

ANDRE KEET

**U**NIVERSITIES as institutions are powerful and their institutional cultures compellingly create patterns of consistency and regularity. But these patterns are brought into question at moments of dispute, such as the many instances we now experience on our campuses.

These are educational moments to embrace. We have to challenge the institutional cultures of historically disadvantaged institutions that normalise fragile conceptions of quality and service; and we have to apply the same energy to challenge warped and self-referential conceptions of quality and excellence in other types of institutions.

In addition, we have to defy institutional cultures rooted in traditions, culture and forms of doing that are incapable of reading the differences and heterogeneities among students, knowledges and staff.

The articulations of students over the past few months, in numerous radio interviews, meetings, protests, memoranda, television debates and social media discussions, have given us a clearer glimpse of their humiliating experiences.

They are adept at formulating their captivity within institutions that provide them with a fleeting picture of the structural “imprisonment” of all, including university managements.

Students are not blind to the constraints that weigh in on the entire sector and its actors. Nevertheless, they demand a form of cultural and recognitive justice in the actions of managers and academics that have not yet taken shape in the way universities see and understand students. A reasonable demand, by all counts.

Even so, students will be challenged, as university transformations attempt to play out in the future, not to generate new dogmas and new forms of unproductive violences.

Rather, as they have proven to a large extent, novel forms of a politics of solidarity and proximity across various divides are shaping a rational social and intellectual project across our campuses.

As the robustness of student engagements grow, they sense, as some research has shown, the power of institutional culture and its structuring impulses on students, university leadership and academics alike. In rejecting the violence and destruction of property, as we should, we must nevertheless resist the employment of an idea of decorum and politeness that, in most instances, results in the co-option of the student voice and practices.

Instead, we should read what we observe on our campuses as an expression of the limits of regulatory-consensus politics.

What is emerging is an agonistic politics that is infinitely more capable of creating the conditions of the vibrant democracy for which we all yearn; one that can shift the social structure of the academy and open its epistemic prisons to free us all. This may, by all accounts, assist with sharpening the quality of the political, institutionally and nationally.

Though the battles on our campuses speak to much wider and deeper issues, there are elements of party political jostling being imported into university spaces in very morbid and counter-productive ways.

This particular trend needs to be examined by students and



Students like these at the UKZN Howard College. The sector should read what is observed on our campuses as an expression of the limits of regulatory-consensus politics, says the writer. PICTURE: GOINA NDWALANE

# The challenge is in transforming the institutional culture

stakeholders themselves if we want a fighting chance for inclusive and heterogeneous narratives of change to be conceptualised and performed within university environments.

Achille Mbembe is right to link the developments on campuses with our national political discourse, and the demands emanating from the everyday survivalist struggles of communities who still aspire to the idea that post-1994 should be “better” for all.

Though party politics seems to creep in from time to time, “the political” (the everyday struggle for social justice) appears to eclipse “the Political” (actions in alignment with party political discourses) — at least as far as the broad conglomerate of student mobilising forces are concerned.

In the student dissent that presents itself as antagonisms, there resides an instructive proposition for how we view institutional cultures. Subjects (the students) and their subjectivities not only enter institutions that already operate on pre-determined templates. They enter with an expectation to be part of a dynamic social process within which they want to renegotiate the terms of their recognition.

We have to abandon the pre-determined templates as forms of

non-thinking. Our social processes must see and foresee an explosion of existing and emerging differences that demand the right to own social spaces as a public, common good.

When these come together within the student social movements of our times, they do so on the basis of political opposition to certain practices such as exclusions, subordination and debasement.

Socially just institutional orientations will be expressive of these antagonisms; not as an impasse, but as progressive movements that will better serve the core mandates of the university.

It should be abundantly clear that our vice-chancellors and university senior leadership are caught up in various dilemmas that are now, not for the first time, partially being disclosed by student movements.

What is also clear is that the majority of our university leaderships are competent and proficient in many respects and committed to university transformation and the Department of Higher Education and Training is emerging as a key and capable driver of change.

Equally clear is that communities of practice are operating productively in various

university spaces and the quality of most of our students’ analyses and mobilising practices are growing in substance and strategy. At issue here is how one “plays the game” and at the same time “changes its rules” without imploding the system.

#### Key questions remain:

a. In what ways can we rethink the limits of the idea of institutional culture to make way for working towards socially just institutional orientations?

b. How can institutional culture advance recognitive justice (based on recognition, redistribution and representation) and cultural justice (the equal responsibility to suspend that which is culturally taken for granted)?

c. How can we employ the insights and challenges placed before us by student voices to rethink the nature of the university in relation to Africanising institutional culture and the decolonisation of the university?

d. To develop inclusive and non-alienating academic practices, how do we shovel in ways to reveal how the social structure of the

academy co-constitute institutional culture for our research and teaching and learning to shift in socially just directions?

e. How do we think of institutional culture as a challenge across the different types of universities as a sort of demand for collective responsibility and joint accountability for “quality” university education across the sector?

f. What would an institutional culture do that is not only inclusive by making space for various subjectivities, but provides the mechanisms and space for students and staff to continuously renegotiate the terms of inclusion and recognition as ways to disrupt the frames imposed on them?

g. How can institutional culture become a standard focus of analyses that challenge gender-based discrimination, ethnicism, chauvinism, ableism, sexual violence, as well discrimination based on sexual orientation, class and social status?

*Professor Andre Keet is Director of the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice at the University of the Free State.*