

**CONTESTING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA:
FROM MASS OPPOSITION STUDENT POLITICS OF
THE 1970S AND 1980S TO STUDENT POLITICS
IN THE POST-1994 ERA OF RECONSTRUCTION**

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INTRODUCTION

Chairperson, colleagues, comrades

Thank you for this invitation to be with you this evening.

I believe I will serve your purposes best if by drawing on my past and my present I speak on the theme of **Contesting higher education in South Africa: From mass opposition student politics of the 1970s and 1980s to student politics in the era of post-1994 reconstruction.**

Let me begin with the observation that if life and politics for student activists of the 1970s and 1980s was harsh, it was also in some ways considerably simpler than for student activists of the past decade of our democracy and for student activists today. To put it in a different way, student activists of the post-1994 reconstruction era have faced and continue to face a considerably more complex and difficult social reality and much more formidable challenges than their predecessors of the 1970s and 1980s.

PROPOSITIONS

With this acknowledgement, I wish to advance 9 propositions on the theme of **contesting higher education in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s and in the era of post-1994 reconstruction.**

1. First, while we spent many, many hours arguing about the nature and goals of the political struggle and about political strategy and tactics, and about who constituted the 'people' and who constituted the 'enemy', the enemy was fairly clear.

Who today is the enemy is, of course, much less clear. Indeed, today it is not at all polite to even speak about the enemy!

2. Second, while we may have quarrelled about whether the Freedom Charter was a revolutionary programme or not and whether it represented all the demands of the people or only the minimum demands, we were generally agreed that the alternative to our misery was a South Africa based on the Freedom Charter, in which *The People shall Govern* and in which *The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!*

Of course, we did try to amplify the Freedom Charter by initiating a campaign to formulate an Education Charter. We did attempt to give meaning to our slogans of 'Education towards Democracy' and 'Organising for Peoples Education'. But by and large we were well served by the Freedom Charter and its declaration that *The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!*

In the era of reconstruction, however, student organisations and activists would be defining themselves out of the change process if their contribution was to be limited to mere restatement of the education and other ideals of the Freedom Charter.

Today's activists must engage with the problems and challenges of higher education change, reconstruction, transformation, with the questions of the social purposes and role of higher education in South Africa in the new millennium, of appropriate frameworks and policies, of ideal institutional landscape, and of mechanisms and instruments for pursuing change and for creating a higher education system that is more suited to the needs of a socially equitable and developing democracy.

This is huge demand on the contemporary student movement, this expectation to make a transition from the politics of opposition to a politics of reconstruction and transformation, which entails engaging concretely with profoundly difficult policy issues, dilemmas and choices, and which frequently entail trade-offs between dearly held values.

The contemporary student movement must do its best to make the transition and engage with the challenges of reconstruction and transformation. But if it does not do so optimally, this is not reason to sideline or marginalize student organisations. Government and institutions must still value the role of student organizations, must respect their autonomy and must hear their 'messages and translate these messages into political decision making' (Melucci, 1985:815).

3. Arising from this point, student organisations should not be shy to and should not hesitate to hold government and society to the idea that the Doors of Learning and Culture (Must) be Opened!

In this regard we can ask, how open today are the doors of higher learning?

Let's begin by acknowledging some real achievements. Student enrolments have grown from 473 000 in 1993 to over 700 000 in 2003. The participation rate is nearing 18% (compared to the medium-term National Plan target of 20%). The extent and pace of the deracialisation of the student body and of many institutions must be a source of pride and celebrated. Whereas African students constituted 40% of the student body in 1993, today they make up 60% of overall enrolments. There has also been commendable progress in terms of gender equity. Whereas women students made up 43% of enrolments in 1993, today they constitute 54% of the student body.

Of course, these global figures mask inequalities in the distribution of black and women students across academic programmes and especially at higher levels of post-graduate training, but let us accept that they are an achievement.

Yet it is also true that:

- For most South Africans that may aspire to a higher education the doors remain firmly bolted, with currently little prospect of entry
- The doors to particular fields and levels of higher education remain firmly shut, especially for black and women South Africans
- For a sizeable number that do obtain access, the door rather than being fully open is a revolving door, since between 40% and 60% of the student cohort that began in 2000 dropped out by 2003
- For many, having entered the door it is thereafter a case of smoke and mirrors. The doors that lead to real learning, to becoming highly educated and cultured, and to graduating with real knowledge, competencies and skills, and with attitudes that are appropriate to functioning as socially committed and critical citizens and human decent beings, are all too often either closed or ajar only all too little.

Why? Because there are poor or limited environments and cultures of excellent teaching, dedicated mentoring, and academic development to support students and provide them with every opportunity for success.

Too often, poor quality academic programmes are justified in terms of under-prepared learners and/or in terms of providing access and opportunities to traditionally disadvantaged social groups. This represents a cynical notion of equity, and also confuses certification with meaningful education.

Equity without quality is a betrayal of students, the public and society at large. It also means that we do not in any substantive and meaningful way contribute to eroding the domination of high-level occupations and knowledge production by male and white South Africans. Further, while it confers institutional benefits and private benefits to those that are certified, it generates little benefits for society or the public at large.

- Only for some are the doors of learning and culture truly open.

It is only these some who are provided environments and cultures that are safe, secure and respectful, that are intellectually nurturing and promote higher learning, and that embrace students as partners in the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

It is only these some who are beneficiaries of well conceptualised, designed and planned teaching, learning and research programmes, which provide them the opportunity to develop and succeed as intellectuals, professionals and researchers, who can think theoretically, analyse with rigour, gather and process empirical data and do all this with a deep social conscience and sensitivity to the development challenges and needs of our society and continent.

It is only these some that graduate with a mastery and proficiency of the practice of a discipline or field, as excellent professionals and simultaneously enlightened and critical citizens.

Why the doors of higher learning are bolted or only partially open, what are the historical and contemporary reasons for this, and what must be done to open the doors much wider, are matters that must deeply occupy us if we are to create the kind of society envisaged by the Freedom Charter.

4. The education clause of the Freedom Charter says that *Higher education...shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit.*

We can take pride in the fact that a National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has been successfully established and has been continuously expanded as a means of providing access for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. There are also numerous scholarships available for outstanding students.

Yet we must acknowledge that the current government investment in NSFAS is inadequate to fully provide access and equity of opportunity to eligible and talented students from working class and rural poor families and from even lower middle class families, and that the present number and range of scholarships are also insufficient. In both areas more has to be done to realise the commitment of the Freedom Charter to open higher education to all and to also *develop and encourage national talent for the enhancement of our cultural life*.

5. The education clause of the Freedom Charter also says that an aim of education will be to inculcate a love for people, for the oneness of humanity and for freedom and peace.

It is, however, doubtful that our higher education institutions produce graduates who are fully aware of the historical context in which they live, or fully grasp the myriad challenges of this context.

Jody Kollapen, the Chairperson of our Human Rights Commission, observes that:

...the reality remains that for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. Intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations.

(T)hese millions... see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided.

He quite rightly goes on to say

We need to be creative and bold...to challenge poverty and inequality, to reshape the way society is structured and does its business and, importantly, to ensure that the concept of the

‘oneness of humanity’...comes to mean just that (NEPAD’S Human Rights Challenge, *Connecting...*, February-April 2003:26).

Yet, our academic programmes and curriculum inadequately incorporate issues related to what it means to live in South Africa and Africa and what are our responsibilities as highly educated professionals.

We have a serious shortage of high level personpower and it is vital that we address this through appropriate mechanisms and innovative academic programmes and curricula, otherwise economic and social development will be severely constrained. This does not, however, mean that academic programmes should be narrowly tailored to the needs of the labour market and economic productivity alone. This would reduce higher education to being an instrument of the economy, and also intensify the unfortunate marketisation of higher education.

The challenge is: how do we respond effectively to the graduate and knowledge needs of the economy, while also protecting and promoting the wider social purposes and functions of higher education?

6. Finally the education clause of the Freedom Charter notes that *all the cultural treasures of mankind shall be open to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands.*

Prior to 1994 we were cut off from these ‘treasures’ because of isolation from the rest of the world and from especially other underdeveloped countries. Since 1994, there has been a welcome internationalisation of our higher education, with the much freer flow of academics, students, knowledge and information.

Foreign student at our institutions have increased from 14 124 in 1995 to 46 687 in 2002, and constitute 7% of the total student body. Students from the South African Development Community bloc increased from 7 497 in 1995 to 31 724 in 2002. Students from other African countries increased from 1 769 in 1995 to 6 317 in 2002.

There are financial benefits to having international students at our institutions and in our country. But this should not be principal reason for internationalization, especially in so far as Southern African and other African countries are concerned. Given our history, we have an obligation to

contribute to higher education institution building in other African countries and also to their research and high-level personpower needs. This, however, raises curriculum, organisational and other challenges for our institutions if we are to make a meaningful contribution.

Despite the push of some developed countries, we should oppose the view that our international activities in higher education should become the object of trade agreements through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). They have been occurring for a long time outside of GATS and the WTO and must continue in the spirit of internationalism.

7. The Freedom Charter declares that *The People shall Govern*. Unlike in the pre-1994 period, student politics today occurs in a context in which the people do indeed govern. Students are now citizens and voters, have guaranteed rights to student organisations and student representative councils (SRCs), and also participate in a range of higher education governance structures at institutional and national levels.

Are students, however, making effective use of the opportunities to participate in governing? How well equipped are student activists to participate? And, is participation substantive and meaningful or just formalistic. Of course, student organizations, SRCs and activists face real constraints, but it must be posed whether they have been sufficiently creative and innovate in developing mechanisms to facilitate their participation in governance.

8. As non-citizens, without the vote and powerless to effect change through constitutional means, political strategy for the 1970s and 1980s student activist was quite clear and straightforward: build national organisations; fight for SRCs; educate, mobilise, and turn the higher education institutions into terrains and sites of struggle; thwart all attempts by the government to divide and rule and to win the hearts and minds of black students and, instead, unite students and recruit them into the national liberation movement.

Such a strategy of mass opposition politics has not been available to post-1994 student activists. On the one hand, some of the conditions for mass student mobilisation - a clearly identifiable enemy, mass opposition as the only basis of change, thwarted economic and political opportunities, supportive mass democratic organisations and communities, and so on - have not been present post-1994. On the other hand, students now function as citizens and voters, have guaranteed rights to

SRCs, and participate in a range of higher education governance structures at institutional and national levels.

Unable to engage fully and effectively in reconstruction politics, and unable to also conduct an effective opposition politics that is mass-based, disciplined, grounded in rigorous critique, and wins support from other social forces, the question of strategy is a vexing one for the current student movement. Appropriate strategy and tactics are most likely a combination of reconstruction politics and mass-based opposition politics conducted by strong organisations and able leaders. How such politics are to be pursued, around what issues, and how they are to be underpinned by effective organisation are key questions for student activists.

9. In the 1980s we were clear that as higher education students we were not the vanguard of the national liberation struggle. Our best prospects for freedom in our lifetime depended on building alliances with workers, youth, school students and township residents, on building the banned ANC and strengthening its influence, machinery and power. At the same time, the ANC and other organisations and various social forces were available for alliances, both as part of building the unity in action of all oppressed and also because we had some influence intellectually and politically, and muscle organisationally.

Post-1990 a much more complex situation confronts student activists. The ANC is the government, there is little in the form of strong alliances with workers and other social forces, and the student movement is much weaker in influence and organisational strength than it was previously.

How to relate to the state and government, to political parties and civil society formations, what kind of principled, strategic and tactical alliances to build, are further vexing issues for the current student movement.

CONCLUSION

There is, today, much debate and contestation, as there should be, around the pace and nature of change since 1994. Some social actors, disappointed with the nature and pace of change over the past ten years, argue that government has embraced a conservative 'neo-liberalism' and that government policies are 'neo-liberal'. Others suggest that government policies continue to display an unwavering adherence to

the radical goals of the Freedom Charter and the 1994 reconstruction and development programme.

I subscribe to neither of these analyses. One, with its indolent thinking substitutes slogan and labels for serious analysis. The other, with its rosy-eyed optimism presents the struggle as an unbroken long march to certain equality and ever greater freedom.

There is, in my view, neither a hegemonic neo-liberalism and entirely neo-liberal inspired reform process; nor a wholly revolutionary, total and sweeping displacement of old social structures, institutions and policies, and imminent dawn of an entirely new social order. Instead, the reality is one of a mixed picture and fluid situation; of contesting social forces with competing goals, strategies and policy agendas; of attempts to address and resolve profound economic and social paradoxes in differing ways; of continuities and breaks; of contradictions and ambiguities in policy and practice, and of differing trajectories and trends. The new South African social order is not yet indelibly defined and continues to be uncertain.

There is scope to shape the new South Africa and what the student movement does or does not do, on its own or in alliance with other forces, will contribute to the shaping and the outcomes. The student movement continues to have a vital role to play in mobilising and educating both students and other social groups

There is no shortage of issues around which the student movement can mobilize student and other social constituencies. It can mobilize against a number of conditions in higher education that have been noted that are cause for concern. It can also mobilise around a number of wider civic issues: against tardy civil servants who oblige citizens to resort to class action suits to secure pensions and social grants to which they have inalienable rights; and against the fraud and corruption, which undermines the morality and values of the new society that must be built and denies services and opportunities to those most in need.

It can mobilize against attempts to degrade the goal of broad based black economic empowerment to the creation of a few score multi-millionaires instead of economic opportunities for the masses of our people. It can mobilize to ensure that the African renaissance is not limited to a renaissance of the already rich and powerful and new elites but is a renaissance foremost of Fanon's wretched of this earth. It can especially mobilize against the pernicious and all too often self-serving dogma of TINA - there is no alternative – insisting that to be a free people is to take responsibility for making difficult choices,

and that there is no reason that yesterdays necessary compromises and necessities must become everyday virtues.

As a movement of intellectuals and the highly educated, the student movement has a great responsibility for educating about the nature and pace of change and the reasons for these. It can educate about the visions that inspired the national liberation struggle, the desirability of creating a new social order in South Africa, the antagonists and protagonists of such an order, and what will be required to realize this order. It can educate about the reasons for continuing wealth and poverty and prosperity and deprivation, and pose questions about the nature and appropriateness of state strategies and policies. It can educate that malnutrition, infant mortality and disease continue to afflict along the unacceptable historical lines of race, class and geography, that HIV causes AIDS, and that only anti-retrovirals currently offer any hope of arresting the horrific social consequences of non-treatment.

Quentin Hoare, who did so much to popularize the writings of the little hunchback Italian giant Antonio Gramsci, has written that ideas are utopian not because of the goals they seek to achieve but when they are conceived outside of human beings to realize them. If the student movement is, however, to assume its historic mission, which would be in keeping with the student movements of the 1970s and 1980s, it will need to be rooted among students, organised, united, disciplined, and with the creativity and innovativeness to push the bounds of possibility.

I don't subscribe to the infantile view of 'good' non-government organisations and civil society and 'demon' state. The state is a crucial vehicle for social transformation in South Africa, is a site of struggle and like the rest of society must itself be democratized. A strong student movement would seek to build an empathetic yet critical relationship between itself and the state – support the state where warranted, but fiercely maintain its independence and unsparingly critique it when necessary.

A confident ANC political party and government should not fear a strong, active and assertive student movement. To the extent that the ANC pursues vigorously the 'people's contract' and its commitment to create a better life for all, there should be a strong identity of interests between it and such a student movement.

Chairperson, colleagues, comrades

There is much unfinished business in higher education and in South Africa.

There is also much that a powerful student movement with roots among students can contribute within and outside higher education to help realise social equity, justice and democracy and a higher education system that critically engages with and advances this agenda.

We used to say *Aluta Continua* – the struggle continues. Victory is certain! It is time to change the formulation. It is the road to victory, which is long, unfinished, and full of twists, turns and obstacles, that continues. It is only struggle that is certain!

There is great value in cultivating among our people a ‘prophetic memory’ - that our history teaches that nothing is gained without struggle, that it is in our power, individually and collectively, to reshape and remake our country, and that real equality, freedom and democracy requires that they be unbound and extended from the political sphere to all spheres of our society.

This struggle, which has to be waged through innovative new institutional forms and in creative and imaginative new ways, requires a new generation of student activists and an organised and united student movement.

I end by recalling the words of the Jewish sage, Hillel:

If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?