

Reciprocity and Responsibility for the Public Good

Hall, M. (2007). Reciprocity and Responsibility for the Public Good. Research Partnerships and Collaborations for Development: Strengthening Structures of Reciprocity and Responsibility. Institute for Developing Nations, Emory University

This is a discussion about partnerships between universities, and so I want to frame the questions of reciprocity and responsibility within the concept of the university as a public institution – a place for research, critical inquiry and public intellectual life and teaching. It is always interesting to ask such questions in the context of South African higher education, because South Africa is in so many ways the limit case of extremes- the ideal of liberation and the curse of AIDS; the beauty of the land and the ugliness of poverty; growing inequality that gives this country the distinction of being the most unequal in the world in terms of household incomes.

At the same time little about South Africa is an exception, and the extremes of the South African case point to potential futures inherent in the present elsewhere in the world. To drive from Cape Town International Airport to the campus of the University of Cape Town is to bring the drab statistics of development economics to life – from shack to mansion; a fifty-fold increase in household incomes in twenty minutes; from 50% unemployment to a critical skills shortage, from treating extensive burns from paraffin stoves to cardiac surgery. But these dichotomies are also everywhere, if less extreme, and more hidden away: in the drive from the suburbs of Washington to the inner city; in the ethnic ghettos visible from the Eiffel Tower; in the drive south on the 101 from San Francisco. This points to the role of partnerships. If partnerships are to be more than amicable and nominal exchanges between Vice Chancellors and Presidents, they will build on the ways in which we can see our possible and potential futures in each other's present circumstances, and build interventions with defined objectives.

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Institute for Developing Nations

***Research Partnerships and Collaborations for Development:
Strengthening Structures of Reciprocity and Responsibility***

*October 8-10, 2007
The Vineyard, Cape Town
South Africa*

Reciprocity and Responsibility for the Public Good

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“How might we begin to imagine new kinds of conversations, relationships and collaborations between and among communities, universities and NGOs in areas relating but not restricted to health, authority, governance and resources such as land and key issues in culture and development such as civil society and indigenous knowledge?”

“How does one begin to create durable structures and processes that nurture and sustain unexpected questions and practices across disciplines and publics engaged in the work of development and in improving the human condition?”

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There are rich and varied possibilities for the conversations, relationships and collaborations that have been imagined in the framing of this conference. One such stream finds its origins in the role of the university in addressing inequality and its consequences. In the broad horizons and long duree of institutional histories, from Oxford, Bologna and Timbuktu eight hundred years ago to the land-grant universities of the US, the redbricks of Europe and Africa's post-independence universities, the great achievement of higher education in the twentieth century was to secularize admissions and widen participation way beyond founding elites, and to maintain and improve the standard and scope of research, critical enquiry and teaching. As such, universities are among the most significant redistributive mechanisms of our times, providing opportunity based on talent, and fuelling economic growth through innovation.

South Africa – again and as so often the limit case – illustrates the redistributive role of higher education, and its direct relationship with the economy. Segregated education was one of the cornerstones of apartheid's legislative scaffolding, and the huge injection of public funds into white-only schools and universities after 1948 reached out to poor whites who had previously been marginalized and fuelled an economic boom that lasted some fifteen years. The same policy also continued and deepened the marginalization of the black majority, denying individual opportunity and potential by preventing any significant skills development through education. By the late 1960s, South Africa had both growing unemployment in the unskilled black population, and an acute skills shortage in the small white population. Now faced with the unexpected economic consequences of segregation, the apartheid government began to invest in secondary schools and universities for blacks, simultaneously attempting to use the repressive apparatus of apartheid to preserve white privilege. The outcome was to create, through significantly increased access to education, a large cohort of conscientized black youth, the genesis of the Black Consciousness Movement, the township uprisings of 1976 and the 1980s, and re-emergence of the ANC as a significant political movement within South Africa.

The point I want to emphasise here is the intimate connection between education, the distribution and redistribution of opportunity, the path of economic growth, and political imperatives. It is simply not possible to understand the history and form of the South African state, both through the last century and today, without taking into account the redistributive effects of education, whether these redistributive effects are advanced or restricted. There are obvious points of connection between this South African story and higher education in the US. It is common cause that part of the remarkable success of universities in the United States has been their ability to attract and foster talent from all parts of the world. To take just one field, gifted Indians were recruited and supported at leading US universities, contributing major advances in information technology. The

return of many of them to India over the last decade has fuelled the efflorescence of the Indian IT industry in cities such as Bangalore – a pattern that is being repeated in China.

American universities are known and celebrated as world universities, developing and redistributing access to opportunity and knowledge. But, as in South Africa, the role of universities is mitigated by public policy and its consequences. Last year, I took part in an intensive seminar with a small group of colleagues, including Professor Adam Habib, then Director of the Democracy and Governance Programme at the South African Human Sciences Research Council, now Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg. Shortly afterwards, Professor Habib set off for New York, to meet with the National Academies of Science and other US academic organizations to foster partnerships, and I set off for Washington, on my way to a meeting at the University of Massachusetts. I was greeted courteously, and was through immigration in thirty minutes. Professor Habib was interrogated for seven hours, the visa issued him by the US Embassy in South Africa was revoked, and he was deported. Public policy intrudes into the shared world of scholarship and creates ironies of history. Twenty years ago, Adam Habib and I would not have been able to live in the same suburb or work at the same university. We could, though, have worked together on sabbatical at a US university. Today, we can work together without restriction at any university in South Africa, but we could not be sure that we would be successful in meeting up on a US campus.

Such barriers run counter to the great achievement of the widening distribution of knowledge through the institution of the university. It is a signal feature of the “network society” so presciently mapped by Manuel Castells that information technology, digitalization and the “death of distance” as a barrier to the distribution of complex information has been matched by intense localization of high-level expertise in the economically developed world. The key to the future of the university at the periphery of this network society is not to dream of the return of the intellectual diaspora – for us the hundreds of Africans who have of necessity made their careers in universities in Europe and North America. It is rather to forge counter-networks through institutional partnerships, combining the global opportunities of new technologies with the creativity of local experience.

More specifically and perhaps obviously, universities address inequality through their admissions policies. As Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated in his magisterial study of the French university system before 1968, the complex mechanisms of university admission can serve both to preserve the power of a social elite, and to regulate the conditions of recruitment to such elites. There are many good reasons for equitable admissions policies, including respect for human rights and social justice. Here, I want to stress the utilitarian benefits of countering inequality through progressive admissions policies. Again, South Africa provides the limit case. The consequence of apartheid education policies after 1948 was one of the highest participation rates for white South Africans ever achieved: by the late 1980s, some 80% of young white South Africans were admitted to undergraduate study at a public university. However, this was 80% of only 20% of the South African population, and the participation rate for black South Africans was under

10%. As already argued, the economic consequences were devastating, and took effect within the span of only about three cohorts of students moving through the system from enrolment to graduation. Apartheid policies restricting participation in university education to white students created crippling shortages of expertise, slowing economic growth to a halt and precipitating the serial crises that started in the early 1970s and eventually destroyed the edifice of segregation twenty years later.

The point of self reflection for a university such as my own is not so much pride in 178 years of history, but amazement that we survived at all, given that until the late 1980s we were restricted by the arbitrary inventions of race from admitting students with innate talent from 80% of the population of the country. And this challenge continues. For, despite a decade of democracy, it is still the case that participation in higher education in South Africa is structured by race, with some 60% of young whites gaining admission to public universities, but only some 12% of young Africans. Inequality is South Africa's most important public policy issue today, and will be so for the foreseeable future. Universities are the key redistributive mechanisms, because our economy cannot grow if 88% of young black Africans are denied the opportunity of advanced study as a result of continuing disadvantage.

And what is the point of self-reflection for US universities entering into partnerships that are defined through reciprocity? I've commented on one area – the foreclosure of human rights and the rising intolerance of some university administrations to dissenting views that are seen to be unpatriotic. One could also reflect on what it means to be a higher education system in which more than a third of all research, across almost all disciplines, is funded by the military. Here is a snip from yesterday's New York Times:

“In this isolated Taliban stronghold in eastern Afghanistan, American paratroopers are fielding what they consider a crucial new weapon in counterinsurgency operations here: a soft-spoken civilian anthropologist named Tracy. Tracy, who asked that her surname not be used for security reasons, is a member of the first Human Terrain Team, an experimental Pentagon program that assigns anthropologists and other social scientists to American combat units in Afghanistan and Iraq. Her team's ability to understand subtle points of tribal relations — in one case spotting a land dispute that allowed the Taliban to bully parts of a major tribe — has won the praise of officers who say they are seeing concrete results.”

My argument, to pull together the threads, is that the great achievement of the university as an institutional form over the last half century has been as an agency for advancing equality through widening participation in admissions and through building national and international networks through which knowledge is created and shared. This is demonstrated through normative forms of the university, and through rogue inversions such as the public university in apartheid South Africa, where the university was the key agency first for the upward mobility of the white population, and then for enabling the “youth revolution” of Black Consciousness and political engagement which eroded the foundations of the apparatus of institutionalized segregation.

In contemplating the defining questions for this conference – the appropriate nature of partnerships and the creation of durable structures that advance development – we must see the university itself as an institutional form for the public good. The critical mirror we need to hold up for ourselves and our community of practice is whether, and how, this measure is being met. This leads to tough practical and ethical questions from both sides. For who will benefit from our reciprocity in creating and distributing knowledge through scholarship, and how will we pace ourselves against the objectives we set?