The national plan for higher education in South Africa and African indigenous knowledge systems: A case of conflicting value systems?

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ABSTRACT

In this article I would like to indicate that there is an inherent conflict between the underlying values portrayed by the policy document entitled ‘National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa’ and the values embodied in the discourse about the African Renaissance and the promotion of African indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) in South Africa. This article will attempt to analyse the dominant values of the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa as well as the underlying values portrayed by the programme for African IKS in South Africa. Thereafter the paper will demonstrate that the cultural climate emanating from the discourse in policy documents such as the ‘National Plan for Higher Education’ (NPHE) is relatively hostile to the value system necessary for an IKS programme to take root in South African soil. I thus want to argue that a case of conflicting values between the NPHE and the IKS programme arises from an existing split between official values and non official values apparent in the policies governing the direction of higher education (HE) in South Africa. The paper will offer some ideas why this situation has come about and pose some critical questions for discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In this article I would like to indicate that there is an inherent conflict between the underlying values portrayed by the policy document entitled, ‘National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa’ and the values embodied in the discourse about the promotion of African IKS in South Africa. I intend to start by examining the broader context of the globalisation discourse in HE and the ensuing cultural environment created by the current dominant discourse; thereafter I shall analyse the underlying values of NPHE in South Africa.

Subsequently I will unpack a few key values embedded in the African IKS discourse. Thereafter I will compare the respective value systems of IKS and HE discourse and demonstrate that they are in stark conflict. An incompatible environment emerges as a result, which in my opinion will undermine the future implementation of African IKS in HE programmes in South Africa.

GLOBALISATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Researchers have a variety of opinions about globalisation, a term more often used
in economic terms, to refer to the global economy, fast capitalism, economic liberalisation and free trade regimes. Others like Tomlinson (1999) use it in terms of culture, which is more relevant to this paper. In this context it has been referred to as Westernisation, Americanisation, modernisation and homogenisation. Examination of the notion of globalisation throws up a lot of inherent dichotomies. Sklair (2001) suggests: ‘there is a widely-held misconception that globalisation and localisation are mutually exclusive and contradictory processes’. Nevertheless he admits ‘global forces certainly change local cultures’, but says ‘this does not necessarily mean that they destroy them, though sometimes they do’ (Currie 2003, 17).

It also carries the inherent implication that the nation-state no longer has sole control over its finances and thus power to determine its own identity – because of the new rules of the global economic system. Supranational organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF play an increasing role in engaging nation-states in the big game of the world economy. This is clearly evident in a country like South Africa that wishes to establish a national identity, totally different from the past, yet is at the same time caught in the claws of the transnational players in the world economy. As a result one sees, for example, the inherent tensions between policies such as the RDP and GEAR: the RDP is based on redistributive development that aims to meet people’s basic needs by creating and sustaining growth through competitive engagement in the global economy. Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) is a fiscal control mechanism and fits into an exported approach to development, based on structural adjustment through growth by linking job creation through increasing foreign investment. GEAR is consistent with World Bank macroeconomic principles. Later on I will pay attention to similar contradictory values that underpin the RDP and NPHE policies.

Enough about globalisation. I do not want to get caught up in the globalisation discourse per se, but wish rather to point to its possible relevance for academia, according to the broad principles given in the NPHE. In his recent article on the impact of globalisation on universities, Currie (2003, 16–23) uses four criteria (originally developed by Sklair 2001) to measure globalisation. The following phrases are typical jargon and reflect practices adopted by universities worldwide:

- foreign direct investment
- world best practice
- corporate citizenship
- a global vision.

I am briefly going to unpack these ideas and leave it to readers to decide to what extent respective South African universities have succumbed to the globalisation ethos. It amounts to downgrading the value of social and community goals locally while upgrading the value of national competitiveness (Sklair in Currie 2003, 19).
Foreign direct investment (FDI): Foreign direct investment simply means that education has been targeted as the most profitable export earner for developed countries. Countries like Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada view the capital injection from overseas students as an exported commodity. University administrators use the language and hence the mindsets of business officials, as in phrases like, ‘retain existing markets’, ‘create new products’ and ‘find niche markets’. Administrators often start talking about globalised degrees to prepare students for the new technology economy. Subsequently students are adjusted to a dominant culture and uni-dimensional world rather than a multipolar world. Such a mindset recognises neither the diversity of students’ backgrounds nor the needs of the countries where they will return to work.

World best practice (WBP): Education administrators use the term WBP to indicate all measures of performance achieved by various systems of benchmarking. Benchmarking is a clear reflection of the commodification of everything, including the knowledge packages offered at universities. The accountability movement, also known as quality assurance, is a good example of universities developing WBP. The business practice of mergers and alliances continues to penetrate HE. Hence education becomes a business practice, where the ethos of ‘education as business’ dictates what is to be taught, and how and when.

Corporate citizenship: The corporate image of universities, their relations with their clients, and so on, will predominate to a point where the critically reflexive nature of academia – which should characterise university life – might ultimately be lost and academia becomes nothing but a corporate organisation, with no space for intellectual debate and healthy critique.

Global vision: A globalising corporation needs a vision which denationalises itself and focuses more on the needs of global markets and partners. Managerialism becomes the most important value. The main values worth striving for in this context are efficiency and cost-effectiveness – these particular values will increasingly predominate, to the detriment of the academic cause and of intellectual debate.

NPHE: UNDERLYING VALUES

It seems the basic tenets of the NPHE are expressed in two, conflicting tongues: the first uses the rhetoric of equity (and redress) and the second speaks of proposals and strategies that are incompatible with the plan’s declared intentions. These are the proposals intended to achieve efficiency, cost-cutting and cost-effectiveness in HE (Ntshoe 2002, 8).

The following questions are key to discussing the value systems of the NPHE and African IKS discourses: (1) Where do South African universities put the emphasis in the global/local debate? (2) What kind of epistemology is valued? (3) What kind of worldview is portrayed and valued? (4) What kind of pedagogy is
valued? These questions will be the basis for analysis and comparison of the relevant underpinning values.

Where do South African universities put the emphasis in the global/local debate?

Many universities in the developed world, in Australia, for example, became enterprise universities, limiting the power of academics and creating an aggressive workplace to achieve corporate goals. Is this what we want for South African universities? My assessment of the dominant values underpinning the NPHE and the Higher Education Act, is that they portray a value system which indicates that HE in South Africa is being gradually lured into globalisation rhetoric, to the detriment of a clear vision of what is necessary for the local context. This is perhaps my overriding reason for putting this argument forward – to caution against rigorous implementation of these policies, because South Africa will lose out in so many ways by not defining development in our own context, by not building capacity among our own academics, let alone doing justice to the implementation of African IKS in education.

So I argue that focus on the characteristics of a globalising value system, has meant an ever-increasing emphasis on the global, as opposed to the local.

What kind of epistemology is valued by HE discourse?

A good example of the prevalent epistemology underlying NPHE, is the instrumental reason revealed by the NPHE’s directives to scale down the offerings of the humanities and social sciences, especially at the Historical Disadvantaged Institution (HDI’s), in favour of technology and science – because of the link which the NPHE foresees between economic growth, employment, globalisation and the type of offerings in HE. This trend could be attributed to the perceptions that these programmes in the humanities are irrelevant to development in a postapartheid South Africa. The overarching epistemology evident from the research policy and other documents is that Mode 2 knowledge is favoured over Mode 1 knowledge.

The current jargon used in the NPHE and other policies regarding HE reflect a new behaviourism which is also a manifestation of the concept of instrumental reason. Furthermore, the commodification of knowledge is part and parcel of the globalisation ethos and is reflected in the idea of cost-effectiveness of multipurpose programmes which are therefore assumed to serve in many contexts at the same time.

Specifically defined priorities are stated with reference to the Policy and Procedures for the Measurement of Research Output (stated in the Higher Education Act of 1997 and referred to in the NPHE). This clearly reflects an epistemology of utilitarianism which militates against values of including a
pluralistic approach towards multiple knowledge systems. With regard to these notions on required research outputs, Bozzoli (2004, 5) pleads for more flexibility in terms of allowing artists, poets or basic researchers to follow their passions and enrich the world with their discoveries. She comments furthermore on the prevalence of a general mindset of utilitarianism in academia, which is exacerbated by what she calls ‘a fundamental anti-intellectualism’. One of the reasons, she goes on to say, is the enormous pressure under which academics have to perform their growing lecturing as well as research duties. According to the above-mentioned document, more often than not research has to be conducted within very narrowly defined prescriptions, such as needing to direct links to policy formulation within specific ideological frameworks. Basic research which in the past led to important discoveries, for example, Professor Tobias with his phenomenal palaeontological findings, suffer as a result. Clearly basic research in for example the arts, culture and humanities domains are no longer regarded as priorities in South Africa, because research in technology and the hard core sciences has more money-generating possibilities, all of which resembles the predominant value system in HE today. The question remains: How will such priorities favour a growth of African IKS in SA which is closely related to the arts, culture and humanities domains (Odora Hoppers 2002)?

What kind of worldview is portrayed and valued in the NPHE?

Examining the NPHE document itself, one may ask: ‘What is the dominant cultural climate and ultimate worldview created by policies and discourses in HE?’ A close look at the NPHE clearly shows its underpinning by a general discourse of globalised competition and managerialism. One realises the NPHE policy framework and that of its predecessor (the ‘Size and Shape’ document) were developed against the background of two distinctive forces: first the demands of the political agenda to shape a new identity for the country to make a clean break with the past, through nation building and the RDP; second, the pressures of meeting the imperatives of the worldwide economic order after 40 years of isolation, through GEAR (Ntshoe 2002, 7).

The document itself also refers to a programme for redress to achieve equity, but it becomes very clear that the ethos is informed by the New Right that shaped GEAR which speaks the language of free market economy, in terms such as ‘strict monetary policies’, ‘streamlining government services’, ‘cost-effectiveness’, ‘rationalisation’ and ‘productivity’.

Key features of this New Right jargon, found in the underpinnings of the NPHE, are the increasing demand for globalised economic competition, managerialism, greater accountability and emphasis on efficiency (Ntshoe 2002, 7).

So I am arguing that the NPHE pays lip service to RDP ideals, such as equity and redress. To strengthen this argument, a few critical questions: Why is little attention given to the development of the HDIs and why is there little concern
about the identities of the HDI’s which almost all have to merge with Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs)? Why is the issue of mergers so important to the document, instead of collaboration? The latter strategies spelled out in the NPHE are clearly useful to achieving cost-effectiveness and efficiency, but not specifically to serve developing the local context and the local people.

In conclusion, one could support Ntshoe’s (2002, 10) comments on the NPHE document’s inadequate attention to the lack of visionary leadership and the dubious assumptions of the managerialism underpinning the processes of HE transformation, which will inhibit proper understanding of the complexities faced by South African HE in steering between global and local forces.

What kind of pedagogy is valued?

According to the NPHE, subsidy cuts in public HE, declining student numbers, and declining matriculant numbers in the early 1990s have resulted in market-like behaviours currently experienced in the sector (Department of Education 2001, 12). These forces have induced public institutions to look for what Clark terms ‘entrepreneurial sources of revenue’ (Ntshoe 2004a, 143). HE institutions in South Africa adopted market-like behaviours and quasi-marketisation as strategies to find additional funding (Delanty 2001, 121). In South Africa one way of securing funds was to increase student enrolment at lower cost and switch from student grants to student loans (Ntshoe 2004a, 143–144).

In this regard the NPHE raised concerns about institutional competition and its harmful effects on attempts to transform the system. One can easily see from these kinds of economic survival strategies that managerialism as a powerful value system has shifted the focus away from previous concerns about what was beneficial for students.

The effect of another value change in policies surrounding HE, is that structures, not people, take centre stage in order to bring about transformation. In the NPHE and Shape and Size documents, two views prevail about the current status of HE in general and HDIs in particular. One is that getting the size and structure of the system right will necessarily resolve the major problems and the other is that transformation no longer offers hope for HDI’s. In other words, no matter how much people want to make a difference, the ultimate structure will determine the transformation drive (Ntshoe 2004b, 8).

Moreover, Bertelsen (quoted by Soudien & Corneilse 2000, 304) points out that a new managerialism has got a hold on university administrators, who have expropriated the authority of academics. Core university activities have been put through the prism of business practices. Research and teaching must be packaged in a way that will add value to the market and they are measured by quality control mechanisms borrowed from the market.
AFRICAN IKS: UNDERLYING VALUES

In my opinion the IKS programme in South Africa has two overarching aims. One is a practical drive to empower local people to utilise their indigenous knowledge so as to improve their own livelihoods. The other is a more philosophical and an equally important aim: to validate African indigenous knowledge and integrate it with Western scientific knowledge. It is argued such an accomplishment will enable people in South Africa to recover from an inherent feeling of helplessness or inferiority, to adopt a mindset which Odora Hoppers (2001b) calls a post-victimology perspective.

The symbolic reappropriation of identity and pride in own cultural heritages, knowledge and capabilities will create a sense of identity and purpose in life. The resultant mindset of self-confidence and empowerment will subsequently lead people to become active participants in shaping their own destiny. Indeed this is the aim behind the African Renaissance. Crossman and Devish (Odora Hoppers 2002, x) agree that the main thrust for IKS in South Africa is the quest for identity in ‘an as yet inequitable society – an extension of the political liberation struggle that has lost vision due to the transformation itself . . . given the shocking realisation that in terms of world views the enemy [colonisation] has largely been internalised’.

Similar questions could be posed on the African IKS discourse, to uncover the underpinning values:

- Where is the emphasis in the global/local debate, for the African IKS project?

The IKS project aims primarily to reclaim an African identity. This journey presupposes a rediscovery of the African context and coming to terms with a history of subjectification under colonialism. That in itself necessitates a process of decolonisation. For such a process to unfold, I would like to argue, much time and patience is needed to reconnect with own heritages – where the use of indigenous languages is encouraged, where there is expressed political will to spend resources on research on oral histories, folklore and so on, and where local people pursue cross-cultural practices within a post-positivist research framework.

There is ample evidence in the IKS literature (Teffo; Vilakazi; and Nkomo in Higgs et al. 2000, 51–198) that recentring the African context (hence specific locality as opposed to emphasis on the global world) and African ways of knowing are pivotal to the IKS project and subsequent development of local communities. In this regard, Fr Njoku (2001, 5) goes on to mention the need for scholarly attention to: ‘our own context and environment, to respect and make greater use of the unique tools we have for the generation and transmission of knowledge’.

Failure to appreciate the role of culture has led to poor performance in education in many African countries. For example, science education within the narrow definition of Western knowledge systems and textbooks, excluding the African learners’ context, ignores what meaningful learning is all about. If
educators who teach in an African context, start with the indigenous knowledge systems which provide the framework for their learners’ initial experiences, they will encourage their learners to draw on their cultural practices and daily experiences as they negotiate new situations in science education.

The value of recognising the importance of the African context for education and developmental purposes is a most prominent and fundamental feature of the IKS project.

In conclusion, the important question remains: What kind of value system is needed for African IKS to flourish? The answer seems fairly simple that the ‘African context’, as opposed to the global context, should take centre stage. This emphasis, I would like to argue, is lacking in the current HE climate, where knowledge is preferably packaged so that it can be sold everywhere, irrespective of context and history or cultural background and hence is underpinned by a decontextualised, market-oriented value system.

• What kind of epistemology is valued in the African IKS discourse?

The African IKS project is concerned with reflecting critically on the reasons behind the loss of so many rich sources of knowledge due to the disruption of colonialism which, according to Seepe (2001, 22), subjugated and crushed the cultural, scientific and economic life of the colonised.

The underlying notion of critical reflexivity within the African IKS project aims to address issues of alienation and dominance. By critical inquiry, we can identify, analyse and change an oppressive situation. Freire (Freire & Faundez 1989) has echoed this idea in his notion of ‘reflection and action’. For example, local rural people should be made aware that certain entrenched beliefs, about their own seemingly hopeless situation can be changed, if they know it is the product of false assumptions, originating in a colonial past. Odora Hoppers (2001b, 36) takes this point further and argues for what she calls a ‘post-victimology’ perspective, where local people should be allowed to redefine their own existence. She asks the question: ‘Are rural people living off local resources really backward, vis-à-vis, urban people in the North who are consuming global energy and natural resources at unsustainable levels?’

The African IKS discourse therefore, aligns itself with a clear preference for an epistemology of critical reflexivity and empowerment which should encourage people to gain confidence in their own ways of being in the world (Higgs & van Niekerk 2002, 45).

• What kind of world does the IKS discourse envisage?

On closer analysis of the underlying value system of the IKS project, one cannot over-estimate the extent to which worldview, knowledge production and ethical considerations (knowing and doing) are linked, thus referring to a holistic worldview. Consequently one could state that there is an inextricable link between
ethical-cosmological considerations, research and development, which forms part and parcel of the IKS philosophy.

Du Toit (2002, 62) makes mention of the holistic nature of African rationality. He goes on to say that the broad cultural setting which includes, the linguistic, political, economic, religious, and scientific contexts are co-determining African rationality. Ntuli (Odora Hoppers 2002, 56) talks about how the African worldview, immanent in the IKS project, rejects instrumentalism embedded in the separation between subject/object; knowing/doing; human beings/the world and so on. Such a worldview strives for a harmonious balance between human and nature, among people themselves as well as between the material and spiritual world (Goduka 2000, 68–70).

Holistic views on living, knowing and doing have never been foreign in traditional Africa, as has been so in Western traditions. Ndlovu (2002, 54) argues that the traditional African worldview is characterised by holistic belief systems. He refers specifically to the Yoruba in Nigeria, where he points out that it is impossible to separate knowledge from any aspect of life. For instance to exclude god from science is unthinkable in Yoruba thought, where faith and reason are mutually dependent. In similar vein, philosophy, theology, politics, social theory, land law, medicine, psychology, birth and burial ‘. . . all find themselves in a holistic system, which is so tight that to subtract an item from the whole is to paralyse the structure of the whole’.

According to the IKS project and its holistic worldview, development of knowledge is a holistic journey that encompasses process, content, learners, educators, and the sociocultural context in which the structured learning is being modelled.

● What kind of pedagogy and overriding cultural climate is underpinning the African IKS discourse?

It is commonly accepted that the principle of ubuntu (a person is a person through other persons) is the embodiment of traditional African culture and lifestyle. The principle of ubuntu focuses attention on people’s interdependency within a community and precisely that capacity makes survival within impoverished circumstances possible. In other words, if one’s identity is linked to one’s role in the community, nobody can easily be left out and overlooked with regard to livelihood, as is the case in many Westernised communities. Ubuntu then becomes, as Shutte (1993, 46) claims, ‘I participate, therefore I am’.

Ethical considerations underlying actions and behaviour were always regarded as important in traditional African villages. Letseka (2000, 186) points out that a traditional African upbringing cannot be conceptualised without a distinctly defined ethical basis. He goes on to say that if a person committed a crime, such as rape, the whole community would express their displeasure in the form of ‘he is not a person, but a dog’ and such a person would be punished accordingly.
Therefore ‘botho’ or ‘ubuntu’ becomes normative in that it prescribes desirable and accepted forms of behaviour.

Furthermore, Mosha’s (2000, 46–47) comments on specific pedagogical tools in indigenous education, such as use of stories, proverbs, riddles, song and dance, that contribute to the moral formation of persons and communities – is a wake-up call for the currently bankrupt society which is increasingly besotted with material goods to the detriment of moral principles and beliefs.

It becomes clear that the underlying pedagogy of African IKS discourse is in stark contrast to the instrumentalist, materialistic ideals of Western ways of knowing and being in the world.

**CONCLUSION: CONTRADICTIONS AND TENSIONS**

In this article I have attempted to reveal some of the contradictions and tensions between the general academic climate emanating from values underlying the NPHE document, to reveal the dominant South African HE discourse and values underlying the African IKS discourse. The clash between the underpinning values of the respective discourses became quite obvious, once juxtaposed and compared.

I have examined the underlying values, in terms of four key questions which dealt with the global and local emphasis, the epistemologies, worldviews and pedagogies. It became very clear that the emphasis in HE is increasingly on the global context, whereas in the case of the African IKS project, the local African context is pivotal. The former discourse strives for a borderless value system where knowledge is packaged and can be sold everywhere, irrespective of context and history or cultural background.

Looking at the epistemologies of the two discourses, exposed the opposing, prevalent values. IKS strives for an epistemology of critical reflexivity and empowerment of the African voice. This is in stark contrast to a technicist epistemology where knowledge is seen as an unintellectual commodity with market value. Here knowledge is valued according to world best practice and profit making – whereas in an African IKS context, knowledge is seen as wisdom to enrich people’s livelihoods in a holistic sense.

In contrast to the holistic worldview of the IKS discourse, underpinned by ethical and spiritual concerns, the value systems underlying the HE discourse resembles a materialistic worldview where knowledge no longer has any inherent value beyond a market value, which is primarily determined by market and economic forces.

Finally, I examined the respective pedagogies underlying the two discourses and found they are also in opposition. The IKS discourse favours the ubuntu humanism of persons and interrelatedness of beings, whereas, in the HE discourse structures and managerialism increasingly displace the importance of persons. Odora Hoppers (2002) mentions cultural richness in spite of economically poor
communities: as opposed to global capitalism where money and powerful structures dominate.

In conclusion, I demonstrated in this article how HE in South Africa has wholeheartedly bought into the globalisation and marketisation of education value system which does not accommodate the drive for indigenisation or localisation of knowledge, let alone the validation of African IKS to enrich the prevalent Western scientific body of knowledge.

However, a few authors have suggested that it might be possible to make certain inroads in-between the two dominant conflicting value systems and its concomitant discourses in order to alleviate some of the dilemmas. According to those authors (cf Stromquist & Monkman 2000) a situation might arise where sometimes international discourse takes centre stage, and sometimes local debate does. I conclude by reiterating the words of Soudien and Corneilse (2000, 312) who put it so succinctly: What we see is a discursive landscape dominated by the new demands of the epoch. Everywhere, however, are the insistent claims of the local; as the global seeks to assert itself, so the local seeks to pull it back.

Let us hope it is also true for the players in the emerging South African HE scene to pull back against the overwhelming forces of the global.

REFERENCES


