

This essay has been prepared for *The Next Twenty Five Years? Affirmative Action and Higher Education in the United States and South Africa*. Edited by Martin Hall, Marvin Krislov and David L. Featherman. University of Michigan Press, In preparation, 2009. The point of departure is Justice Day O'Connor's statement, in her 2005 ruling in the US Supreme Court, that affirmative action would not be required for more than a further 25 years. I am indebted to others taking part in this project for productive discussion and debate on this and related issues.

Nothing is Different But Everything's Changed

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Once upon a time there was an ocean. But now it's a mountain range. Something unstoppable set into motion. Nothing is different, but everything's changed.

I figure that once upon a time I was an ocean. But now I'm a mountain range. Something unstoppable set into motion. Nothing is different, but everything's changed.

Home again? Naw, never going home again. Think about home again? I never think about home. But then comes a letter from home, the handwriting's fragile and strange. Something unstoppable set into motion. Nothing is different, but everything's changed.

Paul Simon, "Once upon a time there was an ocean". Surprise, 2006

Introduction

It may be a paradox of the university as an institution is that little changes with time and yet little is predictable. This is well illustrated by the recent history of the University of Cape Town. If Justice Day O'Connor's mirror to the future is reversed to reflect UCT in 1980 there is a predominant sense of continuity. Architectural motifs are the same, inspired by Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia and mediated by some controversial modernism and the frame of Devil's Peak and Table Mountain. Teaching is still in tiered lecture halls and smaller seminar rooms. Some eccentrics persist with blackboard and chalk. The newer computer laboratories are tucked away in basements. There has been some organizational rearrangement; there are some new academic departments and some disciplinary casualties. But qualifications on offer are still overwhelmingly the same and a student who had interrupted study in 1980 can still use academic credits earned at that time when re-registering today. Graduation ceremonies are more interesting (graduates from more than 90 countries, ululation, vuvuzelas blown and a diverse dress code), but gowns are still worn and Gaudeamus mumbled, and the faculty still process in rank order, leading in the Chancellor to convene the assembly.

Yet if anyone at a graduation ceremony in early December 1980 had predicted the political order of South Africa 25 years later, they would have been regarded as eccentric. If they had made their views publicly known, they could have expected the attentions of the Bureau of State Security. Nelson Mandela was on Robben Island, the ANC in exile, internally weak and regarded as a terrorist organization. Racial

segregation was in full force, as was job reservation, residential segregation and the Immorality Act. The National Party appeared impregnable, buttressed (despite international sanctions) by Cold War policies of containing Russian and Chinese interests in Africa. While Soweto and other townships across the country had erupted four years earlier, the uprising seemed to have been suppressed by the combination of police and military firepower and the work of an all-pervasive security apparatus. Despite an established tradition of principled opposition to apartheid, UCT was an overwhelmingly white institution, constrained by both enrollment and employment legislation and almost completely dependent on the state for financial support. Laughter would have greeted predictions that, 25 years later, South Africa would be lauded for a progressive constitution, would be one of the few countries permitting gay marriage and would have a seat on the United Nations Security Council.¹

This paradox – as Paul Simon puts it, that nothing is different but everything’s changed – can be understood by distinguishing the formal institution from the substantive university. In this device, the formal institution is the edifice of regulations, customs and physical structures that serves as gatekeeper to knowledge. The formal institution scrutinizes applicants, assesses and examines students, confers qualifications against the standards that it and other institutions set, determines who can be considered a legitimate “knowledge worker” and validates the form and content of knowledge through guild-like academic disciplines. The shape and function of this formal institution is well known from a range of work from varying perspectives: Burton Clark’s analysis of disciplines, Bourdieu’s analysis of the validation of the “state nobility”, Paul David and Dominique Foray’s economics of knowledge, and specialist studies of university architecture, which show how particular architectural forms recur at universities across the globe.²

The substantive university, in contrast, is volatile and pliable. It can be understood as multiple communities of practice which define academic, social and political affinities and exclusions within the physical space of the formal institution and also beyond it, whether with local communities or with international organizations of similar knowledge specialists.³ Despite the persistent metaphor of the ivory tower, the substantive university is profoundly affected by the wider society that it is both in, and of.

This distinction between the formal institution and its substantive communities of practice is a device, an artifact that helps unravel some of the complexities. Day-by-day reality is shaped by the recursive interaction of the formal and the substantive, creating institutions that are monumental and predictable, as well as transitory and volatile.⁴ What starts as a paradox – as a puzzle amenable to interpretation – may end as a contradiction in which the needs and aspirations of diverse communities of practice can no longer be met within the framework of the formal institution, as something unstoppable set into motion. In this essay, I will use the example of the University of Cape Town to look at the three domains that are closely relevant to the concerns of this volume: admissions, the faculty and the construction of knowledge.

¹ Institute of Race Relations Survey; Saunders 2000

² Clark 1983, 2001; Bourdieu 1996; Foray 2004; David and Foray 2003.

³ Lave and Wenger 1991.

⁴ Giddens 1984.

Will the paradox of substantive change within a largely-unchanging institution persist, or will something unstoppable be set in motion?



Turning firstly to admissions, the core dynamic, both for the last 25 years and for years to come, is the relationship between race and class.

Until recently, the dominant interpretation of South Africa's last half century has been exceptionalist. In this reading, racial classification was a residual aberration of human rights that should have been swept away in the processes of decolonization and US civil rights reforms in the 1960s, but persisted through white Afrikaner intransigence to the point where, for the last twenty or so years of its existence, the South African apartheid state was a unique international pariah.⁵ To take but one example from the world of scholarship (from my own field of training as an archaeologist) the World Archaeological Congress was formed in 1986 around international opposition to South Africa, with this goal defined in its constitution as a specific objective that did not apply to other states that may have been criticized for human rights violations (such as the Soviet Union, Israel or Argentina).⁶ While such issues of human rights are of undoubted importance, a corollary of this exceptionalist point of view has been that the "South African problem" had been solved once key symbolic and juristic milestones had been achieved: the release of Mandela, the first democratic elections, the ratification of the new constitution.

More recently, new scholarship, based on reasonable reconstructions of socio-economic data prior to the first nationally representative household surveys and censuses of the 1990s, has mapped out a scenario that is both deeper and more informative than the emphasis on human rights alone.⁷ This work is showing how, from the early 1970s onwards, inter-racial inequality persisted, but was accompanied by increasing intra-racial inequality among Africans.⁸ Through "late apartheid" – when policies were introduced that sought to modernize discrimination – a black middle class began to emerge and distinctions developed between the unionized workforce and a growing "rural proletariat" that was structurally excluded from the labour force and isolated in the Bantustans. Further and continuing research shows how, contrary to most expectations, these trends have both continued and accelerated after the achievement of formal freedoms in the elections of 1994.⁹ The first decade of democracy has seen widening general inequality, increasing inequality within demographic groups (to the point where Africans are almost as unequal as a group as the South African population is as a whole) growing unemployment (with a large

⁵ Reference to exceptionalist views needed

⁶ Hall 2005.

⁷ Seekings and Natrass 2005; Whiteford and Van Seventer 2000.

⁸ In this chapter, as in current South African government practice and contemporary scholarship, apartheid-era racial categorizations are used as the basis for "designated groups", allowing continuity and change to be tracked between the pre- and post-1994 periods. These categories are whites (the beneficiaries of apartheid policies) and blacks (collectively, all those who were the victims of discrimination). The "designated groups" within the general category "black" are "Coloureds", "Indians" and "Africans". These are all, of course, understood as historical, political and social constructs.

⁹ Bhorat and Kanbur 2006; Bhorat and Oosthuizen 2006a; Hoogeveen and Ozler 2006; Leibbrandt, Poswell, Naidoo and Welch 2006; Van der Berg 2006.

number of people having no prospect of jobs and therefore outside the workforce) and increasing poverty (measured by the recognized thresholds of US\$1 or US\$2 per person per day, adjusted for parity).

This increasing understanding of the interplay of race and class in South Africa is, in its turn, putting pressure on established approaches to seeking equity in admissions to universities such as UCT. Current admissions policies have their roots in the mid-1980s, where a sub-set of South African universities began actively to defy apartheid policies and sought to admit significant numbers of black students.¹⁰ Because of marked disparities in the quality of prior education (the explicit policy of privileging white schools in resource allocations), such admissions policies required minimum prior high school attainment thresholds that differed according to the apartheid education department that administered an applicant's school. This differential requirement was buttressed by alternative forms of admissions testing that were "scaffolded", making test achievement less dependent on the knowledge level of the examinee.¹¹ At this stage, and through until the mid 1990s, high schools were still racially segregated (towards the end of this period, in reality if not by law). As a result, race was a reasonable proxy for the quality of education available to an individual prior to university attendance; although there was class differentiation within the group categorized as African, middle class African learners usually had little choice in schooling, and were still obliged to attend under-resourced, apartheid-era schools.

This situation has changed to a degree since the mid-1990s. There has been increasing de-segregation of formerly white schools ("Model C schools", named for a futile attempt by the De Klerk government immediately prior to the 1994 elections to protect white privilege). This has meant that small but significant numbers of black learners have gained access to well-resourced formerly white schools.¹² By 2005, many of this sub-set of potential university applicants had received all their secondary education in such schools. This has raised the question of whether black applicants to universities from such schools are now being unfairly privileged, particularly when this trend is seen in the context of Black Economic Empowerment policy, which has seen the emergence of a financially advantaged black "supra-class".¹³ This argument will be familiar to those in the US higher education system and, indeed, reference is often made to the case against affirmative action in the United States.

As with all comparisons between the US and South Africa, it is important to remember that the African victims of apartheid discrimination form a large majority, and that the burdens of unemployment, poverty and social marginalization are carried overwhelmingly by Africans. Because this demographic category forms a large majority of the South African population as a whole, the emergence of an African middle class and the widening of the Gini Coefficient within the African racial category does not affect the profile of acute poverty, structural unemployment and social exclusion. When the average income of the bottom decile of households is one hundredth of the top decile, the rising tide leaves the poor submerged.¹⁴

¹⁰ Scott, Yeld, McMillan and Hall 2005.

¹¹ Reference to Yeld and Scott

¹² Yeld 2001; Yeld and Haeck 1997.

¹³ **Reference for Black Economic Empowerment**

¹⁴ Seekings and Nattrass 2005; Leibbrandt, Poswell, Naidoo and Welch 2006; Van der Berg 2006.

Consequently, and despite the emergence of a black middle class over the last 25 years, statistical analyses of the dimensions of poverty show a continuing and clear correlation between poverty and educational attainment.¹⁵

It is apparent that the immediate outcome of a university admissions policy that took account only of school leaving results would lead to a re-segregation of universities, since the comparatively small number of African applicants from formerly-white schools would be insufficient to allow an equitable profile in admissions. This is complicated further by evidence that African learners in formerly-white schools score consistently lower than white co-learners, despite equivalence of formal opportunity – a South African version of the US black-white test score gap that is probably due to continuing discrepancies in social capital and prevalent “everyday” discrimination in attitudes.¹⁶

The combination of, on the one hand, a conspicuous and financially privileged black elite and, on the other hand, persistent and increasing economic marginalization of a large majority of black households is already resulting in pressure for changes in current admissions policies from diametric political positions. There is increasing criticism in the media, largely from white applicants and their families, which argues that black applicants now have an unjustified advantage.¹⁷ Some adopting this position seek an admissions system that is based on school leaving results alone, while others argue for a combination of race-blind admissions for applicants from “Model C” schools, and weighting in favour of applicants from less privileged schools. At the same time, and from an opposite pole, there is criticism from ANC-affiliated groups such as the ANC Youth League and the South African Students’ Congress that universities are failing the poor.¹⁸ This position requires an explicitly pro-poor set of policies. In response, universities would need to base admissions on a combination of household income and the measured quality of prior schooling.¹⁹

There are parallel pressures within the ruling alliance of the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party for government to move from policies that are creating black elites and towards an emphasis on economic and social inclusion. This is likely to be a major theme in the 2009 South African election. Consequently, the government itself, perhaps using the lever of the public subsidy to universities, may apply pressure for change in current admission policies.

Closely associated with the ways in which equity is sought through admissions policies is the question of financial aid. South African universities have minimal endowments and, despite ambitious policies to the contrary, this circumstance is unlikely to change over the next 25 years. There is no equivalent to the North

¹⁵ Bhorat and Oosthuizen 2006b; Louw, Van der Berg and Yu 2006; Van der Berg and Burger 2003; Van der Berg 2006. See also Conley 1999.

¹⁶ Alvin Visser, personal communication and unpublished reports, Centre for Higher Education Development, UCT. See also Visser and Hanslo 2005; Conley 1999; Jencks and Phillips 1998.

¹⁷ Give example of letters and Leon response

¹⁸ Give example of COSAS letter

¹⁹ While there have been important moves towards identifying appropriate sets of indicators for the socioeconomic status of applicants to higher education (through increasingly representative household surveys and Department of Education audits of public schools), it will be some while before such measures are sufficiently robust to underpin defensibly fair admissions systems.

American culture of philanthropy in South Africa and only a small alumni donor base. Since it is common cause that alumni loyalty is built up through lifetimes longer than 25 years, there is unlikely to have been an overall change in this environment by 2030. At present, South African universities find financial aid from their operating budgets or from bursary programmes, with additional allocations from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. These combinations of grants and loans currently enable students from poor households to study at university; without this support, students from lower socioeconomic groups could neither afford tuition fees nor raise personal loans to cover such costs against potential earnings.

While systematic data across the South African higher education system is not currently available, it is probable that all universities in the country are close to, or in excess of, their capacity to provide financial aid within the present system. Given the extent of inequality and poverty in South Africa, any shift to a class-based admissions policy will only succeed if it is accompanied by a new approach to student financial aid. Were they to meet current academic requirements for entry, a large majority of South African households would qualify for full financial aid for university study on any reasonable definition of eligibility. Consequently, shifting to a class-based admissions system must have major implications for the ways in which tuition and other costs are funded.

Policies that seek to achieve equity in admissions are closely related to the ways in which the recruitment of the faculty is governed by legislation as well as by internal university policies for transformation. Firstly, there is a direct pipeline from undergraduate admissions and graduate recruitment and on to success in the employment of junior faculty. Universities are unusual institutions in that they develop and qualify their own human resources. Secondly, there is considerable pressure from both within and without for universities that were previously designated for specified races to achieve equitable balances in the composition of their staff. This affects universities differently according to their history. Most obviously, previously white universities such as UCT still have overwhelmingly white faculty (combined with gender imbalance with increasing seniority). But other universities also have skewed staffing profiles that are grounded in the peculiarities of apartheid social engineering. For example, the University of the Western Cape was shaped by the apartheid era Coloured Labour Preference Policy. Other universities recruited comparatively large proportions of nationals from other African countries which is now seen as restricting opportunities for South Africans, while the University of KwaZulu-Natal, recently formed by merger, has inherited the combined challenges of the staff profiles of the formerly-white University of Natal and the formerly-Indian University of Durban-Westville. Thirdly, these self-driven imperatives for change are given emphasis by the Employment Equity Act, which requires all organizations with more than 50 employees to set targets for improving staff representivity by race, and to report their progress against these targets annually to the Department of Labour.²⁰ Taken together, these factors pose considerable challenges to universities in South Africa as they seek to improve the representivity, and therefore the diversity, of their faculty over the next 25 years.

²⁰ Reference to Employment Equity legislation

Here, and in contrast with student admissions, the future is perhaps more certain. South Africa has a small higher education system with limited employment alternatives for academic staff or for administrative staff with career specialization in the sector. This means that faculty turnover rates are low and the opportunities for steering change in staff diversity are quite limited. UCT, for example, has a staff turnover rate through retirement, resignation and unanticipated events of less than 10% per annum. South African labour law is strongly in favour of the employee, and it is illegal to terminate staff contracts for the purposes of achieving diversity (contrary to widespread popular opinion among white South Africans that this happens). As a result, the profile of the faculty at a university such as UCT must remain 90% or more constant on a year-to-year basis.

This is compounded by the necessary length of the pipeline that connects undergraduate admission with eventual recruitment to the faculty. This is at best a 10 year road, and projects such the US-based Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship programme (of which UCT is a member) have shown that it takes about 15 to 20 years to make a measurable impact on diversity through targeted recruitment, mentorship and career tracking.²¹ Further, black faculty at South African universities are actively recruited by other organizations to meet their equity targets in terms of the Employment Equity Act, and such organizations may be able to offer significantly higher remuneration. Government recruits from universities (the current Minister of Education is a former faculty member at UCT), as do other university systems (South African higher education has contributed three Vice Chancellors to UK universities in recent years). On top of this is the international mobility which is one of the attractions of the academic life. All of these factors narrow still further the window of opportunity for significant changes in the demographic profile of the faculty at South African universities.

Change in the composition of the faculty will, therefore, be slow over the next 25 years. A significant number of staff who are currently working at universities will still be in employment in 25 years time and it will remain difficult to meet objectives in employing black faculty for a decade or more. This said, there is likely to be variability by discipline, with the current profile of graduate students and competitiveness from other institutions shaping fields of study differently. For example, considerable progress has been made in moving towards equity in key fields of undergraduate education in Engineering, and it is reasonable to expect that these advances will carry through to graduate student recruitment and the employment of junior faculty. In contrast, while the first qualification in Medicine has seen marked changes in the profile of graduates, and has been a target for equity in admissions since the 1980s, equity recruitment into post graduate specialist fields, such as branches of Surgery, has been negligible, with the result that the potential applicant pool for faculty positions among South Africans is almost completely white (and skewed by gender as well). In these disciplines there is unlikely to be significant change in staffing equity over the next 25 years.

One factor, under-explored at present, which may offer some potential to break out of the slow pattern of change in faculty diversity is the relationship between South African universities and the academic diaspora. South Africa has been hemorrhaging

²¹ [Ref to MMUF programme](#)

academic talent for half a century. Waves of young professionals left the country as apartheid policies began to bite in the early 1960s, and are now ending often-distinguished academic careers in other countries. Others left at key points of state oppression: the Soweto uprising of 1976 and its aftermath, the successive and formal States of Emergency after 1985. There are significant numbers of South African trained professionals in all English-speaking countries, and many informal networks that connect them with each other, and with family members who remained.²² Such networks have been central to economic revivals in a number of countries, including most recently China and India, and South African universities have yet to develop innovative approaches which will allow those who wish to retain or regain connections to do so in ways that contribute to change in South Africa without surrendering complex material and social investments in new countries of residence.²³

A second factor, also under-explored, is the relationship between South African universities and universities elsewhere on the continent. Here, there is both inconsistency in current government policy, and tension between the objectives of labour legislation and the natural interests of universities. South African higher education policy seeks to expand the community of scholarship by requiring that students from Southern African Development Community are treated as if they are South African citizens. In contrast, labour legislation insists that only South African citizens are counted for the purposes of measuring progress towards employment equity targets, and also precludes anyone who has attained citizenship since 1994, thereby counting out a significant number of intellectuals from other countries in Africa who have made South Africa their home and who have been granted South African citizenship.²⁴ In turn again, universities in South Africa have a natural interest in recruiting scholars from other countries in Africa who will both bring fresh perspectives to teaching and research and who will serve as role models, particularly for graduate students, the critical recruitment pool for the faculty of the future.

As with the relationship with the diaspora, it is difficult to predict how this factor will change over the next 25 years. On the one hand little may happen. There is entrenched and growing xenophobia in South Africa and significant restrictions on nationals from other countries in Africa seeking to enter South Africa. But on the other hand government policy may follow the pan-Africanist inclinations of President Thabo Mbeki, who has made the construction of a sub-Saharan African economic and aligned community of nations a central pillar of his policy through two terms of office. Changes in policy combined with appropriate incentives could initiate a strengthening of meaningful connections between South Africa's universities and the rest of the continent.

Changing the demographic profile of students and staff is important as an end in itself in a country where public institutions may still be sharply unrepresentative of the communities they serve. In addition, organizations that depend for their viability on the creation and dissemination of knowledge benefit from increased diversity in achieving these core purposes. A broad tradition, central to shaping the concept of the modern university, recognizes in one form or another an important connection between theoretical knowledge, experience in putting such knowledge to work, and

²² Kaplan reference to diaspora study

²³ Friedman 2006.

²⁴ Ref to employment equity act and regulations

reflection on these processes. From Kant's reflections on the relationship between what would today be called disciplines, to Von Humboldt's University of Berlin, the US land grant colleges, Freire's radical pedagogy, Dewey's philosophy, experiential learning and the efflorescence of new universities across Europe and Africa in the middle of the last century, the modern university has served as a magnet for diverse forms of knowledge, expertise and perspective.²⁵ Universities with established high rankings in international league tables are invariably those that attract talent from a wide, and often global, catchment. Leading US research universities would not be what they are if they had not succeeded in recruiting excellent students and faculty from India and China, and both countries are now benefiting enormously from the reverse flow of expertise.²⁶

This broader context highlights the opportunities for "knowledge work" that the end of segregation and increased diversity can bring for universities in South Africa. In contrast with the emphasis on equity in admissions and in employment, however, this discussion has barely begun. With some important exceptions, there has been no broad public debate about the nature and direction of the curriculum, no equivalent to the "culture wars" in the Humanities in the US, or the public agonies about the competitiveness of the sciences in the United Kingdom, or the epistemological questions around nationalism and pan-Africanism that enlivened intellectual discourse in other countries in Africa.²⁷ In South Africa, issues of indigenous systems of knowledge, and their relationship with university curricula and research, remain unresolved (dangerously so, given the risk of the alienation of intellectual property). Issues of adult education, the formal recognition of prior experience and lifelong learning have been given little more than a nod of recognition, a problem for a country with a significant number of mid-career adults who have not been able to realize their innate potential because of earlier exclusion from educational opportunities on the grounds of race, gender or both.

Why this slowness to get to the heart of the matter for the university in post-apartheid South Africa? There are a number of probable reasons. One is the contribution that university-based intellectuals made to nation building. The last apartheid government handed the ANC a nation with segregated institutions, an almost-bankrupt economy and a failing grade on almost all benchmarks of good governance.²⁸ In the long process of reconstruction, the state has drawn on a wide range of resources that have included, appropriately, the country's universities. Faculty from universities have played substantial roles in commissions, research projects and advisory roles in areas such as education reform, public health, the fight for effective HIV and AIDS interventions, urban renewal, legal reform, the development of new economic policies, new approaches to culture and heritage and the framing of the new constitution. Many of these tasks have been in addition to home universities' requirements for teaching, research and administration. This has diminished capacity for attending to transformative work within universities themselves.

A second reason is the intense process of institutional reconstruction that has followed from the report of the National Commission on Higher Education in 1996 and,

²⁵ Flyvbjerg 2001; Freire 1993; Kant 1979; Kolb 1984.

²⁶ Friedman 2006.

²⁷ Hall 2006; Muller 2000. **Need references to Jansen, Ensor**

²⁸ Hirsch 2005

particularly, from the national working group that reported to the Minister of Education in 1980.²⁹ This has led to an ambitious exercise in restructuring the national higher education system through mergers, incorporations and closures that have reduced the number of public higher education institutions, and to the creation of a new, and little-understood, hybrid of universities and technical colleges, the universities of technology.³⁰ This restructuring exercise has absorbed substantial resources as institutional systems have been re-aligned or re-established. Again, this has left little time or energy for curriculum reform, and has probably encouraged traditionalism in core areas of “knowledge work”; when all else in the institution is contested and uncertain, established ways of teaching and delimiting the boundaries of research are a raft of stability.

The future of “knowledge work” is the most uncertain of these projections for the next 25 years. While trends in the intersection of race and class are reasonably well understood, and the limitations on change in the demographic profile of staff are all too apparent, the “knowledge question” is only partially explored. Will the established disciplines remain dominant, either capturing or excluding new forms of knowledge? Will universities take up the opportunities that the reversal of apartheid isolation has brought? Will the curriculum and the research agenda follow the lead of the west and the north, or will South African universities seek distinction by developing new forms of local knowledge that can inform global issues? Will there be a greater emphasis on adult education, prior learning and continuing professional education? At present these are options for advocacy; their outcomes will be better judged in retrospect.

How could such substantive changes in admissions, the composition of the faculty and the construction and dissemination of knowledge affect the nature of the formal institution – that edifice of regulations, customs and monuments that is replicated through organizational arrangements, official certifications, ceremonies and architecture?

Firstly class: would a move from race to class in admissions change the formal structures of the university? There is a tendency to assume not – to see this as a steady, evolutionary process in which the neo-classical façade of the university has presided benignly over colonial, apartheid and democratic eras alike, and will similarly preside over whatever the future will bring. Such an assumption deserves a closer interrogation.

The university is one of a number of gatekeepers to class mobility. Through finding and recognizing the potential of students from lower socio-economic groups and providing them with accredited qualifications, the university permits graduates to gain access to work that is better remunerated and which carries higher social status. In a country with extreme inequality, the stakes are high and the rewards are potentially substantial, and there are many first-in-family life histories in South Africa that are appropriately celebrated. Increasing numbers of black South Africans have benefited

²⁹ NCHE 1996; Republic of South Africa 2001.

³⁰ [Kagisano article on universities of technology](#)

from these opportunities over the last 25 years, but their achievements have little effect on the formal structures of the university and may indeed re-enforce existing traditions. It is not in the interests of first-in-family graduates to devalue the qualification they have worked so hard to achieve. Twenty-five years ago many students graduating from UCT did not bother with the graduation ceremony; with participation rates for white South African among the highest in the world, attending university and graduating could be taken for granted. Traditional graduation ceremonies in South African universities today are far more popular among students and their families. For all students, admission and success is more competitive, and for first-in-family graduates the generational change in opportunity can be profound.

This, however, is to assume that the gate is open and the road ahead is clear of major obstacles. South Africa today is experiencing both a national skills shortage and rising graduate unemployment, which is a consequence of a serious mismatch between the requirements of the economy and the ability of universities to recruit suitable applicants for qualifications in demand.³¹ While this is partly attributable to curriculum and qualification issues in higher education, the major reason is the crisis in prior schooling and the inability of the public education system to provide adequate teaching in mathematics and science subjects.³² As a result, a significant number of graduates cannot find jobs. In this circumstance, the gateway becomes a barrier and the university a holding ground for unemployable young adults.³³ There is a direct link between the social and political function of the university, the national economy and the place of South Africa in the world. Optimistic views of globalization hold that all ships benefit on the rising tide. But other analyses see widening marginalization ahead and an international labour surplus that will further reduce the opportunities for job creation in the developing world.³⁴

A shift from race to class will also open up the question of academic standards. One of the more insidious aspects of apartheid education was the conscious decision to provide differential qualities of education through marked variation in investments in public schooling and teacher preparation. While the late-apartheid period saw accelerating investment in African schools,³⁵ there continued to be, and still is, significant variability in quality. Universities such as UCT have responded to this problem through academic development programmes which have now been in place for more than twenty years and which can demonstrate an acceptable statistical correlation between admissions decisions and eventual graduation rates.³⁶ However, it is not clear that such programmes could be scaled up to manage a significant increase in first-time undergraduates from poorly-performing schools. While the current focus on school quality by the Department of Education will result in improvements, these will come with new generations of teachers entering the profession; at present provincial authorities are experiencing difficulties recruiting teachers in critical areas such as Mathematics and Science. In the shorter term, universities seeking to change the class profile of their admissions may have to

³¹ ASGISA; Borat on graduate unemployment

³² Reference to schools mathematics and science education problems

³³ Alison Woolf reference

³⁴ Castells 2000; Cohen 2006; Kaplinsky 2005.

³⁵ Seekings and Natrass 2005.

³⁶ Scott 2003; Scott, Yeld, McMillan and Hall 2005.

balance this against current entrance standards rates of student throughput and graduation.

Given this, it cannot be certain that a shift from race to class in admissions will leave the institutional structures of the university unchanged. Given also South Africa's history of youth-led pushes for revolutionary change, epitomized in the Soweto uprising of 1976, continuing or worsening graduate unemployment may lead to a re-radicalization of South African campuses that is in concert both with the labour movement inside the increasingly-fragile governing alliance and with non-governmental organizations that are focused on issues of poverty and social and economic marginalization.³⁷ If, in years to come, South African universities admit larger numbers of students from poor backgrounds who do not have opportunities for employment after graduation, campuses will again become major sites for political activism and opposition to the state, with concomitant pressure for major changes in formal governance systems.³⁸

A second pressure point for current formal systems will come from the need for a major expansion in student financial aid. As noted, this need cannot be met from existing resources and is unlikely to come from endowment income because such endowments have yet to be raised. This may lead down two different roads, the end of each of which would change the nature of the university.

One route would be to argue for greater state support through increased subsidy, dedicated grants or a revised national grant and loan scheme. In essence, any major shift from race to class will considerably reduce the number of students paying tuition fees and will mean that a majority of students will receive grants that will cover almost all their costs; given the nature of growing inequality and poverty in South Africa, there is little middle ground. This, though, will come at the price of autonomy. While the 1997 Higher Education Act confirms that universities are autonomous, with substantial control over admissions, the curriculum, research and other activities, a series of almost-annual amendments to the 1997 Act has reduced this autonomy by extending the right of the Minister of Education to intervene in the affairs of universities.³⁹ In addition, new forms of subsidy allow the state to steer universities through the funding of student places, the level of funding by discipline, rates of graduation and the nature and quantity of research outputs.⁴⁰ The chaos of the apartheid-era higher education arrangements has been replaced by a unitary, state-steered system. Given continuing concerns about the efficiency of South African universities and the returns received on the investment of public funds, it is improbable that the state would grant large amounts of additional funding for student financial aid without a significant increase in control over the way this, and other state funding, is used.

³⁷ Ballard, Habib and Valodia 2006.

³⁸ The first ANC government managed a settlement in campus governance in the interests of national unity, achieving the replacement of the broad transformation forums of the late 1980s and early 1990s with the advisory Institutional Forum of the 1997 Higher Education Act. See Republic of South Africa 1997.

³⁹ Hall, Symes and Luescher 2002; Hall and Symes 2005.

⁴⁰ [Reference to new subsidy system](#)

An alternative route would be for universities to hold out for autonomy and to respond to the demand for more financial aid by reprioritizing budgets. In practice, this would be a trade-off between support for students and support for research. In contrast to the US, South African universities have limited sources of funds for research activities and infrastructure. There is little technology transfer and industry-sponsored research outside specific fields. Income from intellectual property is too low to be worth counting. In contrast again with the US, where state departments such as Defense sponsor research across a wide range of disciplines, there is little contract research from government agencies, and competition for what there is from specialized agencies such as the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the Human Sciences Research Council.⁴¹ In order to establish increased funds for financial aid from present budgets, universities would have to raise research overheads to levels that result in the full recovery of all research-related costs. This would have a severe impact on investment in research infrastructure and would lead to a concomitant reduction in research output and competitiveness.

A third area of pressure on the status quo is “knowledge work” – the combination of the form and structure of the curriculum, research agendas and the relationship between the intellectual autonomy of faculty to enquire where they think best and the need for research that is directed to explicit public interest and benefit. This is an area of tantalizing possibility. For reasons outlined earlier, wide discussion of the curriculum has been curtailed by the pressure of other priorities. It is, though, clear that big research benefits from network effects, and that significant resources can become available for inter-institutional consortia. South African universities are currently involved in regional and international collaborations in medical research, astronomy, climate change studies, marine biology, food security, public health and other areas. If the opportunities inherent in the South African diaspora are realized, these network effects will be further accentuated. This could be coupled with a re-evaluation of the value of local knowledge to global epistemologies – the attributes of universities located on the faultlines of rapid urbanization, key public health issues or the new frontiers in literature and the arts that are fuelled by the benefits of diversity.

Will the interaction between these areas of substantive change and the formal structures of the university as they are today result in a continuing paradox – the quality both changing and staying the same – or will the paradox give way to contradiction, in which forces pulling in different directions cannot be reconciled without the organizational structure of the university changing?

Again, it is interesting to reverse Justice O’Connor’s mirror and look back 25 years. The remarkable thing about universities in South Africa is that they survived apartheid with any credibility. A consequence of apartheid legislation and policy was to require that a university such as UCT (defined as both white and English medium) remain a national resource of recognized quality while searching for talent from less than 10% of the population; a sub-sector with, moreover, common historical and cultural origins and a similar social profile. The effects of this policy were reflected directly in participation rates for university attendance (the proportion of a national age cohort that enters higher education). A participation rate of more than 35% is generally regarded as high, and has yet to be achieved by many developed countries.

⁴¹ [Source on SA research funding](#)

However, by the late 1980s the participation rate for white South Africans was more than 80%.⁴² At this level, the university system as a whole had ceased to be selective. Had apartheid continued for the next 25 years, there would invariably have been a steep decline in undergraduate standards, a shortage of qualified graduates and a concomitant decline in the aptitude of faculty entering the academy. By 2030, South African universities would have been doing little credible research, and would have been offering an extended high school education for those entering the multiple, racially-defined state administrations or taking up jobs reserved on racial criteria in extensive state-owned enterprises.

The university in South Africa, then, was saved from contradictions that would have changed it as an institution by the chain of events that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the “red threat” that sustained apartheid South Africa by a thin thread. When Nelson Mandela accepted an honorary doctorate from Chancellor Harry Oppenheimer at the University of Cape Town in 1992 the formal structure of the institution was re-affirmed and the enduring paradox was secured.

Can this settlement hold into the indefinite future? Probably not. In this essay I have suggested three areas which may puncture the continuum – a major shift in the class base of student admissions that happens without an increase in employment opportunities, a significant loss of institutional autonomy, and new forms of “knowledge work”. Any of these could be accelerated, or become redundant, as a result of still-unforeseen circumstances: why should we be any better at predicting the future than our forebears in 1980? All this said, the university in 2030 takes a vague form, rather like a mountain range glimpsed through the mist on the ocean, where perhaps nothing is different, but perhaps everything has changed.

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⁴² Cooper and Subotzky 2001.

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