Putting universities in their place

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EDITORIAL

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Fearing the loss of an academic year, students at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) returned to their studies in April 2018 after extended protests over the deplorable conditions in the institution's residences. The angry demonstrations in which students clashed with armed police came after Democratic Alliance (DA) national education spokesperson Belinda Bozzoli slammed the university and its managers. She said WSU was 'on its last legs', describing it as a 'train smash' riddled with corruption and led by a 'punch-drunk' management overseeing falling academic standards and a 'dirty, unkempt and unsafe' campus. She further characterised the students as, at times, murderous, and noted that WSU was sited in 'the second most violent area in the world' – the former Transkei.

By contrast, the former Deputy Vice Chancellor of Wits University presented the University of Pretoria (UP) as 'gorgeous' and 'vibrant', a well-managed, socially diverse and internationally competitive, if underfunded, institution – a 'jewel' in South Africa's higher education system. Her general argument seemed to be that the government should not forsake institutions such as UP in its efforts to promote a one-size-fits-all model across the sector. Bozzoli's argument was greeted with anger by senior managers at WSU, who are fully aware of the atrocious conditions in which many of their students live and sought to address her concerns during her visit as part of their continuing deep commitment to trying to improve the situation at the university.

Not just in Mthatha, but in East London, Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg, poorer students are often crammed into over-priced rooms let by unscrupulous landlords in relatively deprived neighbourhoods that lack adequate facilities and services. They may be unable to access safe public spaces; affordable cafes or food shops; necessary communication services (such as high-speed internet and/or free mobile data); appropriate sports and cultural facilities; and relevant academic-related work opportunities. Where such services and facilities are available, they are generally privatised, driving up the cost of higher education for those least able to afford it.

These issues, which have been increasingly driving student protests in South Africa, are problems of place: the actual urban environment in which universities are sited, and how local urban stakeholders, including the private sector, local authorities and the universities themselves, address, or fail to address, the material realities facing many historically disadvantaged students, as well as larger issues of development.

The current Department of Higher Education and Training's policies of higher education, as well as Bozzoli's alternative propositions, appear to seek to wish away the material realities of the places in which students find themselves. However, urban planners across the world have rather sought to confront the role that may be played by anchor institutions – facilities such as hospitals and universities that have, literally, nowhere else to go – in fostering local socio-economic development and, in the process, improving the lives of their students and staff.

According to this view, campuses should no longer be regarded as discrete university spaces, but rather as common, urban spaces. In addition, in pursuit of genuinely equitable

public-purpose mandates, universities have a duty to address the needs of *all* their students – not just those of wealthier students who can afford to live in pricey, privatised digs.

In South Africa, it has been suggested that cities like Johannesburg are still growing despite the absence of major new investment in manufacturing. It has been shown that the city has increasingly become a national and continental hub for innovative services and the knowledge industry, which depend mainly on relatively skilled labour. This growth depends on the quality and talent of the university students produced, and on Johannesburg's ability to retain, attract and use their skills effectively. The observation can also be applied to cities like Cape Town and Durban.

One approach to fostering such growth has been to retrofit urban infrastructure to create university-based precincts that accommodate new technology and knowledge hubs that foster innovation. For example, the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, with little support from the municipality, has turned Braamfontein into an IT hub of Africa and is supporting the transformation of the Hillbrow precinct into a hub for the arts and creativity.

In Europe and America, universities have increasingly adopted a 'third mission' beyond research and teaching, which has included investing in programmes and infrastructure that would secure the safety of staff and students, thus attracting and nurturing talent as well as addressing problems of urban blight and crime. Similarly, UP has engaged with a wide range of local stakeholders around its campuses, especially its Hatfield precinct, helping to create a safer environment, sustained investment and urban renewal.

Different proponents of university city-building place a range of emphases on the relative importance of public and private sector involvement in the process. A comprehensive view is that although private investment is crucial to local economic development, anchor strategies involving universities, hospitals and other public institutions are obliged to embrace a social contract with the urban collective that goes beyond the pursuit of private wealth and the promotion of individualism.

This special issue explores these concerns in relation to a number of South African universities. It makes the case for a stronger engagement between universities and place-based development in South Africa. A grant from the Ford Foundation to the University of Fort Hare at the time of its centenary in 2016 has supported some of the work in this volume, especially the essays related to the University of Fort Hare. In presenting this work we would like to acknowledge this generous support, but also indicate that the views expressed in the individual essays are not necessarily those of the institutions they analyse, nor of the Ford Foundation.

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