

First Things First: Summoning History to the Mission of Healing South African Higher Education



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ABSTRACT

The South African Higher Education landscape is fraught with incidents that require urgent attention, if Higher Education is to be restored to its rightful place in the reinvention and preservation of Africa's last country to obtain liberation. This study, therefore, provides a bird's eye view on the history pertinent to diagnosis and healing of this pivotal sector of the country's educational system. Data for the study were generated through the library and search engines for literature on this field of study. While describing the reality about this sector of education, the authors are of the firm belief that the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the aetiology necessary to ameliorating the effectiveness and relevance of the country's higher education system. The findings revealed, among others, the disjuncture between the medieval origins of the modern university and the current state of the South African University with its inevitable neocolonial stage of social change, which is compounded by the historical and current societal problems. The study recommends a more existential and corporate solution to the ills of this education sector, with a renewed sense of patriotism and a conscious existential pursuit of knowledge. It proposes an altered perception and a deliberate reversal of the mental destruction that was cultivated to promote the socially stratified society, as well as a balance between neoliberalism and the love of knowledge for its sake. It is also hoped that the study will raise awareness towards the neglected aspects of social reconstruction caused by long-lasting social conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

Paying closer attention to the unfolding drama of Higher Education (HE) in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) reveals an ever-festering wound that defies the optimism that should have characterised the post-1994 era, in a country which was the first to be colonised by European powers and the last to obtain liberation. In clinical contexts, healing requires history-taking and observation with the view to ascertain the aetiology of the disabling condition of the patient. The same approach is necessary to healing South African Higher Education that is wallowing in some gruesome realities. The reader is here reminded of the murder of the former chairperson of Humanities for the RSA Universities, Prof. Gregory Kamwendo in 2018; whose death is linked to his unrelenting passion to root out corruption at the University of Zululand (UniZULU). In the same year, Prof Bongani Mayosi of the University of Cape Town committed suicide after several failures to resign as Dean. In a "Cassandra-like" fate, he had been facing hostility and rudeness from both students and staff during the Fees-Must-Fall movement. In Greek mythology, Cassandra was a prophetess who was cursed by Apollo for not reciprocating his love. Apollo cursed her

prophecies that they should not be believed, no matter how accurate they were. Eventually, she became known as the prophet of doom, despite the veracity of her predictions. The fate of Prof Mayosi and the elimination of many other African think tanks within the RSA HE system has recently been taken to its tragic aura by the brutal murder of a 51-year-old associate professor, Saber Tayob Mohammed of the University of Limpopo on the 13th of May 2022, who was shot 10 times while jogging. This festering condition of the South African HE has recently been worsened by the brutal murder of the bodyguard to Professor Sakhele Buhlungu of Southern Africa's oldest university for Blacks, Fort Hare in which the professor was actually the target (2023 February).

Corroborating these historical facts is the proliferation of literature of cynicism by some social and educational observers of our education system. In his work titled *Learning Lessons*, Jansen laments the demise of one flagship university in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, which is plagued by incessant strikes spanning a period from 1978 to date.¹ He implicates factors such as political interference, electricity outages, academic timetables, staff salaries, the list goes to 50 items: As if not enough, this RSA HE connoisseur also laments that, at this university, "...students are served a microwave version of Bantu education on a post-apartheid platter."² These unrelenting residues of ethnic social engineering plaguing the HE are also evident in several observations he has made. Jansen reports that while studying in the US, a compatriot and friend of his told him about "another friend who was told by a white South African Professor that he could not do engineering because blacks cannot think in three dimensions".³ This mindset by a faculty member in RSA is indicative of the fact that even lecturers in institutions of HE in RSA are victims of epistemic theft and social Darwinism.

The mental shape characteristic of the producer of the cynical statement above has been sucked into by colonial narratives about Africa, whose agenda setting was to eliminate Africa in the commonwealth of knowledge as a contributor. While trying to pose as an authority in the intellectual capacity of an African, he inadvertently exposes his ignorance of the fact that Africa is home to one of the first modern universities, the University of Timbuktu. Needless to mention, he is expressing his ignorance of the fact that classical thinkers and scholars such as Thales, Hippocrates, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plateau, who have influenced Western thinking, all came to Egypt to enlarge their knowledge.⁴ It can then be said that, in a *Schindler's list* type of execution, Africa is being executed on her soil by those she has conceived. *Schindler's List* is a Jewish holocaust movie in which the knower is eliminated and her ideas are being used by those who have eliminated her.⁵ In this movie, there is a scene in which a young female civil engineer cautions her guard in the concentration camp about the technical fault that would lead to the collapse of the building they were constructing. The guard reports this to his superior, who instructs the subordinate to implement the idea and thereafter kill the owner of the idea. This is akin to an instance at one Black University in RSA where some professors were deflating the passion of their postgraduate students, thereafter stealing the ideas they had initially labelled un-researchable and then publishing them as their own. However, human beings are, by and large, products of their ideological ecosystems. The perceptions which sound too racist above are pardonable when considered against a historical record by Appel, who exposes the clandestine eugenic origins of such mental shape as he states that South African racial and eugenic scientists propounded several theories of intellectual differences between the races.⁶ For example, it was argued by Loram in 1916 and by Briant in 1917 that, "...although Black boys were mentally advanced than White boys, post-pubescent Black males experienced mental arrest and even retrogression."

The picture above grows gorier following Jansen's observations that in this education sector - "dissertations and post graduate exam papers are circulated among friends... passing discussed over weekends at some gatherings in the presence of the same students..." He continues, "Exams and

¹ Jonathan D. Jansen, *Learning Lessons*.(Cape Town.: Bookstorm., 2020).

² Jansen, *Learning Lessons*, 45.

³ Jansen, *Learning Lessons*, 56.

⁴ Zodwa Motsa, "When the Lion Tells the Story: A Response from South Africa," *Higher Education Research & Development* 36, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 28–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1249070>.

⁵ Steven Spielberg et al., *Schindler's List*. (USA, 1993).

⁶ Stephen W Appel, "' Outstanding Individuals Do Not Arise from Ancestrally Poor Stock': Racial Science and the Education of Black South Africans," *The Journal of Negro Education* 58, no. 4 (1989): 549.

interview panels are composed of like-minded people who are in friendship relationships and before you know it, a student has a degree, then swiftly, a job in the department”.⁷ This is a very complex scenario in that, on the other hand, there are ideological power battles, as well as academic jealousies, that at times disadvantage those who deserve degrees while supervisors may also be happier with students who become their intellectual carbon copies. This may then stifle and stunt intellectual autonomy.

Jansen further laments “Some black academics...take shortcuts to academic excellence. There’s no transparency in terms of how budgets are run or accountability...”.⁸ Also, according to him, “independent thinkers stand no chance of promotion as it is very personal.”⁹ Terms for appointment and promotion are based on very low standards. Friends help friends...”.¹⁰

Social justice and reparation complicate the HE landscape even further by resorting to massification, an ethically justifiable stance aimed at creating a balance between quality HE and socio-political reconstruction. This reconstruction move inadvertently becomes a sequel to the ever-degenerating standards at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Jansen claims that universities spike the numbers of incoming students to increase the revenue flow via tuition fees and government subsidies, leading to a sharp drop in education standards.¹¹ Jansen et al. lament the acute scarcity of A-rated Black professors in South Africa.¹² To them, this is the aftermath of a 'psychology of the defeated,' which craves urgent attention.

Among other works which directly raise awareness on the assertions above are: Nhlanhla Maake’s *Barbarism in higher education*, Itumeleng Meko et al.’s *The Battle for The Soul of South African Universities* and Jonathan Jansen’s two books *Knowledge in the Blood* as well as the other one with an apocalyptic title *As by Fire: The end of the South African University*. To accomplish the job at hand, this study will discuss the following: the medieval university and the spirit of its times, the advent of modern universities in Africa, the birth of South African Higher education and its milieu, neoliberalism and its influence in the higher learning of South Africa.

Medieval Roots of the Modern University

This section will trace the genealogy of RSA modern HE with the view to deriving a picture of what university life has been like since the medieval era. It begins this investigation by stating from the outset that history does not apportion modern HE to Europe. However, for this paper, that will be the starting point. What history reports is that, from ancient days, emperors and kings used to recruit young men with a proven record of a high intelligence quotient, and they would train them for service in the administration of their empires. While there is awareness that Africa boasts of the ancient university of Timbuktu, this study, however, acknowledges that the modern university in Southern Africa is a product of the European Medieval University, and this would become the farthest we can go back in tracing the history of HE in the country.

The morphology of the concept of University suggests unity in diversity, and it was first used in Europe to denote a community of scholars who grouped together to educate the clergy.¹³ Contrary to conventional wisdom, the oldest research university, Bologna in Italy was founded in 1088 by an organized guild of students (hence studiorum), whereas the University of Padua was founded by

⁷ Els van Rooij, Marjon Fokkens-Bruinsma, and E Jansen, “Factors That Influence PhD Candidates’ Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics,” *Studies in Continuing Education* 43, no. 1 (2021): 86.

⁸ van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, “Factors That Influence PhD Candidates’ Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics.”

⁹ van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, “Factors That Influence PhD Candidates’ Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics,” 96.

¹⁰ van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, “Factors That Influence PhD Candidates’ Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics,” 92.

¹¹ Jonathan D. Jansen, *Corrupted* (Wits University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18772/12023037946>.

¹² Jonathan Jansen et al., “Why so Few Ps Become As: The Character, Choices and Challenges of South Africa’s Most Talented Young Researchers,” *South African Journal of Science* 120, no. 3/4 (March 27, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2024/16882>.

¹³ T. Thompson, *The African Trade for Negro Slaves, Shewn to Be Consistent with the Principles of Humanity and the Laws of Revealed Religion* (Simmons and Kirkby, n.d.).

masters/lecturers.¹⁴ Heer reports that in medieval times, the term university was used in Europe, to denote a community of scholars who grouped together to educate the clergy.¹⁵ He claims that this Middle Ages term “university,” which comes from the Latin word, *universitas*, meant primarily an association, a corporation of the kind already found in urban life. In its narrow sense, the word university originated as an association of teachers or scholars for their mutual benefit during their sojourn in foreign parts.¹⁶ This institution was built on disputation and dialogicality and debate was therefore central to knowledge-making.

At Bologna, the university originated as an association of German, French and English students. Needless to say, in this cultural and linguistic melting potpourri, there should have been a common language, which in this case was Latin. The penchant for learning was the driving force behind enrolling in a university. It actually led to the finding of the university as opposed to today, where universities are generally started by governments. At Bologna, the people who counted were the students, circular in their interests and completely self-assured, most of them were already mature and experienced men. These students of civil law would tolerate no sermonizing, whether from Rome or from university professors. The University belonged to them. Heer posits that a professor at Bologna was really a kind of private tutor, employed by an independent group of students whose ages might be anything between 17 and 40. This attests to the fact that learning was driven by students.¹⁷ On the contrary, the current generation of students seems driven by economic coercion exerted by the labour market. As such, degree certificates have become more important than learning.

The medieval (1100-1500 AD) university was marked by its veneration for past intellectual heroism.¹⁸ Also, as one of its characteristics was heterogeneity; that is, this institution was highly internationalized. It trained up and molded a new class, or what might also be described as a new type of man, the academic and the intellectual. When that happened, the university then started to attract the attention of the powerful in society. It can; therefore, be surmised that university, which resembled a mass movement, was either established by students or masters with its constitutionality suggesting universe-ality and college-ality. The intellectual *milieu* which became a “substratum” for this university was a revival of the intellectual legacy of the Greeks and the Romans and the students were exposed to the allure of the languages in which original study materials were written. This intellectual trance swept through Europe.

Observation shows that in the history of humanity, every major revolution cannot happen without dedicated ideologues.¹⁹ It is by following these ideologues that we may derive a better understanding of the foundations of the medieval university and its zeal. Among the many, was Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola whose seminal work titled: *Oration on the dignity of man* is representative of the spirit of the times. Below is the transcription of some of the lines from this audio poem that is available on YouTube.

*Man has been bestowed all power;
can be whatever he wants to be...
You are all sons of the most high,
impatient with mediocrity...nothing to be seen,
more marvellous than man.
Man was born to be useful to man.”
As exclaimed by Hermes Trismegistus,
'a great miracle is man', Asclepius!
By the acuteness of his senses,
the inquiry of his reason,
and the light of his intelligence,*

¹⁴ Kanit Wongsuphasawat, Yang Liu, and Jeffrey Heer, *Goals, Process, and Challenges of Exploratory Data Analysis: An Interview Study*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1911.00568>.

¹⁵ F. Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe, 1100-1350*, A Mentor Book (Welcome Rain, 1998), <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=8CEXiRuWKOIC>.

¹⁶ Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe, 1100-1350*, 242.

¹⁷ Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe, 1100-1350*.

¹⁸ Eugene F Rice, “The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460-1559,” 1970, 22.

¹⁹ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (Harper & Row, 1975).

*he is the interpreter of nature,
set midway between the unchanging
timelessness and the flux of time;
that he is the living union as the Persians say,
and the marriage hymn of the world.*

This poem, which is a precursor to humanism, celebrates the intellectual prowess of the medieval man. The last phrase of the first line, “all power suggests intellectual omnipotence, that is to say, the poet acknowledges no hurdles to learning and that all humans have the capacity to do that. If there is a will, man (the generic) can be whatever they want to be. This is a direct rebellion from the intellectual slumber and cynicism that had characterized the Dark Ages (4th -14th centuries AD). For this ideologue, being a man meant being impatient with mediocrity. He further perceived man as a marvel capable of beating all marvels. The poet alludes to the altruistic nature of man in the line: “man was born to be useful to man.” He name-drops; and recurses intellectual giants such as Hermes Trismegistus who also averred that “a great miracle is man”. To bolster his argument, he supports this claim by alluding to the three factors; the acuteness of his senses, the inquiry of his reason, and the light of his intelligence, which when combined, qualify man as the interpreter of nature (scientist). This poem counterfeits the *zeitgeist* which predicated the imperial power later wielded by Europe over other continents. It mirrors the background against which the disdain of ignorance had become a norm. Indeed, medieval man saw ignorance as something that could degrade. It is the intellectual appetite, manifest here, which characterised enrolment into HE, and provided leverage to European powers which in turn provided the imperial muscle to colonize most of the world.²⁰

Intellectual Resurgence

The intellectual milieu of medieval Europe was such that ignorance was disdained, and to be associated with it was self-degradation. This provides a background against which the mathematics-crazed man borrowed the intellectual passions of antiquity which was said to have been inscribed over the doors of the Platonic academy which cautioned: “Let no one unskilled in geometry enter this door.”²¹ The poem shows the weakness of the brain profiling which confines individuals into a mental cage, where they become limited. In RSA, there are children who were made to believe that they could not do both physics and history and make distinctions in both. Those high school learners who do ten subjects at matric, which include natural sciences such as physics and maths; humanities such as history and geography, as well as commercial subjects such as accounting and economics are erroneously perceived as hyper-intelligent. As part of the intra-specific the researchers were able to create other people into the images that they will adopt and inadvertently cajole them into rendering themselves convenient to our manipulation.²² This whole saga constituted what is called epistemic sabotage and agenda-setting. Epistemic sabotage refers to the subversion of a people or an individual’s intellectual abilities. This intra-specific competition strategy is normally aided by agenda setting, which refers to the social organization in which the powerful in society decide what their target of control should or should not know. In the context of an ethnically or tribally chauvinistic society, this may be carried out in the form of muting the history of the target populace/race. The myth of racial/tribal/ethnic intellectual superiority is repudiated by Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Theory.²³ In this theory, Gardner argues that all humans can possess all intelligences, as long as the environment stimulates them. This explains the genesis of the viciousness behind the various educational departments in racially segregated South Africa.

The Advent of Modern Universities in Africa

Modern African and South African universities are a product of European expansionism, influenced by Darwinism. However, this form of education, eventually, proved to be a double-edged sword. While on

²⁰ Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

²¹ Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe, 1100-1350*.

²² C. Darwin, *On Natural Selection*. (New York. : Penguin Books., 2004).

²³ Howard E Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Basic books, 2011).

the one hand, it created intellectual snobs with no relevance to the exigencies of their own people, on the other, it also gave birth to a new generation of activists. These men and women became known as the first generation of African intellectuals. HE was then introduced as a State Ideological Apparatus,²⁴ which assisted those in power to dwarf what Shakespeare would have called the rag-tag people.²⁵ Africans were supposed to receive education of the subordinate race. However, this very education birthed revolutionaries who overturned colonialism. Among them are Mmakgomo Charlotte Maxeke, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, James Moroka, Modiri Molema, Beyers Naude, George Bizos, Onkgopotse Tiro, Steve Bantu Biko etc.²⁶ Higher Education then became an instrument of both social engineering and revolution. Subsequently, it incited conflict among the races. Unlike the medieval university, the inception of this university was inevitably a product of racial and class tension. It fermented the inter-racial and inter-generational rancour which the RSA University has not healed from, hitherto. Below, we turn our focus to this university.

The Birth of South African Higher Education and its Milieu

The arrival of HE in RSA was marked by the establishment of UCT in 1829 as the South African College, a high school for boys. The College had a small tertiary education facility that grew substantially after 1880.²⁷ What is evident here, is patriarchy in the origins of South African higher education, and secondly the possibility of racism. The discovery of gold and diamonds in the North of the country – and the resulting demand for skills in mining – gave HE the financial boost it needed to grow.²⁸ The second institution of Higher learning followed in 1896. Following the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley, this institution was created to provide the new industry with skilled labour. The discovery of gold in the Transvaal expedited the process of industrialization and the demand for an institution of higher learning that could meet that demand. This eventually led to the relocation of the Kimberly Technical Institute to the Witwatersrand in 1906, and its subsequent renaming into the University of the Witwatersrand in 1910.²⁹ Higher education growth continued as the Natal University College in Pietermaritzburg was established in 1910 and granted an independent University status in 1949.³⁰ This was facilitated by its rapid growth in numbers, its wide range of courses and its achievements and opportunities for research. All of these universities were liberal and their racial tolerance and English influence led to the desire among Afrikaner nationalists to establish racially segregated universities under the Volks spirit, hence, Volksuniversiteite. These included Stellenbosch (SU), the University of Pretoria (UP), Potchefstroom, Raandse Afrikaanse Universiteit (now UJ) and the University of the Free State. Running parallel with these were Universities established under the Extension of University Act of 1953. Being an extension of the Bantu education, these universities included among others, Fort Hare, Turfloop, University of Zululand and the Bantustan Universities such as the University of Bophuthatswana, Venda and Vista.³¹ The various racially segregated universities became the pivot of the 1976 uprisings, The Fees Must Fall, Rhodes Must Fall and other # movements that followed.³²

With evident racially-segregated HE, racial conflict was inevitable in the Higher Education sector, which serves as a microcosm of society. The youth in HE rose against the dehumanisation of racism within the HE sector.³³ In reaction to apartheid policies, this led to the formation of social justice and students` political organizations such as the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), South

²⁴ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

²⁵ William Shakespeare and Burton Raffel, "Macbeth (the Annotated Shakespeare)," *And i Don't Understand If the Book Was a Bit Confusing Because It Wasn't*, 2005, 256.

²⁶ Lawrence A Hoffman and Janet R Walton, *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*, vol. 3 (University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

²⁷ Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: [The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid]* (Heinemann, 1990).

²⁸ Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: [The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid]*.

²⁹ Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2012).

³⁰ Wilkins and Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond*.

³¹ Nombasa Mbatyoti, "Black Female First-Generation Students' Lived Experiences at an Historically White South African University" (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2022).

³² Wilkins and Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond*.

³³ Baldwin Ndaba and J. Smith, "Steve Biko and the Rise of Black Consciousness," *The Black Consciousness Reader*, 2017, 23–63.

African Students Association (SASO), later, SASCO, The Pan African Students' Organization (PASO), AZANIAN Students Cooperation (AZASCO) and Freedom Front Youth Plus. This began the culture of youth activism which amassed the power to destabilise the institutions of HE while simultaneously becoming indispensable role players in the democratisation of HE. With NUSAS being predominantly White in its leadership and demography, this inevitably led to a breakaway Black organization called, SASO.³⁴ Its power was prodigious to the extent that the state had to murder some of them, for example, Onkgopotse Abram Tiro and Bantu Steven Biko. This could be attributed to the advantage of testosterone and oestrogen as well as the generativity of an age bracket in transit. This generation had very little to care about (no child, no family responsibility); and at the same time, a lot to care about as far as the future is concerned. Also, they had a lot of time on their hands to organize and strategize. The South African Students Organization (SASO) was founded in December of 1968 at the University of Natal-Black Section, as the campus of Durban-Westville, which later became SASCO.³⁵ Its birth was actually the result of dissatisfaction among some Black students about the ability of NUSAS to represent the interests of a Black constituency. Harry Nengwekhulu, a Turfloop (now UL) student and founding member of SASO, described discontent among black students in NUSAS over issues such as language and flags of delegates. In the following quotation, he points to a particular tipping point at a 1968 NUSAS Conference:

The idea came initially from the conference of NUSAS at Rhodes University. The big problem again with that – normally at those conferences. NUSAS would say “We must fight apartheid; we must sleep in the white areas”. We [black delegates] were doing that at very great risk of being arrested. When we went to Rhodes we said, “No, this time we’re all going to sleep at the location.” [...] And it became a major issue, because why should we have [the] risk of being arrested by going to sleep in a white area, and you [white delegates] are not willing to? If you are fighting the system, you must come and sleep with us.

It was contention over this and similar issues which persistently divided Black NUSAS members from White and finally led to the 1968 formation of SASO. The new organization quickly rooted itself at Turfloop.³⁶ Its inaugural conference was held there in July of 1969, and it was there that Steve Biko was elected the organization's first president. Abraham Tiro, then a second-year education student, was in the hall at the time. However, no sooner had SASO been established at the University of the North than it began to encounter resistance from the university administration. At this juncture, students used the administration's refusal to allow them to affiliate with NUSAS in 1968 to their advantage. As described above, students at Turfloop (now Limpopo University) had been disallowed from affiliating after a protracted battle between University officials and the SRC; in fact, two former rectors at the time had 'encourage[ed] students to “shake off the yoke of NUSAS and to establish their own ... organization.” According to Harry Nengwekhulu, Professor Engelbrecht, who was the acting rector in early 1969, cautioned his students, ‘Don't allow yourself to be used by NUSAS; you are not instruments.’ SASO's on-campus leaders like Nengwekhulu used this to their advantage. They garnered the tacit allowance of Engelbrecht and the university administration to operate on campus: Engelbrecht never came out in support or opposed. He allowed it to operate because we “argued that through our own organization we would not be ‘used.’” Nonetheless, liberals had always been the greatest enemy of the nationalist government. This marked the beginning of political interest in intra-university politics, which became marked by ideological allegiances. This eventually, consciously or unwittingly introduced a new form of intra-racial struggle which demonstrated partisanship along personal and not institutional preservation, pulling institutions asunder.

What further emerges from between Engelbrecht and the students here is the conflict that mutated into a generational one, and institutions of higher and lower learning had to bear the brunt. This was the result of the fact that SRC influenced by the spirit that leaned more toward the exigent and more apparent and yet limited mode scope of socio-political activism. These universities became the epicenters of youth

³⁴ Ndaba and Smith, “Steve Biko and the Rise of Black Consciousness.”

³⁵ Marieta Du Plessis et al., “South African Higher Education Institutions at the Beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Sense-Making and Lessons Learnt,” in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 6 (Frontiers Media SA, 2022), 740016.

³⁶ Ndaba and Smith, “Steve Biko and the Rise of Black Consciousness.”

and student activism, which precipitated the Soweto uprisings of 1976.³⁷ Graduates from these universities, particularly Turfloop, unprecedented by none, produced young teachers who became ideologues of a complete paradigm shift in the politics of RSA. The presence of these teachers in classrooms around the country was a critical way in which Black Consciousness philosophy was transmitted to the next generation of student activists. This ran in parallel with the conscientization of the *Afrikaner jeugraad* ‘patroned’ by the Broederbond (The Afrikaner brotherhood).³⁸ For instance, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, a member of the SRC committee that had invited Tiro to speak, also found employment as a teacher in Sibasa, Venda in 1973. Even though he was teaching Mathematics and Science, Nefolovhodwe strove to, politically, conscientize his students by encouraging them to read all the available newspapers and holding weekly class discussions on current affairs. He attempted to keep this subject relevant by gearing the discussions towards how Science and Mathematics could be used ‘for the good of society’. He also picked particular students for more overt political education, taken verbatim, as Nefolovhodwe states:

*But I would add my own political activism; that’s what I used to do. [...] [I focused on] these ones who may finish school and go to universities, so I was trying to link them with the activities already at a higher level. So that is what I used to do and it went very, well. There are a lot of others who went on to university and became very good activists.*³⁹

This signals us to the fact that while lecturers were working hard to ensure that they produced quality graduates, the adrenaline (fight or flight hormone) of students was spent on the bread and butter issues of the day. The discussion above demonstrates that the blending of political activism with the *zeitgeist* similar to that evinced by the medieval era students, was possible. While teaching Mathematics, and not ignoring the burning issue of his society, he most probably became a hero to his students. While in some quarters, education was discouraged, Pandelani encouraged students to read, and this on its own, has the capacity for personal initiative in the development of one’s medium of instruction and cognitive prowess.⁴⁰ In order to substantiate the argument above, a table is presented below demonstrating disabling and enabling narratives between two diametrically opposed racial divisions and ideologies.

The black education institution v/s white establishment and youth orientation	
Black	White
<p><i>In August 2015, a video titled: ” luister”, captured Black students narrating ...(their) experiences of discrimination and exclusion on campus. “From experiences.”⁴¹</i></p> <p><i>Khotso Seatlholo “We shall reject the whole system of Bantu Education whose aim is to reduce us, mentally and physically, into hewers of wood and drawers of water” ...</i></p> <p><i>Our whole being rebels against the whole system of existence...</i></p> <p><i>The type of education is like poison that is destroying our minds; it is reducing us into intellectual cripples that cannot take a seat in the world community of academics. It is killing an inherent sense of creation in us, and thus, it is frustrating us. Kane-Berman & Stuart (1978).</i></p>	<p><i>“We must strive to win the fight against the non-white in the class room, instead of losing it on the battlefield.” The Afrikaans students complained that the black students were not “student-orientated” on the main campus (“like on the education campus”), and they were rebellious.⁴⁶</i></p> <p><i>Jansen “For years in the decades since 1948, Afrikaaner nationalist sentiment was successfully defended in white Afrikaans schools and universities.</i></p> <p><i>“There was an everyday character of normality in white university life generally and in the preparation of teachers in particular. The curriculum was never</i></p>

³⁷ France N. Ntloedibe, “The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising of 16 June 1976” (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

³⁸ Wilkins and Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond*.

³⁹ Ndaba and Smith, “Steve Biko and the Rise of Black Consciousness.”p. 42

⁴⁰ X. Malcolm and Alex Haley, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X New York,” (Ballantine Books, 1964).

⁴¹ Theunis Roux, “Constitutional Courts as Democratic Consolidators: Insights from South Africa after 20 Years,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 5–18.

⁴⁶ Mark Jansen and Jan van der Kooij, *Evaluating Interfaith Dialogue: Educational Outcomes and Social Impacts* (Amsterdam: Intercultural Dialogue Press, 2017).

<p><i>Just as the youth is currently being encouraged to resist discipline, parental authority, school authority, etc, so can they be brought into revolt against what is decadent and destructive”.</i>⁴²</p> <p><i>There was a schism among blacks when mines were opened. Only men were allowed into the cities, breaking families. Students observed parents enduring atrocities and lost respect for their elders. Rebellion and animosity were ravaging the black race, disintegrating it. Up to today, we see students killing teachers at schools; and now at universities (intra-racial projection of anti-pathy).</i></p> <p><i>Black students who go to universities, both historically White and historically Black, come from a place of violence in their homes and communities, which a re in a society that is deeply violent. “The struggles that we have waged as students are reflective of the persistent historical cleavages such as race and class distinction, which have shaped so much of who we are in our aspirations”</i></p> <p><i>Malaika Wa Azania, Problem: those who stood against things that were dwarfing their nation, were killed (Onkgopotse Tiro).</i>⁴³</p> <p><i>These traits became wired into the personalities of current crop of students (carry a vicarious pain) despite them not being aware.</i>⁴⁴ <i>Generally, blacks were alienated from their own country and this made it impossible for them to love their environments even in the university; as they felt helpless.</i>⁴⁵</p>	<p><i>questioned, only obeyed (military conscription legacy).”</i></p> <p><i>“The authority of the leader was paramount; and any descent was punished swiftly and abruptly. There was no racial tension, for white lecturers taught white students about a white society with a white curriculum.”</i></p> <p><i>“Students, even university students were children, whose parents may be called at home if their offspring missed a class. Many students called their lecturers Oom (uncle) and Tannie (aunt)”.⁴⁷ (intra-racial and generational harmony).</i></p> <p><i>Eg: White students urinated into the food and fed the cleaning ladies at UFS; another white boy at Stellenbosch university did the same thing on the belongings of a black student. (inter-racial projection of hatred) ... “another friend was told by a white South African Professor that he could not do engineering because blacks cannot think in three dimensions”.</i>⁴⁸</p>
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The table above delineates the aetiology of the problems at the heart of the South African HE system. What appears in the table above is a manifestation of the social engineering that internal stratification has unleashed on the unity of the university in RSA.⁴⁹ These stereotypes have been made possible by living apart (Apartheid) of the same nation.

The facts shared on the template further demonstrate that, while a White child is learning in their own language-Europeanised curriculum, taught by Whites, the situation is different for a Black child. This division of society was marked by two forms of alienation, the self and the societal. On the one hand, the state had engendered a cohesive self on the part of the White learner and student (the elect), while on the other, it simultaneously orchestrated a destruction of the ‘othered’ self.

Twenty-seven years after the first democratic election, this social engineering is traveling “incognito.” The Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) in RSA, advised mostly by the base

⁴² Wilkins and Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond*, 286.

⁴³ Malaika Wa Azania, *Corridors of Death: The Struggle to Exist in Historically White Institutions* (Blackbird Books, 2020); Mary Ellsberg et al., “Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls: What Does the Evidence Say?,” *The Lancet* 385, no. 9977 (April 2015): 1555–66, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61703-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61703-7).⁴³

⁴⁴ Jansen, “As by Fire: The End of the South African University.”

⁴⁵ Jansen, “As by Fire: The End of the South African University.”

⁴⁷ Jonathan D.Jansen, *As by Fire: The End of the South African University* (Cape Town: NB Publishers Limited, 2017),13-14.

⁴⁸ David W. Hedding et al., “COVID-19 and the Academe in South Africa: Not Business as Usual,” *South African Journal of Science* 116, no. 7–8 (2020): 1–3.

⁴⁹ Lily Kpobi and Leslie Swartz, “Indigenous and Faith Healing in Ghana: A Brief Examination of the Formalising Process and Collaborative Efforts with the Biomedical Health System,” *African Journal of Primary Health Care & Family Medicine* 11, no. 1 (July 22, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4102/phcfm.v11i1.2035>.

and the superstructure approach to societal reform, ignored this fundamental area of reform, the mind, about which Mbuli argues that, *'ukulimala kwe nqondo, ukulimala kwomuntu*, meaning an injury to the mind is an injury to the person."⁵⁰ The result of this social engineering is that the self of the recipient of the state's neglect and subversion has led to a schism in the personality of the "other". This is the ostracism of a race and individuals classified as part of it. There is, therefore, the need for a psycho-social restoration of the selves that were on the receiving end of state institutionalized injustices and prejudices. It is, therefore, exigent that there be attention to what could rehabilitate the metaphorical "prodigal soul" which has become flung away from sanity to be repatriated back to the itself. This prodigal soul has become an automaton for self-destruction and further alienation. In medical terms, this can be explained in terms of auto-immune destruction. The race that was targeted for an inferior station in race relations was never encouraged to develop the same discipline that was being encouraged in favour of the other races. This *status quo* then mutated into what Jansen calls *Knowledge in The Blood*.⁵¹ Leaf expounds generously on how these generational character traits are wired into our personalities.⁵² With the race that received the raw deal in the social engineering that came with colonialism and apartheid, it is against logic to expect a behaviour that runs contrary to the socialization the erstwhile regime apportioned to them. This is corroborated by Primo-Levi in his work, 'Is this a man' as he states "...being treated in an inhumane manner, makes it hard to maintain your humanity".⁵³

Like in America, this asymmetric symbiosis has led to South African blacks still playing catch-up not only in education-related matters but even in the kind of discipline which is commensurate with academic excellence. This socio-educational challenge is not unique to South Africa. In Britain for instance, Ashimolowo observed an anti-intellectual spirit called "victimology."⁵⁴ Besides the above, there is "tenderpreneurship" of overnight fortunes, which produces instant billionaires, killing the zest for education among blacks. The last and inevitable factor that interferes with the health of the Southern African University is neoliberalism-inevitable and yet not innocent. This concept and its paradox within the South African HE system are discussed below.

Neoliberalism

The interest of the powerful in harnessing the intellectual prowess of the populace has evolved into a control measure and will continue to do so.⁵⁵ In the process, natural selection will continue among humans, and this manifests itself in the higher education arena as well. This is analysed against the unrelenting strides of modernism, post-industrial revolution and its variants as they exert themselves and display their most profound impact on HE, not only, in South Africa but in the whole world. In HE, this is called neoliberalism, a concept that created a political economic framework which privileges: strong private property rights, free markets and cut-throat competition. As part of the global society which also survives on internationalization, its evolution with regards to HE proved, relatively so, to be a departure from the spirit of medieval pursuit for knowledge, where learning was not hyper 'curriculated' so as to suit the market needs. That is to say, the education was in some instances student-driven as has been observed in the case of the University of Bologna in Italy. Neoliberalism put humans into templates, curiosity was thrust into some form of power play which engulfed and besieged the individual's will and genius. This runs in contradistinction to the natural disposition of humans to determine what needs to be known at an individual level as manifested in childhood. From antiquity, this subversion of the intellect was lamented by Seneca who argues that,

I respect no study and deem no study good which results in money-making. Such studies are profit-bringing occupations, useful only in so far as they give the mind a preparation and do not

⁵⁰ Mzwakhe Mbuli, "Before Dawn," (Congress of South African Writers, 1989).

⁵¹ Jansen and van der Kooij, *Evaluating Interfaith Dialogue: Educational Outcomes and Social Impacts*.

⁵² Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health* (Baker Books, 2013).

⁵³ Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health*, 119.

⁵⁴ Matthew Ashimolowo, *What's Wrong With Being Black?* (Destiny Image Publishers, 2011), 296.

⁵⁵ Mark Gatto, "Parenthood Demands: Resisting a Dystopia in the Workplace," *Human Resource Development International* 23, no. 5 (2020): 569–85.

*engage it permanently. One should linger upon them only so long as the mind can occupy itself with nothing greater.*⁵⁶

Seneca's observation provides a clue to the anomalous situation in South Africa's HE where postgraduate degrees are increasingly becoming the reserve of international students. Studies such as those of Maluleke and Ngoepe reveal that at some of South Africa's institutions of higher education, more than 50% of doctoral students are not South African.⁵⁷ Though, the authors in this study esteem internationalization and academic hybridity highly, the dearth of South African students in higher education doctoral degrees should be a concern.

South African Higher education is compounded by the conflict emerging "...under conflicts over limited state funding and attendant an opportune market pressure put on public universities in times of crises that shape profoundly their framing and outcomes, and the future of the universities" pp567. The innate yearning for knowledge as a natural attribute among *homo sapiens* was replaced by servitude towards labour market demands. That is to say, although enrolled, the 'authentic' student was decentred or if you will, an object in the conveyor belt departing from a college to the HR offices of the industrial world. This becomes the inadvertent reality that society and its higher education are plunged into, and once this has become institutionalized, universities are unlikely to produce pundits, innovators and paradigm shifters. This is inevitable for in their place, the higher education landscape then remains with grade seekers who can even use chicanery and other strategies such as threats and manipulation of the unsuspecting members of an institution to obtain a pass that is not corroborated by actual assessment performance. Against this background, those who are committed to quality among the teaching staff become pariahs in their own philanthropic turf. They become the 'cassandras' we alluded to earlier on. The recent case of Prof. Sakhela Buhlungu of Fort Hare University who narrowly escaped assassination on the 6th of January 2023 is a case in point.

The discussion continues with another corollary of neoliberalism in the context of higher education. With the advent of neoliberalism, willingly or inadvertently, the minds of the 'masses' have been 'shepherded' away from the unfettered and student-centred pursuit of knowledge, which strays away from that of the medieval world *zeitgeist*. This is the alienation that subconsciously devours the zeal for the natural pursuit of *opha* (*knowledge*). This mental outlook is implicated in the fermenting of Africa's Diploma disease.⁵⁸ This anomaly has not developed *ex nihilo*. Partially, it is the inadvertent and philanthropic brainchild of the United Nations that made developing countries believe that investing in Human Resources via education was a panacea to economic development.⁵⁹ The only problem with this infinite and unassailable truth is that it is transplanted into a terrain that is hostile to it. Dore opposed the ensuing mismatch between qualifications and quality education (anti-education).⁶⁰ His position is corroborated by Runhare and Gwirayi, who aver that, "...schooling in developing countries has been distorted by massification and abject poverty."⁶¹ One of the ramifications of this view of HE and the self is the obsession with grades such that if a lecturer is not doing his/her work, but giving inflated grades, the students are unlikely to report such a lecturer to the authorities even when he or she bunks classes.

Observation shows that the situation above has led to an impasse in Africa, South Africa included, with a concomitant rise in the "degreed" population whilst at the same time there is an observable exponential rise in unemployment rates.⁶² If not counselled, some universities and colleges will be populated with a dispirited and disgruntled student body that can render them susceptible to chronic

⁵⁶ L. Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic* (London: Collins classics., 2020), 122.

⁵⁷ Mokgadi J. Ngoepe-Ntsoane, "A Systemic Review of the Socio-Economic Status Using Participating Rapid Appraisal: Case Study of Ikageleng Community in North-West Province," *Journal of Public Administration* 54, no. 4-1 (2019): 822-39.

⁵⁸ Ronald Philip Dore, *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification, and Development* (California: University of California, 1976), 341.

⁵⁹ Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, *The Knowledge Capital of Nations: Education and the Economics of Growth* (MIT press, 2023).

⁶⁰ Dore, *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification, and Development*.

⁶¹ Tawanda Runhare and Pesanayi Gwirayi, *Sociological Foundations of Education in Africa: Perspectives, Contexts and Contemporary Issues* (Oxford University Press Southern Africa Limited, 2021), 340.

⁶² Runhare and Gwirayi, *Sociological Foundations of Education in Africa: Perspectives, Contexts and Contemporary Issues*, 340.

strikes, though these may sometimes come from the corruption of the authorities, which the youth may dare to challenge. Additionally, the RSA situation presents a peculiar and complex scenario regarding access to HE, a phenomenon commonly known as massification. With the advent of urbanisation, industrialisation and the death of the agrarian economy and all the industrial revolution stages the RSA populace has been plunged into utter confusion.⁶³ This has been worsened by the ironies of post-1994, whereby the doors of learning were flung open to the previously marginalized sections of the society, while at the same time, job opportunities were plummeting.⁶⁴ When job opportunities are eroding from the youth, pursuing education becomes a mindless exercise. In the deep recesses of the conscience of the disgruntled masses lies apathy, which inevitably leads to intellectual lethargy. Possibilities arising from this include, among others, universities being populated with possible recruits against the academic project, which can be made possible by an undetected existential vacuum.⁶⁵ Hoffer talks about these masses as ‘recruitables’ in the fermenting of anarchy. This situation is compounded by another factor, which is called neo-liberalism.⁶⁶ This market-oriented motive for HE enrolments has the potential to disrupt the passion for learning rendering the modern South African University an antithesis of one in medieval Europe. In the process, there is a subconscious alienation of the self. With RSA being part of the 3rd world, the possibility of a HE that produces independent and innovative thinkers, who could invent and raise their country from the mire of debt-trap and perpetual subordinate status in the world, becomes disturbing. The neoliberal era of HE, therefore, in a very clandestine manner ‘petitions’ for a suspension of the individual pursuit of intellectual independence, innovation, and self-propelled intellectual action. It then coerces humans into a state of automatons to react only to the whim of the comprador class, where the ‘best’ controls the rest. This is the inevitable way of the world. The demise wrought by this interference with intellectual development has been made apparent by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite having world-class universities even before 1994, as a nation, South Africa could not counter the pandemic by inventing its own vaccines, but instead had to rely first on loans that sank the country deeper into its historical debt to procure vaccines. Higher education institutions could also not intervene. This is the result of schooling and not education, which has been lamented by John Taylor Gatto.⁶⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion, there is, therefore, a need for a deliberate effort to foster a balance between obsession with knowledge pursuit and neoliberal forces. To facilitate this rehabilitation, there is, a need for a robust dialogue emulating Athol Fugard’s “My children, My Africa” between historically privileged institutions and their counterparts which has begun.⁶⁸ Finally, the study recommends a student-driven form of social re-engineering and conscientization, which are more existential and empathetic in orientation. The ultimate goal of the new spirit should be to heighten awareness of university students of the need for a deliberate effort to reinvent the university. It should also heighten perception about the threats that are likely to reverse the fortunes of liberation and plunge the country into disarray. In a movement like this, there should also be a reawakening of the youth, across all races, towards the lost and yet retrievable opportunities that could get the nation back on track toward its leadership position on the continent and its responsibility to contribute its share in the restoration of the continent’s ancient intellectual glory.

CONCLUSION

With the view to first establishing the original and healthy state of HE, this study revisited the history of the modern university, from medieval period to the current. Secondly, an analysis of the nature of the

⁶³ Charles Hilliard Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination, and Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴ Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination, and Development*.

⁶⁵ Christopher M. Cullen, S. J. Franklin, and T. Harkins, *The Discovery of Being and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C: CUA Press, 2019).

⁶⁶ Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*.

⁶⁷ John Taylor Gatto, *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher’s Journey through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling* (New Society Publishers, 2010).

⁶⁸ A. Fugard, *My Children! My Africa!* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989).

university or college, spanning from medieval to present-day South African higher education, was conducted. This was done to trace both the evolution and devolution of this education sector with the object of securing knowledge which could assist in restoring its essence, which is under a serious threat. This was done while simultaneously acknowledging the inevitable regarding human evolution and its consequences on institutions such as higher education. The study also paid attention to the contextual constraints of the modern university. Observation of the history of universities and the society of South Africa has revealed that the disunity of the RSA society, which eventually overspilled into its general education, including HE as its macrocosm, has denied this great nation an opportunity to ascend the pedestal of the world powers. That is to say, RSA (the first African country to be colonized and the last to obtain liberation) has missed out, though not completely so and fortunately retrievable, on the opportunity to compete with countries such as the those forming the G7, including Japan, China and Korea, though providence had predestined it for that station in life. With the youth of this country having demonstrated their power to influence the destiny of the country, it is still hoped that the conscientization of the younger generation should revolve around dialogues on how our history deformed and dwarfed us against the first world and the rising nations of our era. The perception that emerged from the observation of the data is aligned with Mphahlele's view that students should turn the separate education model into a source of self-advancement, and a progressive spring of intellectual progress, which will not only set about cleaning up the mess, created by years of mis-education", but also suggest a revolutionary future for the learning process as he notes elsewhere. Taking into account these findings, this study also affirms that "education must liberate students from the political and economic forces that subjugate our people; it must equip people to overcome the barriers imposed on self-realization and the pursuit of one's destiny.

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