

Need to evaluate how universities produce knowledge today

THE Herald reported on NMMU vice-chancellor Derrick Swartz's address at Saturday's first-year students' welcoming ceremony ("Fees cannot fall", January 23). Many had waited with great anticipation to hear his thoughts, given his absence during the eight-week-long shutdown last year.

Swartz's address had quite a global outlook, with globalisation, and the rapid growth and displacement of industries by way of technological innovation taking up much of his speech.

As expected, his address also included views regarding the fees issue and related questions about protest. It was the usual constitutionalism he had also referred to in 2015 and a restatement of the university council's position – that free education was a national government, not a university, issue.

As is the trend with much of the engagement regarding the fallist movement, Swartz's address was limited only to questions of which actions were legal and which not, pronouncing he would clamp down on any attempts to blockade the university.

I ask whether his address offers sufficient contextualising of the wave of protests that have swept through the country's universities over the past two years? I'll borrow aspects of his address to answer this question making specific reference to the debate on decolonisation, one of the central issues for the fallist movement.

On the role of universities in society

It is important to consider that part of the fallist movement's concerns have been the direction of the knowledge project in South Africa, because in its view very little of what is presented as South African scholarship reflects the South African experience. Much lacks a critique of racism, capitalism and colonialism's role in the shaping of what is considered post-apartheid South African society.

The dominant forms of knowledge that speak to modernity and the requirements of capitalism

reinforces a violent system, and sanitises the structural exclusion of millions of people, their enslavement and land dispossession.

Swartz characterised universities as having the responsibility of generating what he termed "higher level knowledge". Higher level knowledge, from what he presented, can be understood as knowledge that creates further opportunity for the expansion of the human enterprise on Earth.

It is often associated with the fields of science and technology, where new findings enable innovation in industry and provide opportunities for employment and through it for economic growth.

Such an understanding of what constitutes higher level knowledge fails to consider the political, social and cultural nature of knowledge production, and privileges a narrow view of education for economic ends alone. Thinking through the politics of knowledge requires that we probe what knowledge constitutes valid knowledge, for whom is such knowledge produced, by whom and for what purposes.

Swartz's view, I believe, is extremely limiting and avoids any reference to the critically important debate which the present conflict in the university raises – about the content, form and purpose of high level knowledge production and its intellectual challenges.

In this regard even a cursory examination of the main characteristics of the global order will show that the great crisis of the world today is represented by deepening inequality, racism, violence against women, destruction of the natural environment and the growing impunity of war-mongering corporate states. This warrants an urgent explo-

In my View



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ration of alternative knowledge for an alternative society.

This implies that our society, at a global and local level, operates around a particular form of knowledge – one which is racist, capitalist and patriarchal, and construes ideas of governance and power in specific ways that promotes the prevailing arrangement of society.

American scholar Ernst Boyer is often credited with the idea of scholarly engagement within higher education. Boyer fits several practices within scholarship into different categories, namely the scholarship of discovering knowledge, the scholarship of integrating knowledge to avoid

pedantry, and the sharing of knowledge to avoid discontinuity.

He arrives at engagement, as the form of scholarship that is dedicated to application, addressing questions of active citizenship and immediate social challenges. The rise of engaged scholarship has been coupled with the rise of participatory research methodologies that recognise the importance of collectivist approaches to knowledge production that do not rest on the perspective of a distant researcher above that of the so-called objects of research.

Yet Boyer's formulation of engaged scholarship is limited in its lack of critique of the idea of the university as a colonising, capitalist institution which organises knowledge in ways that support the domination of the world and culture by Euro-American capitalist modernity.

As a result, in keeping with the capitalist mandate that subdues research to safe questions that do not challenge authority and unsettle global capital, many

institutions, like NMMU, do the bulk of their engagement work in the form of partnerships with industries – providing cutting-edge research to several sectors including mining, motor and chemical industries – with some charity-based models where very little of the interaction with "communities" feeds back knowledge into the university's own knowledge construction processes, its curriculum and research in particular.

A recent example of why this is a problem is that there are disputes emerging around the Missionvale campus regarding participation of community members in various projects on the campus, including a project involving food garden cooperatives.

It should be within the ambit of the university to work with communities to find sustainable ways of living and to be a critical voice in challenging how the world is organised against the poor. Very little of what is taught within university lecture halls is informed by any analysis of the knowledge that arises from engagements beyond the gates of the institutions.

A case for new knowledge

Higher level knowledge has to be knowledge that challenges our traditional ways (I refer mostly to modernity as tradition here) of thinking at all levels of society. It cannot only be limited to instrumental approaches to satisfy the needs of industry but must also, critically problematise the destructive nature of the present social system.

On the university and its meaning today

In a university that seeks to produce dynamic higher level knowledge, questions of globalisation should not be limited to discourse about the changing nature of work and industry in the last 30 to 50 years, regarded as naturally occurring phenomena.

It should be seen as an outcome of deliberate human action.

The loss of jobs and industries are results of human decision-making and in particular profit-making by global elites. It is intellectually disingenuous to present them as purported by Swartz in his address.

Also globalisation must be understood as a product of colonialism that has impacts for culture, reason and knowledge in society today.

In as much as it is important to possess a knowledge of technological tools that now make our society tick, it is also important that for questions of sustainability and social justice, universities must also produce graduates who understand the world beyond market-driven knowledge.

Most importantly, an African university must offer an understanding of the world that is informed by the very experience of African people on the continent. Without such we will continue to promote a knowledge that doesn't allow us to construct the



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alternative society we need.

It is thus important to interrogate the current wave of student protests at university much more deeply, especially with regard to their critique of the process of knowledge production.

Whatever disagreement may exist with the methods employed by students and workers, they have raised an important discourse which dares us to think deeper about the challenges that exist in our society, and about what and how change should occur if we are to establish a different society.

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