



# Neoliberalism constrains academic freedom

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**Significance:**

Positioning the university as a public good that serves people and the planet was a central concern for those responsible for shaping post-apartheid education. Unfortunately, the current neoliberal environment has led to institutional risk aversion. This means that universities are loathe to speak out on issues of social injustice and environmental degradation. And academics often forfeit their freedoms by assuming that top management can speak on behalf of the university.

In the Commentary ‘Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world?’<sup>1</sup>, Chetty questions when and why a university should speak out on global issues. In particular, Chetty refers to the Israeli–Palestinian war. I leave it to other respondents to tackle the substantive issue of South African higher education’s silence on this issue. Instead, I home in on what I see as a common problem in the post-apartheid university.

Chetty explains that:

*By university, I mean the Council, the Senior Executive Committee, the University Forum, the University Senate, the faculties, schools, institutes, the Alumni Association, and so on.*<sup>1</sup>

He thus understands the university as a complex organisation, as indeed it is. But he repeatedly reveals an understanding of the university as one which is controlled by management. For me, one of the most troubling sentences in the article is this:

*Universities thrive on a diversity of viewpoints, and so imposing a hegemonic view from the top management often leads to problems in a university setting.*<sup>1</sup>

Chetty has reduced a call for universities to take a collective position on this issue to the imposition of a hegemonic view from top management. The suggestion that a statement on the genocide would come from “top management” is reiterated in this later sentence:

*It goes against the principles of academic freedom for the university to impose a hegemonic view from the top, of an essentially political matter, when we have differing views on this amongst staff and students.*<sup>1</sup>

There is an assumption that “top management” can impose a view on the university, which I would argue is at odds with the notion of academic freedom. This view is perhaps unsurprising, given how widespread managerialism is in the system. Jansen<sup>2</sup>, in his book *Corrupted*, suggests that much of the rot in many of our institutions emerges from the overreach of Councils and top management, which lack an understanding of the academic project.

Chetty later specifies that:

*How decisions are made, through consensus or through voting, how decisions are recorded and how they are implemented and monitored are an important part of our administrative processes at universities. Universities need good administrators, and good administrative systems.*<sup>1</sup>

At face value, this is difficult to argue against, but the issue is one of emphasis, particularly when read in relation to the previously quoted sentences. Administrative processes at universities are meant to serve the academic project; they have no other role. In common with many others, Chetty at times seems to understand the purpose of administrative processes as driving academic activities rather than facilitating them.

Alongside the assumption that a statement on international events could take the form of a “hegemonic view from top management”, he acknowledges that institutional decisions should be guided by principles:

*There is no blueprint for what these principles are. They are not in some textbook or to be searched on the Internet. These are established through critical dialogue and debate at our institutions. These principles speak to the very soul of our universities.*<sup>1</sup>

All who care about the sector need to reflect deeply on the extent to which universities are indeed such spaces of critical dialogue. When staff are precariously employed<sup>3</sup>, performance management focuses on metrics over matter, and managerialism allows the flourishing of subterfuge, bullying and blame-games<sup>4,5,6</sup>, it is very difficult for critical dialogue to thrive. Arguably, there is little soul in a university that is at the mercy of managerialism. It is not only fear of retribution that makes it less likely for academics to engage in critical dialogue and debate, but also that instrumental rationality foments onerous administrative loads<sup>7</sup> for those who might otherwise contribute to the nurturing of the academic project.

*Universities are argumentative places, where individuals should engage, hopefully respectfully, with each other on topics on which they have strong disagreements. Our universities should facilitate an environment where this can happen.*<sup>1</sup>

Here Chetty gets to the nub of the matter. But, unfortunately, the neoliberal university is increasingly not a space for argument.<sup>8</sup> Within the neoliberal university, compliance is more valued than critique of the status quo within or beyond the academy.

Chetty includes reference to two texts, one by Benatar and the other by Chetty and Merrett, about specific South African universities. These books both tackle examples of the suppression of academic freedom and the incursion of managerialism. But their focus on personality politics arguably reduces their consideration of how the actions of specific people are enabled by the neoliberal conditioning of post-apartheid higher education.

And even if the university was a space for critical dialogue, what would be the point of us debating amongst ourselves? Far too much energy is spent in the neoliberal university on publishing articles that make little contribution and even less impact in the interests of promotion, financial incentives, ratings and rankings, and far too little is spent on knowledge building, science communication and participating in social dialogue. If the university was a public good, it would focus as much on sharing views with the public as it does on publishing 'accredited outputs'. This would include sharing research-based insights on all issues of interest and importance.

It is worth reflecting on this idea of the university as a public good<sup>9,10,11</sup> – good for all people, including those who never step foot on a campus. In the years leading up to democracy, a great deal of energy was spent discussing the need for universities in South Africa to be positioned as a public good, given that, during apartheid, universities had been “creatures of the state”<sup>12</sup>.

Under apartheid, Afrikaans-medium institutions provided pseudo-scientific justifications for apartheid, educated apartheid’s most notorious leaders and entrenched white supremacy. Their ideological positioning also enabled support from the Broederbond.

While historically white, English-medium institutions outwardly generally rejected the racist premise of apartheid, they complied with the state at almost every level. The extremely low number of applications by these institutions for permission to enrol black students<sup>13</sup>, their kowtowing to the apartheid state’s petty interferences, and their own suppression of ‘troublemakers’, all indicate the extent to which these institutions capitulated to the apartheid state.

Universities designated for black population groups were formed largely to provide the labour needed by the ‘homelands’ and to ensure the provision of the massive bureaucracy required by the apartheid machinery.<sup>14</sup> While these institutions were often spaces of defiance and protest, they were kept under control through the withholding of funds, limitations on the programmes they could offer, restrictions on undertaking research, and state oversight of key appointments.

And then there were the racially differentiated technikons. Almost all education in South Africa was premised on fundamental pedagogics, but technikons bore the brunt of this narrow understanding of education. Fundamental pedagogics, as it was applied in South Africa, was closely entwined with Christian National Education, and positioned the education process as one of input-process-output, failing to take structural and cultural contexts into account.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge was pragmatically understood as neutral rather than inherently political, and it was directed only towards practical implementation. Technikons were thus positioned as training centres, rather than higher education institutions. Like the universities designated for black population groups, they also battled suffocating control by the state, including national oversight of all syllabi and textbooks via the convenorship system.

It was thus unsurprising that those planning a post-apartheid higher education system were determined that universities shake off this heritage. The inclusion of the phrase ‘academic freedom’ in the Bill of Rights, Chapter Two of the Constitution, was not without debate, but given the need for the new university system to play a very different role to that played during apartheid, this inclusion was eventually deemed necessary. The potential for universities to speak truth to power has been codified in various ways, such as the 1997 White Paper making clear that universities bear the task of nurturing critical citizens and must have a “commitment to the common good”.

Sadly, since the vision for post-apartheid universities to become a public good emerged, the sector has tumbled into a neoliberal ideology that reduces all human activity to an economic endeavour. Instead of being

a creature of the state, as it was under apartheid, the South African university has become a creature of the market. And in so doing, it has neglected its responsibilities as a public good. It has consistently failed to speak out on issues related to the well-being of people and the planet.

Chetty states that:

*If we want to become a university that speaks up on human rights matters, let us do this consistently and sincerely.*<sup>1</sup>

I would argue that this is not a matter of what we *want* or *do not want* to do. Universities have a responsibility to be spaces that make contributions to public discourse. While it is true that

*many of our South African universities have never previously established a principle of getting involved in such conflicts...<sup>1</sup>,*

this is a dereliction of duty. In succumbing to neoliberal interpretations of the role of higher education in society, universities have become risk averse, chasing rankings and focusing on credentialing for industry at the cost of contributing to social equity and environmental sustainability.

Academic freedom is not only something to be exercised by individuals; our history demonstrates the need for the university to be a place of collective action. If we only exercised this responsibility as “independent critical public voices”, as Chetty suggests we should, then we would be avoiding our responsibility as a structure serving the common good. The university should always be a place of dissent; any collective statement by the Senate should allow for those who disagree. And we should collectively protect the rights of dissenters, even as we belatedly take up our responsibilities as a public good.

## Declarations

My views are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of my institution or member organisations. I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

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