



The function of a university in South Africa: Part 2

AUTHOR:

Sean Archer¹

AFFILIATION:

¹Department of Economics,
University of Cape Town,
Cape Town, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Sean Archer

EMAIL:

sean.archer@uct.ac.za

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Social insurance institutions appeared after World War I, and were intended to provide safety nets for the income, health, education and pension levels of individual citizens. Later in the 20th century, enthusiasm for the concept of human rights generated a remarkable boost of research interest within universities in the aftermath of World War II. This war had witnessed an unprecedented catalogue of atrocities, most notably genocide, as well as human neglect on a mass scale, followed by the reaction against colonialism already on the brew.

One defining feature of what became the human rights movement has been a concern and set of state policies aiming to raise individual welfare, as well as the emerging conception of the well-being of *all* of a nation's citizens. Eloquent refugee experience in the aftermath of World War II illustrates this feature clearly:

Hannah Arendt, exiled in 1933, stripped of her German citizenship in 1937,...also wondered how Europe had betrayed the stateless in her own time. In 1948, in The Origins of Totalitarianism, she observed that it was citizenship that gives human beings the 'right to have rights'. As for stateless persons, she concluded, they ought to have rights simply because they are human, but her own experience had taught her a different lesson.^{1(p.2)}

Thus the influence of human rights ideas in building firmer democracies, mostly emanating from university-based research, is ongoing despite strong differences of opinion amongst philosophers, lawyers and human rights advocates. These divisions show up prominently in the drafting of national constitutions in *emerging countries*. Bills of rights are embedded in these constitutions as normative aspirations that demand institutions and policies especially devised for the purpose of rights fulfilment. A troublesome idea in the logic of rights for instance, is that one individual's rights cannot be traded off or sacrificed for the benefit of the majority.

South Africa's 1996 constitution is an example of such conceptual conflicts. Human rights occupy an ambiguous position in the sphere of South African policy formation since the fall of apartheid. Controversy arises particularly regarding Clauses 26–29 that specify economic and social rights. When it suits politicians they appeal to rights-based ideas. But too often the constitutional commitment to rights fulfilment is simply ignored for political convenience by them as policymakers and by their advisers.^{2–6}

The endurance of the institutions that emerged from university research, teaching and advocacy in the construction of welfare states, like those that exist today in Western Europe, is evidenced by their successful performance as stabilisers during recent crises. These institutional responses have been generated by the local conflicts emerging from ethnic differences, nationalism and religious divergence within numerous states, including welfare states. Most prominent are the anti-colonial struggles, the civil wars on Europe's periphery, as in the Balkans during the 1990s as well as during the Arab Spring in the last decade. Most recent are the multiple threats to stability posed by incoming floods of Middle Eastern and African refugees.

All these events have posed, and continue to pose, serious tests of welfare state institutions. Yet their stability has persisted. Numerous instances are discussed in an emerging literature; for example, Collini⁷, Algan et al.⁸ and Stiglitz⁹. The relevant point here is simple. None of these successful institutions would have come into being without a great deal of university-based research in preceding decades, particularly so since the end of World War II.

Another cause of institutional disturbance and threat has been the international financial crisis since 2008. Viewed in the context constructed here, their success in stabilising the political and economic dimensions of nation states in Europe and North America make such welfare state institutions now even more widely admired.

Contrary to the conservative expectation that is sceptical of welfare states (often called *neo-liberalism* – a label purposely not used in this paper because of its imprecision and polemical character), the levels of social and economic disruption in the major welfare states have been consistently lower than the average scores worldwide.^{10–13}

South African policymakers imbued with nationalist ambitions have to learn from precedents on every side. This lesson will not be easy. No linear progression is in evidence from developed countries' success to a set of policies suitable for an aspiring developing country like South Africa to copy. It is probable that in the longer run, in a troubling and confusing world, universities everywhere will provide research evidence that bears on the construction of the best institutions to embody the ideals of moral imagination and higher trust between people. At the same time, local universities must come to reflect more prominently the presence of black intellectual elites in teaching, research and administration.

Yet forcing the pace without knowing or heeding the consequences raises the likelihood that this anticipated evolution will take longer to achieve, and on the way impose painful costs on tertiary institutions. To make the universities in South Africa bear the burden of the other components of the education system's failures is illogical. The destined outcome is likely to be reached only some time in an indefinite future.

First, a tipping point is likely once larger and larger cohorts of inexperienced staff and under-prepared students enter existing universities, particularly those that aspire to be research universities on the international pattern. These institutions would then change their practice and culture in directions probably negative for the emergence of the highest quality talents and skills. Second, a proportion of existing academic staff will judge that the work environment for which they contracted originally no longer exists. It is likely they will depart for countries viewed as more promising for pursuing academic careers. Third, the international standing of South African research work and conferred degrees will not survive unaffected. As noted already, a simple test will be whether South African graduates continue to be readily accepted for postgraduate study in the world's major universities? Or instead will

South African applicants be put through rigorous testing procedures for admission there? This will remain the acid test of teaching and research quality for our existing universities.

Background information that can inform these challenging judgements must be treated with caution. Measured in various ways, at least since the early 1990s in the USA and elsewhere, international collaboration between academics in universities and research institutes set up for specific purposes (like environmental studies), has become strengthened and not weakened. This growing international collaboration is so despite the ongoing international conflicts that are driven by ethnic, religious and strategic differences. The evidence for this assertion is readily culled from publications like the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *World University News* and academic journals multiple in number. The isolation of Iranian and North Korean research bodies illustrates the rare national exceptions to closer research ties brought about by strategic and political conflicts at the present time.

In summary, if a university does not keep up its research output, its standing amongst its peers in the world inevitably declines. What does 'keeping up' mean? Einstein's¹⁴ aphorism about research is a useful answer and reminder: 'Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.' It is the deepening international linkages that govern the progress of individual universities as well as the prestige accorded to national systems of universities.

Why, then, has scientific research become increasingly collaborative? Viewing science as an aggregate process for producing new knowledge, the most plausible answer is that the knowledge base has become increasingly complex and specialised ... and thus requires that increased numbers of researchers combine their expertise to make advances. Consistent with this, our survey of corresponding authors shows that access to specialized human capital is the main driver of collaborations ... the growth of useful knowledge comes largely from combining the growing supply of past ideas and knowledge in new ways.^{15(p.16,17)}

Finally, the *economic role* played by universities is probably the most prominent of their activities, and the most unlikely to provoke contention. Contemporary economies that are successful combine private and public sectors that vary in relative size for reasons of history and informed belief. But all productive organisations, no matter their kind of output, require administrative, managerial and technical skills, growing ever larger in their variety because of ongoing specialisation trends.

Under this heading of an economic role fulfilled by universities, all that matters for the main theme of this essay is the truth behind the assertion that no national economy can function in the modern world without the skills produced through university study, teaching and research. A number of the necessary skills and aptitudes can be acquired outside formal tertiary study or be imported. Yet the vast bulk of the essential competencies cannot be acquired this way.

The interdependence of growth and diversification in economic activities, the expansion of scale economies, and the evolving knowledge incorporated into production, are the keys to progress that raises living standards. This fact has been known by scholars and policymakers since before the time of Adam Smith in the late 18th century. Increasing specialisation of tasks is entailed. This point can be illustrated using a simple example: bread can be produced most cheaply in large quantities if its production is confined to a source that does nothing else. But satisfying consumer wants for bread requires transport, a distribution network, multiple outlets, and a diversity of skills. To minimise the cost of a loaf of bread, these inputs too have to be specialised in their functions.

Why does this interaction of specialisation and economies of scale often fail? The administration of fragile states cannot deliver services in numerous spheres, most prominently in the conduct of their economic activities because of managerial incapacity, decision-taking based on the interests of the elite, corruption and, above all, the perpetual failure to

invest. For our purpose, investment is simply the use of resources *now* in order to obtain a larger output *later* greater in value.

In the economic sphere, the means of valuation – most importantly the indicators known in the discipline of economics as *relative prices* – have to be established by a combination of processes. These processes are free exchange between individuals and between organisations for which markets exist, as well as by the state's efficient pricing of *public goods*. Such goods cannot be produced and distributed through market processes alone for well-known and accepted reasons that need not detain the present discussion.

As already noted, the role played by universities in economic life is apparent with great clarity. Universities produce skills, aptitudes and knowledge with immediate economic application. In addition to this instrumentalist view, and at least equally important for stability and growth, are the effects on *values to live by* that university exposure embeds inside individuals. Certain effects have already been mentioned, although not their economic importance. For example, credibility is the ability of a person or institution to retain trust and legitimacy. In addition, there has to be recognition by legislators and policymakers that an individual's pursuit of maximum welfare, meaning the highest return that he or she wants from the possession of resources, does not get shaped and tamed sufficiently by the *invisible hand* of the market (Adam Smith's striking metaphor). An efficient regulatory state is essential.

For the insights that must govern economic alongside political institutions, university teaching has to steer between two 18th-century philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith and David Hume. A social contract has to underlie all nation states; that contract can be achieved through knowledge acquired and imparted by universities.

*Political writers have established it as a maxim that, in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest.*¹⁶

One further illustration of the role played in economic life by universities concerns social and economic *equality* – a subject which is receiving a great deal of contemporary attention. Currently there is growing recognition that inside the world's major economies, the distribution of income and wealth, seemingly inexorably, moves in the direction of widening inequality, although this may not be true at the global scale because the available evidence cannot be unambiguously interpreted.¹⁷

Evidence on these trends widely cited is the research results for developed countries presented recently by prominent scholars.

To sum up what has been said thus far: the process by which wealth is accumulated and distributed contains powerful forces pushing toward divergence, or at any rate toward an extremely high level of inequality. Forces of convergence also exist, and in certain countries at certain times, these may prevail, but the forces of divergence can at any point regain the upper hand, as seems to be happening now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century...historical experience suggests that the principal mechanism for convergence [on greater equality] at the international as well as the domestic level is the diffusion of knowledge. In other words, the poor catch up with the rich to the extent that they achieve the same level of technological know-how, skill, and education, not by becoming the property of the wealthy.^{18(p.27,71)}

Thus the role of universities in fostering *both* directions in the movements of inequality, towards higher as well as lower levels, is not complicated to understand. As we argued earlier, tertiary level institutions (universities being the most prominent) create knowledge, and they impart such knowledge through teaching within all societies in the contemporary

world. Knowledge is the key variable that determines and therefore explains the direction these inequality movements in the command over resources take at any point in historical time.

It is not just a matter of the demand and supply of university graduates that determines the value of the activities they produce. Low numbers and proportions of scientists, chartered accountants, medical specialists, lawyers, business entrepreneurs, and other categories of high earners in a national population do go a long way to explain their entrenched positions in the top percentiles of the income distribution of any country. South Africa occupies an intermediate position in the global scale of the rewards paid to professional skills.¹⁹

Yet universities determine equality and inequality in societies in multiple *other* ways too. For instance, technical progress in production has been shown to have major effects on the equality of income and wealth as well as on income growth. For decades it has been accepted that there is a bias favouring demand for higher skills in ever-changing technology. Ongoing technical progress has deepened inequality because it creates jobs for higher paid workers and inhibits job creation for lower paid workers who are offered deployment mainly of muscle power and extended time on the job.

The primary research behind new methods of production and organisation originates in universities, both in pure and applied sciences, so universities are the ultimate source of this bias. There appears to be no feasible counter strategy to limit these inequality deepening effects which are a byproduct of new technology.^{15,20}

Skills bias is one idea underlying the interpretation of the 'laws of capitalism', as Piketty and his research group call them. Whether that claimed bias towards inequality can be offset by appropriate blocking institutions and policies is a separate question. It is also the key question that must be answered if human progress demands an inherent component of *rising* equality. This question is one that political philosophers have grappled to answer for centuries, most intensively in recent times since the 1971 appearance of Rawls' influential book, *A Theory of Justice*.

A literature sceptical about the structural nature of such *laws* is in the making. It claims that inequality can be countered by the right institutions and policies, given the necessary political willingness to do so.²¹⁻²⁶ For the purpose of the present argument, we do not need to pass judgement, but we must recognise the roles played by universities in the research on inequality and on potential countervailing policies and institutions.

Nationalism and university destruction

An entire mythology is growing up around the subject of South African university 'transformation', and regrettably certain professional educationists are perpetuating these myths. The word 'transformation' needs quotation marks because it is used in ways that convey, at best, political intention. It is certainly *not* a word that adds insight and analytical value to discussion about the function of universities, nor about the criteria and decision processes essential to the search for the policies best able to regulate universities.

To summarise once more this Commentary's theme, if South African universities are damaged by ill-considered policies driven by ideology, then every group in the country will suffer the consequences. One cannot construct a set of national institutions that support democratic government; that sustain a lively and evolving cultural life; and that promote an economy that encourages individuals to pursue their own interests along with those of the entire community, without the high-level skills and personal values that must guide such conduct. These can be provided only by autonomous universities that pursue excellence as judged by international standards. No other institutions, least of all government decree, can provide these skills and values.

Numerous historical examples illustrate the vulnerability of universities to the pressure of nationalist aspirations. In the 18th and 19th centuries, German universities were admired above others for their teaching and research achievements. But they later fell prey to nationalism. Their activities became 'directed' in the service of German imperialism. Then again a century later, universities in countries newly independent

from colonialism were subjected to reform decisions by their new governments that led to their own destruction.

Pakistan is one example. Universities were seen as not meriting their resource allocations, as well as harbouring individuals and groups deemed unreliable in the task of nation-building. Existing universities were run down deliberately and quickly, so that by the time these policies came to be recognised as destructive of *nation-building* and so reversed, their rebuilding has proved costly in resources, lengthy in duration, and controversial to their citizens. '[In Pakistan] the science and education ministries were often afterthoughts. ... In the late 1970s, the [Peoples Party] founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto diverted scarce resources and personnel into building the nuclear bomb.'²⁷ (See also Osama et al.²⁸ and Bennett-Jones²⁹.)

At the present time, South Africa's higher education policies, particularly the pressures placed on the universities to conform to the dominant political ideologies, come mainly from groups who comprise the new black elite. The resulting policies look like a Trojan Horse. Racial identity alongside cultural identity are not self-evident goods to be fostered in the pursuit of democracy. Both concepts, treated as individual and communal values, are implausible and likely to be divisive. Further, if given priority as goals to be maximised, they threaten to be self-defeating.

That cultural identity is 'a permanent feature of human life' is trivially true. We all come from somewhere ... But why must each of us be more than matter-of-fact in committing our lives to our history, our culture, our identity? They – culture, history, identity – have done many things for us and many things to us. What makes us affect gratitude instead of anger in return?³⁰

The pursuit of equity, when conceived to be simple numerical redress, no matter the possible damage to the characteristics that define and make any university a true university, is precisely such a device. It passes for an indicator of progress, but it is not so.

To recall the major proposition argued here, policies and remedial actions to make redress the dominating objective is to make it parasitic on the first-order functions of a good university. 'Redress' or 'transformation' demand much more nuanced understanding because they carry so much political baggage in South Africa.

The lack of any awareness of a historical perspective in the local policy arena is equally disturbing. Many international precedents in the past must be noticed. At least two should become common knowledge because they were policies that specifically excluded certain aspiring students from entry to universities on grounds that were openly prejudicial and decidedly *not* academic.

The first is the policy of *Numerus Clausus* (meaning 'closed number') in Tsarist Russia. This provision kept out of the universities a proportion of Jewish applicants just because they were Jewish. The second precedent relevant to us is the policy adopted by a number of East European states under communism this century. Their higher education authorities forbade the universities from admitting students from families considered to be bourgeois or dissident.³¹

These reminders must make all observers aware of what is at stake in using race to *admit* by privileging some students and thereby to *exclude* and penalise other students from access to university study. It is morally reprehensible, politically short-sighted, and highly probable to be destructive to the building of a viable democratic state. This tendency forms an integral part of the political baggage which burdens us in contemporary South Africa.

This is so because the first-order objectives of our universities described in this essay are likely to be severely compromised. This is additional to the damage inflicted on individual students aspiring to enter higher education. They will be denied a place in the queue by their race categorisation; others will be disappointed by the lowered quality of the learning and research skills they acquire.

At this stage, this judgement has to be tentative. It is not yet supported by research results from work dedicated to the purpose described here. But years of experience internationally as well as in South Africa should tell us that the right strategy for higher education researchers at every level is not the short-term political game in which policy decisions are made. The right game is the long-term one of building up the institutional capacity both within and outside universities (1) to formulate ideas that are judged relevant to change by university peers in the wider world; (2) to collect and analyse evidence with a bearing on change; and (3) to assess the effects of such changes that are made.

The research questions posed in this article have to be approached openly and *not* with any pre-commitment to answers deemed politically acceptable. To use the old metaphor, we in South Africa have to ask whether we are in danger of sawing off the tree branch on which we are now sitting. In addition, Warnock's³² low-keyed definition of a good school summarises simply and clearly what is at issue for us when it is applied to a good university: 'A good school is a school where learning is possible.' In addition, a recent judgement about universities in the United Kingdom applies also to us in South Africa: '[The] big picture is even wider: if UK higher education is going to prosper in the contemporary world, it is going to have to become messier, less precious, more flexible, and significantly more co-operative.'^{33(p.561)} This is a pithy summary of what we face here.

Will our South African universities continue to make learning possible for those who want it, into the indefinite future? This question concerns all the forms of university activity identified in this essay. So far though nobody is posing such a question. In *Pense'es* (1670), Blaise Pascal contributed an idea that must be pondered by every university reformer:

The last step that Reason takes is to recognise that there is an infinity of things that lie beyond it. Reason is a poor thing indeed if it does not succeed in knowing that.

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