

THE CONSTITUTION AND GOOD PUBLIC LEADERSHIP BREAKFAST DISCUSSION SERIES: THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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On 3 December 2015 the Centre for Constitutional Rights (CFCR) and the School of Public Leadership (SPL) at Stellenbosch University (SU), supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), hosted the fifth and final in a series of breakfast discussions for 2015. The aim of these discussions is to create a platform for conversation and debate about the Constitution and good public leadership. This discussion focused on the future of higher education in the country in the wake of two nationwide protests championed by students regarding transformation at these institutions, as well the raising of tuition fees at the same. The breakfast was attended by guests from across the spectrum including government, academia, civil society and the media.

The first speaker was Professor Barney Pitso, former Vice-Chancellor and Rector of the University of South Africa (UNISA). He opened by pointing out that despite current events, the nation's higher education system is still in good standing and envied the world over. Enrolment numbers more than doubled since 1994, with greater diversity amongst the student population. Furthermore, research output of academics has tripled when compared to other universities, making this the highest in the world.

He then went on to discuss the minimum standard to be retained in quality higher education and highlighted that in seeking to have world class universities, questions of transformation should be addressed.

He said that there is a major debate on transformation of which we are only scratching the surface. This, due to having politicised transformation in a manner that makes it hard to identify the difficult and intricate issues around it that need addressing.

He identified the issue of funding in relation to the economy and that in the midst of this economic upheaval, higher education is a privileged group in the bigger scheme of things. With poverty, health systems and the basic education crisis, an honest conversation about how institutions will be funded is needed. Given all the above, one of the difficult conversations that must happen concerns academic freedom and institutional autonomy of universities. There is a notion that universities would be better off under the control of the Department of High Education. Over the years, there has been more state control in tertiary institutions than ever. This is a cause for concern for the simple reason that the university councils serve as the government of their institutions and thus guarantee their day to day functioning and independence.

Universities are increasingly receiving less and less funding from the state in terms of subsidies. As a direct result of this decrease in funding, universities are relying on their own funds. From this, one can logically infer that government control in these institutions must

also decrease. The idea of institutional autonomy and academic freedom is important for the growth of society. Where academics and the public sphere meet in any society that wishes to grow and develop, those academics need the freedom to work without fear of control from the state.

Ultimately, Professor Pityana stated that 2015 places the nation in a better place than we were before, since the power of the voice of the youth has been discovered.

The second speaker was Professor Adam Habib, who is currently the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as Chairperson of Universities South Africa. He began by describing 2015 as an interesting time to lead a university. He stated that the increasing cost of university education is an impediment to inclusive development and stated that he was in support of the students' demands.

One of the responsibilities of a vice-chancellor is to ensure the sustainability of a university and he highlighted that it is necessary to maintain the high quality of South African tertiary education. Since the #FeesMustFall movement, a task team has been set up by the presidency to investigate the underfunding of universities. Professor Habib stated that in 2012 universities were underfunded by R22 billion. Furthermore, only 12% of national GDP is allocated to universities and this results in institutions compensating by increasing fees to cover the shortfall. He also highlighted that the exchange rate and the dire situation in which the Rand finds itself directly affects the rate of subsidisation.

"Students this year taught us the power of social action", so much so that in seven days, the state gave in to their demands - demands which had been debated over the last five to 10 years. Regarding the difference in tactics of some of the protestors (violence and humiliation), he stated that a balance must be found between social action and legitimate demands. He emphasised the importance of supporting and engaging with students with regard to strategy and tactics.

The #RhodesMustFall movement and the demand for transformation led to two-fold introspection by higher education institutions. Firstly, in terms the multicultural philosophy and secondly whether individual students enter institutions as non-racial individuals to intermingle, thereby creating a single national consciousness.

He asked about how a single institution can have two campuses that are divided by race, all the while claiming adherence to the Constitution, violating the very substance of the same. He emphasised the need to act to change the *status quo* where the majority feel alienated from the institution in which they are the majority.

He closed by asking what the implications of the two student-led movements were. The higher education system has been changed and it cannot be taken for granted. The issue of student fees has not been resolved - it has merely been put on hold. Where ideally the state should subsidise a large amount in the interests of the Constitution, universities are now left



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to manage the shortfall. Thoughtful engagement is necessary. He highlighted that in the coming year the most important discussions will be around institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Questions around transformation and fee structure must be engaged with and emphasis must be placed on the fact that the use of institutional autonomy as an excuse to resist transformation is unacceptable.

Following the speeches, the audience raised a number of pertinent questions ranging from whether the current university model was sustainable, to how institutions could earn back the trust of the students in the wake of the #FeesMustFall protests. Both speakers highlighted the fact that the goings-on at universities were not simply academic but were directly linked to a bigger societal problem. The trust deficit issue is not exclusive to universities but exists anywhere where communities have little or lost faith in those that exercise power.

From the discussion it was made clear that the future of higher education may be at a precarious point and that whilst the proverbial band aid has been placed on the wounds that are transformation and accessible education, these issues must be considered in the larger context of South Africa's problems.