

Inaugural Speech

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**Dichotomy and dualities at the crossroads of
artificial stupidity, the future of academia in
South Africa**

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Dichotomy and dualities at the crossroads of artificial stupidity, the future of academia in South Africa

Introduction

Most professors when delivering their inauguration speech usually focus on their research and continued research. I can tell you a lot about FDI in Africa and the outcomes of the decade that was my primary research concerns. I had the opportunity to investigate what makes business in Africa 'tick' and subsequently travelled from Los Angeles to Montreal, from Maastricht to Ekaterinburg, Madrid to Milan and Bangkok to Seoul. It was a great privilege to meet and work with some of the greatest minds in the field and even to become the South African representative for the Columbia Center for Sustainable Investment of Columbia University in New York.

Along with my deep passion for developing my students as people, not just as academic output, my career started moving in a different direction in 2014. Focusing on coaching and personal development as part of my educational offering changed the course and trajectory of my career. Then came the move into cultural intelligence as the main discourse of business in Africa and the opportunity to teach in Thailand (to students from more than 15 countries in the region) and professionally at Hofstede Insights in Helsinki (cross-cultural specialists from more than 20 countries).

This brings us to the topic I will talk about tonight. I am primarily an educator and what gives me meaning and purpose is to empower people to achieve their best possible outcomes. Therefore, the state of education worldwide and the way this is manifesting in South Africa are close to my heart. Yes, we will discuss a broad spectrum of ideas. The idea is not to be controversial or to offer simple solutions to very complex issues. What made me choose to pursue this topic is the general lack of informed and empowered academics in this area. Academics tend to work themselves into small self-reinforcing research bubbles. This isolation is what has driven the global discourse against modern academia.

The Crossroads

Academic world building up to the Covid pandemic

Like all good stories, we need to understand where we come from before we can thoroughly understand where we are.

Administrative costs

In the 1960s, universities served about two percent of the population and their budgets only had 30% for administration and support. Thus entered the long road to democratisation of higher education globally. Countries like the USA, Russia and the UK were the leaders in expanding tertiary education to a broader base of at least 20% of the population. This also led to a substantial increase in administrative and support cost from 30% in the 1960s to more than 70% in the 2010s.

This growth in administrative costs has led to many universities offering 'courses' with the focus on making money rather than academic integrity. Many administrators also have very little or no experience when it comes to actual academia and therefore make policies that alienate academia.

The South African context

According to Prof Theuns Eloff, a previous Vice-Chancellor of NWU, the South African context of universities during the previous decade can be investigated along party political lines, ideological entrenchment, philosophical currents, and financial implications of the current government situation.

Along party political lines, universities will face the effects of cadre deployment, corruption, and university high jacking. Once Minister Nzimande resigns from Higher Education, there will also be factional infighting to establish power and control.

Ideologically, entrenched economic and political ideologies have led to a climate of distrust and racialism as outcomes. Transformation according to broader racial classifications has deepened the crisis of corruption and weak governance to date. Economically, South Africa is now facing the direst economic situation it has faced in its entire history. South Africans are

currently facing frustration and anger on socially dangerous levels. Increasing poverty and crime are driving a social change whereof the outcome is not certain.

Philosophically, we saw the rise of fees must fall, intersectionality, critical race theory and “wokeness”. Decolonisation and re-racialisation have also been imported from universities in the UK and USA. We will look at some of the issues later in brief

Financially, universities are in trouble as subsidies have not kept pace with inflation. Funding for NSFAS is borne from cuts in other subsidies in research. NSFAS also does not allow for further studies leading to a discrepancy between under- and postgraduate work.

Universities are in trouble globally, but in South Africa. there are exaggerating circumstances that really ask for exceptional leadership.

Democratisation

I already alluded to this. Before the 1950s to 1960s only two percent of people attended university and the focus was on higher order philosophy and critical thinking. Since then, the move have been toward 20 percent of the population and schooling rather than education. Within the South African context, NSFAS has taken this to its current form.

The implications are that students are mostly numbers, and their development is not the concern of the overwhelmed academic staff who are only too keen to check the boxes and get them through their courses. Quality has been sacrificed for quantity. Template learning has replaced critical thinking and innovation.

A new client

The last 30 years saw a significant global demographic shift. Even in the developing world, families who can afford tertiary education have become smaller. The one-child household or even two-child household has had a significant impact on the current generation of students.

Add the small screen socialisation of being connected but not feeling connection (also called gamification). Generation Z is a significant global phenomenon that differs substantially from previous generations. Previous generations followed a logical incremental path of change from prior generations.

Another by-product of the online socialisation of the generation is that most children have spent more time with their parents than another people in their lives. Being only or fewer children has also led parents be more invested into the children (in many instances, which they had later in life). These children got used to the concept of a safe space and an overarching parent that protects them against any and all and everything that they do not like.

Studies also indicate high levels of anxiety and depression among students from Generation Z. This is true especially among female students.

The picture of Gen Z is further coloured by investigating the expectation that Gen Z has over the working environment. This includes little application of self, high levels of collectivism and deliberate activism regarding social and environmental issues.

A new customer

The need for expertise in the global workforce is shifting, According the World Economic Forum, the future job skills are as follows.

- Cognitive flexibility. ...
- Digital literacy and computational thinking. ...
- Judgement and decision-making. ...
- Emotional and social intelligence. ...
- Creative and innovative mindset.

In short, critical thinking, creative thinking, flexibility and people skills.

As Thomas Sowell points out, these are the skills that universities used to teach students, but have neglected to do for the last couple of decades. Prof Cornell West from New York's Union Theological Seminary indicates that it is time to bear witness through integrity, honesty and decency. We are schooling students, not educating them. We should be careful when the quest for spiritual and moral greatness is replaced with ideologies that spread hate, division, and alienation.

Covid

Depending on the point of view, Covid has accelerated processes that were already in place or exasperated the entire system. In the beginning of Covid, everyone was keen on online teaching, classes, and meetings. Two years later, words like Zoom fatigue have entered the lexicon. Covid might not have changed the education system, but it has opened up the discussion about possibilities and the implications of hybrid dynamic environments.

Artificial stupidity

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. In an era where artificial intelligence is touted as one of the significant developments in science, ideology and divisiveness have unfortunately led to mass indoctrination and what can only be described as 'artificial stupidity'.

The attack on free speech

Sara Gon of the Free Speech union highlights the fact that people are crowded out based on their opinion. Free speech is deliberately inhibited, especially on social media. We should be governed by the constitution – you have no right, not to be offended. Free speech implies that if you are offended you have to work on and take on the opinions that you do not like in the 'Townsquare'.

The importance of free speech is that if you do not have free speech, you have nothing, as it is what is used to defend all other rights. Within the South African context, the people to keep this constitutional right in mind are Advocate Mark Oppenheimer, Prof David Benatar of UCT (now cancelled for highlighting UCT's absurdity in intersectionality), Richard Wilkinson, dealing with school and university capture, Advocate Martin Brais CEC, and Prof Caroline Cronje, specialising in the shutting down of speech due to critical race theory and intersectionality.

Why is this important

“UCT vice-chancellor Mamokgethi Phakeng apologises to LGBTQI+ community for ‘hurt’ caused by online event”, News 24.

Four trans activists felt that the question “What does science say about LGBTQ+?” is transphobic.

The UCT example is only the beginning of the storm in South Africa. Fortunately, we have been behind the curve internationally and have time to be more prepared. UCT’s decision to cover before the progressive American Cultural Imperialism has placed them at the mercy of an ideology that does not know mercy and offers no redemption.

Political correctness

The old Soviet concept has returned to silence those who disagree with us. This communist concept of speech tyranny by nature implies that you may be factually correct, but it does not suit those in power, hence it is not politically correct and you should be silent.

The correct reply would constitute something like – Yes comrade, whatever comrade Stalin and the Stasi requires!

Word and Idea Laundering

“There is no swifter route to the corruption of thought than through the corruption of language”; George Orwell

It sounds good and makes people feel good. Everyone wants to be anti-racist, naturally Black Lives Matter, Safe spaces, Inclusion, Diversity, Social Justice. All seems to be just and fair – who would disagree?

Yet if we start reading up on these concepts, we find that there have been meaning swaps and intentional meaning changes.

Words are used to confuse and sperate. It is not a problem, it is problematisation; it is not a narrative, it is a meta-narrative. This creates an environment where it is difficult to question or query motives, especially spaces like universities and the corporate world.

Intellectual vandalism

We are experiencing a full-blown assault on the intellectual and philosophical tradition that has produced the freedoms we have been taken for granted. From Mandela to Churchill, Einstein to Newton and Descartes to Nietzsche are all to be scrapped because they were racist, sexist narcissists.

This is deliberately done to espouse intersectionality and critical theory. We do not have to delve in depth, but one should always keep the following in mind. Science denying ideologies based on race, gender and more has created more division and separation with little or no common middle ground.

There is scope to anchor modern interpretations to ultimate unquestionable facts; for example, that there is only one culture that came to a conclusion that slavery is evil and should be stopped. Only one way of thinking that came to private property and individual rights. Any other interpretation is not fully informed.

The destruction of academic trust

In a university classroom, there exists a social contract between the lecturer and the students. Students are willing to be confronted, stretched, and even offended in the exposure of knowledge if the lecturer is committed to empowering them and leading them along a growth path.

More and more lecturers are schooling students rather than educating them. Combined with the increasing fragility of students and the politically thought tyranny, we see this trust being destroyed.

The list of professors who have been cancelled and been forced from office globally are now increasing daily. Jordan B Peterson, love him or hate him, has a video where he interviews more than 20 academics who are now in academic limbo. The overall impression that one gets from watching the interviews is that the professors were unprepared and have no tools to recover themselves. Their careers as academics are over.

Even more sad is that many of these academics still believe that they will wake up and realise it was only a dream. Somehow, they think they will be able to go back to a normal life.

The safe space

Students of Generation Z have been taught and empowered to believe that they are entitled to 'safe spaces'. Places where they cannot be exposed to anything that is contrary to what they believe. No critical thinking or information that is 'offensive'.

Universities are doing everything from providing rooms with colouring books, all the way trauma counselling rooms for students to accommodate this phenomenon.

Except for the mention that you do not have a right not to be offended. Prof Ruth Simmons the president of Brown University makes the following comment: "Learning is the antithesis of comfort... The collision of views and ideologies is the DNA of the academic enterprise. We do not need any collision avoidance technology here."

Offense can only be taken, not given – Confucius

Whatever you feel or think about me, has got nothing to do with me, it's all your judgement, your biases, and your interpretations. Dr John Demartini.

Should a university be a 'safe space' or an intellectually challenging space?

The end of double-blind preview

South African universities are trapped in a subsidy-seeking publication race that relies on double-blind peer-review journals. Unfortunately, we have seen the ideology-calisation and politicisation of journals.

I have myself experienced feedback from journals, saying that because I am not writing from a Marxist perspective, my work is substandard and unfit for publication.

Peter Ridd of James Cook University was fired for scientifically proving that the BBC documentary of the Great Barrier Reef was nothing but propaganda and that the Reef was thriving contrary to the documentary.

A leading breast cancer research professor from Princeton who was fired after having a mutual consensual affair with an assistant has found that no journal is now willing to publish his research.

This situation will clearly affect the future of research and is untenable in long run.

If the current growth in understanding of biases like confirmation bias is added to the picture, the double-blind peer-review will no longer be viewed as scientific and its days are numbered.

Echoes of intellectualism

In order to keep the focus on intellectual tradition and look at the outcomes, it is pertinent to look at some echoes of past intellectualism and philosophy.

The ghost of Nietzsche

The rise of Global Nihilism and the Final People. Robbing everything of meaning and value in order to create a society based on entertainment and amusement. Lacking connection and attachment to anything more than himself.

The ghost of Jung

Failing to deal with shadow and the integration of the ego leads to a person governed by the shadow and driven by the darkness of the shadow.

The ghost of Descartes

The quest for experiential learning the problem with René Descartes. Learning only through observation and experience will only serve to entrench confirmation and other preferential biases.

The dichotomy at centre of future academia

Why does a university exist?

What is the Telos of Academia?

There are two views as explained through the views of John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx. The university exists to understand the world, or the university exists to change the world. It cannot do both.

Within the South African context, universities are viewed as a necessary instrument to achieve social change and social mobility. The democratisation of higher education focuses on delivering students with qualifications into the working environment with the aim of social change.

The focus is therefore that of the Pan-Africanist ruling party and their activist Marxist ideology.

The problem here lies in that universities were structured according to the Anglo European model of scientific inquiry into meaning and understanding.

This has never been addressed and is largely why South African universities are in a catch-22 position regarding their future roles. Management is more concerned with achieving policy objectives that manging the academic process.

Facing the dualities

We are all prone to dichotomous thinking and tribalism. Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the Gulag Archipelago states that “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. This is not about wrong or right. It about understanding the interplay between the opposites that will affect future of academia to the core.”

Immanuel Kant referred to having an intellectually armed “third” point of view.

As we go through the dualities, ask yourself whether you have considered how to handle them in your situation?

Monologue vs discussion

Those who only know their own side of the case, knows very little of it (John Stuart Mill).

Cancel culture insists on only a monologue. There is no discussion. This is directly opposite to world of science that asks for continuous in-depth multiple point of view discussion to further understanding.

You will hear phrases like the science is settled – remind yourself that science is never settled.

Democratisation vs demonstration of skill

The more people are schooled, the less the focus is on education and the development of skills.

Activism vs actualisation

Are you training activists or educating people in actualisation? Are you protecting activism at the expense of growth and discovery?

Dehumanisation vs individualisation

Are we only part of groups based on immutable traits with no rational logical thinking and an inability to learn, or are we unique complex individuals with individual experiences and talents?

Compelled speech vs liberty

Who has the right to tell whom what to say, or does each individual decide what to say? What is freedom of speech and what is liberty?

Safe spaces

Just how inclusive are safe spaces or are they exclusive? Is academia a safe space? Who benefits from this and why?

Decolonisation or cultural imperialism

The question here is whether decolonisation is re-writing history based on multiple objective perspectives to be as inclusive as possible? Or, are we dealing with an ideological approach that seeks to exclude information based on a monologue?

For example, Harvard's series the Great African Empires dedicate an entire episode to 250 year transatlantic Portuguese Slave trade while not mentioning the 1 200 year Arab slave trade. In fact their conclusion is that Islam brought literacy and schooling to East Africa.

I have been to Bagamoyo in Tanzania, where 5 000 people were daily loaded on ships to be sold at the Zanzibar market. As all of them were castrated, fewer than 500 actually made it to market. This is an example of decolonisation done in the name of an ideology.

Equality vs equity

How do we get a system where we treat people equally vs an equitable system? What about systems of fairness? There is no such thing as an equitable system and the quest for equity (equal outcomes) over equality (equal opportunity) is the main cause of the failure of ideologies such as Marxism and Anarchism. Solzhenitsyn, in his seminal work, concludes that this is not the result of Marxism, Marxism in practice.

Transformation through equity is a direct cause of actively disengaged staff. The system clearly separates people from their specialisation and proclivity to their own interests. It removes the economic principles of incentives and changes the opportunity cost structure.

Coming home

The overwhelming financial and ideological constraints faced by South African Universities will most likely manifest itself through the redundancy of many universities. Currently, estimates are that ten years on, nine of the 26 South African universities will still be viable entities.

Defunding research has become an active way to fund NSFAS and across the spectrum of institutions and research bodies funds are drying up at a rapid rate.

Academic staff are directly going to be confronted by the following challenges

- Loss of meaning and purpose for academic staff will lead to actively disengaged staff
- Loss of competence and skill and the resulting loss of quality
- Financial pressure due to lack of financing.

President Peking University Lin Jianhua, Cambridge VC, Stephen Toope, Oxford VC, Louise Richardson and Yale President, Peter Salovey highlighted the following elements of the future of academia in a recent panel discussion at Peking University:

- The future of research must include practical research for pre-graduate students with senior professors in applicable fields that will count as job exposure.
- Critical thinking and cultural intelligences need to be imbedded in all curricula
- Deliberate social integration across different population groups
- Deep diversity as opposed to superficial diversity
- Interdisciplinary research will be the only acceptable research
- Education should be on qualities and abilities rather than knowledge
- The pace of change requires us to think about jobs that simply do not exist today
- Echo chambers working with business and industry for relevant outcomes
- Social mobility outcomes
- Academics should be central nodes in various public and private networks for education and research purposes
- The future of work is collaborative – students will have to learn how to collaborate rather than to function individually. Individual assessments will become a thing of the past.

John Haidt of New York University adds to this picture, stating that, in order to solve the generational shift and ideological confusion, all curricula should not only include the aforementioned critical thinking skills, cognitive behavioural therapy should also be foundational. CBT helps with self-management and is key for emotional intelligence (well known as another success marker).

He continues stating that concepts such as curiosity, open-mindedness, intellectual courage and tenacity as well as multiple viewpoint diversity will embrace and ‘un-fragile’ the anxiety and alienation of the current generation of students.

Conclusion

Academia in South Africa is at cross-roads long in the making. You can choose to burry your head in the sand or be present. This will require you to speak up at every opportunity.

The South African situation is daunting in its own right. The assault of ideologies and philosophies based on external ways of thinking that I now call American Cultural Imperialism has exacerbated the challenge to critical level. When studied objectively and scientifically it can only be called artificial stupidity.

Each one of us will firstly have to decide whether we are educators or activists. Only educators can be researchers. Activists have already decided on the outcome of research and focus on using this to their ends.

Will you partake in the re-segregation of society like Harvard and Princeton, who now have racially separated graduation ceremonies and many US and UK universities that have racially segregated residences and dorms, or will you partake on empowering and educating a new generation who are informed and balanced in their views? Thus contributing to the development story of South Africa?

Navigating the landscape will be difficult and require creative and innovative ways of looking at careers and actions that were set in stone just a couple of years ago.

The quest is for exceptional visionary leadership. Are you such a leader?