

# RE-IMAGINING THE SOCIAL PURPOSE OF UNIVERSITIES THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

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## **Abstract**

In this paper it is argued that the increasing legitimacy gap and the growing distrust in higher education, its scholarship and its intellectuals may be at the heart of what is driving the serious and diverse challenges being experienced by universities in many parts of the world. Beginning with the idea that some of the world's most significant problems are both deeply social in nature and intensely local and global, this opens the way for the emergence of a social justice agenda that brings together democratic, participatory higher education-community partnerships which in turn may open up a pathway for the emergence of an increasingly democratic ethos in the processes of knowledge production, application and dissemination.

It is argued further that the sustainability of these higher education-community engagements is dependent on their integration into the core functions of the university and in particular into their knowledge project. Examples are provided that demonstrate that this integration is itself a matter of social justice.

And finally, consideration is given to the nature of the intellectual, physical, social and policy architecture that will ensure the emergence of long-term and sustained engagement as in, for example, the case of universities as anchor institutions. This will help to address the emergence of new kinds of social purpose for these important social institutions.

## **Some Framing Thoughts**

Bill Readings, in his posthumously published *The University in Ruins* probes the conditions that are causing the structural changes that we see in universities around the world and asks what the meaning of this is for their future. (Readings 1996) Readings asserts that universities sourced their social purpose and integrity from the idea of the nation-state by their role as custodians and reproducers of national culture. With globalisation and the growing integration of knowledge in production processes, Readings asks whether the university is in a deathly spiral. His main concern is that 'the contemporary university is busily transforming itself from an ideological arm of the state into a bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporation'. (Readings 1996: 11)

The conditions have indeed changed. Nation states are in decline, we have moved from elite higher education systems to massified ones, universities are behaving as corporations, the onset of the fourth industrial revolution and the continuing unfolding of the knowledge economy all apply pressure on the traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century university. Readings urges a re-imagination of the

university away from what he refers to as ‘a *ruined institution*, while thinking what it means to dwell in those ruins without recourse to romantic nostalgia. (Readings 1996: 169) He makes an appeal for a new community of scholars and thinkers.

At a more mundane level perhaps, around the world universities are experiencing new fundamental pressures whether they be severe funding cuts, the erosion of institutional autonomy and academic freedom and deep attacks on what are seen to be some form or other of elitism. In a recent issue of World University News, Wilhem Krull describes the social pressures being brought to bear on universities in Europe in the face of growing populism, xenophobia, nationalism and the erosion of democracy in several national contexts. He goes on to say “Despite the wide variety of different higher education and research systems in Europe as well as the quite diversified and often multi-faceted institutional structures in each country, we can observe negative, even hostile attitudes against cosmopolitan elites, research-based expertise and evidence-based policy-making in many and this affects universities.” (Krull 2017). This is extremely serious in the sense that these negative attitudes are driven directly at the core of universities, at their knowledge projects.

In the face of this growing phenomenon, two circumstances stand out. Firstly, this is happening at a time when universities have never been more productive in terms of their traditional products and outputs. Secondly, these institutions of higher learning are essentially left to fend for themselves. There is very rarely a broad-based social defence of them. Krull advises that it is necessary for scholars, scientists and the universities to regain the trust of their publics. He warns, though, that this is not easy. “Instead of primarily speaking to the public, it will be essential for scientists and scholars to first of all listen to the people in front of them, to take their concerns seriously, to pay attention to the social pressures they are exposed to, and to bear in mind that to overcome emotional differences may in the beginning matter just as much or even more so than the coherence and consistency of the respective arguments.” (Krull 2017). He essentially calls for universities to be more engaged with their communities and publics. The question that remains is how best is this to be done?

The South African university system is experiencing its most serious crisis since 1994, when democracy was ushered in after one of the most notable struggles for human rights and social justice. While universities – both black and white – were part of the apartheid infrastructure and fully complicit in the construction of apartheid’s political, social and economic architecture, they were also powerful engines for the galvanising of young and talented minds in the creation of anti-apartheid and postcolonial imaginations of hope and humanity. Universities were sites of great contestation. It was not unusual to see students grappling with the ideas of Marx, Fanon, Gandhi, Nkrumah and Paolo Freire – and also of South African scholars Harold Wolpe, Moses Kotane, Govan Mbeki and others. The interesting detail is that almost all of the learning about these big ideas of change and transformation happened outside the formal classroom in constructed sites of engagement, in partnerships between university-based progressive, left-wing scholars and students with trade unions and community-based organisations. These became dynamic interfaces between the universities and the organisations of mass-based mobilisation to redefine and reconstruct the idea of humanity in apartheid South Africa. They became the source of great innovation and mobilisation.

And now, that system is in the midst of new waves of complex, exciting, devastating student uprisings. They represent powerful forces of engagement throwing both the universities and the national state into chaos. The two key issues raised by the students are deceptively simple in construction: free higher education and quality, decolonised education. South Africa's universities have long had a strong underpinning social mobility agenda but as chronic underfunding by the national state through its subsidies to higher education took hold, tuition fees began to gallop at levels beyond inflation and we began to see the gradual erosion of an unspoken social contract as higher education priced itself way beyond the reach of most South African families. While the national state responded by introducing a loan system to address the tuition fee affordability issue, not enough was invested.

The demand for decolonised education is interesting. It is about the knowledge project of South African universities. Clichéd though it may be, the students ask: are the 26 public universities in South Africa really South African universities and how would we know? Another way of posing this question is to ask to what extent the intellectual, living, cultural and spiritual milieus of the majority of South Africans find representation in the intellectual and technological bodies of these institutions; that is, to what extent are they South African universities.

Except for sporadic and scattered support for the student campaigns by individual scholars, this on-going student campaign pits itself against the national state on the one hand and against the universities on the other. There is much re-reading of Fanon and Biko and a vibrant resurgence of black consciousness thinking. The majority of South Africans find it is important to listen to what students are saying, students who have grown up in the post-apartheid era, who see the imagination of the 1994 democratic transition as constraining if not antithetical to the creation of a society that is more humane, more equal, more engaged in the life of its citizens. The universities are seen by these students as a part of the socio-political architecture of the post-1994 democratic dispensation which in turn is seen to be responsible for designing and presiding over increasing inequality and grinding poverty.

How is one to interpret the demands of the students? For most South Africans, it is a happy moment to see their children attend university because of their role in social mobility but simultaneously they experience alienation from these institutions of higher learning. The demands of students may be interpreted as a cry for the institutions to develop a social justice agenda that links them much more closely, on the one hand, to the enveloping challenges of a developing society and on the other hand, that allows millions of South Africans to see themselves represented in the knowledge enterprises of the universities (Bawa 2015).

What one sees, therefore, over the last 10-20 years is that universities both globally and nationally have been facing a crisis of purpose, identity and confidence. The discourse on institutional change has been driven primarily by their alignment with economic globalisation and the evolution of the knowledge economy. This was certainly the advice to African universities by the World Bank (Salmi 2002). Is there a way out of this? Or is Bill Readings' declaration of 'The University in Ruins' an unavoidable outcome? Is the idea of (re)developing a social justice agenda for our universities a new, compelling social purpose that addresses the philosophical concerns of Readings? And would it provide a framework for Krull's more pragmatic concerns of engaging the public? Would such a development address the deep

unhappiness of South African student activists who want their universities to transcend the reproduction of existing elites and to begin to address not only the historical social injustice of the apartheid regime but also that of the new regime?

### **Challenges that Simultaneously Intensely Local and Intensely Global**

The world faces unprecedented global challenges such as the unmitigated ravages of rising human consumption and their impact on the climate; forewarnings of an unsustainable earth-humanity nexus that is likely to leave hundreds of millions of people in near future generations scrambling for declining levels of food, water and energy security. The devastation of infectious and lifestyle diseases and unacceptably high maternal mortality rates in several parts of the world are of deep concern. The ease with which 'the Other' is created and the subsequent rise of political violence is something that we see the world over as populism and tyranny galvanise political and social identity as a source of power. The continuous growth in xenophobic tendencies is everywhere pertinent, even in societies that have a rich history of diversity and social integration and cohesion. Concomitantly, we witness massive global migrations that place young and old in semi-permanent limbo. And perhaps most important, violent poverty is the general condition in many parts of the world, increasingly accompanied by growing inequality.

And in addition, we observe a growing erosion of democracy as elites establish and reestablish their hegemony over the economy, often accompanied by a slide towards anti-intellectualism and the violence that flows from the degradation of ethical society. The democratic project is rapidly being threatened by its failure to address the standout challenge of improving the quality of life of all. The enormous upwelling of social cohesion and human empathy that was a product of the South African struggle for democracy is rapidly being dissipated, so much so that the government has now instituted a new-fangled social cohesion advocacy programme. While these social challenges are all prevalent in South Africa, it is not difficult to see that these issues belong to many societies. They are simultaneously intensely local and intensely global.

### **Revisiting the Social Purpose of Universities as Knowledge Intensive Institutions**

Universities cannot solve these problems by themselves. But as social institutions they cannot possibly sit on the sidelines either. They are created by society to play particular sets of roles. They are the primary producers of high level human capacity that is key to the functioning of complex societies. They are driven in and by democracies to produce graduates that are critically engaged in the processes of political and social life. They contribute to the constant renewal of humanity's imaginations of its past, present and future. Thereby they help to shape new generations of public intellectuals both inside and outside the academy. They are expected to help us understand how we might enhance ethical society. In many societies, they are seen to be the key institutions for social mobility. All of this is done through their enveloping agenda of producing, applying and disseminating knowledge. Primarily, they are the key engines of knowledge dissemination since the production and application of knowledge happens also in other kinds of institutions. It would appear then that as social institutions of a special kind, universities could bring the processes and power of knowledge to these huge challenges facing

societies around the world. This means bringing their enormous human capacity, the ethos of the world of academia, their physical presence, their infrastructural resources and perhaps most importantly the talent, energy and passion of generations of students to bear on these serious socio-political challenges. Universities have the potential to be hugely influential. They could be the anchors around which societies begin to solve some of their most pressing problems.

Because of the knowledge intensive nature of universities and hence their direct connection with the global knowledge enterprise, the shape of the relationships between universities and their local and national publics is influenced also by their role as globally connected institutions. They are institutional bridges that span multiple borders, that drive the creation of global scholars who constantly see their work as having global dimension. They act as pathways for the flow of knowledge, of scholars and of students. They are ideally placed to make the connections between the intensely local and global. increasingly, as transactional bridges across nations they provide the basis for community members involved in university-community engagements to meet colleagues in other parts of the world. Arjun Appadurai in his *Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics* (Appadurai 2001) and in a presentation he made at the University of Witwatersrand titled “Cosmopolitanism from below” (Appadurai 2011) talks about the emergence of international networks of activists for sustainable housing from India and across the world. Universities can be real bridges between the local and global, bringing the wealth of knowledge and experiences produced in local collaborations of engagement into global partnerships and thereby addressing among other matters the idea of international solidarity.

Even so universities around the world face challenges of legitimacy. They are often described as elite, as being unresponsive to societal challenges or as being focused on the needs of political and economic elites. Declining governmental subsidies are increasingly common. They are constantly under pressure from employers for providing education unsuited to the needs of the labour market. Local communities often find them to be alienating.

John Dewey’s invocation of the school as a social centre is tied precisely to the idea that it was a social space that had to be occupied for social change, social transformation, spaces within which society and education shaped each other (Benson et al. 2017). This is mirrored in more recent times by similar analyses of the role of universities in society. In Clark Kerr’s reflections of the University of California in the 1960s he acknowledges the connection between the University of California and its many communities by recognising that ‘Knowledge is now central to society. It is wanted, even demanded, by more people and more institutions than ever before. The university as producer, wholesaler and retailer of knowledge cannot escape service.’ (Kerr 1963: 86) And Bok explores with caution the potential role of the research university in society as being multifaceted and with sensitivity to the privilege of these powerful institutions in the midst of communities under stress (Bok 1982).

### **Thinking about university-community partnerships and their sustainability**

Readings’ fear that the social purpose of universities has been eroded has to be addressed by understanding the extent to which the local and global conditions within which universities exist have changed. To provide a basis for the rest of this paper, it is helpful to return to an idea that is

eloquently captured in *Knowledge for Social Change* by Benson et. al., an idea that rests at the heart of a more radical approach to the engagement of universities with society:

*“The higher education democratic, civic and community engagement movement emphasises that collaboration inside and outside the academy is necessary for producing knowledge that solves real-world problems and results in positive changes in the human condition.”* (Benson et al. 2017: 69)

What this means is that if universities are to address large societal problems then collaborative engagement has to be integrated into the core functions of universities rather than as an add-on or be seen to be something good that universities may do. This collaboration rests at the very heart of the mandate of universities as social institutions, as sites of production of knowledge, its application and its dissemination. The installation of such an enterprise into the knowledge project of institutions in turn ensures that engagement is integrated into their research and innovation, their teaching and learning (Bawa 2014).

This integration of engagement is fundamental to its sustainability. To examine the relevance of this, a South African example is instructive. During the years of apartheid some of the universities allowed safe, experimental political and intellectual spaces for engagement between scholars and communities but had little resolve to fund them in any serious, sustainable fashion even though they had such a large influence on the nature of the universities. In 1994, when change came and as donor funding dried up, the projects folded. There was little, if any, institutional defence of them. In 1995, University of KwaZulu-Natal had 87 such units, centres and programmes and these gradually folded as funding for them dissipated. These projects were dependent on external, soft funding from local and global foundations and international development agencies. This dependence on ‘soft’ funding has been exacerbated. Described in the language of universities having 3 pillars of core activities: research, teaching and engagement, the South African Higher Education Act of 1997 implores universities to participate in community engagement. In this formulation engagement is gently eschewed by the teaching and research mandates and forced into specially constructed units. The Durban University of Technology adopted what may be a more valuable conceptualisation of engagement as one of the threads in the DNA of the institution and then requiring its representation in all aspects of the university (Bawa 2015).

It seems important therefore that universities deliberately shape themselves to address the creation of intellectual, social and physical meshes between themselves and the struggles and aspirations of their communities. Before exploring this further let us attempt to delineate the kinds of influences of engagement that we can consider. Engagement is multidirectional and multidimensional in its design and its impact. It is multidirectional in the sense that its design usually influences both community and university partners (and other partners), though in different ways. And more importantly it influences the future evolution of the university-community nexus. In the same vein, the interaction is multidimensional in the sense that there would be many interfaces of connection or intersection such as research, teaching, capacity building, technology transfer, creating theory-praxis nexuses, co-designing social mobility enterprises and deliberately designing programmes that build critical thinking and scepticism and so on.

It is important to understand the implications of this. Both universities and communities are shaped by (and shaping) these interactions, even though there is a very significant set of power relations that define these interactions. The only way to address these power relations is to establish a structural architecture for these engagements through careful consideration, through the development of a common understanding of the epistemology that underpins engagement and through the construction of an institutional policy. This will also help with achieving sustainability of engagement. We shall return to these later.

### **The knowledge project as a binding imperative**

The development of a new social purpose for universities has to be linked with its central functions and as has been seen, this is about the production, application and dissemination of knowledge through the processes of research, innovation, teaching and learning. Readings' deep concern was that the role of university in addressing the construction, maintenance and development of the nation-state, primarily through its work on what may be thought of as national culture was being scratched out of the formal knowledge project. One way of building a new social purpose is to ensure that Clark Kerr's idea of the multiversity intersects in multiple ways with a social justice agenda which is conducted, amongst others, through an engagement paradigm.

As far back as 1994, in a very substantial study of the way in which university-industry partnerships were evolving in Europe, Gibbons et.al. in *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* described the way in which knowledge and innovation were being produced in what they called Mode 2 knowledge production, as opposed to what they called Mode 1 type, an exemplary model of which we may think of as Newtonian physics. (Gibbons et al. 1994) They found interesting new elements emerge in their study. For instance,

- The projects worked on are at the outset defined in the context of an applications imperative, rather than from an academic perspective.
- Immediately this implies that the project is described and defined by a team of academic and industry players – a clear indication that the definition of the problem is best constructed by a combination of different kinds of expertise.
- The teams are transient in nature depending as they would on the nature of the problem at hand.
- The teams are necessarily interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary giving credence to the view that the real world is not kind enough to divide itself into academic disciplines.
- Interestingly, most of these projects are usually conducted in the field rather than in university-based 'laboratories'.
- The outputs of these projects are of multiple kinds: presentations on the factory floor and conferences, reports, journal papers, patents, etc.

It is very likely that the work of Gibbons et.al. is in need of fresh review and development. The explosion in technological advances in the past 23 years, the evolution of the world of work,

major advances in the production, storage, and analysis of big data, etc. all contribute to significant changes in the processes and methodologies of research and innovation.

Even so, it would not be hard to map modified versions of these characteristics of Mode 2 knowledge production onto university-community partnership projects and in fact Gibbons did extend this work to engagement (Gibbons 2000). As was mentioned above, engagement is very often multidimensional in the sense that one set of interactions may well involve more than just one knowledge-intensive modality in that they may simultaneously involve research, innovation, teaching, learning and the extension to product-related outcomes. And if we overlay this with multidirectional flows of knowledge interactions, the map of activities can be quite complex.

Returning once again to the South African context, one is particularly aware of the coexistence of knowledge systems within which people navigate for the construction of meanings. The social construction of scientific knowledge, for instance, is complex and challenging. Adam Ashforth describes this in his studies on the way in which some people in the township of Soweto in Johannesburg construct understandings of the transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in ways that are completely contrary to the scientific understanding of this (Ashforth 2002). This is in the face of extraordinary advertisement campaigns to educate the public. HIV/AIDS is clearly still a pandemic ravaging South Africa. The failure of social policy initiatives is assured in, for instance, the design of preventive measures without a thorough understanding of these alternative ways of knowing. Taking into account the complete hegemony of the 'western' scientific knowledge system in South Africa's universities it is clear that there is need for the design of specific spaces where these coexisting knowledge systems may engage and interact with each. This is not particular to South Africa. Suzanne Newcombe describes the way in which in India Ayurvedic ways of understanding the human body and the diseases is so fundamentally different from what we might refer to as allopathic medicine. People slide from one system to the other depending on the circumstances. Addressing the interaction between these knowledge systems is a social justice issue. (Newcombe 2017)

There are other kinds of knowing. A project to determine the ways in which the process of fermentation in the preparation of food evolved in a peri-urban community outside Durban has been described in a previous publication and this kind of engagement produces is an unearthing and codifying of systems of knowing that are deeply embedded in the histories and experiences of communities and individual community members. (Bawa 2015) Again, this opens the way for the slow erosion of the legitimacy deficit. It is in essence addressing the social justice agenda by helping to reshape the relationship between different ways of knowing, reinforcing the idea that universities ought to create the spaces for their interaction with each other.

The observation by the women involved in this study (and their families and community) that their practices in food preparation were somehow of interest to university-based scholars, seeing their ideas and practices as being responsible for the design of laboratory-based research, the fact that those practices were codified and taken into the global knowledge terrain can only act to create better/stronger understandings between the community and the university. More importantly, before such actual research engagements begin, an infrastructure for an ongoing connection between the university and the community was constructed involving the local

schools, the local government structure and the local clinic. There is a clear understanding that a suite of different forms of engagement will emerge, a multidimensional suite.

### **Building the infrastructure for a vigorous democracy**

Before progressing further let us hark back to some of the public goods that universities are expected to deliver. Complex, well-functioning democracies require the renewal of the intellectual cohorts of general society, individuals and collectives that are active citizens with social agency. They must do this through building critical thinking and critical awareness, to introduce their graduates to systemic thinking in the context of the super-complexity of modern social and physical environments. They have to develop the skills of problem solving and be able to work in diverse teams. They must have sufficient background in philosophical discourse to engage in ethical reasoning and ethical development. This is a role they must play with their students but also with people in their immediate multiple communities. Engagement provides an exciting theory-praxis nexus where these skills may be honed, in an ethos of service and where policy and implementation gather traction.

In a recent New York Times Op-Ed, Bret Stephens reports on a speech delivered to an audience in China by University of Chicago's President, Robert J Zimmer, in which he states that his university's impressive tally of 90 Nobel Prize winners follows from an academic culture that held fast to "discourse, argument and lack of deference" (Stephens 2017). The foundation for this approach was established very much at the creation of the University of Chicago but it was revitalised in a 2015 faculty report commissioned by Zimmer on *Freedom of Expression* (Stone, 2015). At a time when we sense an acceleration globally of powerful (and frightening) strands of anti-intellectualism and irrationality, it is important that universities and their internal communities continue to be bastions of free expression, discourse and debate that help us to ensure that they continue to drive the unfettered production of knowledge, the development of new generations of fearless intellectuals and to be examples of spaces that that are bastions of free speech and academic freedom.

Universities, however, also have a role to play in extending the capacity of communities to be bastions of free expression, discourse and debate so that the capacity of societies to mediate the onslaught of 'fake news', anti-intellectualism and the retreat from rationality that undermine democracy is strengthened. The lack of deference that Zimmer desires for the University of Chicago, its students and its scholars must also pertain to broader society. The most reliable safeguard of democracy is the development of organic intellectuals and this has to be seen as one of the outcomes of the theory-praxis nexuses of engagement.

### **An evolving engagement terrain. The example of citizen science**

The university-community engagement movement in the United Kingdom had its roots in discourses on science and society and on the evolution of citizen science. The opportunities for the creation of these nexuses referred to above is growing and we are fast approaching the point where we may begin to see signs of the democratisation of knowledge production. The idea that

university-based scholars and community-based activists may indeed begin to work together to jointly shape research activities aimed at some of the most difficult challenges facing the communities or even to engage in (even esoteric) research activities about the local and/or global context. The generation of passion and enjoyment in science and humanities activities amongst young people is of vital importance not only to their own development but also to the capacity of their communities to engage in policy debates of all kinds. Shiv Visvanathan, in his essay “On the Annals of the Laboratory State”, describes the devastating impact of top-down development programmes and projects on communities in India. (Visvanathan 1997) It is of paramount importance to build the capacity of communities to participate in developmental policy debates. The politics of engagement are also the politics of citizen science and need constantly to be evaluated and explored so that the principles of collegiality, mutuality and collaborative engagement are rigorously maintained.

On first reading John Steinbeck’s *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, one could not help but be enthralled by the possibilities of the democratisation of scientific practice and the multiple ways in which the social construction of scientific knowledge can play itself out (Steinbeck 1951). Mary Ellen Hannibal’s *Citizen Scientist* captures through her personal explorations the passion, excitement and emotion in the complexity and beauty of scientific discovery. In describing a meeting arranged by the California Academy of Science on citizen science and the establishment of two large biodiversity research programmes she describes with a sense of belonging:

*We've been here before, in a different way. In opening its arms to the scientific participation of regular people, the institution is returning to its roots. The academy was founded entirely by amateurs. And the contributions of amateurs working at the academy have been fundamental to the working out of one of arguably the most pivotal scientific breakthroughs of all time, the theory of evolution by natural selection. (Hannibal 2016: 197)*

A South African example of such a project has been the compilation of the biome of Ukulinga, the experimental farm of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, done by university-based biologists with a hundred Grade 11 students from 3 local high schools. The students were introduced to a number of instruments and techniques and to the ideas of the scientific method.

### **Architectures: Structures and Policies**

If we accept that engagement ought to be seen as being at the core of a university since it contributes at the heart of the knowledge project, it has also to be seen as a powerful mechanism for institutional transformation. Just as universities are specifically designed for research and teaching/learning, they must be designed for engagement with multiple dynamic interfaces where the intersections of humanity, its poetry, its technologies and nature are re-imagined by multiple partners on an ongoing basis. The need for porous boundaries that are physical, intellectual and sociological in nature is vital for the university as a social institution to be home to different modes of research and teaching/learning and to permit for free, unhindered flow of people, ideas, methodologies and technologies and through which multiple ways of knowing may interact with each other. At Durban University of Technology, every research centre was expected to establish a dynamic interface, a platform for continued, continuous engagements.

The question has to be answered: what are the implications of this for the conceptual and physical architecture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century university if we accept that it needs to develop new and exciting relationships with its communities – both internal and external. The recent exploration of universities as anchor institutions deserves serious consideration as a framework for a range of experiments around the world as a way of facilitating higher education—community partnerships in a variety of contexts. The conference site of the Anchor Institutions Task Force (AITF) meeting in New York City in October 2017 describes anchor institutions in the following way:

*Anchor institutions are enduring organizations that are rooted in their localities. It is difficult for them to leave their surroundings even in the midst of substantial capital flight. The challenge to a growing movement is to encourage these stable local assets to harness their resources in order to address critical issues such as education, economic opportunity, and health. It is difficult to imagine fragile local economies and widening social disparities changing without leveraging stable institutions, especially amidst a decline in government resources. These dynamics have given rise to the concept “anchors” as agents of community and economic development. (AITF 2017)*

Each context will produce its own brand of anchor institutions in the sense that the movement draws on local institutions which are a permanent feature to that context. The idea is that the place of engagement has to be seen to be and designed as long-term, permanent partnerships.

The AITF defines the core values (AITF 2017) of anchor institutions as having a firm commitment to at least

- Collaboration and Partnership
- Equity and Social Justice
- Democracy and Democratic Practice
- Community to Place and Community

This is a powerful set of core values around which to imagine the construction of porous boundaries, dynamic interfaces, policy instruments and programmes of activities. One may imagine that the nurturing of inclusiveness in the face of diversity and difference would also be a core value, a way to ensure that diverse ways of knowing are embraced. Each context though, with its unique signatures will produce its own constructions of engagement and this may make it difficult to imagine the emergence of a theoretical framework for these institutions as a way of contributing to the re-imagination of the 21<sup>st</sup> century university though work in this direction is already being done. (See for example Ehlenz 2017)

### **Some concluding thoughts**

In some form or another, universities around the world are facing a difficult moment as social institutions. To a large extent this mirrors the major changes unfolding on the global stage and the nature of the response of universities to them. Among these three stand out. The first is the impact of human consumption on what was referred to above as the earth-human nexus with its devastating implications if global warming is not reversed. The second is the stubbornness of

deep and grinding poverty in the context of obscenely growing inequality. And the third is the degradation of democracies in many parts of the world. If Bill Readings was looking for social purpose for universities then these (and others) provide the basis for a re-imagination (Readings 1996). The key issue is that none of these large challenges can be addressed simply within the walls of institutions. These are social challenges and solutions can only be developed in the schema of a collaboration between Mode 1 and Mode 2 processes, through basic fundamental research and intensive engagement with social partners (Gibbons 1994).

This kind of engagement, if managed in terms of the learnt lessons of so many collaborative partnerships globally, is fundamental not only as a way to address the solutions to these challenges, but also to address the issues raised by Wilhelm Krull (Krull 2017). The only way that social institutions such as universities can withstand the assault on them in challenging political and economic circumstances is by the emergence of broad-based public support for them. The key challenge here is to ensure that individuals and communities see these as their institutions, as their key engine for addressing the challenges they face, as places where they find themselves represented.

And finally, the construction of a social justice agenda as a motif for the research and teaching/learning activities of universities addresses the critical question being raised by the students at South African universities. Following the logic of Shiv Visvanathan, there is an ever present danger that top-down approaches may have most devastating impact on precisely the people and communities who are considered the beneficiaries of such activities (Visvanathan 1997). Democratic, collaborative engagement in any social justice agenda is critical to mitigate against the risks of the social engineering so often at the centre of development policies. As universities open their doors to students from local communities, the emergence of demands such as this one will emerge naturally.

And finally, over the history of engagement much has been written about the sustainable approaches to the democratic, collaborative initiative, numerous conferences held and many practices evolved. Constructing the architecture for engagement is probably the key challenge facing universities. The gradual but definite emergence of signs of increasing democratisation of the knowledge enterprise will be accelerated if the facilitating intellectual, physical, social and policy architectures are created. Interfaces to turn the university inside out will enhance and strengthen not just the communities which surround the universities but also the universities as knowledge intensive institutions.

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