



Transformative students are reflecting on new knowledge

UCT students protesting the Cecil John Rhodes Statue at UCT protested on campus. The writer quotes academic Achille Mbembe saying about the Rhodes Must Fall campaign: "They [the students] are asking new questions about the politics of the production, circulation and redistribution of knowledge. They are reading new texts."

PICTURE: DAVID FITCHE

JUDY FAVISH

DISCUSSIONS about the ways in which universities engage with their local, regional and national contexts are inextricably bound up with conceptualisations of the developmental role of universities, and efforts to transform the knowledge project of universities.

Although a lot of progress has been made towards institutionalising engagement, this progress is uneven.

Much more needs to be done to move engagement from the periphery of the institutions to the centre. In assessing whether it is sufficient for government simply to acknowledge that "engagement has come to be seen as part of the work of universities", we need to ask three important questions.

First, given the pervasive inequalities that continue to characterise our society should the question of how our public universities engage with these inequalities not be integral to any discussion about transformation of higher education?

Second, should we not be interrogating the extent to which universities have consciously organised themselves to play active developmental roles in society?

Third, if we accept that engagement on the part of universities is a key vehicle for addressing the development needs of our society, what needs to be done to enhance and expand engaged scholarship?

To address global grand challenges such as poverty, inequality, various forms of discrimination, climate change and food security, the report recognised that universities would need to think about the kind of

transformation that would be needed in their governance structures, curricula, resourcing both pure and applied research and extra-curricula activities to enhance their responsiveness.

In the South African context, given the extreme injustices that continue to characterise our society, how universities engage with their society should be seen as integral to the transformation agenda.

This view has been strongly echoed in the student protests currently spreading across the country.

Reflecting on the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town, Achille Mbembe has said: "They [the students] are asking new questions about the politics of the production, circulation and redistribution of knowledge. They are reading new texts. They want to reform the classroom, the modalities of teaching and learning, the spatial and symbolic environments the universities are, how to turn them into liveable and habitable spaces for all".

From 2009 to 2014, there was a strong emphasis on building the field of community engagement institutionally.

The results of a national survey conducted in 2014 of the institutionalisation of community engagement, to which 19 out of 23 institutions responded, indicated that it was on institutional agendas at a symbolic level.

Eighteen institutions reported that their strategic plans contained objectives related to community engagement and/or social responsiveness.

However, responses to questions designed to assess the extent to which institutions had been able to move community engagement beyond the level of rhetoric to the centre of the academic project were

much more uneven.

This is significant because integrating engaged scholarship into performance reviews and selection criteria is critical for demonstrating that value is attached to explicit connections being made by academics between their scholarship and the social context in which they find themselves, as well as to the production of a wide range of socially useful outputs.

One of the reasons provided for the lack of detailed national policies on community engagement, and for hampering its effective institutionalisation, is that conceptual frameworks of it differ so much across the system that it is difficult to define exactly what it is.

While it is indeed true that efforts to reach consensus on a single conceptual framework for community engagement across the sector have failed, it is significant that the responses to the survey revealed a good deal of consensus on "common elements which all institutions believe should characterise the field" (as a forthcoming Council on Higher

Education publication puts it).

These elements are that:

Engagement can take multiple forms but for academics it must involve interconnections with research and/or teaching;

The activities should have an intentional public purpose or benefit;

Community engagement involves universities and multiple social partners, but excludes interaction with other academic constituencies;

The interactions between universities and social partners should be characterised by reciprocity and mutual benefit;

Community engagement is a key mechanism for building civic consciousness among students and plays a role in building their commitment and capacity for critical citizenship;

There is lots of evidence of how academics are using the knowledge generated through engaged research to challenge dominant theories of development and design contextually relevant curricula that contain alternative ways of explaining development challenges and original solutions to problems – drawing on different disciplines and epistemologies. One of the biggest challenges militating against institutionalisation involves broadening the scope of what is understood and recognised as "scholarship".

Coupled with this is the need for recognition for the many different kinds of outputs that emanate from engaged scholarship, such as legislation, policies, plans and applied research outputs and the different formats used for dissemination of research.

Challenging dominant notions of what counts as excellence in scholarship and scholarship itself

will require a willingness to challenge that which advance particular types of research measured by rankings at the expense of the civic, social, and educational missions of institutions.

A third challenge relates to the lack of funding for activities associated with engagement, such as fieldwork, transport and the production of popular materials.

This lack has hindered the growth of engagement.

The National Development Plan suggests that the potential and capacity of South Africa to address its pressing needs will depend on adopting an approach that "systematically includes the socially and economically excluded, where people are active champions of their development". Implicit in the notion of inclusive development is the need for collaboration between different social partners.

While acknowledging the different developmental paradigms informing engaged scholarship, engaged scholarship is a key vehicle for addressing the development needs facing the country.

However, given the pervasive nature of poverty and inequality, a transformative approach to engagement requires public universities consciously to allocate resources to generate knowledge to promote a more equitable and sustainable social order.

A transformative approach also entails creating an enabling environment within universities for transforming the politics of the production, circulation and distribution of knowledge and re-thinking what constitutes a "good university" in the South African context.

Judy Favish is Director, Institutional Planning, University of Cape Town.

“
A TRANSFORMATIVE
APPROACH ALSO
ENTAILS CREATING
AN ENABLING
ENVIRONMENT
WITHIN VARSITIES