

The Influence of Context in the South African Higher Education System: A Social Realist Critique

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KEYWORDS Higher Education. Context. Structure. Culture. Agency

ABSTRACT Higher education systems, the world over, operate in different contexts. The South African education system is no exception. This concept paper employs a social realist theoretical framework to examine the influence of context on the South African higher education system. In this concept paper the researchers interrogate the influence of context in the pre-democratic era in South Africa. The researchers show how culture in terms of racial discrimination in society then influenced structure in terms of policies and institutions which served to propagate a differential higher education system on racial lines. The researchers also examine the post-apartheid environment which is marked by the need to address past imbalances in higher education. The new political dispensation ushered in after the demise of apartheid, the resultant policies and reorganisation of the higher education system are further examined. In this paper the researchers argue, using a social realist lens, that context has a great influence on the conceptualisation, organisation and implementation of higher education. The researchers conclude that a closer understanding of higher education system operations is made clearer by interrogating the interplay between structure, culture and agency in any given historical period.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education serves numerous functions and purposes in society and debates are unending on many issues regarding higher education such as access, success, quality, organisation, funding and relevance, among others. Education in democratic governments should ensure that all children regardless of their backgrounds are afforded equal chance to participate in higher education as one's life chances are generally enhanced by attaining a reasonable standard of education. Education becomes a means for social mobility and according to the United Kingdom Government (2012):

Social mobility is about ensuring that every person – and, in particular, every child – regardless of their background, their circumstances, or their social class, has an equal opportunity to get on in life.

It becomes imperative to ensure that policies and regulations are put in place to ensure equal participation in higher education so that children from lower social classes are not deliberately disadvantaged and the poverty cycle perpetuated.

Higher education is important in addressing the manpower needs of a country. There is a

relatively strong correlation between higher education and economic growth in countries. On the specific role of university education in most post independent Africa states, Eshiwani (1999: 31) states that:

...first, the university was viewed as a vehicle for training high-level manpower for the new nations. In this regard there was a need to expand the system, both in numbers and in the degree offerings.

The above observation reveals the importance of higher education for manpower development. Expansion of higher education in African states and also in South Africa should be viewed in the context of the need to produce a broad human capital base to support the growth of the economy.

Higher education in South Africa has evolved over time from the differential system based on racial discrimination during the apartheid era to the current environment where emphasis is on equity, equality and redress of past imbalances. Badsha (1999: 40) observes that in South Africa:

... the higher education system is required to redress past inequalities as well as to meet the development needs of society, in a rapidly changing global context.

The need to address past imbalances is the thrust behind transformation in higher education and while higher education addresses issues of transformation it also has to meet the developmental needs of South Africa by ensur-

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ing relevance of the programmes offered. Several educational innovations in South Africa have been developed as change strategies around which education is interpreted as a powerful agent of social transformation.

Context is the environment in which higher education takes place. This environment is marked by the social, political and economic climate of a country at a particular time in the country's history. Socially, context is marked by race and ethnic group relations in a country. In apartheid South Africa, racial discrimination resulted in Whites superiority over Blacks and educational systems through policy pronouncements, organisation and structures reflected this discrimination. Post-apartheid context is one that puts emphasis on transformation and redress. The paper, therefore, seeks to interrogate the influence of context of higher education in South Africa using the social realist analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework

This concept paper is underpinned by the socialist theoretical framework. Archer (1996) developed a social realist analytical framework through which the underlying causal mechanisms at the level of the real can be analysed using the concepts, structure, culture and agency. According to Archer (1995), the social world comprises of the 'parts' (culture and structure) and the 'people' (agency). Boughey and Niven (2012: 643) argue that Archer's work is based on an argument against the tendency in sociological analyses to conflate the structure, culture and agency. Rather the epistemic fallacy is the process of taking what can be apprehended empirically, as the way things are. This is because we often do not see and experience how things are at the level of the real. This is what is termed the 'epistemic fallacy' (Bhaskar 1978: 16). There is need to always analyse structure, culture and agency separately as they are separate phenomena that have separate causal affect. Each have inherent properties and powers that result in causal influences and the interplay of the three should be clearly understood in order to explain society. Archer's argument against the conflation of structure, culture and agency is that it makes it difficult for the social analyst to see which aspect of the social world exerts influence on a context at a particular point in time

In Archer's social realism theory, structure relates to material resources and to the recurring patterns of social behaviour or to the inter-relationship between different elements of society around the distribution of these material resources and patterns of behaviour. These elements of society include social class, gender, race, marriage and education, among others. In an institution of higher learning structure includes things such as policies, committees, educational development centres, as well as more abstract phenomena such as race, gender, social class and knowledge structures in the disciplines. These structures, as Danermark et al. (2002: 181) show, constrain and enable the actions of the agents (for example the educational developers), and in turn, agents reproduce and transform structures.

Culture, in Archer's social realism theory, entails how and what we think about things. This includes values, beliefs, attitudes, ideas, ideologies, theories and concepts which are manifest through discourses used by particular people at particular times (Quinn 2012; Boughey 2010). In a university set-up, agents who include academic staff, academic developers and members of the university management may hold certain views, theories and beliefs which dictate what can have an impact on them and these shape what agents can do (Archer 1995). Institutional policy documents that talk to issues of academic staff development would be an example of the espoused culture of the institution on staff development.

On the other hand, agency refers to the personal and psychological make-up of individuals, as well as their social roles and relates to the capacity people have to act in voluntary ways (Archer 1996). Agents can play certain functions to change or retain the structural or cultural features they find in an institution. Kinvinen and Piironen (2006: 225) state that the actions of individuals and groups affect social structures by modifying them. It is therefore clear that the way agents relate to structural conditions by either changing them or retaining them has an effect on future interactions.

The Pre-1994 Higher Education Context

Literature refers to two divisions of context namely social-structural conditions and conjec-tural conditions (Melluci 1989). The distinc-

tion between the two above-mentioned divisions are well explained by Melluci (1989:49) as the division between elements of a permanent and synchronic logic of a given social structure, and elements which emerge as temporary variations of its functioning in a diachronic perspective. Since structure (for example a building) is not what we see daily, this implies that the structural features are long term and permanent while conjunctural ones may be short term and temporary. According to Melluci (1989: 49-50), this distinction 'allows one to separate the analysis of the (long-term) pre-conditions of action from the (short-term) factors activating specific forms of collective mobilisation'. Looking at the structural conditions, it is important to carefully ponder and analyse the reasons for the existence of structural conditions as long-term structures. One reason is that 'doing justice to the reality of history is not a matter of noting the way in which the past provides background to the present; it is a matter of treating what people do in the present as a struggle to create a future out of the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but the only raw material out of which the present can be structured' (Abrams 1982:80). Similarly, Keane and Mier (1989:4) state that institutions, organisations and people operate 'within the framework of possibilities and constraints presented by the institutions of our complex societies'. It is from this background that we discuss the challenges in the process of transformation.

Colonialism: During colonialism South Africa was shaped by various factors related to social structure and cultural conditions that contributed to separate development. The separation covered all areas of social, political and economic development. As a result, within the higher education context, inequalities of race, class, gender, institution and space shaped the history of higher education. According to Boughey (2010), there were patterns of systemic inclusion and exclusion and marginalisation of few institutions, social classes and specific groups. In support of the above view, literature (Council for Higher Education 2004: 62) elaborate this statistically indicating that on the eve of democracy the total enrolment in Higher Education (HE) was about 17% of the 18 to 25 year old cohort with about 9% Africans, 13% Coloureds, 40% Indians and 70% Whites.

This implies that there were huge discrepancies in terms of race and class. This also corre-

lates with their representation in the workforce coupled with a lot of inequalities. So the ideology of apartheid was that Whites should enjoy access to well-resourced institutions and this benefited them more compared to Blacks.

Apartheid Ideology: As indicated above, apartheid ideology had resulted in institutions intended for White students being highly resourced than those intended for Black social groups (Boughey and Niven 2012). In a way one would understand that within these separate institutions, different ideological orientations in economic and social functions existed. This was to maintain the ideology of apartheid and capitalist social order in the self-governing homelands. As indicated, these institutions existed but did not serve the needs of the communities they were supposed to serve. For example, the funding system was not enough to meet the academic needs of the poor students or to encourage them to continue with their studies. The qualifications of the teaching staff were of a lower standard compared to that of the Whites institutions. With regard to the geographical location, historically Black institutions were situated in the remote areas and this further disadvantaged the students. This had negative effect in teaching, learning and research. The issue of separation affected many things including language. English and Afrikaans were the only two official languages of learning in higher education-which is the case even up to the present day.

What is clear is that the apartheid ideology provided a culture of discrimination in the way higher education was planned and implemented. The differential approach to higher education (HE) in which there were higher education systems and standards for Whites, Indians/Coloureds and Blacks shows how serious views on race relations can impact on higher education provision. Badat (2004) states that higher education system in apartheid South Africa was inherently inequitable, differentiated along the lines of race and ethnicity, and designed to propagate inequality between blacks and Whites. Odhav (2009:37) observes that the apartheid policy (1959) created universities 'split along racial and ethnic lines for the different African ethnic populations (Zulu, Tswana, Sotho, etc.) and for Coloured and Indian populations.' Infrastructure, funding and curriculum in the universities were different with the view to promote

Whites' supremacy over Blacks. In underling the purpose and goals of higher education in apartheid South Africa, Badat (2004: 5) contends that:

... all higher education institutions were profoundly shaped by apartheid planning and by the respective functions assigned to them in relation to the reproduction of the apartheid social order.

Higher education system became a reflection of the political climate at the time. This resulted in advantaged and disadvantaged universities. This shows that higher education institutions, as structures, were created to mirror the apartheid social and political order.

The Post 1994 Structural, Cultural and Agential Influences

In terms of structure, policies have been put in place in South Africa to redress imbalances in higher education caused by long years of apartheid. The apartheid governments deliberately excluded the black majority from education in general and higher education in particular. Prior to the attainment of democracy in 1994, very few Blacks entered universities. University education was also very segregatory in terms of quality of education and institutions that offered it. They were what we now call historically advantaged universities which catered for mostly White students and others that catered for Blacks, Coloureds and Indians. The discriminatory practices were based on cultural conditions of the time based on white superiority and the resultant treatment of blacks as second class citizens.

Upon attainment of democracy there was a need to address the past inequalities hence from as early as 1997 the White Paper number 3 titled *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* stressed the need to transform higher education in South Africa. White paper number 3 was the first structural condition to drive change and it was also based on changed cultural conditions where the discourse of equity and equality replaced that of discrimination hence the need for "redistributive social policies aimed at equity" (Department of Education 1997:1.7). Higher Education in post-apartheid South Africa was meant to dismantle the apartheid landscape which was characterized by racial and ethnic segregation, fragmentation and

poor coordination (Department of Education 1997; Hall et al. 2004). Jansen (2003) further points out that during apartheid all public higher education institutions were created on the basis of race, ethnicity and language. All these factors had to be addressed in the new political dispensation hence the promulgation of policies to address the past imbalances. These policies and Acts served as strong structural measures for change.

On the set-up of the university system during the apartheid era, Pinheiro et al. (2012: 99) state that:

Prior to the fall of the apartheid regime in 1994, the domestic HE system was characterized by six white Afrikaans-medium universities and four white English-medium universities; four centrally controlled universities for 'Africans'; one each for 'Indians' and 'Coloureds' and four universities located in the former 'independent homelands' for African students.

Such a set-up was meant to propagate the racial superiority of Whites and denigrate Blacks by denying them access to higher education. The minority group of Whites had more access to university education compared to the Black majority. There was, therefore, a need for equity and equality in the post-1994 period.

It is also important to note that the enactment of laws to address inequalities in higher education in South Africa was driven by new cultural shift. Contrary to the apartheid era in which Whites looked down upon Blacks, the new dispensation had the belief system of equality. The interplay between structure and culture is very clear.

The merger of universities in South Africa was part of the transformation agenda. This was meant to create a single, coordinated system of Higher Education without racial inequalities (Asmal and Hadland 2011; Department of Education 1997). So apart from transforming higher education with the view to improving access to higher education to previously disadvantaged groups, the issue of mergers sought to change higher education in line with the new social and political order.

The Link Between Higher Education Policy Directives and Social Transformation

In line with the national transformation agenda in higher education there are a number

of policy directives that have made the furtherance of the transformation agenda possible.

Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education. Education White Paper 3, Government Gazette No. 18207

The transformation of higher education as conceptualised in the White Paper on higher education was premised on the principles of equity and redress, democratisation, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability. The principle of equity requires fair opportunities both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them. Applying this principle implies, on the one hand a critical identification of existing inequalities which are the product of past policies, and on the other a programme of transformation with a view to redress.

Higher Education Act of 1997

The Higher Education Act of 1997 is the most important structural policy directive informing the operation of higher education in South Africa. Chapter 2 of the Act created the Council for Higher Education (CHE) with several mandates such as advising the Minister of Higher Education and Technology on key issues pertaining to higher education such as the structure of HE, planning and funding. The CHE also works to promote access of students to higher education. The CHE plays an important agential role in ensuring planning, implementation, quality assurance and evaluation in Higher Education. The Higher Education Act explicitly states that the CHE must establish a Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) whose mandate is to perform the quality promotion and quality assurance functions. In this regard, while higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, their functions are regulated by the HEQC. This is seen through institutional audits that institutions of higher education are regularly subjected to. Programmes offered in institutions are approved and accredited by the Council on Higher Education.

Chapter 4 of the Higher Education Act provides for the governance of higher education institutions and outlines the governance structure of a higher education institution. This fur-

ther shows the significance of the Act as an important structure governing the operationalisation of HE in South Africa. Role played by the different agents in HE institutions are provided for and regulated by the Act. In the event of audit reports showing financial or other maladministration of a serious nature at a public higher education institution, the minister has the right to appoint an administrator to take over the authority of council or management for a prescribed period until a meaningful turnaround strategy is implemented. This is for public good as HE institutions operate on public funds and such funds have to be protected.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was formed when the then National Department of Education was split into two namely the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training. DHET is tasked with the responsibility for the coordination of the education and training sub-systems of post-school education, including universities, Further Education and Training Colleges, Sector Education and Training Authorities, and Adult Basic Education. The DHET is therefore an important structure in HE in South Africa as it responsible for HE by playing a coordinating role.

A look at the (DHET) Strategic Plan (2010 - 2015) shows some important structural functions of the Department. DHET seeks to increase access to HE for potential students and intends that by 2030, at least 50% of young people in the 18-24 age group should be studying in universities and colleges. This is against the realisation that access to education for previously disadvantaged groups remains elusive. The Strategic Plan (p. 18) states that:

Access to, and success in post-school education is strongly differentiated by race and class. Inequalities in education and training outcomes must be significantly reduced over the next 20 years. The demographics of the system should progressively reflect an improved equality in relation to access to opportunities, success and retention rates, as well as in educational outcomes in all parts of the system. As the quality of the education base improves, race and class will cease to be the driving determi-

nants of access. Economic barriers to participation in on-going education and training will be significantly reduced. Challenges of throughput inefficiencies will give way to greater success and participation. All higher education and training institutions will have inclusive institutional cultures, respectful of difference, and supporting learning and development. Institutions will prepare students for a democratic, diverse society - students who are socially conscious, who have a sense of citizenship and respect for human rights and democratic values.

The above observation shows how that strategic plan is an important structural and agential determinant to address challenges in equity and equality, which continue to dog HE many years after the attainment of independence. Blacks are in the majority yet the participation of black students in HE is less than that of their White counterparts who are the minority. Issues of failure to complete programmes on time and dropping out of programmes are largely to do with black students (Scott et al. 2007). There is, therefore, a need for strong structural and agential functions to address cultural challenges that continue to see differential participation in HE on race and class lines.

National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) Act of 1999

This Act came into existence against the realisation that funding is a determinant to access (or lack of it) to higher education in South Africa. There was need to ensure funding of students and the regulation of such funding. The purpose of the Act as derived from the Act itself is:

To establish the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS); to provide for the management, governance and administration of the NSFAS; to provide for the granting of loans and bursaries to eligible students at public higher education institutions and for the administration of such loans and bursaries; to provide for the recovery of loans; to provide for the repeal of the Provision of Special Funds for Tertiary Education and Training Act, 1993; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

Government commitment to fund students as evidenced by an Act of Parliament is clear evidence of commitment to ensure access to higher education for the general populace. Without

government support most of the students in the universities today and many who have graduated would not have managed through higher education as university costs are quite exorbitant for average families. No issue of transformation could be addressed meaningfully without addressing the effect of economy and class on access to higher education.

CONCLUSION

In this paper the researchers showed the influence of context on higher education by examining context and how it influenced higher education in the pre-1994 and post-1994 eras in South Africa. It emerges from discussion that social, political and economic in both eras resulted in policies and regulations that shaped the conceptualisation, organisation and implementation of higher education. Social and political realities provided the cultural environment in which higher education operated and the cultural environment resulted in structural context by way of policies, regulations and institutions of higher learning. The type of agents in the form of driving forces behind higher education also played a pivotal role in the way higher education system was operationalised. Higher education, in terms of aims and organisation, is better understood in the environment it operates in.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the discussions raised in the presentation the following recommendations are made;

- Higher Education in South Africa should continue to address the imbalances of the historical past by ensuring that issues of access to and success in higher education for the previously historically disadvantaged social groups are given adequate attention.
- Policies and regulations in the current HE system in South Africa should be effectively implemented to ensure real transformation in universities.
- Policies and regulations should be put in place to ensure cultural factors such as the language of instruction in universities are addressed. Continued use of former colonial masters' language in universities appears problematic to an African university context.

- Whilst funding has been made available to students from previously disadvantaged social groups by way of loans and bursaries from government, there is still need to ensure that measures are put in place to support such students academically to assist them to succeed in their studies.

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