



Towards an Ubuntu University

African Higher Education
Reimagined

Edited by
Yusef Waghid
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Preface

In this book, we shall argue for a reconsideration of the idea of a university in light of the African ethic of *ubuntu*, literally, human dignity and interdependence. The context in which we shall endeavour to argue for an *ubuntu* university is the higher education discourse of comparative education. By implication, to set the scene for the arguments that unfold in this book, it should be conceived that globally universities have evolved into higher educational institutions concerned with knowledge (re)production for various end purposes that range from individual autonomy to public accountability to serving the interests of the economy and markets. However, our primary concern with such purposes of the university is that some universities have not always responded to their claims of being publicly accountable or responsible in many instances.

Theoretically speaking, our argument in defence of an *ubuntu* university is grounded in a (post)critical paradigm. According to a critical (higher) educational theory, a university should be concerned with notions of autonomy, empowerment and emancipation. Post-critical (higher) educational theory would accentuate a concern for becoming as an enabling condition for a university's advancement. Considering that our argument is in defence of an *ubuntu* university commensurate with notions of autonomy, empowerment, emancipation (in particular decolonisation and decoloniality) and becoming, it seems as if a post(critical) paradigm of higher educational theory underscores and frames our

seminal thoughts throughout this book. Put differently, a post(critical) higher educational theory manifests in our understanding of what it means to rupture higher teaching and learning associated with an African university (Waghid et al., 2018).

The public university in South Africa has been subjected to higher education transformation over the last three decades; yet, the university has not always adhered to its transformation goals. Thus far, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) has produced three reviews of higher education in South Africa (with a fourth one in the making) as it guided the transformation of the university sector in South Africa over the past three decades. The three published reviews are *South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy* (2004), *Review of Higher Education in South Africa—Selected Themes* (2007) and *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy* (2016). Over the last decade, the public university in South Africa made a concerted attempt to deal with persisting inefficiencies and a lack of progress in higher education transformation. However, as will be argued for in the ensuing chapters, it seems as if transformation took on other forms such as reform, reconstruction, improvement and development of higher education discourses in the country. Not that these other forms of change were not necessary, but because no permanent change had been cultivated, as the concept of transformation intimates, it can be concluded that substantive change in higher education has not always ensued.

In addition to the higher education transformation project's perceived failure came the accompanying student protests around access, equity, institutional cultures, decolonisation and social justice. Often, regulative measures were introduced reactively in response to crises of governance, lack of adherence by individual institutions, student protests or to restrict the proliferation of private higher education providers and distance education programmes. Despite a clearly articulated regulatory framework, policy implementation without clearly stipulated targets remains problematic, thus making long-term transformation of higher education inadequate. The efficacy and success of such efforts at transformation also require that they be synchronised with each other and with the broader macro-economic environment, that they utilise effective political and

institutional leadership and that they build consensus and foster accountability.

It seems the public university's unwillingness to sufficiently and boldly tackle matters such as ongoing student protests against rising tuition costs; institutional corruption and mismanagement of resources; gender inequality and exclusion; sexual harassment and malpractices that involve bribes for marks, academic plagiarism and indiscipline; and excessive student drinking and delinquency exacerbate the crises in university education. Yet, by far, the most disconcerting aspect of university life seems to be related to the pedagogical activity of higher teaching and learning itself. Teaching and learning seem to have remained overwhelmingly concerned with knowledge transfer and acquisition and limited opportunity for critical pedagogical practices. At the time of authoring this book, what we have found during what has now become a third wave of the coronavirus pandemic is that universities have introduced emergency online remote teaching to attend to the learning responsibilities of students. Yet, emergency remote teaching seemed to have enhanced learning by transmission and that the possibility for critical learning has invariably been subverted. In this way, the public responsibility of the university seems to be under threat and the institution, without being too alarmist, teeters on the brink of collapse. Thus it seems as if higher education has again been sacrificed for online remote and blended learning as if these approaches to higher pedagogy in themselves can build confidence in university education. What has emerged seems to have further undermined the possibility for higher education to manifest, and the university appears to be limping in a quagmire of pedagogical uncertainty and ambivalence. If learning by transmission is considered as the only legitimate form of learning, then the likelihood that criticality would be pronounced would be remote in itself.

In response to such a dire situation in which the university in South Africa seems to find itself, we propose that the idea of a university should be rethought in light of the African ethic of *ubuntu*. In our view, *ubuntu* is both a philosophical and a politico-ethical concept that can contribute, firstly, to thinking about the university differently in troubled times and, secondly, to enact practices that can realign institutional and transformational purposes with an idea of community in which academics and

students can cultivate relations of individual freedom, collaborative engagement and co-belonging. What a university framed according to *ubuntu* can engender is a higher education institution that reconsiders the transformative potential of the institution itself. The distinctiveness of *ubuntu* lies in its internal connection to human action and the external enactment of relations with other humans, contexts and entities of a non-human kind, such as computers and other technological devices.

Underscored by the dictum “I am because we are [and can become]”, *ubuntu* implies having intra- and inter-relations with the self and others, including other things so that the actions implied by *ubuntu* are a matter of doing things with others and not always to and for others. We argue that an *ubuntu*-inspired university can offer the institution an opportunity to remain autonomous yet publicly responsible for its actions. In the main, such a university would not only consolidate the institution’s transformation agenda but would, firstly, extend it to matters of public concern. And, here we refer to issues that involve its transformation in relation to claims of knowledge and reason and lines of inquiry not thought about previously. Secondly, such a university would consider its engagement with the broader community not as a service provision or an activity with impact but rather as an act of genuine collaboration in the interest of both the institution and the broader public. Thirdly, the university would lay claims to cultivating a moral attentiveness to address local and worldly concerns in and about matters that would enhance human dignity, social and restorative justice and peaceful human coexistence.

By far, the most poignant aspect of higher education transformation that the public university ought to consider more plausibly is the notion of decolonisation. Decolonisation, as elusive as the term might be (Zembylas, 2018), seems to be linked to offering resistance to the exercise of politico-economic sovereignty of one dominant nation over another less dominant one (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Thus, when we talk about the decolonisation of higher education, we refer to practices of resistance that are offered to disrupt skewed understandings of power-sharing and imposition that constitute higher education practices. Together with decolonisation, the notion of decoloniality can be considered as restoring the cultural values, economic aspirations and knowledge interests of

(previously) colonised communities (Mbembe, 2016). By implication, the decolonisation of the public university is an attempt to oppose and undermine the imperialist legacy and devaluation of the cultures and knowledge interests of marginalised communities. Decolonisation of higher education thus involves recognising the cultural values and knowledge concerns of marginalised communities that have been suppressed and undermined. In this way, the decolonisation of higher education can be couched as a re-articulation of the underlying value systems of excluded communities. And, this is where the decolonisation project connects with *ubuntu* in the sense that the latter equally insists that the values of the other in their otherness should be attended to. Hence, the decolonisation of higher education is synonymous with reshaping the higher education landscape according to the moral values of *ubuntu*. The question can legitimately be asked: Is an *ubuntu* university different from an entrepreneurial university, thinking university and ecological university? (Barnett, 2018). While these different understandings of a university accentuate both the epistemological and the moral imperatives in relation to itself and societies in which they manifest (Waghid & Davids, 2020), we argue, it is through the *ubuntu* university that emotivism in the forms of dignity and humaneness will enhance a university's capacity for autonomy, responsibility and criticality.

The very idea of reimagining an African university is based on the view that universities on the continent, as elsewhere, have and continue to undergo unprecedented changes as enunciated by Zeleza and Olukoshi (2004). Our argument for an *ubuntu* university is a way of redefining and defending the significance of higher education institutions on the continent. We also recognise that other philosophies impacted the transformation of universities on the continent such as *ujamaa* (people in community) and *ukama* (people in relation to one another) (Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004). However, in limiting our claims to *ubuntu* and its constitutive notions would not minimise the importance of rethinking the idea of the university on the African continent. And, introducing a snapshot of the South African university context and how it can be impacted by *ubuntu* seems to be a tenable way to enhance claims for the cultivation of an *ubuntu* university on the continent.

Likewise, we do not use the notion of a (South) African university in some homogeneous way as if universities on the continent do not have their own challenges in the context of transformation. Consequently, we refer specifically to the indefinite article of 'an' African university thus recognising the complexities and distinctiveness associated with the concept of a university in and for Africa.

We shall confine the book to twelve interrelated chapters and a post-script in which the following themes will be addressed.

In Chap. 1, we analyse the notion of a university in the context of global and local knowledge interests. That is, we proffer an argument for globalised knowledge in response to merely global/universal or local knowledge concerns associated with the task of a university. Put differently, we argue in defence of a reimagined idea of knowledge fusion. Chapter 2 analyses the transformation of a public university in South Africa over 30 years. We specifically examine the higher education transformation project and its apparent failures in South Africa concerning genuine public university practices. In Chap. 3, we focus on the notion of *ubuntu* as an African ethic for higher educational transformation in South Africa.

Chapter 4 accentuates the notion of *ubuntu* in the context of collaborative engagement and co-belong. We offer a defence of an *ubuntu*-inspired university. In Chap. 5, we analyse the notion of an African university of reason, conscience and humanness. Chapter 6 outlines the idea of a communal African university of deliberation, freedom of expression and equality. It focuses explicitly on the notion of *indaba* as a cultural platform upon which research, teaching and learning should be based. It is argued that *indaba*, as a cultural platform, provides spaces where community issues are deliberated upon and divergent views are exchanged to pursue communal resolutions. Chapter 7 critically reflects on communality, responsibility and public good as the key cornerstones of social justice education in universities in Africa. In African countries, the universities are located in a milieu where social justice is deficient in all social spheres. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the universities as ideal spaces of free critical thinking, unprejudiced analysis and mutual exchange of ideas to be the key cornerstones for social justice.

Chapter 8 shows the needed connectedness of comparative education, democratic citizenship and an *ubuntu* ethic in an African university. We present three major arguments: first, since the field of comparative education strives to continuously re-imagine itself, be reformative, be reflexive, challenge hegemonic education systems and embody the character of connectedness (of human and non-human relations), it is in line with values sought through democratic citizenship education and an *ubuntu* ethic in an African university. Second, since claims of democratic citizenship education aim to produce responsible citizens, they are in line with an *ubuntu* ethic. Third, an African university based on an *ubuntu* ethic is necessarily democratic. In Chap. 9, we have argued that within an *ubuntu* ethic, higher education teaching and learning are intrinsically and extrinsically linked to acts of transformation, engagement and comparative education. We show that teaching and learning in such a form need to guard against rote learning and instead support deep learning grounded on learning theories and reflectivity. We argue that teaching and learning, as an act of transformation, touches on access, social justice, freedoms and epistemological and ontological dimensions.

In Chap. 10, by appropriating Galtung's (1969) theory on violence (social justice) and peace (social cohesion), we identify some evidence of the violence that is present within the pedagogical teaching practices and curriculum content in the higher education landscape. This includes structural violence and violence against the soul of the student. Subsequently, we argued that university teachers should be willing to act by making changes from this position of critique, even though there will be some risks involved. In Chap. 11, we argued for a pedagogy of care that is rhythmic in nature. The act of delaying judgement, intrinsic to rhythmic care, beholds the potential to provoke and bring students to a position where they come to speech. Through deliberation, listening with and caring with, students and university teachers are open to possible transformation—transformation to the extent that the plight of the marginalised is noticed and, through compassion, just action is ignited. Higher education is premised on a pedagogy of care that is rhythmic in nature and falls within the broader paradigm of *ubuntu* education. The cultivation of students (and university teachers) who can restore justice through the healing of caring relations is a necessity for the global world,

particularly the African university landscape. In Chap. 12, we expound on the need to develop the capacities of university students in higher education by arguing for post-critical teaching and learning with technology. Drawing on the seminal thoughts of John Dewey (1902/1966) regarding three “evils” as a result of a curriculum that further exacerbates psychological violence among students, we contend that teaching with technology in line with *ubuntu* is necessary for advancing critique, responsibility and dissent among students.

In the Coda, it is argued that an *ubuntu* university is a forward-looking concept that would enable us to think anew, face new challenges and chart new paths domestically, regionally and globally. The notion of an *ubuntu* university is proffered as a political-oriented concept in the pursuit of social justice. In addition, it is also couched as an ethics-oriented idea that can hopefully advance a sustainable future, global peace.

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1

The University in the Context of Global and Local Knowledge Interests

Introduction

We begin from the premise that humans have the potential to come to know. That is, they can act in such a way that they endeavour to find out what might not yet be known to them. When they do so—that is, acting towards knowing—they usually apply their minds to come to understand matters that concern or interest them. Thus, their knowledge happens from actions of the mind, their awareness of this or that matter and their intuition about what they instinctively consider to be the case. In this way, knowing something involves reasoning, feeling or the exercise of emotion and instinctive behaviour—all human actions that influence their knowledge. This chapter first examines what such acts of knowing entail before we, secondly, tackle forms of knowing, specifically the dichotomy between non-indigenous and indigenous knowing. Thirdly, we examine what knowing means in the context of the universal/global and local/traditional before we proffer an argument in defence of glocalised knowledge that ought to be associated with the task of a university.

The emphasis on knowing is a matter of finding out what this or that means. One would not necessarily know what a university involves