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# Transforming an Open University: Examining the University of Cape Town

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Roberto N. Ifill

*I* joined the Faculty Development International Seminar under differing circumstances than many of my colleagues. Although I shared with them an abiding interest in South Africa and concern about its future after the dismantling of apartheid, my position at the College connects me directly to the topic of Transformation and Multiculturalism. At Macalester, as well as in the States and across the world, we continue to struggle with competing necessities: respect for difference and the urge toward building community. As I see it, the struggle forms around a series of hard questions. How is it possible to reconcile respect for diverse perspectives with the requirements of civil society, especially when it is difficult even to keep the two values in an uneasy suspension? How do we establish multiculturalism as a fundamental institutional value? How should diversity act to restructure and revivify our institutions, rather than serving as a superficial patch to cover past misdeeds?

I looked to the new South Africa as a nation that is honestly struggling with those questions in the context of establishing true democracy, providing equitable economic growth, and binding up great wounds that were centuries in the making. From what I had read and heard about events over the past decade, it appeared that South Africa had been miraculously transformed from a brutal, racist, retrogressive regime to one of the few beacons of democracy on the continent. It appeared all the more miraculous because the ultimate transition to majority rule was remarkably free of bloodshed and because of the enduring nobility of the first leaders, including Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. I was eager to learn, as best as someone spending only a brief time in a complex society could, whether these miracles had actu-

ally occurred and whether the rapid forward progress of the early 1990s was being stymied by the realities of the late '90s.

My overall impression of South Africa is that the tale of miraculous transformation is overdrawn, but not entirely fanciful. Some of the indications are obvious—symbols like the national flag, coins, or the variety of black people in visible positions of authority. In many areas, the transformation seemed to occur almost overnight. Other changes were subtler. For example, we were informed that Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa, lay in the heart of Afrikaner political power. There was little evidence of their continued presence; instead, I encountered a wide variety of black Africans, and to my eyes, the firm set of their faces seemed to tell me “this is *our* country, now.”

Nevertheless, the effects of apartheid persist in South Africa, much as the symptoms of disease linger in the body even after the virus is destroyed. The shanties of the townships still exist, despite efforts by the government and private developers to build modest single family homes. Residential segregation is still stark; efforts to break down the strictures of the defunct Group Areas Act are resisted by all parties. Most heartrending for all of us, the vast disparities in income, wealth, opportunity, and personal autonomy remain, despite slogans of the ANC promising thorough reform and redistribution.

I believe these results are partly explained by the path the leadership of the new South Africa chose in coming to power and in governing. It would have accorded with human history if the new leadership had indulged the urge to wreak retribution on their former oppressors. However, the senior leadership believed such action would destroy the fragile freedoms so newly won by frightening away foreign investment, encourage internecine warfare among the many African ethnic groups and the re-creation of ethnic enclaves first carved out under the Group Areas Act, and ultimately lead to the civil wars that plague so much of the continent.

Instead of acting to monopolize their political power, the victorious ANC extended it, even to some former foes. I think about the design of the national flag and how it ingeniously intertwines the sacred symbols of the contending groups in a way that creates a new, syncretic symbol. I am impressed that there has been little impetus for purges, except (understandably) in the national security apparatus. Instead, new and old personnel, methods, and principles are encouraged to interpenetrate, providing a more dignified exit for the old regime and breathing and learning space for the new.

As we discovered during our visit to Pretoria and especially Cape Town, these attempts to ease into radical transformation carry a steep price. Although the common people strongly support the ANC, many in the trade union movement are impatient with the slow pace of improvement in wages and labor conditions.<sup>1</sup> The prosperous sectors of the South African economy have led it to unprecedented growth, but unemployment in many of the larger townships is still well over 50%. I was impressed that the infrastructure in the two cities I visited was in excellent shape; the roads were in good repair, electricity and other utilities ample. We could see construction cranes working feverishly all over Cape Town. We could also see piles of household trash toppling over in the townships because there were insufficient collection services.

One of the more stubborn reminders of the apartheid system is how its scheme of racial and ethnic classification persists in the public imagination. Officially, South Africa is one nation composed of cosmetically diverse people. Officially, race is understood as a social construction. The underlying reality, however, remains this: in South Africa, society is a racial construction. A number of us interrogated our hosts about race, racism, and its continued influence. Perhaps we saw all too uncomfortable parallels with the United States, or we wanted to break through the shell of denial. Whatever the case, for me the analogies to the United States were obvious, and so less interesting. What left a distinct impression on me is the status of the mixed-race South Africans, usually referred to with some embarrassment as the "so-called coloured." In the racial economy of apartheid, these people were encouraged to form a distinctly different society from that of other black Africans, adopting Afrikaans as a mother tongue, and being allowed to be citizens of South Africa while blacks were relegated to "homelands." Many rejected the "divide and rule" strategy and formed alliances with the liberation movement that eventually came to power but a large number did not. What I found remarkable, in my conversations with some professionals in a coloured township near Cape Town, was that many young people want to carve out a distinct identity, not so much to garner privileges as they had before, but in protest of their newly second-class citizenship. In short, they don't wish to become absorbed in a pan-African *mélange* and lose their language and syncretic culture.

The contrasts and contradictions that I noticed throughout South Africa were echoed at the University of Cape Town, the focus of my

research study. I was drawn to examine UCT by memories of a grants program initiated by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation while I was a program officer there. UCT was one of four South African Universities (including the University of Witwatersrand, University of the North, and the University of the Western Cape) who were anticipating the end of apartheid and wanted to accelerate racial integration of their institutions. Significantly, UCT and Wits were almost 100% English-speaking white, while U North and UWC were almost exclusively people of color. The first grants were distributed in 1990, and I was curious about whether they had any significant impact on these institutions. Given the limited time available for discovering the answers to this question, I concentrated my efforts on UCT, as it is arguably the most prestigious university in the country and its former Vice-Chancellor Stuart Saunders was quite persuasive about his commitment to the issue in his meetings with us in New York.

In the sections of the essay that follow, I sketch a brief portrait of UCT and its place in the apartheid era. I focus more attention on the immediate post-apartheid era, when many reforms were instituted, and then describe from the perspective of some college literature and refreshingly frank administrators how UCT is currently meeting its challenges. I close the essay with my own assessment of how UCT needs to make progress in the future to transform itself into a first class multicultural institution.

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The University of Cape Town is the oldest university in South Africa. Founded in 1829, it has long been an enclave of the English-speaking academy, much as Stellenbosch University has served Afrikaans speakers. UCT offers courses at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels in the arts and sciences, medicine, business, law, and other applied fields. At start of the 1999 academic year, it had enrolled 16,000 students, about 11,000 of whom are undergraduates. The curricular structure of the University is an amalgam of British and American models, with semi-autonomous divisions called Faculties, each with its own dean. Above them is a senior staff of deputy vice-chancellors, presided over by the Vice-Chancellor, the equivalent of a University President. The Chancellor is an honorific title, but somewhat similar to the Chair of the Board of Trustees, which is called the University Council.<sup>2</sup>

UCT has long prided itself as being an “open university,” and that term deserves some explanation. For much of the history of South Africa before the Afrikaner-dominated National Party came to power, rigid racial segregation was de facto practice. With the establishment of apartheid, the government systematically erected legal barriers to separate races and languages. In higher education, a provision of the Group Areas Act attempted to codify in law what was occurring in practice—racial and cultural exclusion in the universities. The law created new universities for coloured and black African students and attempted to restrict cross-racial admissions at existing schools. A number of universities, including UCT and Wits, resisted this imposition by declaring that their existing policies forbade racial exclusion in admissions or hiring.

At UCT, the protest was symbolic as well as practical. The Torch of Academic Freedom, usually lit as its bearer led academic processions, was carried extinguished for the following thirty years. The president of student government the year the Group Areas Act became law was a black African. UCT established a reputation as a liberal institution fighting a principled battle against the injustice of apartheid. Its graduates and professors either were or were connected to leading white dissidents and gave quiet support to the more radical resistance of the ANC and its allies in their struggle against the National Party.

By the late 1980s, it became increasingly clear that the unwieldy apparatus of apartheid was crumbling. Accompanying this realization was a great fear—that the system would collapse in a crash, causing severe economic dislocations, ruptures in the social fabric, perhaps civil war.

During these turbulent times, UCT was among the leading institutions seeking ways to embrace the changes about to occur. In part, this was because the reality of the “open” universities did not match their aspirations. Until 1990, nearly 90% of the student body was white and nearly 100% of the faculty and staff. People of color generally resided at low-level positions or in service jobs. Outside of a small African languages department (which also taught Afrikaans), there would be little to show a visitor that UCT was, in fact, a college in Africa, except the flora and fauna in the small preserves surrounding the campus. Lip service to liberal ideas of equal opportunity would not suffice in the South Africa looming on the horizon at decade’s end.

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The fundamental issue confronting these institutions and higher education across South Africa is how can these institutions effectively diversify in order to serve the needs of the new South Africa? Pendant on this central question were a number of others:

- How do traditionally white institutions attract African students, faculty, and staff? Is there sufficient capacity for the expansion this entails?
- How can this diversity be sustained?
- How and where will this diversity affect the operation of these institutions?
- Can (should) institutions reconcile greater diversity with reputation for academic prestige?
- How much should higher education invest in primary/secondary education to prepare new generations of students?
- What more may be required, beyond diversifying, for South African universities to serve their students, faculty, staff, and nation better?

In many respects, the questions these universities faced were similar to those faced by many institutions in the United States in the late '60s and early '70s, so it isn't surprising that leaders in institutions like UCT looked to the U.S. for advice on effecting a rapid increase in racial diversity. As we shall see later in the essay, the difficulties encountered in working toward the answers were also similar to those encountered in the States ever since.

The first and most enduring focus of interest at UCT was the student body. In 1989, 84% of the student population was white South African but by 1995 nearly half of the student body were students of color.<sup>3</sup> (Unfortunately, in a country where 80% of the population are of color, this increase represents limited progress.) In interviews with UCT officials, I learned that several factors have contributed to this trend: increases in students who would have chosen traditionally black institutions; increases in enrollments from other sub-Saharan African nations; and decreases in white enrollments. Because of stringent admissions standards and the continued inadequacies in the pre-college education system for black South Africans, there has been little growth coming from the general population of high school matriculants.<sup>4</sup>

The rapid influx of black students brought with it a series of challenges that continue to confront UCT to this day. These students, in the aggregate, were graduates of poorer quality secondary schools, had lower incomes, and traveled farther from home. Therefore, a higher proportion of these students required academic and residential life support on a campus that had limited amounts of either in the late '80s. The curriculum offered at UCT drew largely from Anglo/American models, outside of specific Africanist programs. Faculty diversity had lagged significantly behind student diversity. It was quickly evident to UCT's leaders that increasing diversity had far-ranging implications for the conduct of the University itself. What wasn't clear was what those implications were.

In response to these challenges, UCT instituted a number of changes, whose pace accelerated under the aegis of the first ANC national government in 1995 and the arrival of the first black Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, in 1996. The emphasis now moved from *transition* to *transformation*, from reform to reformulation. Efforts to diversify the university were now to inform a comprehensive planning process that affected all aspects of UCT, from its governance structure to its curriculum to its physical plant.<sup>5</sup>

As early as 1980, UCT established the Academic Support Programme (ASP) to counter the effects of unequal educational opportunity. Its staff devoted itself to various programs of remediation and "bridging" to increase the success of enrolled African students at UCT and to prepare greater numbers of potential students for its academic rigors.<sup>6</sup> By 1994, ASP became ADP, as "Support" gave way to "Development," and, more importantly, its mandate and mission expanded. As a result, the program and its leaders became more prominent and relevant in the life of the University.

Perhaps the most significant reforms over the past decade were sparked, in part, by student protests in 1993. Even before the elections that brought Nelson Mandela to office and before the new Education Minister mandated transformation plans for all colleges and universities in South Africa, a group of student leaders pressed the University Council (equivalent to a Board of Trustees) to establish a Transformation Conference that intended to reshape the institution fundamentally. An executive committee composed of equal numbers of students, faculty, and staff emerged from this Conference with substantial authority over rethinking governance, admissions policies, curricular

development, and the mission statement. The committee also worked to select Dr. Ramphela as the new Vice-Chancellor.<sup>7</sup>

The lasting product of that movement, beyond an ambitious mission statement, is the raising of expectations. No longer could UCT complacently rest on its history of liberal reform; it was now in the throes of transformation — or was it? As other changes swept across the campus in the '90s, there was growing concern that the rhetoric of transformation leapt far ahead of its reality. Perhaps nowhere is that dissonance more acute than in the areas of faculty hiring and student affairs.

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As noted, the diversity of faculty and staff has lagged well behind that of students at UCT. Over 90% of tenured and tenure-track faculty are white (and male!); this figure represents 40% of instructors at the university. In the larger group, there is somewhat more diversity, but it is as precarious as the job tenure of those instructors. In my research in University documents and, more usefully, in interviews with staff directly involved in the recruitment and retention of faculty, I can identify a number of reasons why.<sup>8</sup> There are considerable constraints on the supply side that inhibit rapid diversification, but more disturbing are the barriers on the demand side that limit opportunity.

It should come as little surprise that the pool of available scholars of color, particularly black Africans, is small. The education system under apartheid was grossly inequitable in its allocation of financing, teachers of ability, facilities, and materials. Small wonder that few pupils of color even matriculated at colleges and universities, let alone graduate programs. Those few who did acquire sufficient credentials to be eligible for employment were often relegated to second and third tier establishments, from which few UCT faculty were likely to come. Many scholars who had protested apartheid were jailed, banished to the countryside (including the most recent Vice-Chancellor and one of her Deputies), or went into exile in Europe or the United States. Given the lengthy gestation period needed to produce new scholars, it would be some time before a healthy supply would develop.

In addition, with the opening of educational and employment opportunities, many students who might have considered the academy now opt for positions in the government, business, or other institutions. The lure of these positions attract faculty currently on staff as

well, and did so particularly during the formative years of the first ANC administration.<sup>9</sup> The scholars in exile have not proven to be a significant source for new faculty either, according to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of Human Resources.

There are two developments that are acting to offset these trends in a modest way. More faculty from other African and Asian countries are being attracted to the university. As universities throughout sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia are suffering from declining resources, campus unrest, and crumbling infrastructure, UCT becomes ever more attractive. The second development is the "Growing Our Own Timber" program in existence for nearly ten years, funded by the Mellon Foundation and others. This program provides recruitment and mentorship for undergraduates interested in pursuing advanced degrees. As there are many levels of teaching status at the University, the program also helps its enrollees navigate toward a tenure-track position. My best assessment of the program so far is that there are many enrollees at the beginning of the pipeline but very few at the end.

Although my correspondents were pleased to discuss attempts by the University to improve the supply side of the market for faculty diversity, they were equally forthcoming about their disappointment with the resistance they continue to feel from faculty hiring committees. The process of hiring new faculty is similar to that followed by universities in the U.S., except that the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, advised by the Employment Equity (Affirmative Action) Officer and Transformation Officer, may intervene if the search process ignores or defies the need to enhance diversity in the faculty. Once given approval for a search, departments are largely autonomous in determining the fields of study, criteria for judging credentials, scope of institutions searched, etc. Only recently has the University mandated direct contact with the Employment Equity Officer both before and during the search, so as to avoid forcing the Deputy Vice-Chancellor to cancel a search near its completion.

In the view of UCT officials, many departments view the impetus for diversity as a top-down initiative, less rooted in the enduring values of the institution than in current day political realities. There is, therefore, the tendency to treat diversity and quality as contending values. This judgment is reinforced when a candidate's credentials are judged on the perceived prestige of the institutions or publications listed in the vita, or when the definition of research and teaching fields

are strictly based upon Anglo-American models. Administrators fight a pitched struggle against the inflexibility of search committees, a scenario familiar to many Affirmative Action officers in U.S. institutions!

With respect to students, the challenge is less in attracting an increasingly diverse student body than in creating conditions for academic success and community building. As noted, students of color, particularly black African students, face a number of hurdles even before they matriculate—the poor condition of pre-college education, little family experience with college, lack of independent income, geographical isolation. Therefore, many students require support, not only for academic preparation but to manage all of the profound changes they will experience.

In addition, residential life stands at odds with academic life at UCT. A small majority of students live off campus after the first year. The overwhelming majority of those students are whites who find it much easier to rent close to a campus located in an affluent white suburb, or whose families live close by. As result, over 70% of dormitory residents are students of color, the majority being black Africans. Diversity may be achieved, but at the expense of building community.

This scenario resembles that facing a number of traditionally white institutions in the U.S. a generation ago. To their discomfort, many administrators, faculty, and students discovered that diversity not only changes the complexion of a campus community, but also the way it operates. If the institution doesn't make good use of the opportunity for building a multicultural community, tension and the impetus toward new segregation develop. The students of color feel like guests or educational exhibits in their own institutions. They are disconnected from support mechanisms and their professors and, ultimately, their academic work suffers. As the literature confirms, the results are lower grade point averages, lower retention and graduation rates, and a greater tendency for faculty and staff to invidiously compare diversity with quality.

UCT suffers from these trends as well, but has put a number of programs in place to counteract them and to encourage transformation toward a multicultural campus. The Academic Development Programme mentioned above has been absorbed into a more comprehensive program, the Center for Higher Education Development (CHED), which combines all student support services, ranging from academic advising to job placement. The operative model for CHED has several elements—comprehensiveness, connectedness of functions, and seam-

lessness. A comprehensive program not only serves a number of purposes, but also a large number of clients; students of color are therefore no longer marginalized as the only ones “needing help.” Connectedness allows for students, faculty, and staff to share information, insights, and ideas, rather than compete across arbitrary boundaries separating curricular from non-curricular issues. Seamlessness is perhaps the most important feature, in that it allows students easier passage through the support systems, and demystifies the process of becoming a successful student and community member. The newly appointed Dean of Students is cautiously optimistic about the prospects for this new approach, especially as it has to contend with unresolved conflicts that have built up over the past several years.

In the areas of faculty hiring and student life, UCT continues to struggle to meet the daunting goal it has set for itself. Although the institution is devoting increasing resources toward solidifying its position as a world-class African university, it is unclear whether that involves fully committing to the ideal of a multicultural community—that is, one in which diversity is fundamentally connected to the values of the institution and helps to nourish them. UCT’s difficulties are mirrored in South Africa as a whole. In its symbols, policies, and practices, South Africa continues to struggle with the project of forging a national identity that is at once all-embracing, yet dependent upon respect for distinctive subcultures.

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Our brief tour of history and present conditions show that the University of Cape Town has bobbed atop a roiling tide of change in South Africa, sometimes floating out ahead of the crest, sometimes lying beneath it. In the last decade, it has seen dramatic change in the demography of its students, administrative leadership, structure, and relations with its stakeholders in and out of government. For all that, I would judge that it has yet to transform itself into the world-class African university cited in its mission statement.

For transformation truly to take place, a number of conditions should be met. The university should continue to critically scrutinize the Anglo-American model of the Academy, especially as to how it hinders continued progress and sets diversity and quality against each other. Faculty and staff should challenge the “deficient student” construct when working with students of color; it turns out that the acade-

mic support these students need is useful for all students. CHED has established a beachhead, but its philosophy should be broadly shared in the faculty. One way to accomplish that is to make more strenuous efforts to diversity the faculty and staff.

As UCT moves forward, it should continue to reexamine what it means to be a leading institution in southern Africa, and how it measures its success. Should success be gauged by the number of Nobel laureates in the faculty, or the proportion of graduates who hold influential positions in public service and industry in South Africa and throughout the continent? We can put the question another way. Will UCT become a catalyst for the African renaissance so confidently predicted by President Mbeki, or an isolated redoubt, preserving its “purity” from the encroachments of the new South Africa?

The sense I have, after speaking with staff and examining documents, is that there is ambivalence about the proper answer to these questions, perhaps because UCT is still in transition and unsure about the leap into transformation urged by student protest and the vigorous leadership of the outgoing Vice-Chancellor. As in the United States, people are products of their upbringing and training; even as they reject the racist values that had surrounded them, they are still haunted by them.

I did feel some rays of hope, however. UCT has recently commenced a comprehensive strategic plan and transformation lies at the heart of it. The recently revised mission statement more explicitly ties the aspirations of the University to transcending the “legacy of apartheid in South Africa and to overcome all forms of gender and other oppressive discrimination.”<sup>10</sup> The most pointed criticisms of the status quo came from younger white staff, and I trust they are seconded by their counterparts in the faculty. I look forward to returning to the University in another five years or so to assess the progress they have made. ●

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## Notes

1. In the recent national elections, they won an even larger percentage of the vote than in the previous ones. Roelof “Pik” Botha, a stalwart member of the “liberal” wing of the National Party, announced he would join the ANC while we were in South Africa.
2. *Taking Stock of Transformation at the University of Cape Town 1996–1999* (1999), 20.
3. *The Transformation of the University of Cape Town mid 1980s–mid 1990s* (1996), 6.
4. *Ibid.*, 10.
5. This process is described in detail in *Taking Stock*, 15–18.

6. Ibid., 21–25.

7. *Transformation*, 3–4.

8. Dr. Dan Ncayiyana, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of Human Resources and Transformation, and Frank Motteno, the equivalent of the Affirmative Action officer, were invaluable resources. Thandie Lewin, the Transformation Officer, was particularly helpful in giving me candid assessments and access to a wealth of relevant material. Dr. Loveness Kaunda, the new Dean of Students and warden of the All-Africa House, provided important insights about student life.

9. Indeed, the Vice-Chancellor had accepted a senior management position at the World Bank two months before our arrival. She had been the first black and female in this position and was responsible for many of the rapid changes that had taken place.

10. Excerpted from the University of Cape Town Mission Statement in *Taking Stock*, p. 6.