

# QUALITY, DISSONANCE AND RHYTHM WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Y. Waghid**

Department of Education Policy Studies

Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch, South Africa

e-mail: yw@sun.ac.za

## ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue for a position of quality in higher education commensurate with the cultivation of dissonance and rhythmic action. I focus specifically on the (South) African university and the reason why dissonance and rhythm offer pragmatic ways to respond to changes in and about university education. Without being oblivious of the tremendous strides universities have made on the African continent, my contention is that not enough has been done to ensure that quality and change have been enhanced. My argument is deconstructive and conceptual in the sense that I endeavour to imagine what universities will look like beyond merely consolidating their claims of rationality. In this article, I offer my thoughts on new imaginings for higher education as propositional pieces cohered by the central themes of dissonance and rhythm.

**Keywords:** Quality, dissonance, rhythm, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the *South African Journal of Higher Education* in collaboration with the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) organised a joint conference at Stellenbosch University on the issue of quality and quality assurance in higher education, with specific reference to South Africa. This meeting sparked my interest in quality and quality assurance beyond mere technicist procedures of ensuring quality. At the time, much of the work on quality associated with the HEQC was framed along the criteria of quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, quality as transformation, and quality as excellence (Waghid and Gouws 2006). Moreover, considering that many of the university academic programmes were assessed along the lines of the afore-mentioned criteria, no real interest was shown in evaluating what came to be known as the compliance approach to assuring quality. Yet, what emerged from the presentations was a dire need to look at quality in relation to deliberative engagement. That is, assuring quality should not be associated exclusively with looking for compliance, but rather that quality should become constitutive in

the academic offerings of higher education institutions (HEIs). As argued elsewhere, the notion of quality assurance ought to be exercised as a transformative process invoking democratic practices of human engagement (Waghid 2001). It is the latter position that I shall analyse in relation to five propositions. These propositions have been articulated as meanings that constitute the act of transforming higher education vis-à-vis quality in (South) Africa when I was invited by the CHE as guest speaker to present my thoughts on quality at the Quality Promotion Conference on 26 February 2019.

## **PROPOSITION I**

In my view, a democratic practice that ought to be high on the agenda of any quality assurance process is the notion of critique. Implicit in such a claim is that university education ought to be enveloped by democratic practices. This view is corroborated by the fact that much of our research, teaching, learning and community engagement already involve engaging with one another in multiple forms of association. If one considers the inextricable connection between engagement and democratic action, it seems quite defensible to link democratic actions with university education. An instance of a democratic practice is the notion of critique. It is not possible for people to engage credibly without critique holding some prominent place in their engagements. Critique provokes people to think differently on the basis of putting to question and encouraging one another to disagree – that is, to engage democratically. Yet, disagreement is not sufficient in the absence of witnessing. That is, one can critique a particular academic programme. However, if critique is not accompanied by an act of bearing witness, then the possibility that genuine critique manifests might not be realised. To bear witness, implies that the person him- or herself is conscientious and committed to making the act of critique unfold. It is witnessing that allows one to tackle the inhumane from *inside*, in other words, to prevent a thinking university from collapsing into an abyss of deceit, dishonesty, academic perjury and injustice. For example, I have witnessed a highly commendable and astute faculty debauch into unit that dishonours scholarship. Only when such an institution bears witness unto itself does the possibility exist for the institution to rise above its de-meritorious predicament towards that which might again be possible. In other words, an institution that takes the notion of quality seriously, would encourage its academics to engage with dissonance and dissensus towards the cultivation of that which is still possible and perhaps yet to come. Put differently, a university that does not take critique seriously, would undermine the institution's aspirations in relation to its research, teaching, learning and community engagement. After all, a university is a public institution that renders reasons based on research, teaching and learning. In this way, the possibility of quality can be enhanced.

## **PROPOSITION II**

A second feature of a quality university is that such an institution would not prevent its academics and faculties from abandoning their freedoms. What is crucial about a university without condition is that unconditionality does not constrain a university in saying everything publicly. Put differently, such a university – more specifically its teachers and students – cannot be curtailed in its independence of thought and action, namely to surrender itself unconditionally, which means that such a university should not be curbed in taking risks in speech and action. For Derrida (2005, 14), unconditionality “exposes ... the weakness or the vulnerability of the university. It exhibits the fragility of its defences against all the powers that besiege it, and attempt to appropriate it”. Here, I specifically think of limiting the powers of a university to dis-invite scholars not perceived as promoting the democratic ethos of society to render an account of their – albeit illiberal – views. A university, which uses its limited power to prevent scholars from outside the institution to undermine the democratic values of the institution, should not be allowed to do so. If not, such a university cannot be categorised as one without condition. As soon as a university is subjected to control by others in limiting the academic autonomy of others who might hold starkly different views espoused by the university, such an institution would no longer be affirmed an unconditional independent institution. A university without condition would not prevent others from taking the university and its scholars to task or disagreeing vehemently with established practices. A university without condition is one that engages with diversity and differences, and refrains from censoring those who might hold opposing views not always commensurable with the ethos of the institution. Quality can be assured because difference would be responded to and not just unduly dismissed without due consideration and engagement. It is the notion of unconditionality that gives a university its scholarly edge because it opens up the institution to a plurality of thought that has always been associated with the quality of scholarship engendered by a university.

## **PROPOSITION III**

A quality university is constituted by the quality of thought of its members, that is, staff and students. What staff and students do in relation to thought should be underscored by a deep concern for provocation and reflection. If students and academics do not provoke one another in their pedagogical relationships, it seems most unlikely that they (students and academics) would evoke one another’s potentialities to reflect about ideas and actions. Hence, for a university to be provocatively reflective, it has to call out for or invent different radical openings

to come up with what is not yet – that is, new possibilities that can take a university into the realm of the seemingly impossible. In a way, it is the responsibility of such a new university – one without condition – to invent alternate ways to deal with contemporary societal matters (such as human torture or migration of asylum seekers) and with those who perpetrate terror. Only then would such a university act with a renewed responsibility towards a future – a matter of going beyond the profound and the radical.

#### **PROPOSITION IV**

The question is, what are the implications for the scholarly future of a quality university and, by implication, faculty, staff and students? Firstly, as is evident among many students already, learning to think for themselves seems to be a major challenge. Students do not always question the authority of teachers, and they fail to resist the corporatist orientation of a university. By far the majority of students are mainly concerned with test scores and high percentages – that is, with “accounting [rather] than accountability” (Giroux and Searls-Giroux 2004, 276). Of course, I am not suggesting that there should not be some sort of evaluation of students’ work and academics’ performances. However, if evaluation of scores and performances become the only ways in which a university advances its work, then there is always the possibility that the primary task of a university – to pursue responsible research, teaching and learning – would be undermined. The latter is so because it seems as if the knavery effect is beginning to dominate institutional performances as academics put more emphasis on quantification than on responding credibly to claims of a just society. Secondly, academics are more concerned with their own rankings and performance scores, than with guiding their work to make a difference in society or the academic community, for that matter. Thirdly, by far the majority of academics are reluctant to take up positions on controversial issues or, as aptly put by Giroux and Searls-Giroux (2004, 278), they fail to play an active role in “lessening human suffering ... retreating into arcane discourses that offer them mostly the safe ground of the professional recluse”. In cases where the university seems to be remiss of its responsibility to serve society, it quite obviously lacks quality.

#### **PROPOSITION V**

At the level of the ethical and spiritual (I might add), a university of love, togetherness and compassion “is intensely focused on solving well-defined problems” (MacIntyre 2009, 173). A university that gears its actions towards legitimate problem solving is one that honours what it means to advance quality through ethical and spiritual orientations. This is so, because compassion is reflective of an ethical account of a university while love and togetherness are

constitutive of advancing a university's metaphysics of inquiry that assents to truth in relation to the nature of God. For a university to act with compassion would therefore be "a way to address the deeper human concerns that underlie its basic problems, without sacrificing depth and rigor" – that is, its love for and togetherness in knowledge (MacIntyre 2009, 177). The point about a university in compassion is that the pursuit of knowledge cannot exclusively be about finding sufficiently good reasons to advance arguments and debates – that is, the rational and metaphysical. Rather, in addition to addressing matters of metaphysics based on love and togetherness – a commitment to the intrinsic and extrinsic worth of knowledge – a university in compassion directs its concerns for truths towards the ethical as well. As pertinently put by MacIntyre (2009, 176), such a university "articulates and moves toward answering questions the asking of which is crucial for human flourishing". When human flourishing is at stake, such a university would be concerned with cultivating quality.

The above propositions are all intertwined: Without critique, unconditionality, provocation-reflection, responsibility and the pursuit of the ethical-spiritual, a university cannot lay claim to advancing quality. This brings me to the title of this article, "Quality, dissonance and rhythm ...".

## **ADDRESSING THE TITLE, "QUALITY, DISSONANCE AND RHYTHM WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION"**

Of interest to me, and in terms of the issue of bringing quality into conversation with dissonance and rhythm, is the idea of play. Here I draw on Giorgio Agamben's (2007) analysis of the concept of play. Agamben's depiction of a university as a playland, where the spectres of work with which they play, can be linked to the work of people (academics and students) who need reviving otherwise they would be devoured. Teachers and students therefore need to play with matters pertaining to a university – such as curriculum, teaching and learning – else they and their actions would become pointless. In other words, when university teachers and students do not start to play, they will not be in a position to celebrate rituals or manipulate objects and sacred words in and about a university's life (Agamben 2007, 79). We cannot imagine a university retaining its impetus if it does not revel in research activities where students and academics manoeuvre traditions, foci and assertions pertaining to the university curriculum. For the latter to happen, following Agamben, I suggest that teachers and students begin to play. Play brings to the work of university scholars, firstly, a "playland" in which unconstrained "pandemonium" unfolds (Agamben 2007, 75). When, pandemonium manifests in a university, uproar, bedlam, disorder and subversion of practices emanate – a matter of laying claims to dissonance (Agamben 2007, 76). For example, a faculty of education that subverts its academic

programme because it constrains student innovation, uses play to undermine such a programme. As children play with toys, which they manipulate for their own use, so scholars play with a curriculum by subverting established traditions and practices in order to produce other more relevant or provocative spectres of the curriculum. Here, we specifically think of integrating the subject of political resistance in every course in post-colonial teacher education programmes at university. If students can be taught to resist every conceivable aspect of a teacher education curriculum, they would invariably be initiated into a different – albeit provocative – way of learning not necessarily indicative of current teacher education curricula in post-colonial Africa. Learning to resist politically is an act of play because the latter allows a university to take stock of what it does and then it either advances its activities or put a hold on its activities to reconsider its tasks again and again. Play therefore allows a university to act rhythmically – that is, not just in one singular direction but rather in multiple ways as it reminds itself constantly of rendering its reasons on the basis of pushing forward and holding back – that is, acting with rhythm.

## **CONCLUDING MY THOUGHTS ON DISSONANCE AND RHYTHM IN RELATION TO DECOLONIALITY**

Nowadays, much is being made of decolonisation and decoloniality in and about higher education in Africa. I do not want to ruin a university's initiatives in the pursuit of decoloniality of higher education. However, my argument is that no attempt at decoloniality should be embarked on independently from notions of democratisation, such as critique, unconditionality, provocation-reflection, responsibility and the pursuit of the ethical-spiritual – all aspects of democratic action that advance quality. More recently, Manthalu and Waghid (2019) were in charge of publishing an anthology of essays where an education for transformation on the African continent was brought into conversation with claims of decoloniality, in particular how critique, dissonance and rhythm could be made sense of in relation to the situatedness and theoretically informed understandings of African higher education. An understanding of higher education for decoloniality – as an acknowledgement that patterns of exclusion, inequality and other forms of illiberalism and injustice are still prevalent albeit in subtle forms at many HEIs in Africa – is challenged, and arguments are proffered in defence of dissonance and rhythm, an idea that resonates with an education that remains in potentiality. By an “education in potentiality” is meant that such human encounters – in other words, educative actions – are never complete and that there is still more to know and with which to engage. Put differently, higher education is an encounter that makes human engagement and the sharing of ideas based on deliberations embedded in dissonance and rhythmic action possible.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. 2007. *Profanations*. J. Fort (tr.). London: Zone Books.
- Derrida, J. 2005. *Sovereignities in question: The poetics of Paul Celan*, in T. du Toit and O. Pasanen (ed). New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Giroux, H. A. and S. Searls-Giroux. 2004. *Taking back higher education: Race, youth, and the crisis of democracy in the post-civil rights era*. New York: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- MacIntyre, A. 2009. *God, philosophy, universities: A history of the Catholic philosophical tradition*. London: Continuum.
- Manthalu, C. H. and Y. Waghid. (Ed.). 2019. *Decoloniality and decolonisation of education in Africa*. London: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Waghid, Y. and A. Gouws. 2006. Higher education quality assurance in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 20(6): 751–761.
- Waghid, Y. 2001. A conceptual analysis of a reflexive democratic praxis related to higher education transformation in South Africa. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.