



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

FOURTH AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS PROJECT SEMINAR

PRINCIPLED LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT DOES IT ENTAIL?

FUNCTION HALL, 4TH FLOOR, KGORONG BUILDING UNISA

MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS, PRETORIA

26 AUGUST 2019

It is with a deep sense of appreciation to my colleagues who have once again put together this lecture that I stand before you today. This I say because we can now confidently say the *African Intellectuals Project* is a flagship initiative for the university. Through this programme we are afforded an opportunity as the university community to reflect on some pertinent questions facing the higher education sector and the society in general. So, thank you colleagues!

Programme Director, for it to be considered helpful to humanity's quest for understanding and knowledge, every intellectual programme must be of relevance to some or other challenge confronting society in general; at a particular time, or projecting into the future.

It must either be a response to or offer some answers to what must be done to solve present challenges. I therefore argue that even before we talk about principled leadership, the very notion of leadership itself must be a response to some prevailing phenomenon. To this end I wish to argue that we must first examine the context within which the exercise of leadership is undertaken, and specifically leadership in higher education.

Let me therefore 'paint the wall' (the context) which will hopefully serve as a canvas onto which Professor Thoko Mayekiso will paint the picture of principled leadership, and what it entails.

The Context

In the same way that the basic education sector was never to be the same again after the June 16, 1976 uprising by learners, the higher education sector has never been the same again since the *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* movements. Also organised

under the rubric of these movements was the *#OutsourcingMustFall* movement.

Whereas the debates about curriculum transformation and the need to change the culture within universities can be traced to the middle 1980s when student and staff (especially academic) organisations began to agitate for radical changes, it was not until 2015 that those calls found such radical expression when the *#RhodesMustFall* movement emerged at the University of Cape Town and spread all over the country.

What cannot be denied is that these movements translated what have always been radical intellectual discourses around the need to decolonise the academy, and what it offers, into a popular movement whose agenda is now understood by more people than just a few activists. Thus, the first challenge that I would argue is faced by leadership within the sector – from the university management through to academic leadership – is how to respond to the calls to decolonise and Africanise our universities.

As we have said many times on this platform, ours must be a true African university and not just a university in Africa. We have gone even further to proclaim that ours must be *An African University*

Shaping Futures in the service of Humanity. And therein lies the second challenge.

The higher education sector must be responsive to the challenges faced by our communities. We must identify with and feel the pain that our communities feel. This we do by formulating and always updating programmes that help us to uplift communities, no matter how small our contributions may be.

It is when we begin to respond to the challenges faced by our communities that we become more aware of the socio-economic conditions under which many of the communities from which our students come from, live under.

The levels of poverty that affect our communities is not just a matter of academic observations for us. We are literally confronted by that as a university. But how?

When students present what may, for some, sound like unreasonable demands for extra space to study regardless of being an ODeL institution. When students demand stipends for food as they complain of hunger, when students demand increased allowances for textbooks, this is a reality, a context within which we must exercise leadership. And it is not easy!

Programme Director, we are faced also with the harsh realities of austerity measures that the country, and the government in particular, is faced with. As he provided answers to parliament last week, the President made a comment that was missed by many, surely because of the narrow focus on some sensational (of course not unimportant) issues that the nation is currently transfixed with.

One of the major points that he mentioned was that the government is struggling to raise the requisite financial resources needed to meet the overall needs of the country.

Once again, and just like the question of poverty, this challenge is not simply theoretical for us as the higher education sector. In the context of *#FeesMustFall* and *#OutsourcingMustFall*, universities are faced with decreasing subsidies, inadequate fees and debt accrued from students, and a shrinking donor base.

There can be no denying that at the core of these challenges is the crisis of neoliberalism, a decadent manifestation of the capitalist system. Our colleagues from Sociology, Political Studies, Economics and Development Studies can elaborate much better on that. Yet, as university managers we find ourselves having to go beyond just an appreciation of the intellectual analysis of what we are faced with. We

must, at the same time as we provide these analyses, also ‘grapple’ with how we balance competing needs.

Last, and exacerbating the crisis of neoliberalism, is the challenge of the rampant corruption that has literally ‘gripped’ and has the potential to ‘cripple’ the world. I am emphasising the entire world because the major weakness that we South Africans have is to often fail to realise that many of the problems that we are confronted with are not unique to us.

As many have pointed out, corruption, both within the public sector and the private sector, literally ‘eats away’ the very little resources that remain as the productive forces (the economies) are shrinking.

This, programme director, is the context within which the exercise of leadership, both in society in general and the higher education sector in particular, is undertaken. It is my submission that any examination of how we as university managers ‘run’ these institutions must begin by appreciating the macro-context within which we operate; what Louis Althusser would call the ‘base’.¹

¹ Althusser, Louis (1970) *Ideology and ideological state apparatus (Notes towards an investigation, in Althusser, Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. New York, Monthly Review Press

It is once we have had a 'grasp' of the 'base' that we can move towards the 'superstructure', that is, practical challenges that we are faced with and what needs to be done.

Some specific challenges faced by universities

In a very short 1965 comment in the non-academic journal, *Science*, William K. Seldon made a disturbing assertion which has come to haunt the higher education sector. Writing on the governance of the universities and liberal arts colleges in the USA at the time, Seldon had this to say at the conclusion of his liberal commentary:

If society is to thrive and progress, higher education must nourish individual freedom and creativity, but it must be prepared to do so under forms of governance different from those which have prevailed in the past. A new day, with intensified public and governmental concern for higher education, is rushing upon us. If higher education does not or cannot assume constructive leadership in facing this new day, the public, through its civil government, will be forced to do so.²

To say that the ability of higher education institutions to remain sites of independent academic enterprise that are insulated from the

² Seldon, William. K (1965) The governance of higher education, *Science*, Volume 149, Number 3685 (13 August 1965)

interference of government and influence of the market has almost been eroded would be an underestimation.

In their summary of a major project undertaken under the auspices of Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) some five years ago, Ebrima Sall and Ibrahim Oanda outline some of the challenges faced by higher education institutions on the continent.³ The findings of the project indicate that universities have had to change at a fast rate, responding to the need to create knowledge, improve equity and respond to student needs. This has led them to compete for the best students, research funds and the best academic staff.

The changes brought to bear on universities have produced a new dynamic. On the one hand is the push for decreased direct management by governments. On the other hand, and as universities have to galvanise resources over and above what the state can provide, has been the adoption and “rising influence of the business enterprise model as an organisational ideal”.⁴ There is however divided opinion on whether this approach is necessary.

³ Sall, Ebrima and Oanda, Ibrahim (2015) Revitalising higher education for Africa’s future, *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, Volume 12, Number 2, pp. 95-107

⁴ Ibid, pg. 98

There are those who argue that the adoption and promotion of an 'entrepreneurial' university model is necessary as it can lead to galvanising of resources and efficient management thereof. Critics have however pointed out that increased involvement and adoption of private sector views will lead to the rise of 'academic capitalism' and the ruin of the university as cultural institutions, leading to the erosion of academic freedom and independence, plus critical scholarship.

There is no doubt in my mind that we will agree that these are the realities that we are facing as universities. Related to this development is what has come to be known as the emergence of 'managerialist' practices within universities, which have led to managers being accused, sometimes correctly so, of running universities as if they were business enterprises and not safe spaces for the academic project. Yet, it is not as if, as managers, we choose to adopt some of these practices as if we were blind. It is always a tender attempt to balance competing interests – a quest for the production and nurturing of independent and critical knowledge on the one hand, and the need to manage the resources of the university on the other; encouraging (I bet you can at times say 'pushing') academics to publish and produce more PhD graduates on the one hand, while ensuring that such publications and the quality of the PhD graduates are of a high standard.

Having briefly outlined some of the specific challenges faced by universities what then are our expectations of the kind of leadership that must be provided in these institutions?

Leadership within higher education: Some points to consider

In her reflections on an experimental project carried out in the United Arab Emirates, Lauren Stephenson provides a detailed outline on some of the observations that emerged when assessing the efficacy of what has come to be known as transformative leadership.⁵

Drawing from varied theoretical traditions, including the work of Paolo Freire,⁶ the transformative leadership approach “begins by considering individual, organisational, and societal goals for education transformation and social justice”.⁷

Stephenson provides the following description and approach of transformative leadership style which I wish to quote at some length because of the pertinent points raised. She writes:

⁵ Stephenson, Lauren (2011) Developing a Leadership Education Framework: A Transformative Leadership Perspective, *Counterpoints, Volume 409, transformative LEADERSHIP: A READER* (2011), pp. 321341

⁶ Freire, Paolo (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder

⁷ Stephenson, Lauren (2011) Developing a Leadership Education Framework: A Transformative Leadership Perspective, *Counterpoints, Volume 409, transformative LEADERSHIP: A READER* (2011), pp. 321341

(Transformative leadership) takes into account the disparities and inequities in the wider society and attends to the ways in which these disparities affect the ability of organizations to be successful and the ability of individuals to experience both equitable access and equitable educational outcomes. Transformative leaders work, broadly, for goals related to both academic excellence and for overcoming inequitable practices, both within and outside of schools. Transformative leadership is an analytic and normative concept that recognizes the need for leaders to address beliefs, assumptions, practices, and policies that oppress or exclude some groups.⁸

She continues, this time paraphrasing Shields (2010):

It (transformative leadership) links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded, focusing on the generation of transformative actions that permit the full inclusion and participation of all, that eliminate deficit thinking, that address issues of power, privilege, and hegemony, and that hold all to appropriate high expectations.⁹

⁸ Ibid, pg. 325. Emphasis in parenthesis added for clarity

⁹ Ibid

We can safely say that how we respond, and responded, to student demands during the *#RhodesMustFall*, *#FessMustFall*, and *#OutsourcingMustFall* movements determine whether we can be said to be transformative leaders.

Apart from the approach, the practical style of a transformative leader is marked by a “shift from theory to practice, from roles to processes, from knowledge to learning, from individual action to collective action, and from detached analysis to reflexive understanding”.¹⁰

Finally, Stephenson postulates five key beliefs that shape transformative leadership, which she does qualify are not to be understood to be straightforward, but are fluid, organic, evolving and complex. These are:

- Leadership competencies can be learned and developed
- Leadership is contextual and is influenced by culture
- Leadership development is a lifelong process
- Leadership is learned best through leadership in action and through reflection on that action, and,
- Leadership is based on a foundation of ethics and manifests itself in service to others.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 335

Others postulate what they call responsible leadership. Kim Cameron starts off on a cautionary note:

Responsible leadership is rare. It is not that most leaders are irresponsible, but responsibility in leadership is frequently defined so that an important connotation of responsible leadership is ignored.¹²

It is to Nicola M. Pless and Thomas Maak that we turn in an attempt to understand what responsible leadership is. For these writers, responsible leadership is about “accountability, appropriate moral decision-making, and trust”.¹³

Pless and Maak argue further that, by definition, “responsible leadership is geared toward the concerns of others and asks for what and to whom leaders are responsible”. This means that responsible leadership is not about ‘the self’ as in an individualistic manner. It is about ‘the others’.

As Deborah Hicks and Lisa M. Given argue, in a way bringing the arguments made by Stephenson on the one hand and Cameron on the

¹² Cameron, Kim (2011) Responsible Leadership as Virtuous Leadership, *Journal of Business Ethics*, Volume 98, Supplement 1: Responsible Leadership (2011), pp. 25-35, pg. 25

¹³ Pless, Nicola. M and Maak, Thomas (2011) Responsible Leadership: Pathways to the Future, *Journal of Business Ethics*, Volume 98, Supplement 1: Responsible Leadership (2011), pp. 3-13, pg. 4

other together, and paraphrasing James MacGregor Burns, a “leader (should be) in a position of communal influence with his followers”.¹⁴

Hicks and Given’s approach in synthesising principled leadership approach together with transformative leadership is indeed much more helpful than Pless and Maak (who I referenced earlier). The latter tend to argue that the two approaches are different.

It is my submission that these schools of thought can be brought together in ways that are useful for us, especially in the context of our lecture today. More than even Hicks and Given, I would argue that it is Michael E. Brown and Marie S. Mitchell¹⁵ who provide us with more ‘food for thought’ and challenge on what principled transformative leadership should perhaps entail.

Focusing on ethical leadership and its effects on an organisation Brown and Mitchell argue that “what leaders incentivize communicates what they value and motivates employees to act in ways to achieve rewards”.¹⁶ It is therefore, continues Brown and

¹⁴ Hicks, Deborah and Given, Lisa M. (2013) Principled, Transformational Leadership: Analyzing the Discourse of Leadership in the Development of Librarianship’s Core Competences, *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, Volume 83, Number 1, pp. 7-25, pg. 9

¹⁵ Michael E. Brown and Marie S. Mitchell (2010) Ethical and Unethical Leadership: Exploring New Avenues for Future Research, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Volume 20, Number 4, pp. 583-616

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 583

Mitchell, “not surprising ...that employees rely on their leaders for guidance when faced with ethical questions or problems”.¹⁷

Paraphrasing Treviño *et al* (2000, 2003), Brown and Mitchell argue that leaders “must be both strong moral persons and moral managers in order to be seen as ethical leaders by those around them”.¹⁸ Critically, argue Brown and Mitchell even further and necessitating that we quote them at some length:

Strong moral managers who are weak moral persons are likely to be seen as hypocrites, failing to practice what they preach. Hypocritical leaders talk about the importance of ethics, but their actions show them to be dishonest and unprincipled.¹⁹

How then do all these relate to the topic at hand?

Leadership in the era of transformation

It is my submission that any discussion about leadership should, as I have already tried to demonstrate, be located within the context and tempo of what obtains on the ground. I have demonstrated that ours is a discussion that is taking place in the era influenced largely by the

¹⁷ Ibid, paraphrasing Treviño (1986)

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 585

¹⁹ Ibid

student movement of 2015 - #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, and #OutsourcingMustFall.

It is a debate that is taking place against the backdrop of increasing pressures on universities as a result of the pressures from below exerted by both students and workers, and austerity measures from above, imposed by the state.

It is a debate that is shaped and influenced by global and continental shifts in the governance and management of universities. These shifts, as I have tried to demonstrate, are themselves shaped by the hegemonic neoliberal market forces which have eroded the autonomy of universities and have forced us to accept and adopt business models of governance and management.

The consequence of all these has been increasing threats to the academic project, and the changing picture of a university as a space for independent knowledge production and cultural advancement.

It is this complex environment that we operate in, and under, and the emerging, sometimes depressing, picture that we are facing on the canvas, that we must contend with.

This complexity must further be located within the broader context of decolonising and Africanising the university. That we must do, no matter how contradictory and enormous the task may be and feel.

It is against this complex backdrop that our capacity as leadership is tested. It is indeed out of these treacherous waters that we must emerge as principled leaders. It is therefore my hope that Professor Mayekiso will help us to see that and understand the picture as she starts to paint it, and we begin to see ourselves in it.

On behalf of the Council, Management, Staff and Students of the University of South Africa I wish to welcome you Professor Mayekiso, and all present today. We look forward to learning from you.

Thank you!!!