

University and Society: Disruption, Discourse and New Directions

(Version of 9 May 2018)

Rationale, motivation and aims

The project seeks to understand and unpack the deep complexities of the South African university against the background of global discussions on the changing role of the university. Although many of the challenges like university funding, access, inequality, representativity, curriculum, and the impact of technology are true of universities almost everywhere, they are especially pertinent in South Africa because of the crises of the past few years. South Africa is faced with an urgent societal challenge. It would therefore be important for projects to be responsive to a particular aspect of the challenge in higher education, and to propose solutions to address that challenge. Projects should be conceived with the aim of not only scholarly output, but also societal impact. Inherent to the project is a desire to be forward looking and to engage the next generation of academics in this endeavour.

Knowledge of South Africa, being on the African continent, and what is South African is often narrated from the outside. However, the project necessarily begins with understanding the past, and raises the question: has colonisation directed and positioned South African universities into a subservient global position?

In this regard consideration should be given to questions like: Is it possible to sketch out the past and the future of South African higher education and can the current *disruption and discourse* be translated into new directions and practice?

Two further motivations point to the focus of this project:

1. The current local discourse of and activism around transformation have highlighted the need to revisit the concept of what a South African university is or ought to be. This project aims to enrich the concept of transformation to reposition South African universities in the African and global contexts. The idea is to interrogate and broaden the notion of the university and to use the concept of transformation to reinvigorate and reposition South African universities within a global context.
2. The project explores the tensions and possibilities between dominant and dormant epistemologies operative in the university. It provides an opportunity to reinterpret and contextualise knowledge, and to position South African scholars and scholarship as global leaders in this intellectual enterprise.

Theoretical point of departure

The obvious point of departure would be decolonisation. The project seeks to ask whether other countries or systems have already successfully decolonised higher education, and whether we can learn from them? Or are we unique, and therefore have to do it ourselves?

Questions to consider include: What is the impact of diverse knowledge systems on contemporary higher education?

This is often ignored in debates on globalisation, and in understanding what constitutes excellence in universities. The intention therefore is to allow for a dynamic, respectful, and scholarly engagement with diverse knowledge systems, whilst building on established approaches, and to provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of what it is to live in a world of interconnecting global and local hierarchies.

Areas of inquiry

The project focuses on four areas of enquiry, each pertaining in specific ways to the South African context:

- *Understanding the colonial legacies and post-colonial realities of the university*
- *The entanglements of knowledge traditions and transitions in the university*
- *Understanding the contemporary university*
- *The university of the future*

Temporally: While the first three areas emphasise the unfolding of past and present processes, the last area focuses more pertinently on future developments.

Spatially: In each of these areas, the focus on the South African context could be progressively broadened – where appropriate – to invite perspectives describing developments in Africa or other parts of the globe or, more broadly, global contexts and trends.

Understanding the colonial legacies and post-colonial realities of the university

Legacies and life worlds in South Africa's universities were drawn from the Anglophone and European university traditions. Not one South African university has been immune from the impact of these traditions. Without understanding this founding principle, the case for repositioning South African universities is impossible. We envisage an engagement that provides an understanding of these histories.

Questions to consider would include:

Can we compare South Africa with the rest of the continent with its multiple colonial legacies?

What is the impact of colonial knowledge on the formation of the South African university system?

The entanglements of knowledge traditions and transitions in the university

This area seeks to engage in discussion around different epistemologies that underpin a layered and complex university system. Understandings of the world in South Africa are informed by the deep and nuanced complexities of its peoples. The richness of South African intellectual traditions and their place in the world resists a one-dimensional understanding.

The project envisages an engagement with these traditions and their relationship to knowledge formation and the idea of the university. Inherent here is the need to interrogate how a South African university can be based in local intellectual traditions, while also aspiring to global relevance.

Understanding the contemporary university

Universities worldwide are relentlessly focused on attaining ‘excellence’. But through whose lenses is ‘excellence’ to be seen? Who defines the criteria under which the quality of a university is to be judged? By what convention, precedent or authority, and by whom?

In South Africa, where universities face a legitimacy question based on legacy issues, such questions have mostly been phrased in terms of a push towards decolonisation. It would be helpful, however, to see this local manifestation of questions about higher education against the background of the global context.

For this purpose we need to investigate, not only how universities engage with society, but how they actually respond, or fail to respond, to societal challenges. These might be global challenges, like climate change or clean energy, or social challenges like poverty or poor schooling, or local challenges like a city running out of water. The university’s academic role is not only a matter of what the university is good *at*, but equally a matter of what it is good *for*. Decolonisation is a societal challenge of particular relevance to South Africa. It is not only ‘excellence’, but also the extent to which a university is an integral part of the society within which it is situated, which determines its legitimacy, and indeed its quality.

In the South African context, therefore, questions to consider include: How do we include/engage with features of South African universities including (but not exclusively) matters pertaining to participation, access, identity, location, student preparedness, transition, schooling, curriculum, university funding and affordability, the student experience, the relationship between universities and the labour market, and the impact of technology?

The university of the future

If South African universities are to escape the present paralysis, they will need to reflect the country’s many worlds and its location on the African continent. The next South African university needs to be intellectually critical, socially engaged, decolonised, and relevant to South Africa and Africa, and its societies and languages. These features of the next South African university will uniquely position it in a global context.

We seek proposals that conceptualise and imagine the next South African university, also in comparison with universities in other locales. Questions to consider include: Does this require a new kind of post-secondary system, especially a new kind of university alive to a globalisation that does not privilege one set of values or knowledge over others?

This long-term theme project of STIAS will be conducted in partnership with other South African knowledge institutions.

Prospective applicants within this theme project are referred to the STIAS website for information on [Application to the STIAS Programme](#).