

# Three Theses on the Social Dimensions of Higher Education

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**Abstract:** *As we search for some fundamental principles about higher education in facing an ever more uncertain future, it may be well to look critically at our past. In this paper I will do so, looking at history both recent and distant, in settings that I have some familiarity with. I formulate three theses: one on diversity, one on excellence, and one on responsiveness.*

**Keywords:** *Quality; diversity; excellence; responsibility; responsiveness.*

There are, I believe, two key questions we should always ask about our academic work. The first is: what are we good at? Most of us, and certainly all university leaders, are very practiced in responding to this question. We can easily reel off subjects and disciplines in which we excel, statistics about rankings and league tables, names of eminent alumni, tales of prizes won, and evidence of esteem indicators. There is, however, also a second question, which I believe is of equal importance. The second question is: what are we good *for*? We are much less practiced in responding to this second question. Indeed, it still seems to catch us by surprise. This question is about our role in society – about the social dimensions of higher education. It is within this context, that of the good-for question, that I would like to put forward three theses, drawing on past experience in order to try and formulate helpful principles for the future.

My first thesis grew out of my time as Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University. Stellenbosch is a university town about 50 kilometers east of Cape Town. Historically, it was the first inland town founded by the Dutch settlers, when they started venturing out from their fort in Table Bay in the 1670s. It is located in an area of great scenic beauty, situated in the Winelands of the Cape. It is also well known amongst rugby fans as the base of a rugby club which has produced many Springboks for the national team. For all of these reasons it is a very popular tourist destination.

There is however another reason why Stellenbosch is worth knowing about. It was there, in that beautiful university town, where apartheid was born. Most of the well-known figures of apartheid had a Stellenbosch connection, and for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Stellenbosch was the intellectual home of the apartheid regime. The architect of ‘grand apartheid’, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, was a Professor of Sociology at Stellenbosch University before he turned to politics. D.F. Malan, the man who won the election of 1948 which initiated the 46-year rule of the Nationalist Government, had his home in Stellenbosch. Indeed, the National Party itself was founded in Stellenbosch, in 1914 (two years after the founding of its nemesis, the African National Congress). When Verwoerd was assassinated in 1966, his successor was a Stellenbosch alumnus, John Vorster, who became Chancellor of the University – as did Vorster’s successor, the strongman P.W. Botha.

Surely it is one of the tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Afrikaners, who had the sympathy of the world after being defeated by the mighty British Empire in the Boer War of 1899-1902, decided that their only chance of survival was through the domination of others. And surely, within that narrative, we should take account of how and why a university became a standard-bearer for a narrow ethnic

nationalism, proclaiming itself (through the mouth of Rector H.B. Thom in the 1960s) as the *Volksuniversiteit* of the Afrikaners.

It is necessary to say something about apartheid, for those readers for whom it is a concept distant in time or geography. On a high wall in the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg you will find a display which lists all the apartheid laws passed by parliament between 1948 and 1994. There are many, and they are very detailed. Apartheid was intended to make sure that white people and black people would live their lives separately, that white people would exercise political and economic power while black people would supply labour, and that education for black people would be restricted on the grounds they would never need anything more. Cities and towns were divided into separate residential and business districts, every post office and every police station had two entrances, one for ‘whites only’ and one for ‘non-whites’, and every park bench, every bus and every beach was likewise designated. Nationally, all African black people were supposed to be resident in one of the so-called ‘homelands’ (or ‘Bantustans’), but were permitted to come and work in the white areas provided they had a ‘pass’ authorizing them to do so. In the educational sphere, Dr Verwoerd himself piloted the Bantu Education Act through parliament, in the process asking the infamous rhetorical question ‘What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics?’

The ‘grand apartheid’ vision was that each of the homelands would be an independent country for each of the separate ‘ethnic’ and/or linguistic groups: the amaZulu, the amaXhosa, the Batswana, the VhaVenda, and so on. The rest of the country would be for the white people. (The fact that, in this manner, about three quarters of the population was supposed to be resident on about 13% of the land was glossed over.) Then, as regards higher education, each of these independent countries would have its own university. This idea was duly enshrined in law through the ironically-named Extension of University Education Act of 1959 – which meant, in reality, that black students were removed from ‘white’ universities, because they were supposed to go to their ‘own’ universities. In this manner, apartheid thinking went, a very diverse country would have a very diverse higher education system.

Or would it? That rather depends on what you think diversity looks like.

I was appointed as Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University in May 2001, while I was still working in Australia. I was the first ever Rector to be appointed from outside the University; the first who was not an alumnus, and the first who had never been a member of the Afrikaner *Broederbond* (‘Band of Brothers’), the secret organization behind the National Party. How, I wondered, when I took up office on 1 January 2002, does a university which had been the intellectual exponent of apartheid become an integral part of the new South Africa?

Stellenbosch University, as I found it, was still largely populated, and entirely controlled, by white Afrikaners. In my view this situation was neither justifiable nor sustainable. I took up the leadership of the University committed to the view that the acknowledgement, promotion and celebration of diversity should be a key response to the legacy of the past. But that would have to be a diversity different from the apartheid kind: not a diversity where people were kept in different boxes, but a diversity where people rub up against different people all the time.

There is pleasant tradition at Stellenbosch University that the academic year begins with an academic opening: a full academic procession, and a university-wide congregation where all new students are officially welcomed by the Rector. Like most universities in the southern hemisphere, the academic year at Stellenbosch follows the calendar year, and so the academic opening usually takes place at the end of January. Within a few weeks of taking up office, therefore, I had the opportunity to give a major address to my new colleagues and students. And this is what I said:<sup>1</sup>

*Stellenbosch University needs more diversity.*

*The reason why I believe we need more diversity is this: diversity has an inherent educational value. That is why we need more of it. This is an educational institution. Our business is about knowledge. That means we all have to learn, all the time. [And ...] we will learn more from those people, those ideas and those phenomena that we do not know, than from those we know only too well. We need around us people who represent the rich spectrum of South African life, and we need the diversity of ideas that are new to us. We need to pursue this diversity of people and ideas because of our core business – which is to learn.*

I could have chosen to justify diversity as a moral imperative, which it was. I could also have chosen to justify it as a strategic or even a tactical move. Instead, I chose to give an educational justification for diversity at an educational institution. It is always easier to be convincing when you really believe what you are saying, and I am convinced of the inherent educational value of a diversity of people and ideas. This became the keynote, so to speak, of my Rectorship at Stellenbosch, and I believe it remains as valid today as it was then. And so, for present purposes, I present it as my first thesis on the social dimensions of higher education:

### **Quality needs diversity.<sup>2</sup>**

For my second thesis, taking my cue from the antiquity of Bologna *La Dotta*, let us first go back into European history. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1277, in Paris, there was an attack on academic freedom. The Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, issued a condemnation of 219 propositions associated with Aristotelian teachings at the University.

As we know, the writings of Aristotle entered western Europe via Muslim Spain during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, causing a tremendous intellectual revival. Particularly influential were the writings of ‘the Commentator’, the jurist, physician and scholar known as to Europeans as Averroes of Cordoba. Averroes took the stance that it was wrong for religion to forbid philosophy, and this very same point of contention resurfaced in the Catholic Church. The Bishop of Paris, for one, in his scatter-gun condemnation, believed that he was defending faith against dangerous Averroists like Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia. These logician-philosophers were rationalists, arguing that reason should follow its course irrespective of any doctrine of faith.

But the Bishop overreached himself. Amongst his 219 propositions were some attributed to a renowned scholar who was supposed to be on the side of the Church: Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor. While Aquinas did write a treatise against the Averroists, he was himself a true Aristotelian, teaching the primacy of the intellect over the emotions. For Aquinas, God was ‘the most perfect of intellectual beings’ – a kind of Supreme Professor of Logic. He made it his life work to reconcile faith and reason in his *Summa Theologica*, and that he was largely successful is shown by the fact that he was not only canonized within 50 years of his death, but that Thomist teachings remain a key part of the Catholic Church even today.

And so universities, in a wonderfully unintended consequence of the Condemnations of 1277, became liberated to follow reason wherever it may lead. Over time, this dedication to the exercise of reason and the pursuit of truth became what we might call the soul of the university – its essence, or animating principle. Five hundred years after the futile actions of the Bishop of Paris, Immanuel Kant reformulated the primacy of reason in a little treatise titled *The Conflict of the Faculties*.<sup>3</sup> The University, as was common in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was composed of four Faculties. The three ‘higher’ Faculties of Law, Medicine and Theology were, according to Kant, subject to the bidding of the state or

the Church. The ‘lower’ Faculty of Philosophy (or the Arts), however, had the privilege and the obligation to be answerable only to reason.

*It is absolutely essential that the learned community at the university also contain a faculty that ... concerns itself with the interests of the sciences, that is, with truth: one in which reason is authorized to speak publicly.*

The same ideal was still prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We even installed our own patron saints of higher education: Wilhelm von Humboldt as the proponent of blue-sky research, and John Henry Newman as the proponent of teaching knowledge for its own sake. When we formulate what we are good at, we do so in the context of Von Humboldt and Newman.

But then, around the turn of the new millennium, something happened. We made a Faustian bargain. We traded reason as the soul of the university for something called ‘excellence’. Somehow we convinced ourselves that higher education is a competitive enterprise, and that our job is to outperform our colleagues at other universities in measurable output parameters. Higher education thus becomes a kind of continuous Olympiad.

Let me draw out the consequences of this change by saying something about a cliché: the knowledge economy. If we take this idea seriously there is a simple but profound question which has not been asked often enough: in the knowledge economy, what are the drivers of supply and demand? In the academic world in which I grew up, the answer was clear: the driver of knowledge on the supply side is the curiosity of the individual researcher. That is why we speak of ‘curiosity-driven’ or ‘basic’ or ‘pure’ research, and this was the pre-eminent and most highly esteemed kind of knowledge production. Moreover, in the paradigm of curiosity-driven research, knowledge production was as much as we were required to do. As long as our output was good, and we kept on pumping out knowledge into the world, that was our job done. We were confident and comfortable in our belief that through the workings of an invisible hand, curiosity-driven research would in the fullness of time bring benefit to society. In the meantime, we could reap the rewards of ‘excellence’ by enjoying the esteem indicators of being highly ranked.

Most of us, including myself, actually do believe in the validity of the invisible hand argument. However, increasingly many of us also believe that, while true, it is not the whole truth. It is essentially a supply-side argument, not taking account of the fact that the workings of the invisible hand are unpredictable and slow. It focuses on what we are good at, ignoring the entire demand-side dimension of the question what we are good *for*. There is a legitimate question about the extent to which we respond (or fail to respond) to the needs and demands of society, and ‘excellence’ by itself will not answer that question. That is my second thesis:

#### **Excellence is not enough.<sup>4</sup>**

For my third thesis, I will first draw on recent experience. I live in a town called Franschoek, about an hour out of Cape Town. In 2017 and 2018, Cape Town very nearly became the first major city to run out of water. For three winters it did not rain to the extent expected, and dam levels went down precipitously. There was an imminent risk that the taps would run dry. Severe water restrictions became the norm: no watering of plants, no washing of cars, re-using your household grey water, two-minute showers only (not more than once a day and not every day), not flushing the toilet every time you use it, and so on. It is fair to say that the City was not well-prepared, and for some time its response to the crisis seemed to be only to pray for rain. There is something else worth noting for its absence, though: where were the universities? There are four universities in and around Cape Town, three of them have an institute of water research, and none of these institutes played any major visible public

role during the crisis. Which raises the question: if universities have so many experts, and there is a need for knowledge to address some societal challenge, where and how should these experts play a role?

This is very much an issue on the demand side of the knowledge economy, and it brings up a question about the responsiveness (or lack of responsiveness) of universities to societal challenges.

Nowadays most universities, in most parts of the worlds, see their academic work as playing out in three portfolios: research, teaching and something variously called ‘outreach’ or ‘engagement’ or ‘community service’ or even ‘third strand’.<sup>5</sup> Now here is a question: in your university, is the ‘Outreach’ portfolio defined by what the university would like to deliver, or by what society actually needs? Further, turning the question into a little thought experiment, the university could ask itself: of all the grand challenges facing society, globally, nationally and regionally, for which of these do we have the knowledge base and the academic expertise to help find solutions? Moreover, which of these challenges are particularly relevant in our own city or region? So, for example, when there is a water crisis, will our institute for water research be in the forefront of seeking solutions?

The question of responsiveness (or lack of it) is very much in the context of the overall ‘good for’ question, and it is a question well worth the attention of all universities. Does your university, for example, have a ready portfolio of responses to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals? And does that portfolio feature on your university website with the same level of prominence as your latest ranking on the most fashionable league tables? In terms of local challenges, have you taken notice of the idea of ‘university social responsibility’?<sup>6</sup> Do the leaders of your university have regular meetings and productive collaborations with the city council or local authority? Do you educate your students primarily so that they can get jobs, or so that they can be responsible citizens?

I have already made the point that knowledge production is indeed a valuable part of our social responsibility, but that excellence in knowledge production is not enough to discharge that responsibility. So what more do we need to do? We need to do as much on the demand side of the knowledge economy as we have been accustomed to doing on the supply side. Specifically, we need to put that which we are good at to work, in response to the needs and demands of society. That is my third thesis:

### **Responsibility requires responsiveness.**

Let me conclude by returning to the Condemnations of 1277. One of the rationalists whose work stood condemned was a now-little-known figure called Boethius of Dacia, or ‘Danske Bo’. In a marvelous little treatise titled *De Summo Bono* he wrote:

*The supreme good open to man is to know the true, to do the good, and to delight in both.*

This sentiment rather sums up what I wanted to say about the social dimensions of higher education. To know the true is our traditional task. It is about the pursuit of truth, the exercise of reason, knowledge production, the supply side of the knowledge economy. It is what we are good at. To do the good is to put our knowledge and expertise to work in responding to societal challenges. This what we should be good for, and what we should do more of. And finally, we might do well to remember that we can take delight in both.



- <sup>1</sup> Amanda Botha (Ed.), *Chris Brink – Anatomy of a Transformer*, SUN Press, Stellenbosch, 2007. Also freely available as a downloadable pdf on the internet.
- <sup>2</sup> First formulated in an address delivered at the Rhodes Trust Centenary Reunion in January 2003. See Botha, *Anatomy of a Transformer*, Part 2.8.
- <sup>3</sup> First published in 1798 in Königsberg as *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, it was actually composed of three different sections written at different times. *The Conflict of the Faculties* was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1992, translated and with an introduction by Mary J. Gregor. See <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/nebraska/9780803277755/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Chris Brink, *The Soul of a University – why excellence is not enough*, Bristol University Press, 2018.
- <sup>5</sup> I am one of those who believe that the terminology ‘third strand’ has been harmful. In positioning our role in society as a third strand of activity, we divorced it from research and teaching, thus characterising it as an onerous add-on obligation rather than an integral part of scholarship.
- <sup>6</sup> See for example Daniel T. L. Shek and Robert M. Hollister (Eds.), *University Social Responsibility and Quality of Life – A Global Survey of Concepts and Experiences*, Springer, 2017. It is also worth noting the existence and activities of an international network of universities called the University Social Responsibility Network, <http://www.usrnetwork.org/>