On campus

Global Summit on Student Affairs and Services: Prof. Adam Habib's keynote[*]

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The evolutionary growth of the university in the 21st century is affected by enormous challenges and the possibility of problems being addressed is constrained by national politics, bureaucracy and resource limitations that threaten the equality of the global academy, says Prof. Adam Habib, vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. The evolutionary growth of the university in the 21st century is affected by enormous challenges and the possibility of problems being addressed is constrained by national politics, bureaucracy and resource limitations that threaten the equality of the global academy, says Prof. Adam Habib.

He was a keynote speaker at the 2016 Global Summit on Student Affairs and Services held from 27–28 October at Stellenbosch University near Cape Town.

The gathering was organised by Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education or NASPA, and Stellenbosch University and the International Association of Student Affairs and Services, with 50 student affairs leaders in attendance.
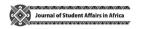
To survive the 21st century, it is essential to come together as global citizens and a global academy, said Habib, who is also chair of Universities South Africa, the representative body of 26 public universities.

Major challenges such as inequality, terrorism, public health, climate change and renewable energy are transnational and require multinational teams that come together and comprehensively tackle them. This needs to be done in a calm and collected manner, and thoughtfully so as not to reinforce inequalities and polarise societies.

Inequality is a Common Problem
Habib noted that higher education could help to create a more equal society, by producing growing numbers of quality graduates and providing sufficient numbers of students from poor and marginalised communities with access to the best universities in society.

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Another challenge is to provide sufficient numbers of high quality graduates in professions required by society, so that skills scarcity does not lead to undue escalation of remuneration.

"Both cases are easier said than done in South Africa," said Habib, acknowledging that as a university leader he is not a neutral analyst of the country's higher education situation.

"South Africa is a microcosm of our world, an acute manifestation of challenges that confront us. The struggle is a harbinger of what is likely to happen to us all."

Habib observed that the United States has experienced a rising number of social protests since 2015. The country is saddled with US$1.3 trillion in student debt, and young people were unhappy with the economic system.

Lack of stability in the United Kingdom following the Brexit vote highlights that many young Brits are alienated with the decisions of their parents.

A Noble Struggle

Inter-generational conflicts are playing out on campuses, as they are safe places where young people experiment with ideas.

Habib backed the student struggle in South Africa as a noble one, explaining that the issues in essence are the high cost of university education and the alienation many black students feel in historically white universities.

The government has expanded the higher education system from 420,000 students in 1990 to 1.1 million in 2015.

> As we expanded, the per capita state subsidy for students began to decline. Vice-chancellors and bureaucrats like me began to increase fees, often in double digits. When you do this for a 15- to 20-year period, the price of higher education is taken out of the hands of poor people and the middleclass.

In Habib's view, another major problem has been that universities have failed to come to terms with their diversity. Universities themselves have to change – but there is an expectation that students have to change for the university.

A powder keg for South African students was a statue at the University of Cape Town, of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes, who donated the land on which the university is built. Last year the statue became a point of disaffection, with black students feeling it was not an appropriate symbol for the campus – the #RhodesMustFall movement achieved its aim.

This struggle is not unique to South Africa. For instance, the BlackLivesMatter movement has been taken up on US campuses because of the alienation black students have felt.

A Tactical Problem

As much as Habib is convinced students have genuine grievances, he said strong questions were not being asked about tactics used by the student movement. Some sections of the movement appeared bent on perpetuating the language of racism.

I worry about the politics of duplicity, where you say one thing in private and another in public. I've been accused for the last three to four weeks of refusing to meet students, yet out of seven to eight groups I've met six to seven of them, and every one of them says, "Please don't say publicly we are meeting you". I've got on my cell phone somebody saying, "HabibMustFall, you are a manifestation of liberalism". Then a minute later I get an sms saying, "We don't really mean it."

If students continued with the politics of duplicity, they would repeat the mistakes of political parties.

I worry about the politics of spectacle, where effectively what you want is to engage with the crowd, but use the crowd as a mechanism of silencing rather than opening up and democratising.

Habib is also concerned about the propensity for violence, and in the South African context the propensity to arson that has destroyed R1 billion (US$74 million) in educational infrastructure.

No one can explain how you are advancing the cause of free higher education if you burn the very infrastructure required for that free education.

He is aggrieved about the intolerance of the movement and the failure to understand that it had failed. Reforms must be slow and consolidate an outcome that is accepted by society.

Habib recalled, after the #FeesMustFall struggle exploded on campus, the tension when he met with students for 24 hours to seek a solution, as he felt theirs was a legitimate struggle.

But as much as there is legitimacy, if you truly believe in the legitimacy of the ideal of fees must fall, then you must have the political courage to confront it when tactics are not conducive to realisation of that struggle.

Fixing the System

It has been calculated that funding South African higher education in its entirety – tuition fees, accommodation and subsistence – would cost R50 billion a year. The next question, Habib pointed out, would be: what of technical and vocational education and training, or TVET colleges. They could cost another R30 billion. "Why are you putting R80 billion in higher education and TVET when you have four million [youths] unemployed and are not funding early childhood development?" he asked. Research showed that quality early childhood education played a major role in achieving inclusive higher education.

Solutions on how to fund free education should be context-specific, Habib said. Looking at the issue as an ordinary citizen, a general call might be to tax the rich and put the money into higher education. But the money would not be generated immediately.

He said the student movement had come up with proposals including to increase tax rates for the corporate sector by at least 2% and add to the skills levy. All proposed taxes would end up an additional 15% burden on the rich.

While Habib knew there was tax avoidance, if increased taxes resulted in a 20% contraction in gross domestic product "you have effectively lost out, you have less money". It was important to operate based on a world that existed, rather than one people wished existed.

One way was to start thinking of progressive reforms that would make free higher education possible, for instance a grant system must be available, but the rich should pay for higher education, and possibly a financing mechanism should be created for the middleclass – bearing in mind the American problem of huge and mounting student debt.

These examples do not argue for an end to free higher education calls, said Habib, but for thinking about hard trade-offs – and such decisions should not only come from cabinet ministers or vice-chancellors or students, but from society as a whole.