Conceptualising the Role of Universities in Transforming Society: Trends and Tools of Traits

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Abstract: The universities are a microcosm of the society and are required to contribute towards changing the material conditions of the communities. The concept of transformation of the society is a centrepiece for transformation and transformative leadership that intercept the structural resistance to change and unlock vestiges of development. This study is locating the role of the universities in transforming the society with a deliberate action in downplaying the notion of universities being "white elephants" and "conservative spaces" for the intellectuals. The study positions an argument whether the universities can provide the prerequisites capabilities that resonate with societal transformation agenda. It is a scholarly piece that remains conceptual literature review and analysis of the trends of the universities posture towards transforming the society. The reviews of articles, media releases and policy trajectory to uncover the impact of the posture of universities in transforming the society are foregrounded with the intention to deconstruct the interface of universities and society. The establishment of new pathways for universities to reshape the society with key recommendation being that the universities must create an academic and solution-based intervention to the immediate community for empowerment and for sustainable livelihood. In this regard, education is intended to be for public good.

Keywords: Universities, Transformation, Transformative, Policy and Development, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

The conceptualisation of societal transformation requires identification of social partners that have complementary role to play through a developmental agenda (Janus, Klingebiel & Paulo, 2015). Gyong (2012) argues that the notion of transformation is a fundamental step for ceasing continues ability for participatory economy and human comfort to thrive. The democratic government of South Africa has enacted legislative framework that are inspiring confidence to change the material conditions of the poor (Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017). It is worth noting that these legislative frameworks at their core address the issue of capacity to sustain the developmental agenda which universities are a centrepiece to deliver a sustainable capacity for democratic objectives to thrive. It is arguable that skills development address social attributes and industrial set of capabilities, and these are exactly the direct impact of turning the untenable in developing society (D'Alessandro & Zulu, 2017). In this context, capabilities assist in building transformative leadership at the cutting edge of delivering developmental agenda for sustainable development (Armah, 2013). The concept of transformative society forces one to concede that it invokes the existence of developmental local development. The

earlier is informed by the conceptual definition of developmental local government that is working with citizens to meet their developmental goals (Sebake & Mukonza, 2021). It is in this regard that the concept of sustainable development must start at the local government level given the context of its proximity to the citizens (Nkuna & Sebola, 2012).

It is in this regard that the study aims at enquiring whether the university can utilise its ability to contribute to the social context of the society through transformative pathways. Sebola (2014) suggests that the policy perspective of a developmental society is shaped through research that develops innovative pathways for crystalizing a thriving democratic society based on the will of citizens. This notion provides a compelling argument that universities are centres that must promote democratic participation and the aspiration of citizens. Sebola and Tsheola (2019) note that universities function as centres for addressing diversity and social justice, which is a fundamental backbone of societal transformation. The argument made earlier challenge the notion of inequalities that is experienced by the South African citizens that has now become the commonly known factor. It is in this context that the notion of validating the role of universities creates an important study that contributes to universities

and society as a common and automatic partner for speeding up transformation. This study remains relevant for trends and tools of traits to lift the fundamentals embedded in the relationship between the universities and developmental agenda of the society. The earlier assertion completes the argument by Schiuma and Carlucci (2018) who suggest that universities are an ecosystem of developmental agenda and transformation. It remains the crux of the study to uncover how universities contribute to build human conscious for sustainable transformation agenda in South Africa.

2. Conceptual Interlink

The notion of universities being a microcosm of society establishes a narrative that one is the feeder to the other. Community function as a comfort space for development and growth of citizens, which universities are home for students from different social background and cultural orientation that must co-exist (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015). Additionally, society is dependent on universities to transform its social context for redress, and specialised skills to innovate the economy that is responsive for self-reliance (Xaba, 2017). It is in this context that the societies look upon universities as a social partner to lead variety of developmental agenda for the society through development of human and social capital (Crane & Hartwell, 2019). It is then in this context difficult to separate universities as intellectual hubs of societal development embedded in educational pedagogies as a means of addressing complex challenges confronting the society. Feola (2015) is convinced that societal transformation remains incomplete without education that translates to unlock vestiges of bondage to speed up self-participatory development through human empowerment. In this regard, universities and societal transformation are concepts that are not separable but are intertwined.

3. Theoretical Framework

Sebake (2020) argues that a scholarly study is expected to be embedded in theoretical context in order to utilise theory to reflect the epistemological underpinnings of the study in question. Theory provides substance to the body of knowledge through cultivating a focus dialogue with scholars who contributed extensively to a specific subject of investigation (Mudau, 2021). It is in this context that the universities and societal transformation

reflect institutions and organised citizens working together to achieve the objectives of greater development agenda, which the collective action theory is explored.

3.1 Collective Action Theory

The notion of existence of the universities and societies are organised phenomenon that finds its common action being that of foregrounding transformation through skills development and human capabilities. DeMarrais and Earle (2017) suggest that transformation of complex societal challenges require collective action in purpose. On the other hand, collective action theory explains the strategic actions that emerge out of a collaborative effort to address common developmental agenda (Carballo & Feinman, 2016). It is worth noting how developmental agenda of transformation compels all role players to be formally organised to understand the trajectory of societal development. In this regard, the role of education offered by universities is by extent a strategic response to the systematic challenges that confront the society (Carballo & Feinman, 2016). Additionally, collective action theory is an integrated strategy of confronting challenges of the society through each partner identifying its area of contributing to resolving multiplicity of problem without creating new regime of systemic challenges (Percoco, 2016). The above arguments present an interesting interlinked phenomenon that universities and societies are agents of transformation and their actions are inseparable with the trajectory of transformation.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Conceptualising Tools of Trait

The thriving society depends on its ability to reflect on the necessary skills relevant for its growth path. Elyachar (2012) explains to us that the African continent with its slowly developing states paves an important and deliberate notion necessary for introspection for its trajectory of influential critical analyses of development. A thriving society is postured by its agency and institutional arrangements to cultivate capacity to meet the expectations laid down by the Sustainable Development Goals (Knutsen, 2013). In this context, I argue that the concept of tools of traits is found on the ability to foreground capacity that is of the cutting edge for economic growth. Franks, Lessmann, Jakob, Steckel

and Edenhofer (2018) suggest that the first-class countries are characterised by its provision to provide education, health and necessities that restore public good. For instance, the Pan African Agenda 2063 provide basis to rethink education as a fundamental tool for changing the material substance of life of African citizens (Marginson & Yang, 2020). Additionally, education is an important asset and a game changer for embracing diversity and promoting social enterprise (Owens, 2017). It is in this context that tools of traits are characterised by the society that can analyse the needs of its economy and utilise universities to provide education that is community based. Benos and Zotou (2014) underscore that education is an instrument of human society that transform the community to the greater good. For instance, the South African context posits that the national plan on higher education, support and promote universities that are embedded in the socio-economic and social conditions of the society and intervene (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). In this context, the social capital and skills capabilities are defined as tools of traits that are important centrepiece of building a thriving economy that change the material conditions of the society for greater and sustainable good.

4.2 Leadership and Transformative Society

It is often complex to define leadership beyond the personal value chain due to the nature of embedded political system of foregrounding self-service and the culture of patronage. Accordingly, Lumby (2012) notes that universities are required to cultivate a distinct leadership characterised by value systems that address issues of social justice. It is in this context that universities are centres of excellence that provide human capital that are transformative to lead the society to attain its ultimate objectives. From African perspective, leadership is a dominating feature of academic discourse due to its importance to shape the course of societal transformation (Fourie, Van der Merwe & Van der Merwe, 2017). In the same vein, leadership represents human culture of being an agent for transformation (Fourie *et al.*, 2017). It is in this regard that leadership and transformation are two concepts that are inseparable. Mahembe and Engelbrecht's (2013) study on assessing the seventh leadership in African context, suggest that the servant leaders are found to be the category of leaders that are truly committed to the aspiration of the constituencies than that of their own. The same study found that the scourges of governance pitfalls

that are man-made in public service are reflective of the massive failure of comprehending servant leadership as an embedded value system in Africa (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2013). Sustainable development is underpinned by the capacity of leadership to comprehend social catalytical change in society (Santamaría, 2014). One is content that nurturing a human character that understand that leadership is service to society and that is the conviction that is located within the shoulders of universities. In this regard, universities would then represent a context of being a microcosm of the society than a "white elephant".

4.3 Education and Human Needs

It is a common fact that undeveloped and developing countries are in the business of posturing a struggle for human development. Aulia and Elihami (2021) explain to us that education is an instrument to strive to the attainment of human needs. On the other hand, the understanding of the theory of needs is motivated that education presents necessary tools of traits to attain the Maslow theoretical orientation of conceptualising human needs (Hale, Ricotta, Freed, Smith & Huang, 2019). This notion notes the phenomenon of driving human capital relevant to drive the narrative of the society towards capable state in the context of reflecting on the role of universities and society (Ngumbela, 2021). In this context, universities offered a precious public asset that assists the societies to traverse the turbulent towards sustainable growth and development (Ngumbela, 2021). Additionally, Olayiwola (2012) notes that it is with conviction that education first liberate citizens to be agent for their self-reliance and self-organisation. On the other hand, I am convinced that education creates an opportunity to build human conscious that moves from a vintage point of selfless posture through its value systems, which universities note to be that of transforming society to realise its objectives. That is why Msuya, Ahmad, Kalunguizi, Busindi, Rwambali, Machinda, Krogh, Gjøtterud, Kifaro, Ndemanisho and Nziku (2014) posit that education and universities are instruments of bettering the conditions of the society for the greater good. In this regard, education is a role of universities and represents a mouthpiece of the success and thriving society to meet the expectations of human development (Agbedahin, 2019). It is therefore that education and attainment of human needs are that the latter is the result of the earlier and the two concepts are intertwined.

4.4 Universities at Service to Society

Mbah (2019) argues that universities are a major contributor to sustainable development and at the centre of meeting the rapidly changing needs of the society at large. This provides an important call for universities to embed its services to address the needs of the community within their own locations. Several scholars agree that universities are mostly regarded as key assets in communities and are precious resources to support the function and thriving principle of democracy in advancing sustainable development goals (Cook & Nation, 2016). On the other hand, Harkavy, Hartley, Hodges and Weeks (2016) explain to us that universities are serving mostly a stricken poverty community as educational institutions; they must serve to improve the material needs of the communities through promotion of talent and human capital. All these arguments above are mainly due to universities function as centres of innovation that are at the cutting edge of transforming the society to the better through its educational pedagogies (Eversole, 2012). In the interest of expanding the argument, universities are resources position to serve as anchors and hubs for the regime and complex challenges of the communities that require integrated approach to improve the lives of the ordinary citizenry (Harkavy *et al*., 2016). Additionally, universities are an ecosystem of enabling thriving communities that are self-organised to sustain their livelihoods through promotion of pathways for self-reliance (Kitamura & Hoshii, 2014). It is in this context that university are relevant partner that through the National Plan on Higher Education, they are required to be at the service to the society through impactful and sustainable social capital investment.

From the historic point of view, African continent emerged out of bondage of its horrific era and it requires to be strengthened for its sovereignty and universities are expected to be champions of social change (Mitchell & Soria, 2016). Brennan, Cochrane, Lebeau and Williams (2018) postulate that universities are a strategic centre that must address the moral fabric of the society to promote equality through inculcating education that reflect the trajectories of social justice at all material time. In this regard, equity and social justice establish the relevance of the universities to shape "tools of traits" to empower the most marginalised group in the society (Brennan *et al*., 2018). The reviewed literature forces one to concede that universities

that analyse the developmental challenges of the society and strive to participate to ensure sustainable capacity to maintain sustainable development, those are universities that are in service to society.

4.5 Innovation and Socio-Economic Transformation

Universities are centres that provide innovative and sustainable strategies to create viability for thriving economy. Deiaco, Hughes and McKelvey (2012) challenge us that from the outset, universities are an important role player in the knowledge economy. The significant activities of education and research have been proven to be playing significant role to transform pathways for the thriving economy (Deiaco *et al*., 2012). For instance, the economic trajectory of China has been noted thriving well in the manufacturing industry, given the narrative of China for fronting relevant and global comparative skills regeneration (Zhou & Luo, 2018). In the same otiose, Zhou and Luo (2018) note that the investment in the sophisticated and advance technology by China remains an imaginative result of education and regenerated skills that are relevant to the economic growth. The notion of development does not represent a spontaneous process that happens naturally but happens through the investment in social capital in which education finds expression (Dudin, Lyasnikov, Kuznecov & Fedorova, 2013). It is therefore with conviction that universities are expected to be at the cutting edge of innovation to reimagine new pathways of reigniting social capital that cultivates socio-economic responses.

Alexander, Andersen, Cookson Jr, Edin, Fisher, Grusky, Mattingly and Varner (2017) argue that innovation crystallises the ability to comprehend the socio-economic opportunities that stems the notion of growing nature of poverty. On the other hand, substantial progress is noted with a clear understanding that poverty provides more gaps resulting in inequalities that are experience being exacerbated by lack of economic transformation for rural and township citizens (Benfica & Henderson, 2021). Universities are institutions that shape the course of action for cultivating a culture of rethinking human capital that are catalysts for transforming the landscape of the society towards meeting its developmental objective (Alexander *et al*., 2017). It is in this regard that one is conceding that universities are for public good and have the responsibility to be responsive to the needs of the society and establish relevant "tools of traits".

4.6 Universities as Champions of Skills Development

The existence of the universities is a strategic intent to respond to the skills revolution that meets the expectations of the local economy for self-sustainability (Allais, 2012). It is in this context that social and vocational skills are fundamental to run the economic through innovative pathways represent an important tool for developmental agenda (Cunningham & Villaseñor, 2016). Additionally, South Africa is regarded as a country with growth in graduation rate, but with a high level of unemployment amongst youth (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015). Oluwajodu, Greyling, Blaauw and Kleynhans (2015) note that this phenomenon questions whether universities are at the cutting edge of cultivating catalysts of social change for the society guided by innovation that create than cease opportunities for economic bubble. Universities are supposed to respond to the needs of citizens through education that is established to invoke soft skills that can provide sustainable means of social cohesion for the notion of nation building (Kruss, McGrath, Petersen & Gastrow, 2015). In context, one concedes that skills development requires two key priorities *inter alia*: firstly, relevant skills through programmes that address local economy, and secondly, common educational programmes that would serve multidisciplinary for building human conscious. Universities that contain the above can impart education that is relevant to ensure "tools of trait" are foregrounded within educational intervention and that education then become of public good.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The notion of scientific research is expected to present research methodology that resonates with the literature review study (Snyder, 2019). In this regard, the study of complex literature review is an important strategic choice of a scientific study (Snyder, 2019). The context of research methodology remains a guiding principle that navigates to acquire data valid and reliable for any scientific study to establish its logical conclusion (Patel & Patel, 2019). A study is expected to make a strategic choice on the method and approach to follow. Qualitative method carried textual narrative to explain the shape and nature of the phenomenon understand without application of statistical analysis (Smith & Smith, 2018).

In this regard, the study utilised qualitative method for reviewing complex literature.

5.1.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection followed the review of 52 scholarly articles to articulate the role of the university in transforming the society to improve skills that improve the lives of ordinary citizens. The choice of utilising qualitative method for literature review analyses text to review the quality and impact of the study at hand (Peterson, 2019). On the other hand, qualitative analysis constitutes an important approach towards studying the trends that contribute to shape the nature of the study at hand (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2012). It is in this context that literature collected and analysed theorise an ideal role of the universities as it interfaces with the society and this constitutes theorising and shaping the existence of universities and societies.

6. Results and Discussions

In the review of literature to present finding through discussions, scholarly articles have been generally helpful. These scholarly articles are in the area of transformation and social cohesion; skills development, and entrepreneurship and innovation for socio-economic development. Jain-Ghai, Cameron, Al Maawali, Blaser, MacKay, Robinson and Raiman (2013) note that complexities of a phenomenon are expressed through the literature is a strategic choice of establishing new pathways in the body of knowledge. In this context, I concede to have reviewed twelve (12) articles out of the 52 overall literature to support the findings.

6.1 Universities' Role in Cultivating Social Consciousness

The moral fibre of the society is confronted by greed and social ills that contribute/d in undermining the course of a transformative society despite constitutional democracy that guide the kind of societies South Africa is supposed to be (Hickel, 2014). Pavlidis (2015) opines that the formation of human development is regarded as a self-journey of discovery towards the ability to resonate with material conditions of the society and seek to cultivate care and agency for social change. In this context, the role of the university is to build an intergeneration of active citizenry for foreseeable future. This is mainly because education that is routed in the social context of the society assists to generate graduates

that are not only for their families, but that of their own communities (Halman, Baker & Ng, 2017). In the interest of furthering the argument, the society that has social conscious, can adapt to the tune of social cohesion and transformation that is authentic to change the moral fibre of the society to the greater good (Klein, 2013). Additionally, education is therefore regarded as a tool of cultivating social capital for building a responsive and a caring society that value co-existence (Novy, Swiatek & Moulaert, 2012). It is in this context that the role of universities is amongst other be to lighten the moral campus and value system that inspire human capital ability to rapidly response to the societal transformation.

6.2 Educational and Skills Development

The rapid growing challenges of the society need both skills development and regeneration to tackle political developments and socio-economic development. Allais (2012) notes that the South African trajectory is toughed by a lack of robust development and cohesion in the area of skills development, which has created stagnant to dismantle the existing inequalities. Despite the call for more market related education that can revitalise the economy, higher education sector still finds it problematic to respond to the market revolution with relevant skills (Modisaotsile, 2012). On the other hand, the shortage of market skills stifles inclusive growth that fundamentally juxtaposes the South African economy with the first countries (Akoojee, 2012). Additionally, skills discourse remains a serious concern due to the static economy and lack of innovation for alternative self-organisation to connect university education for transforming sectors of the economy for much greater response to the material needs of the citizens (Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016). The literature presents a complex mismatch in the education's response to the critical skills that respond to the economy and this remains a continuous and relevant area of future research to evaluate the impact of universities in skills development and regeneration.

6.3 Cultivate Thriving Economy Through Innovation

Haltiwanger (2012) suggests that a thriving economy is self-organised through innovative strategies that support sustainable initiatives for entrepreneurship and job creation. Ciriaci, Moncada-Paternò-Castello and Voigt (2016) explain to us that innovation is compelling stands of communities to be at the cutting edge of creating new pathways of developmental agenda for sustainable development. In this regard, thriving economy is dependent of creativity to transform and translate policy regime that unlock challenges of self-organisation for the greater society. The growing pressure mounted to universities to respond to the culture of knowledge economy and these made plethora of universities in South Africa to pronounce themselves as entrepreneurial universities (Malebana & Swanepoel, 2015). The earlier was a notion of admission that ethos of entrepreneurship are fundamental to self-organise and impact on the society moreover entrepreneurship is a multidisciplinary concept (Sánchez-Barrioluengo & Benneworth, 2019). This milestone had seen the growth in participation of university students who grow their enterprises while at universities and carry it on while back in society as an alternative for employment seeking. It is in this context that Elyachar (2012) notes that entrepreneurship education in South African universities contributed significantly to growth of Small Medium and Micro Enterprise spaces in South Africa like in developing countries. It is in this context that universities in this area has inspired confidence to the transformation of the society and lead through exemplary. Littlewood and Holt (2018) confirm that the earlier comfort the notion that entrepreneurship is a social phenomenon that demonstrates growth is easing bondages of economic viability for any developing nation as economy represents social tool for transformation.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study was presented as a complex literature review to investigate the universities' role in societal transformation. This study demonstrated to be fundamental as the question of universities as "conservative spaces" for academic monopoly with no consideration of the need to connect with the society was long weight as a discourse question. It was a necessary study to identify in which way the universities are assisting to cultivate a culture of transformative leadership and being of value to citizens' aspirations. It is conclusive that no society can achieve development agenda without identifying social partners that are of a cutting edge to create ecosystem of success. In this regard, universities have registered both successes of interlink and disconnect which for ease of reference, universities are presented to interlink with society in the area of social cohesion and human development. These areas were presented to be positive given that no

transformation of any nation without healing from social ills that collapse the moral fibre of the society. Additionally, the thriving enterprises that have generated solid ground from university postured a success in running viable business enterprises. Finally, the failure to deliver skills that are relevant to the persistently fragile market is a fundamental mismatch. This area is topical and requires introspection in relooking into the role of universities as a responsive institution that delivers relevance to the economic opportunities. It is in this context that unemployment amongst youth is challenges given this mismatch. This study is conclusively proven that collective action theory compels universities and society to act with common purpose to fashion societal transformation through sharpening tools of traits. The study recommends the below actions.

- Cultivate human conscious for embedding value of social justice and active citizenry. This must be investigated on how to accelerate impact for eradication social ills that undermine constitutional democracy to function.

- Investigation into how skills that response to the market can be envisaged to create a solid link between the university and society.

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