

# Academic activism is key for democracy

Our universities have an important role to play in overcoming legacies of inequality

COMMENT  
Nuraan Davids

**D**ebates and conflicts centring on the role of higher education in relation to democracy are not new. Many democracies, however, have not had to overcome the lasting effects of both colonialism and apartheid, and none have had to embark on a similar type of transformational path of political, social, economic and educational reform as South Africa.

Certainly, the end of South Africa's political struggle has not translated into a struggle-free democracy. If anything, the country's transition to a democracy has amplified the demands for far-reaching reform and restoration.

Not only is higher education highly stratified in terms of student and academic demographics, but there are significant incongruencies concerning academic offerings, resources and facilities, further hampered by high rates of student attrition and degree incompleteness brought about by financial constraints and/or inadequate academic support.

Alongside these discrepancies and challenges are escalating problems pertaining to systemic institutional cultures of racism and marginalisation, leading to experiences of increasing alienation and displacement among both students and academics.

Seemingly, the promises suggested by a democracy, as expressed in a litany of policy reform, has done little to redress historical inequalities — to the extent that it remains commonplace, 27 years into democracy, to still refer to historically ("white") advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions.

There are, therefore, particular developments and experiences that provide the South African story with a definitive edge, which not only speaks to its broken and damaging history but also raises concerns about its ongoing fragility.

This is most evident in increasing displays of violent student protests that portray not only intense student frustration and anger but also a pervasive sense of hopelessness that cannot simply be dismissed.

Unless the current narrative shifts to a greater focus on the role of higher education in relation to its responsibility in a democracy, as



**Alienation:** Protests at South African universities, such as this one at Wits University, speak to the country's broken history. Photo: Delwyn Verasamy

opposed to a minimalist emphasis on transformation in terms of numbers and representation, the existing fragility may lead to disrepair.

One of the key considerations to draw upon in this regard are renewed conceptions and enactments of academic activism — that is, a willing acceptance of responsibilities that extend beyond teaching, learning, research and writing, and which are critical to the development and sustenance of any healthy democracy.

The role of universities has traditionally been seen as having to extend beyond the immediate functions of the academy. This is because education should enable intellectuals to grasp the entirety of the social and political structure, adopt a deeper and wider perspective, be open to that which is different and unfamiliar, and to respond critically to whatever is encountered within the university space as well as the public sphere.

Seemingly, and probably more so in a time of a "post-truth era", there is a need for universities to be and do more in relation and response to broader public debates and discontents.

While widely understood as a feature of higher education, there is seemingly little consensus of what academic activism implies as actual lived endeavours, expressions and experiences for academics, as well as management and governance structures.

It is, therefore, unsurprising to find that despite understanding the theoretical importance of the role of higher education in actively pursuing and espousing new forms of knowledge, reasoning and judgement, there is disagreement not only on who and what embodies activism, but also on whose responsibility it is, and what, if any, its parameters are.

Underscoring the work of activism is a deliberate focus on critique, with a clear understanding of the link between education and society. The concern of education, whether at primary or tertiary level, cannot only be about socialising young people into existing arguments and patterns of behaviour. Whether through teaching, research or community service, academics occupy an exceptionally privileged space in being able to initiate and participate in scholarly and civic debates.

Working within higher educa-

tion infers a persistent and critical awareness of the surrounding environment, debates and controversies, which inevitably impact not only the functionalities of higher education, but the experiences of students. There is a serious risk to the work of academics should they approach their disciplines without a broader contextual awareness.

Producing knowledge is not only linked to new ideas and innovations. Knowledge has to be seen as advancing progressive social change; it is as concerned with questioning what happens within institutions as it is with what happens in the public sphere.

Academic activism is attuned to the reality that, as a collective, we contribute to, produce and reproduce our social worlds. As such, there are necessary questions to be asked of academics: What are your responses to the plights of students, whether pertaining to funding, food insecurity, mental wellness or gender-based violence? What are your responses to institutional practices and cultures that serve to discriminate, marginalise or exclude? Where are your voices when dissenting views are silenced?

These questions cut across society; higher education systems mirror the kind of society in which we find ourselves.

Academic activism involves an acute focus and attention on engendering a substantive democracy by interrogating dominant discourses and narratives across all sectors of society.

Any notion of activism, regardless of being located in the spaces of higher education, is necessarily tied to what it means for higher education to be and do in a democracy.

Activism requires the action that makes knowledge, objection and resistance visible and audible. The challenge and responsibility of academic activism is driven as much by a democratic imperative as it is by moral responsibility.

**Nuraan Davids is a professor of education in the department of education policy studies at Stellenbosch University. This article is based on the book *Academic Activism in Higher Education: A living philosophy for social justice* (Springer, 2021), which she co-authored with Yusef Waghid from the same department**



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