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Public higher education in peril? A view from down south

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Public higher education in peril?

A view from down south¹

Jennifer M. Case

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This paper reflects on occurrences in 2016 in South African higher education with which many readers will be at least partly familiar, at least from the ‘visuals’ on their media feed of violent confrontations between protesters and police, and the evolving memes from #RhodesMustFall through to #FeesMustFall. There is no South African academic who has not been intensely engaged over this period in trying to think about and understand these unprecedented and fast changing events – they have affected and challenged us all deeply.

In this paper, however, I aim to step aside from the fray to try to ask the question of how this came to be, focusing specifically on the response of one university, the University of Cape Town (UCT) where I work, and in particular on how it came to a decision to suspend its operations for an extended period in late 2016. What is the deep logic underpinning this response? Can we go beyond the storm in the tea-cup to think about the events in South Africa in the broader global context of contemporary public higher education and the challenges it faces? The starting point for this work is captured in a challenge issued by the historian Rebecca Hodes in a recent analysis of these events published in the journal *African Affairs*². She writes in conclusion:

It is to the value and meaning of higher learning, both within South Africa and beyond, that scholars of Fees Must Fall must turn.

¹ ‘Down South’ is a colloquial term used in countries north of its borders to refer to South Africa; I am using it here with some reference to the term ‘global South’, but aiming for a more modest claim for where I am coming from.

² <https://academic.oup.com/afraf/article/doi/10.1093/afraf/adw072/2760213/Questioning-fees-must-fall>

The paper has three parts, starting with an overview of the empirical context, focusing in some detail on the response that UCT made to the student protests. The second part builds on the work of Bill Readings in order to develop an argument that suggests that this response relates at least in part to a broader loss of purpose of the university. I will argue that in agreeing to shut down its operations for an extended period, this university articulated its agreement with the protesters' claim that ultimately it lacked legitimacy. This can be interpreted in purely South African terms as being about the failure of the post-apartheid settlement and the university's culpability in this regard, but in this paper I want to offer a broader interpretation which suggests that the shift to define the purposes of the university in more instrumental and extrinsic terms has made it extraordinarily vulnerable.

This risk is playing out in striking ways in South Africa, but it is a risk that in maybe more muted form could weaken the capacity of universities elsewhere. The third part of the paper argues that we urgently need to recover and indeed reinvent a sophisticated argument about the purposes of higher education, building this around an expanded notion of the public good.

The events at the University of Cape Town in late 2016

Student political activism is not a new thing in South Africa: during the apartheid era universities and schools were key sites of resistance, most significantly at institutions then designated for black young people where there was ongoing repression of political action but significant protests also took place at the English-speaking, then designated 'white', universities like UCT. In the democratic era there have been annual protests and frequent shutdowns at historically black universities but it was only in 2015 when protests started at the higher status historically white universities that they got everyone's attention – under the banner of #FeesMustFall (#FMF). This culminated in a nationwide protest, a march on parliament in October 2015, and an order by the government of a tuition freeze. Many academics celebrated the fact that important issues in higher education were finally on the national agenda and that student activism was finding its voice.

In 2016 protests continued sporadically on various campuses, with intensification from September onwards following confirmation from the government that fees would remain, even though there were additional funding options for students. By the end of 2016 in many contexts violence had occurred with substantial infrastructural damage and much debate around the presence of police and private security on university campuses. At UCT we lost the final four weeks of teaching in the academic year; other universities avoided this but only with heavy and controversial security arrangements.

We should not be surprised at the eruption of student protest on South African campuses circa 2015. South Africa finds itself in a time of massive political contestation with the unraveling of the hegemony of the African National Congress

(ANC) and a tussle over the future. There hasn't yet been a substantial political presence left of the ANC and this is now taking shape; there are the first coalition governments in key urban metros; it is to be expected in this moment that youth activism will be vigorous. This is a country with extremely high levels of inequality and a mixed record of delivery in the post-apartheid era, most especially in eradicating the legacy around racially differentiated school education. This also means that students experience higher education differentially and there are valid questions over whether universities are meeting the needs of all the students they admit. Furthermore, in any university, there is, or should be, an ongoing debate about which knowledge is privileged in the academy. So if anything we should most probably be surprised that widespread levels of student protest *only* took hold from 2015 in democratic South Africa.

It has been noted that #FMM has already been the subject of 'acute academic interest' and this overview cannot do justice to the many important angles that have been taken. The work of Rebecca Hodes has already been mentioned; she closely analyses the emergence of this student movement, noting, of course, that such unitary framings are problematic. With others³ she notes especially the role of new media in facilitating communication and forms of organisation in groups of protesters. The focus in this paper, however, is not centrally on the student protesters and the important questions around why they might be protesting now and why the modes of protest and forms of organisation emerged as they did. I am also not going to be able to discuss here issues of funding higher education, on which much has already been written⁴.

Here I focus on the response of the university to the protesters, specifically looking at UCT, which in some quarters is considered a paradigm of an appropriately engaged response. In other quarters the UCT management has been vilified for what has been perceived as undue capitulation. In what follows, I give a brief overview of how the university's response to the protests evolved during the latter part of 2016. Here I am drawing primarily on the official university communications, as my interest in this paper (as outlined earlier) is in trying to understand the response of the university to the protest (rather than the protest itself).

During February 2016 a protest over student housing at UCT under the hashtag 'Shackville' led to the vandalism of university property, including the burning of artworks. Following a high court order and a lengthy university disciplinary process, a small group of students were facing at least temporary expulsion from the campus. In mid-September, this group started moving around campus, demanding that classes close down – the word 'lecture disruptions' entered the UCT lexicon. The

³ <http://www.litnet.co.za/standing-injustices-nine-notes-feesmustfall/>

⁴ <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20151104111825416>
<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=2016030410040021>
<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20170115103354140&query=nico+cloete>

university closed first for an afternoon, then extended the closure into another day, then a further two days – with the vice-chancellor (VC) writing that ‘We need to create space again to be engaging with protesters in a less hostile environment’.

At the end of this first week it was announced that the closure would continue for a further week and the VC said ‘I am convinced that bringing security and police onto campus will make things worse if we have not first engaged with all parties in an attempt to convince most of them that we are listening and hearing, and serious in wanting to address legitimate issues’. At the end of this week he wrote: ‘I write this evening with a heavy heart. I had hoped to report an agreement arising out of a mediation process that has continued all weekend, but it has now concluded without resolution.’ It was announced that there was a student group who ‘wished the university to remain closed for another two weeks at least. ... After further negotiation they reduced the demand to one further week, but were unwilling to commit that after that week the university would be open’. The next day the VC wrote: ‘the academic year is in jeopardy’ and thus the decision was made to open the university with the assistance of private security. Classes were held on the Monday and Tuesday of the following week but many of these were ‘disrupted’ and attempts were made to stop access to campus. On the Wednesday afternoon the university took the decision to close for the remainder of that week, the third week of the shutdown. At the start of the fourth week the announcement was made that the university would be closed on the Monday. On Monday the announcement was made that it would be closed on the Tuesday. On Wednesday the announcement was made that we would be closed for the remainder of this fourth week and at the end of the week it was announced that the university would open but there would be no more face-to-face teaching on the UCT campus in 2016. The next day we were told: ‘... we have to accept that, for the moment, the leaders of the protesting students do not yet accept the need to continue the academic programme without disruption’.

The following week, even though there were no classes, protests continued on campus with staff being removed from offices, arson threats issued, etc. The week following that saw a court interdict obtained and the public order policing were on campus; the protests ceased. But the threat of exam disruptions was now the focus of the executive and at the end of the following week it was announced with much fanfare that an agreement had been reached with protesters that they would not disrupt examinations, in exchange for a range of actions and promises by the university.

From this brief overview you should now have a sense of the difficult position the university leadership found itself in, and how their approach developed over time. As already mentioned, responses on campus and in the media to these events have been quite polarised. Rather than engage here with the somewhat predictable arguments either in favour or not of the actions of the UCT vice-chancellor, Dr Max Price, I want to dig a bit deeper and try a bit less passionately to ask the question of how this came to be. There are two current arguments that have been put forward to

date, and while I recognise the discursive value of these, I think they are too superficial for our purposes – one is that UCT never had a choice in any of its decisions (the argument is that we narrowly avoided a ‘Marikana’, referencing the deadly 2012 standoff between police and mineworkers in which over 40 people lost their lives), the second argument is that the university is indeed so irredeemably colonialist and racist that the whole project deserves to be shutdown, maybe indefinitely.

What is of interest to me is that the arguments from a smallish group of protesters coming from a relatively extreme pan-Africanist view⁵, came to somehow resonate so deeply with the insecurities of this university. Ultimately this group came in effect to direct the course of the academic programme for the latter part of 2016, which almost certainly will have long-term consequences for this university.

The contemporary university loses its sense of purpose?

In order now to develop a position about the contemporary university and how it sees its purpose in society, I start in quite a different time and place, with a book published exactly twenty years ago by a Canadian, Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins*⁶.

This book made a huge impression on me when I read it not long after its publication; I was doing a PhD focused on student learning in engineering but already my head was getting turned by these bigger questions about ‘the university’ – and all around me were scholars talking postmodernism / critical theory / cultural studies. I knew little of these worlds but was completely attracted to Readings’ iconoclastic style and irreverent critique of the wonderful new world that we were seemingly being ushered into in the early days of university mission statements and strategic plans. He notes how in these exercises universities spend lots of time supposedly identifying what is unique about their particular institutions; while what is most notable about such documents is how very similar they are. The word ‘excellence’ came not only to be a bit of good marketing speak but in fact, argues Readings, a quickly adopted underlying conceptual basis for the contemporary university. Significantly, he notes:

As an integrating principle, excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely non-referential.⁷

Readings’ critique of the new language of ‘excellence’ as being ultimately hollow rang a chord with me. He links this discursive shift to the decline of the nation state and the consequent loss of cultural purpose for the university. Reading this book in the late 1990s and coming from a newly democratic South Africa with a perhaps too

⁵ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-12-12-the-price-of-negotiation/#.WldeK5JXCnc>

⁶ Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

confident sense of its place in the world and how higher education fitted in to this, I will admit I had a sense of optimism that was a bit undentable. A re-read some 20 years later has been, however, most thought-provoking, and has provided an impetus for a new angle on the current crisis in South African higher education which will be developed in this section.

It is important to note here that Readings was only 34 when he was nearing completion on this book and died in a plane crash. The work was brought to completion by his partner and colleague Diane Elam. So, as many commentators have noted, this cannot be read as the full argument as Readings might have intended it to be – but at the same time it can also be seen as significantly ‘ahead of its time’ in terms of its critique of the changes that were only starting to take a grip on university life. Notably, Readings does not use the term ‘neoliberal’ to describe the context he is writing about. He describes three phases of the modern university: that centred on Reason as per Kant, that centred on Culture as per Humboldt, and that centred on emptiness, the contemporary university of excellence. It is worth noting that in 1996 we didn’t yet have an all-embracing system of global rankings. A crucial point to make right now is that Readings does not advocate pining for a lost world. It is lost and not coming back, and he advises that we need to learn how to live in the ruins.

To link the arguments of Readings to the situation of the South African university in 2016, we need to locate this university in the global context of higher education in the early 21st century. South Africa has not been immune to the myriad changes that the altered global economic and political order has wrought since the early 1990s, even though that era also ushered in democracy, and it might have been thought that as a university we were charting our own course. Of course, the critique of the political approach that the ANC took since the late 1990s has already been made. However, in higher education I think it was naively assumed at the time that because our project was so central to the national project of development and redress, by association we were avoiding these excesses of managerialism and instrumentalism; I now think we were quite deluded. The particular way in which higher education was supposed to work miracles in changing South African society – without attendant changes, for example, in public schooling or vocational education, set us up for a nasty fall; we just didn’t see it coming. Here is the philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe⁸:

The drama we are seeing is that we are asking the university to do things it was never meant to do. I mean welfare is the domain of the state, it is not the domain of the university. We can’t be asking the university to do things it was not designed to do. Not only because it costs a lot of money, but also because it’s just not what it is supposed to be doing. It is not supposed to be creating jobs, for instance.

⁸ <http://www.litnet.co.za/interview-the-end-of-public-universities-in-south-africa/>

I think our political commitments have made us dangerously blind to the instrumentalism that is at the heart of much discourse on South African higher education. Why is this a problem? My argument is that when student protesters pointed out that in fact society has not changed as much as they would like, and that they experience this in their being as they walk around a university campus, the criticism found its mark powerfully. And then when we were shown to be lacking in our ability to change society, because we had a hollowed out sense of our intrinsic purposes, we had nothing to fall back on. Thus the UCT VC attempted periodically to assert the rule of law on campus, but when protesters argued that the university lacks legitimacy, he did not seem to have a strong argument to assert in response. Here it also needs to be noted that opinion among academic staff on this campus was sharply divided, and this polarisation also suggests to me that extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, purposes were driving the university agenda.

Of course, at the same time that we were promising the world to South African society we also started playing the game of global rankings – especially attractive when you find a system that ranks you top in the continent. But if you follow Readings' argument, buying into the idea of the University of Excellence (where that excellence is defined by a questionable compilation of metrics) means that there is ultimately a nothingness at the core. A further quote from Readings, referencing the 1968 student protests, is quite stinging if you apply it to the interpretation I am developing here of the current South African situation:

And consequently there is no way back to 1968; a repetition of the radical postures of the late 1960s is not adequate to resist the discourse of excellence. This is because the discourse of excellence can incorporate campus radicalism as proof of the excellence of campus life or of student commitment. . .⁹

South African higher education is in the early stages of massification, approaching 20 per cent of youth in higher education. This is much higher than most sub Saharan African countries, and notably South Africa is doing this massification off the base of arguably the poorest schooling outcomes in the sub-continent. Trow¹⁰ argues that with massification will come a range of challenges. It is not only about crowded classes and a limited resource, but also about a completely changing make-up of the student population, especially with regard to its cultural similarity to that of the professoriate. This unavoidably means a change in the relations between staff and students and also, crucially, a change in the purposes of higher education itself.

⁹ Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 150.

¹⁰ Trow, M. (1973). *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education*. Berkeley, Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

In further contextualising South Africa in its African context, it is worth considering Mbembe's position on the implications of frequent shutdowns for public higher education on the African continent¹¹. He shows how student protests on African campuses, while often crucially important for advancing democracy, have produced an assault on the university from which it could not recover. In too many instances, the public university was left shattered, and private universities moved in very fast to meet the aspirations of an expanding middle class.

I think time is now very short for the South African public university system to save itself from this fate. The ink is already dry on many plans for rapid expansion of private provision.

Regaining a sense of purpose – contemporary arguments for the public good purposes of the university

The third part of this paper aims to sketch something of a way forward for public higher education in contemporary times. Readings reminds us that the golden age, which of course never existed, is not coming back – and at least in South Africa we should be spared from any nostalgia for a system that excluded the majority of its population. So how do we maintain any sense of legitimacy for public higher education in the face of radical social challenges? Readings argues for a University of Dissensus. But dissensus requires us to stay open. We can't paper over the cracks. Crucially, Readings shows that any attempt to find a new consensus will only lead us further into the abyss of administrative vacuousness. In a recent keynote¹² Mbembe is clear:

The university has to be radically open. Metaphorically and practically. It will never close. The last thing in society that will close is a university. When we close a university, that's it. Then there is nothing left, it is time for us to disappear.

Here is Nicoli Nattrass writing in 2015¹³ following the decision to move the statue of Rhodes:

Removing the statue will provide the illusion that we have rid ourselves of Rhodes' legacy. It would cloak UCT in a false mantle of radicalism, hiding the embarrassing truth that we are an elite institution that reinforces social inequality on a daily basis. The statue should be moved – but let's keep it somewhere on campus to remind us that we are the living legacy of Rhodes' elitism, and have a corresponding debt to society.

¹¹ <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-09-22-mantashe-and-student-protesters-agree-on-university-shutdowns-but-this-is-the-last-thing-africa-needs-1>

¹² ICED/HELTASA keynote 2016 – transcribed from <https://youtu.be/qLEEEyn4Hi0>

¹³ <https://www-uct-ac-za.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/mondaypaper/archives/?id=9992>

What do we do with a difficult past in the context of a contested present? This is a central challenge for the public university anywhere, there is nowhere in the world that the university still serves only the students that it was originally set up to serve; the world has changed too much. But also, some would say, not enough. How do we engage with those desires for the pain to go and the future to feel different?

Here I would argue that while we need to embrace openness and dissensus, we also need to have a positive sense of what we are trying to do, of what is the relation between the university and society. What is the value of an institution centred on knowledge, open to contestation, trying to hold together the past and the present? I think that an important angle comes through in current work that attempts to reconceptualise what we mean by the public good purposes of the university.

Jon Nixon¹⁴ argues that while the question of the purposes of higher education has remained central through the years, it is the answer that needs to change over time; each generation and each society needs to work it anew. Nixon grounds his vision in the expansion of human capability at the core of higher education, its capacity for advancing collective reasoning, and for supporting the development of a sense of purpose in individuals. I don't think Nixon intended to make the final comment on this topic, and I think he would agree there is substantial work to do in elaborating the vision, especially in the contexts of emerging economies and newish democracies in the global South.

How can we justify the existence of a university in the context of a radically unequal society? In closing the paper I want to turn to one aspect of this question, considering the impact of higher education on the lives of young people who come through it for an undergraduate education. This is especially important because a key aspect of the #FMF discourse went beyond the issue of fees, to offer a cultural challenge to the value and relevance of undergraduate education. And so here I would like to draw on emerging findings from a project that I am coordinating that has engaged with South Africa young people on precisely this question¹⁵.

We interviewed participants some six years after they started university studies in arts or science, at which time most, but not all, had graduated. They were asked how having been to university had influenced their lives, and they gave both extrinsic (career related) and intrinsic answers. I want to look at the latter – you can see the categories scoping out this area – and for each I offer a sample quote to give you a flavour of the data:

¹⁴ Nixon, J. (2011). *Higher education and the public good*. London: Continuum.

¹⁵ Case, J. M., McKenna, S., Marshall, D., & Mogashana, D. (in progress). *Going to university: The influence of higher education on the lives of young South Africans*.

Personal growth

‘You are just thinking of getting better and better and not like just wanting to sit at home and doing nothing.’

Gaining knowledge

‘... I got so much satisfaction of finally understanding Maths problems, especially when it is really difficult and you know that most of the other students can’t do it...’

Analytical way of thinking

‘What my humanities [degree] gave me really is the ability to critically analyse everything and not to take everything as it is ... and you sort of get good at solving problems and arguing through things and seeing flaws in your own arguments ...’

Being around intellectually-minded people

‘In university you are meeting other people who are top learners while when you were in school you were exposed to few people.’

Exposure to diversity

‘I had to mingle with people from other African countries and other South Africans speaking different languages so it made me learn more about people’s languages and behaviour and backgrounds and what influences them and their likes and dislikes. ... University life has certain things such as promoting gender equality, fighting racism and xenophobia. ... So you are able to handle yourself in ways that you would not be able to if you hadn’t been to university’

Critical consciousness about society

‘... People graduate not necessarily enamoured by the university institution. You can graduate frustrated. You see the problems with the institution, with the privilege of the institution.’

What comes through clearly in these expressions is that young people find themselves changed by the experience of higher education. There is an expansion of agency, an opening up of perspectives and possibilities. In the South African context many of these young people will be leaders and decision makers in our society, whether in a large organisation, in government, in community work, or even within the deliberations in their families. They will be an important resource in building our future society and our democracy.

To emphasise the contrast of these perspectives with some of the interpretations of the student protests, I want to put alongside these contemporary quotes an extract from the 2016 Helen Joseph Lecture¹⁶ by the acclaimed writer, scholar and university leader Njabulo Ndebele. Here, his puzzlement around #FEMF is expressed by a contrast with his own experiences as a student in the 1970s during the height of the repressive apartheid regime:

The apartheid-imposed limitations on my movements were countered by an internal sense of expansiveness I and many of my peers experienced as the very meaning of 'black consciousness'. ...

My fear of 'white' people, no matter how economically or militarily powerful they may have been was replaced by an enormous sense of inner possibility and power Despite the overt power of the racially oppressive system, there was something in me beyond its reach. But something in the national environment today, articulated on some university campuses in 2016, appeared to have reached that inaccessible inner core in 'black' students and appears to have destabilised that core significantly such that the 'black' so affected appear to have lost control over the emergent means of self-definition in the evolving, free and democratic social realm.

The full lecture, entitled 'They are burning memory', is a challenging engagement with the politics of the time, but also for our purposes here a powerful expression of the possibilities of higher education to make real our democratic commitments to the possibilities for individual advancement and the expansion of ways of thinking. The crucial point here is that although articulated by individuals, the changes wrought in individual consciousness also need to be understood through their impact on society.

Lest the arguments for the public good purposes of higher education be considered some academic exercise, I note in closing the argument put forward by Simon Marginson¹⁷, which is that if universities cannot provide an adequate justification for their unique role in society, they will ultimately be dispensed with, as happened to other once august institutions whose purposes for society withered:

When these institutions stand for nothing more, nothing deeper or more collective, no greater public good, than the aggregation of self-interest (like the monasteries in China and England, that accumulated vast social resources but came to exist only for themselves and those who used them) then the institutions are vulnerable.

¹⁶ <http://www.njabulondebele.co.za/2016/09/they-are-burning-memory/>

¹⁷ Marginson, S. (2011). Higher education and public good. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(4), p. 412.

And turning to the South I want to return to Achille Mbembe to remind us that this is not only a theoretical argument:

My worry is that what is going on on campuses with the current impasse is many will begin to wonder whether it makes sense to invest so much money in these enterprises – which is exactly what happened in the rest of the continent, that the university ceases to be seen as a public good and more as a burden. And a place out of which not much is coming, except disorder, chaos and disturbance.

There is urgent and important work to be done.

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