

Thinking Africa

An important, exciting and potentially path-breaking programme called *Thinking Africa* has been launched at Rhodes.

The importance and place of *Thinking Africa* in the process of higher education transformation at Rhodes and more generally is best understood in terms of the critical issues and challenges that are inherent in following six theses.

Thesis one is that in South Africa it is vital that the concern of academics and administrators encompass what Andre du Toit calls the historical 'legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialization.'

du Toit notes 'that the enemy' in the forms of colonial and racial discourses 'has been within the gates all the time', and argues that they are significant threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery and scholarship. These discourses are, of course, also threats to the cultivation of graduates as critical and democratic citizens.

Very importantly, du Toit links institutional culture to academic freedom: cultures characterized by colonial and racial discourses endanger 'empowering intellectual discourse communities,' and 'ongoing transformation of the institutional culture' is therefore a 'necessary condition of academic freedom.'

Recently, Mahmood Mamdani has written that 'the central question facing higher education in Africa today is what it means to teach the humanities and social sciences in the current historical context and, in particular, in the

post-colonial African context.’ Moreover, what does it mean to teach ‘in a location where the dominant intellectual paradigms are products not of Africa’s own experience but of a particular Western experience.’

A recent article by Stellenbosch academics argues in relation to the Western Cape that ‘its universities, its artists and its centres of higher learning could play a major intellectual and cultural role in uncrippling the region’s imagination and creativity, providing the Cape with critical vocabularies and concepts to transcend insularity, provincialism and nostalgia for a shameful and costly past.’

They suggest that ‘a first step in this direction would be to take the study of Africa more seriously than has been the case so far. Part of this process requires...thinking with the rest of South Africa and as an integral part of this country as well.’

The second thesis is that our universities, academics and students, to paraphrase Martha Nussbaum, need ‘the capacity for critical examination’ of ourselves and our ‘traditions,’ including our intellectual traditions.

We need, especially in South Africa, to also see ourselves ‘as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.’ This necessitates knowledge and understanding of different societies and cultures, particularly in the rest of Africa.

Furthermore, we need ‘the ability to think’ about the different experiences of other Africans, to become ‘intelligent reader(s)’ of the various narratives that

portray Africa, and 'to understand the emotions and wishes and desires' of people elsewhere in Africa.

Thesis three is that a key task of universities is to cultivate a 'prophetic memory.' Such a 'prophetic memory' must encompass *remembrance* of our traumatic colonial past; *critique* of the injustices that continue to blight our society; *consciousness* about how societies are made and remade, reproduced and transformed; *imagination* to conceive of new kinds of cognitive praxis, being and acting; and the *desire* to remake our country, including our universities.

Thesis four is that our concerns must also extend to important epistemological and ontological issues that are associated with research, learning and teaching, curriculum and pedagogy.

As the Rhodes Dean of Learning and teaching has noted, to reduce 'teaching to that of simply "conveying knowledge"...fails...to acknowledge the need to develop a citizenry which can be critical of knowledge which has been produced and which can contribute to processes of knowledge production itself.'

Thesis five is that today the competition for and concentration on economic advantage means that certain kinds of knowledge and research, especially that generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering are privileged. The humanities and social sciences are the objects of either benign tolerance, or neglect or outright hostility.

However, as Thandika Mkandawire argues, ‘attempts to improve Africa’s prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford.’

He is absolutely correct that ‘it is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place...if Africa’s development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed.’

The final thesis is that the dominant economic and political orthodoxies of recent decades have been hugely harmful to how we today think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about scholarship and knowledge.

They have emphasized practical utility, professional, vocational and career-focused programmes and ‘skills,’ and have sought to reduce the value of higher education to its efficacy for economic growth. The idea of higher education as invaluable for understanding and democratic and critical citizenship has become disdained, denuding higher education of its wider social value and functions.

It is critical that as academics and university administrators we defend and reclaim scholarship and knowledge as fundamental cornerstones of human development; that we restore to universities their social purposes of producing knowledge and understanding and cultivating minds, instead of their reduction to instruments of the economy and vocational schools; that we recover the vital public good functions of higher education, as opposed to the ideas of higher education as a market, universities as ‘firms’ and students as ‘customers’ and ‘clients.’

This is fundamental if our universities are to play a pivotal role in helping us to think critically and imaginatively about and address the historical and contemporary challenges of the African continent.

Our higher education 'requires bold visions of internationalism, of alternative globalization, that transcend the edicts of market accountability and narrow commercial calculations and embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism.'

Paul Zeleza is surely correct when he says that 'we will have failed the future if we do not vigorously pursue the dreams of university education as an ennobling adventure for individuals (and) communities, if we do not strive to create universities that produce ideas rather than peddle information, critical rationality rather than consumer rations, and knowledge that has lasting value.'

Inherent in the six theses is a critique of current conditions and trajectories and a

Inherent in the theses is the concern whether as universities, scholars and administrators we have grappled adequately with critical issues of intellectual and institutional transformation, and of the African university, as opposed to the university in Africa. The questions that arise include:

- How do we 'decolonize', 'deracialise,' demasculinise and degender our inherited 'intellectual spaces?'

- How do we open up spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, methodologies, objects and questions other than those that have long been hegemonic, and that have exercised dominance over (perhaps have even suffocated) intellectual and scholarly thought and writing?
- How do we build new academic cultures and, more widely, new institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate difference and diversity – whether class, gender, national, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, epistemological or methodological in nature.

On the one hand, these challenges relate to social inclusion and social justice in the domain of knowledge making and diffusion. Concomitantly, they also have implications for epistemological access for African youth and people of working class and rural poor social origins.

On the other hand, they also go to the heart of higher education transformation in South Africa: to the question of ‘the very institution of the university itself and to the role it can play in a new democracy such as South Africa.’

Given the quality of the scholars that are involved, their commitment to rigorous scholarship and institutional cultural transformation, and the programme they have mapped out, the *Thinking Africa* programme is an inspired, timely and most welcome initiative.

It has the potential to significantly advance thinking and practices around the critical issues and challenges that my theses raise, and those that Mamdani and colleagues at Stellenbosch and elsewhere have raised.

Already there has been a very useful *Thinking Africa* intervention in the debate around African Studies at the University of Cape Town. The Fanon Colloquium follows over the next three days, and there are other initiatives in the pipeline.

It is not useful to ask the convenors, to use a much used phrase, what the specific outcomes of *Thinking Africa* will be - epistemologically, theoretically, methodologically and institutionally. These must be open-ended and shaped by processes of engagement and disputation.

The important thing is that in coming years there will be thoughtful engagement with critical issues and challenges.

We must become part of that engagement and help realise the promise of *Thinking Africa's* interventions and impact on academic and institutional transformation at Rhodes, and more generally on the wider higher education terrain.