission, and the uneven distribution of cultural capital.

We might further integrate these arguments for and about transformation and transformation discourses with Ruth Jonathan's (2006) nuanced and rich explication of higher education in South Africa as a social good in her paper for the Council on Higher Education. She explains that higher education is both a social good delivering benefits for society but it is at the same time a private good which bestows economic, social and civic benefits on individuals. At stake, as she sees it, is then to ensure a delicate balance between these two goods:

> Whilst the advantages accruing from higher education to individuals also contribute to society (through GNP, taxation, etc), it cannot also be assumed that those same individuals will put their gains to the service of building a more inclusive social world (in which the competitive advantage conferred by their credentials is progressively erode). They might do so; they might not (p.17)

Higher education can as easily reproduce privilege, albeit a privilege more evenly distributed than in apartheid days, and less racially aligned. What then is the role of a university in working to maximize the tendency of private advantage to become entrenched privilege and inequality? What is it that a university might do to 'influence the degree to which its graduates are disposed to make professional, social and political choices which affect the success of South Africa's substantive democratization?' (p.19) If Jonathan is correct in her claim that, 'the first duty of the academy is to educate persons', then it is at this point that Higgins's pedagogic institutional culture comes into play in relation to professional education and poverty reduction (which is our concern here). How knowledge and skill are taught and learned in what institutional ethos are fundamental to such [professional] educative purposes.

If, as Jonathan suggests, each of us must make continuing choices between personal advancement and social benefit then 'one among several of the influences on such choices is the impact on students of their academic experience' (p.22). What follows from this is democratic accountability on the part of universities to be socially responsive by showing careful attention 'to the attitudes and priorities shown by academics in teaching pre-or in-service professionals and to the ethos of institutions whose environment of social and cultural respect for all students can powerfully affect the attitudes of graduates for either better or worse' (p.34). Universities ought to extend to students their core values of questioning one's assumptions, being open to the unexpected argument or reasoned disputation to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge while seeking also to extend and expand it. Yet in turn this ought to extend, argues Jonathan to directly empowering South African citizens through the core role of teaching and learning in cultivating both personal and social empowerment, passing on to a new generation the necessary individual cognitive skills and broader aspirations, and also 'through the academy's collective contribution to sustaining an ongoing public culture of democratic engagement and critique' (p.36).

In the arena of professional education this ought to translate into discourses of transformation and human development in which students learn not only knowledge and skills but 'the difference between simply having a professional skill on one hand and on the other having the commitment to use that skill to the benefit of others and to continue questioning and extending expert knowledge and its applications' (p.37) Not just the education then of professionals but critical and socially committed professionals. This is then to conceptualize transformation as deeply imbricated in a view of universities as 'social institutions (properly governed by conceptions of service: to disciplinary areas, current students, and the wider society' (Jonathan, 2006, p.47).

Social justice purposes of professional education in South Africa

For this project, what is central is university commitments to poverty reduction, the MDGs and more specifically a 'pro-poor professional' education, which requires attention to access and equity but also quality in professional education and responsiveness and responsibility to the society in which professionals will work and the communities for whom they will provide a service. Yet, as the recent GUNI (2008, p.xxxvii) report suggests, the problem with higher education and the MDGs is that 'the vast majority of academics are not aware of them, and a cannot therefore even start thinking about how their institutions can contribute to them'.

In citing the sociologist C Wright Mills (1959), Badat (2008a, p.7) offers a direct link to ideas central to the capability approach. Thus Wright Mills explains that:

> Freedom is not merely the chance to do as one pleases; neither is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them - and then, the opportunity to choose.

> Beyond this, the problem of freedom is …how decisions about the future of human affairs are to be made and who is to make them. Organisationally, it is the problem of a just machinery of decision. Morally, it is the problem of political responsibility. Intellectually, it is the problem of what are now the possible futures of human affairs (1959, p.174).

As Badat notes, Mills captures the challenge of how a university is to 'formulate the available choices' with respect to the advancement of social equity and redress, equity and quality, and how is it 'to argue over them', and innovate the 'just machinery' that provides the 'opportunity to choose' and to make decisions.

This project locates capabilities and human development (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1997) as core tranvsersal concepts to understand discourses of transformation and development which address the questions raised by Badat (2008a). The capability approach endorses human development; it is therefore aligned with poverty reduction, with improving the lives of the vulnerable, with environmental sustainability, and with an ethic of global concern in an interdependent world. Moreover, according to Brighouse (2004, p.274), the capability approach is radically egalitarian and would require 'extensive redistribution of income and wealth away from existing distributions, both within rich countries, and between rich and poor countries' and 'extensive redistribution way from the distributive outcomes of free markets'.

How might capabilities integrate the quality and a social justice purpose for a university-based professional education? From a capability perspective we would argue that higher education falls short of its own e/quality goals unless the capabilities necessary for diverse students' full equality have been achieved. From the standpoint of human development and justice we would also say that higher education falls short of its e/quality ideals if it stands aside from values of responsibility in and towards society and human flourishing. It would certainly require a conception of full and equal citizenship and the arrangements to develop and sustain this.

Against current conditions of globalization, marketisation and individualism, equality capabilities in higher education, we suggest, would support higher education which contributes to social well being, and the moral role of universities regarding citizenship and democratic life. Equality capabilities would foster the uses of higher education as contributing to a 'rich network of human connections' rather than ones 'mediated by the defective norms of market exchange' (Nussbaum, 2002, pp.291-292). Equality norms would foster higher education for human development.

Universities in the World

The research project is located against a backdrop also of an emergent discourse and practices about the role of universities in relation to social and human development. Recent moves have included an explicit attention to human development understood as 'creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests' (UNDP, 2006) The goal of human development is understood to be 'freedom' to exercise genuine choices and to participate in decision-making that effects people's lives'. It is reinforced by human rights which help 'to secure the well-being and dignity of all people, building self respect and the respect of others' (UNDP, 2006). Yet globalizing forces seem to pull in the opposite direction raising important questions such as: 'How do we create opportunities for learning that are likely to contribute to sustainable human development based on dialogical, co-learning, participatory, problem-oriented and ethical approaches?' (Taylor, 2008, p.xxvi).

What is the real potential of higher education and universities to contribute to human and social development? What versions of equity and equality underpin what it is that universities are talking about and doing when they address professional education in particular? Moreover to take up human and social development is also to orient universities to global concerns and obligations to human well being, and not just economic growth at any cost.

None of this is to deny the difficulty in shifting higher education, or the fragmentation and situated condition of knowledge production in contemporary times, or that higher education (if not universities themselves) has been captured internationally by economic policy and markets under contemporary conditions (Delanty, 2001; Readings, 1996). Nor is to gainsay that higher education cannot be expected to deliver structural change in macroeconomic policy, unemployment, health, poverty and so on. It is to argue, nonetheless, that the capability approach, aligned with egalitarian theories, offers a way to integrate equality and social justice in and through higher education, and to point theoretically, discursively and practically in a different, more just, direction which enables human potentials through a practice of pro-poor professional education and public service.

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