

# UBUNTU AS GROUNDING PRINCIPLE IN PURSUIT OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY FOR AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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## ABSTRACT

The attempts to transform universities in South Africa have focused on the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability as enablers of transformation. As such, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability are about redressing past injustices because the legacy of the past has implications within the context of the democratisation and transformation of higher education in South Africa. However, there is not enough focus on knowledge production, which is critical in the transformation of universities such that scholars are at liberty to draw from the well of knowledge from where they are standing without being hamstrung by already existing theories and concepts to seek validation. The article argues that African philosophies have a critical role to play in the transformation of universities. It therefore uses the philosophy of ubuntu as an example to show the ethical existence of African people that should anchor African universities to reflect the ethos of the communities they serve. Ubuntu thus provides a possibility for universities to cease being ivory towers and begin to forge a symbiotic relationship with their communities. This shows the importance of universities learning from communities and, in turn, using such learnt knowledge to develop theories that solve societal problems before that knowledge is transported to solve the world's challenges. Universities in Africa must therefore become true to African epistemologies where thinkers think from and for communities. The article concludes by arguing that academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability should be anchored in ubuntu to produce graduates that will be of service to humanity.

**Keywords:** transformation, ubuntu, academic freedom, accountability, institutional autonomy, African epistemologies

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability correctly necessitates understanding the university's transformation. In South Africa, the transformation of universities is not only a response to the ever-changing environment but also a way to redress the imbalances of the past so that we achieve social justice. According to Scott and Ivala (2019: 11), “[t]he apartheid dispensation left South Africa with a highly contested and racially segregated higher education system, consisting of a typology of historically white and historically black universities”. In addition, Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela (2009: 12) argue that the

“higher education system before 1994 lacked equity in the distribution of resources to institutions, [there was] huge disparities between historically black and historically white institutions in terms of facilities and capacities, and a skewed distribution of the student population in certain disciplines.”

So, to ensure that South Africa post-independence is transformed, universities are thus tasked with the responsibility of transformation to provide the means of achieving an equitable society. As such, “[t]he reality of 1994 was that, with a new government in place, a new but massive transformation agenda was set” (Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009: 12). The transformation of universities thus becomes an enabler in addressing past inequalities. It is in this context that in 1998, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) was established to ensure that the mandate is monitored, among other things. The role of transformation in higher education is described in the White Paper 1997, which includes “contributing to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship and upholding rigorous standards of academic quality” (Scott and Ivala, 2019: 5). It is important to note that these efforts are not devoid of the legacy of the past. Even in these noble initiatives, such as the transformation of the universities, the exclusion of other knowledge in the trajectory of scholarship creeps in under the rhetoric of maintaining standards. It is in this context that Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a: 175) argues that “[t]he “decolonization” struggle which is upon us is not simply for inclusion but to change the very rules of the game.” It is important, therefore, to remind ourselves of the foundations of universities in Africa which are founded on the destruction of African institutions.

Transformation, in a way, is a response to the destruction of African institutions by rebuilding them to serve African people in particular and the world in general. Assié-Lumumba (2007) articulates this point well as she reflects on the transformed universities and writes,

“If by their will and actions the Europeans could successfully and systematically destroy and reconstruct African social institutions to primarily serve their interests, African people can change

historical direction by their will guided by their determination to serve the interest of the African people, by resolutely undertaking the task of appropriation and reconstruction of their institution” (Assié-Lumumba, 2007: 24).

Taking the argument put forward here, it is clear that the transformation of higher education should be multifaceted such that it focuses on the issues of government, knowledge production, scholarship and curriculum. More importantly, the transformation should respond to the question posed by Alidou and Mazrui (1999: 1) when they ask, “can there be genuine democracy in South Africa when prevailing post-apartheid institutions continue to foster forms of knowledge that continue to produce inequalities which continue to underprivilege the African majority?” This points to the continued exclusions of African contributions to knowledge production, which is critical in addressing contemporary challenges. The call for academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability is about responding to these realities in the institutions of higher learning. Taking this into account, these concepts are not rights but a response to the injustices and exclusion of Africans in the running of universities and the contribution to knowledge production. So, to call for academic freedom and institutional autonomy is a call for public accountability, that universities should produce knowledge for the betterment of society. This is not a right for individual scholars to decide how they want to do their work or where they should work, but an obligation to be accountable to the communities we serve. It is a responsibility that requires sacrifices to ensure that society is transformed.

In this sense, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability are a response to the inequalities of the modern world, which is “founded upon and continues to thrive on this false claim that only one segment of humanity has the prior, superior, and exclusive right to reason” (Ramose, 2005: 3). Just like all other freedoms, they are never free; similarly, academic freedom and institutional autonomy will not come for free. This is more difficult if one looks at the funding of universities. Both public funding and corporate funding have implications for how universities should be governed. This in turn has implications for academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability. Hence communities should also play a part in defending the existence of universities. This means the contributions that the universities make should go beyond just teaching and producing knowledge, but to legitimise knowledge extracted from communities in a more meaningful way such that the communities feel as part of these universities. This talks to the decolonisation of universities because colonial knowledge will cease to be at the centre of the universities. Indeed, it is an enormous task. So, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability are resurgences of decolonisation; they are a political project and different from human rights that serve individual freedoms like the freedom of speech. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni,

“[d]ecolonization of the university is part of the broader struggles to escape from the ‘European game’” (2018a: 162) to conquer the world. It is important to note that prior to 1994 in South Africa, these concepts were not aligned with decolonisation. However, as part of the transformative agenda, they should be understood as integral to the decolonisation project aimed at addressing the imbalances of the past. Therefore, a transformative agenda represents a holistic approach to transforming higher education, which includes affirmative action, institutional culture, knowledge production and language of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, this article focuses specifically on the transformation of knowledge production. The central argument of the article is that the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability provides a possibility of much-needed epistemic diversity in institutions of higher learning. It begins by giving a theoretical underpinning that anchors the argument of the article and assists in moving away from the colonial legacy. The article argues that in an African context, African philosophies should anchor universities, which should, in turn, reflect the ethos of the communities they serve. To show the validity of African philosophies, I use the term “ubuntu”, which transcends Western limitations and thus permeates a different logic in education, which changes the trajectory of knowledge production. I conclude by arguing that universities in Africa must therefore become true to African epistemologies to attain academic freedom and institutional autonomy founded on public accountability and ethics. This is integral to the transformation of the universities and society at large.

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The approaches that centre the argument in the article are the Afrocentric and decoloniality approaches. According to Ramose (2005: 32),

“European colonisation was intent on establishing and maintaining in all the colonised parts of the world the European conception of reality, knowledge, and truth. The European colonial enterprise then was a philosophical urge to impose and universalise sameness.”

So, to understand the universities as we occupy them today necessitates the historicization of the universities. Currently, universities in Africa are clones of Western universities in terms of structure and content. The epistemologies, pedagogies and theories have remained Western. Even though we are supposedly in the post-colonial world, the colonial foundation of universities has remained and is sustained by coloniality, which is Western hegemony (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012), notwithstanding the strides made by the decolonisation project to transform universities in particular, and society at large. However, the legacy of colonialism still dictates what should form part of the African universities.

The article takes an Afrocentric approach that according to Moloi (2020: 2), implies “privileging African knowledge informed by African history and culture, and the assertion of African agency as a means to attaining an African renaissance”. This means privileging African thought about Africa and its development. Mafeje (2000: 66) defines Afrocentrism as “nothing more than a legitimate demand that African scholars study their society from inside and cease to be purveyors of an alienated intellectual discourse”. This position emanates from the conviction that Africa can think despite the colonial myth of emptiness (Ramose, 2005). This is therefore “dismantling their [African] entrapment in the Western epistemic colonisation of terms of reference and enabling African people to speak as their own agents of the change they desire” (Moloi, 2020: 2). This is important for this article to ensure that the analysis put forward contributes to the desired Africa by Africans. Over and above this, it is to ensure that Africa speaks for itself so that its authentic voice is heard (Mafeje, 2000). But more importantly, using the African-centric approach is not to suggest that African knowledges are only applicable to African challenges as Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012: 3) remind us that

“there is an unconscious tendency to think that theories that originate in the Third World (or among Black or gay intellectuals) are valid only for the Third World (or Black and gay people), while theories that originate in the First World (and created by White and heterosexual people) have a global if not universal validity.”

It is in this context that Mafeje (2000: 66) argued that “[i]f we are adequately Afrocentric the international implications will not be lost on others”. So, in using an Afrocentric approach it is not assuming that African theories and concepts are only valid in the African context but because the Afrocentric approach is relevant in moving away from Western hegemony. This requires vigilance to coloniality, and thus decoloniality becomes a necessity. Decoloniality according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018b: 43) “is a collective name for all those [...] anti-Eurocentric hegemonic epistemology, initiatives and struggles”, the struggles to find our authentic voices to address societal challenges. It is important to emphasise that these theories are capable of addressing any societal challenges because “no race possesses the monopoly on truth and intelligence” (Biko, 1978: 77). This means African knowledge is also valid to produce theories.

As already posited, this article uses the Afrocentric approach and decoloniality theory to understand African epistemologies' role in producing knowledge while paying attention to coloniality. The article moves from the premise that the West has limitations too and therefore cannot be at the centre of knowledge production. In other words, it moves the centre, which is

an assumed centre of the universe (wa Thiong'o, 1993). The call for the inclusion of other ways of knowing in knowledge production is not a call to centre the West by engaging or responding to its questions. This does not suggest that the West ceases to exist. On the contrary, this acknowledges Western failures which then allows us to stop responding to its questions and it ceases to determine what is and what is not for the rest of the world. This is not utopia, but this is how many indigenous communities live; their everyday practices are not informed by the Western standard but by their own cultures. More importantly, the article is a scientific endeavour that is premised on a dialogue in the process of generating knowledge. Thus, all knowledges from different societies should be brought to the fore so that we have a meaningful engagement. This calls for epistemic diversity in pursuit of justice in knowledge production. The following section discusses ubuntu to show its foundational principles, which are accountability, justice and ethics that are transformational.

## **CENTRING UBUNTU IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES**

I bring ubuntu as a grounding principle in the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability. It is important to highlight that ubuntu is not brought forth to address the modern-day challenges but as an alternative to Western epistemology. For to use ubuntu to address the modern challenges that it did not create would be the extractivism that Grosfoguel explains as

“extraction of ideas (whether scientific or environmentalist) from indigenous communities, removing them from the contexts in which they were produced to depoliticize them and give them a new meaning based on western-centric ideas” (2019: 208).

It is important to emphasise this because African concepts are anchored in their culture; for example, ubuntu ensures that everyone has a moral obligation to make sure that all life is sustained (Sithole 2009), which means that it is the responsibility of all citizens. One cannot show kindness to people who, in return, abuse such kindness. Hence, justice is the premise for ubuntu to ensure a harmonious existence (Ramose, 2005). As such, to understand ubuntu correctly, one needs to understand the culture from which it is encapsulated. Often, ubuntu has been brought into Western universities using the extractivism approach; consequently, it has been misrepresented, simplified, corrupted, and above all, killed. This article attempts to bring ubuntu in its truest form to show the integral role ubuntu can play in the transformation of institutions of higher learning and society at large such that the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability is meaningful. According to Ramose (2005: 36), “motion is the principle of being, for ubuntu doing takes precedence over the do-er”. In

other words, ubuntu is a verb, which is what *abantu* (human beings) do. So, the attempts to write about ubuntu dislocates it from its present time because ubuntu in its truest form is a constant motion to ensure that it is always in the present. From the cultural perspective, ubuntu cannot be articulated easily as it forms part of “common sense” (*isintu*). It is in this context that we argue that bringing ubuntu to Western universities risks killing it because ubuntu is removed from its present continuous state to stagnation. This is similar to the argument Molapo (2019) makes about writing *molimo*. He argues that “because writing removes *molimo* from its location among things and therefore from death. The consequence of this is the inauguration of a new order that accords priority to space over time in the imagination of life” (Molapo, 2019: 3).

Ubuntu “is the process of becoming a person or, more strongly put, how one is given the chance to become a person” (Kronenberg et al., 2015: 24). Sesanti (2010: 91) supports this view as he argues that ubuntu determines “how you relate with other human beings and nature in general”. It therefore “censures the obscenity of greed and materialism and the insanity of the idea of a rugged, sovereign individual” (Ngcoya, 2015: 253). This speaks to accountability as it is other people who must attest to one’s humanity which anchors the ethical behaviour. Important to mention is the fact that for the person to act in a manner that is understood as ubuntu, they must understand the ethos of *abantu* (people) encapsulated in *isintu* (cultural practices).

Ethics as a principle for ubuntu paves the way for accountability and thus selflessness. To serve in ubuntu is an honourable gesture that puts an individual in a higher position. According to Molapo (2021: 4), “[t]o die and take one’s place among the dead is to always come before the living. The dead as such have priority of place over the living”. This gesture is sustained by reciprocity. When this gesture is not reciprocated, justice must prevail. So, ubuntu is not just being nice; it is an obligation to do right by the next behaviour. So, centring ubuntu in the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability is to enable more just practices that transcend the Western logic currently prevailing in the institutions of higher learning. It is an introduction to a new order that is ethical and transformational. The knowledge informed by ubuntu changes the trajectory of the knowledge production that is centred on profits to knowledge that privileges life. This speaks to epistemic diversity as knowledge produced using ubuntu principles will fundamentally be different from the knowledge we currently have in the universities. Academic freedom from the African epistemology means drawing from different epistemologies to advance human knowledge that can permeate the harmonious existence of all life.

An example of ethics in ubuntu can be drawn from the proverb *azibuye emasisweni*. This proverb is used when the kindness that was given is demanded. To explain this proverb, we

need to understand the meaning of *ukusisa*. *Azibuye emasisweni* comes from the concept of *ukusisela*, which refers to lending the needy neighbour a milky [sic] cow. This practice needs to be understood from the culture of AmaZulu and the role of cows in this culture. The cows are central among AmaZulu in the sense that they do not only provide for material needs but ensures a good relationship with the ancestors who are responsible for the wellbeing of the individuals and the entire community. So, the practice of *ukusisela* is not just about providing for food but taking care of the spirituality as well, because among AmaZulu it is believed that wellbeing is achieved through connecting with one's spirituality – the ancestors. *Ukusisela* is therefore a moral obligation to ensure that everyone is living well. This should be reciprocated. That is why the practice is followed by the proverb *azibuye emasisweni* (the cows that were borrowed must be returned). If individuals fail to honour their obligations to help others, those who have lent them the “cows” can demand these back. Hence the saying “*azibuye*” (let them return), not *azibuyele*. The proverb *azibuye emasisweni* is a clarion call to return what was borrowed in a context where kindness is not reciprocated. It is important to emphasise that this proverb is not a friendly reminder. It is confrontational because it is a demand made when a person has failed an obligation (Radebe 2023). In recent times there has been a misinterpretation of this proverb, which says it is calling for the return to our cultures. There is probably a proverb that talks to that but certainly not *azibuye emasisweni*. That is why it is important that we remind ourselves of who we are and preserve our knowledges to make sure that we do not get disconnected from our roots.

## **TOWARDS ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY**

The dawn of democracy in South Africa ushered in a new agenda aimed at addressing past atrocities of colonialism and apartheid. Universities were identified as critical in the agenda to transform society. According to Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela (2009: 12),

“High expectations were expressed to universities to refocus their roles and to fulfil their traditional role, namely that of contributing towards social, political and economic development, since during their conception they were earmarked as places where leaders were trained, minds shaped and ideas formed.”

This shows the important role universities must play in the transformation of society. According to the historical account of universities in Africa, “it is the universities that promised freedom of thought only to stifle it through religiously adhering to a Eurocentric epistemology and Western-centric cultures and practices” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a: 162). Therefore, the first



important task of transforming society is to transform the universities such that the promised freedom of thought prevails. This means that the first step is to open up the Western canon that grounds any thoughts within the institutions of higher learning. While it is important that “taking over the administration of universities by installing black chancellors and vice-chancellors, increasing the number of black academics and black students as well as including work by African academics in the curriculum” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a: 175), it is also important that these changes do “not touch the structural Eurocentric epistemological scaffolding on which the university in Africa is built [on]” (ibid). So, true transformation of the universities such that they fulfil their mandate to transform society should begin at the epistemological level. This calls for different ways and reasons to produce knowledge. The following section discusses the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability from the philosophy of ubuntu.

In the introduction to the article, it was established that the discourse of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability should be understood within the transformative agenda. This means they should be understood as a response to past imbalances. However, there is another more important factor that forces us to refocus on these concepts, namely, the challenges of modern society. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018b: 37) posits,

“Indeed the whole world is experiencing the deep and catastrophic effects of double crisis. The crisis is both systemic and epistemic. The epistemic part has led to the reopening of the basic epistemological question and set in motion planetary epistemic struggles that are simultaneously unmasking what has been concealed by Eurocentric epistemology while searching for new knowledges capable of taking the world out of the epistemic crisis.”

The above claim indicates that discussing these concepts means that we are discussing them at an epistemological level. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni, (2018a: 176) posits, “At its deepest level, this struggle entailed formulating a new philosophy of higher education informed by African histories, cultures, ideas, and aspirations as well as a fundamental redefinition of the role of the university.” Academic freedom, therefore, is not a mere individual freedom of expression but a scholarly work to theorise from other epistemologies to diversify knowledge.

To understand academic freedom from the perspective of ubuntu requires that we first understand the role of education from an African perspective. In an African setting, education is about preparing individuals for real-life situations such that they become responsible citizens (Radebe, 2022). Knowledge is also understood as experiential hence the saying *indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili* (you can only ask for directions from those who have travelled the path before you). Importantly, education is not for a selected few but for the entire community. As such, the thinker is accountable to the community, which means the knowledge produced at the

university should be guided by the principles of ubuntu, which emphasises the attributes of the graduates in addition to the content. Notably, the disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences moves from abstraction because the Western conception of knowledge production had to be presented as universal and devoid of experiences, time and space. According to Onyewuenyi (1976: 519), “Western philosophy became highly abstract, lifeless and artificial emptied of real content to such a degree that human beings no longer knew what it meant to exist. Thinking overshadowed existence”. It is in this context that there are calls for decolonisation because of the irrelevant knowledge that overshadows existence. Decolonisation of universities for Keet (2014: 28) will result in “the collective processes by which disciplinary practices are successful in working against the inscribed epistemic injustices of all knowledge formations”. That means universities will have the freedom to produce graduates fit for purpose outside of disciplinary epistemic injustices that are founded on the epistemicide of other epistemologies.

Bringing African philosophies to the fore, therefore, changes the trajectory of education as African education is centred on attributes rather than content. It is about how students should learn because the understanding is that *umuntu ufunda azafe*, which loosely means learning does not end. Students are educated to be teachable because *umuntu ufunda aze afe* – not to be experts, but to be teachable. The fact that ubuntu is in motion speaks to the agility that students must be able to respond to the ever-changing environment. Second to this, ubuntu centres *umuntu* over profits. For example, Biko argued that

“Ours is a true man-centred society whose sacred tradition is that of sharing. We must reject, as we have been doing, the individualistic cold approach to life that is the cornerstone of the Anglo-Boer culture. We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give to human relations, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general; to reduce the triumph of technology over man and the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society” (Biko, 1978: 96).

This means that graduates should think for the communities over and above the markets. Graduates should be trained to be of service to humanity so that they remain relevant not just for the market but for their communities as well. However, education in its current state does not focus on students’ immediate environments but on the industry. It is in this context that the #feesmustfall movements revolted against “the irrelevance of what is taught in universities and its misalignment with labour market demands” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a: 189). Preparing students with the skills to be open to learning will be agile to the ever-changing demands of the markets.

Institutional autonomy becomes integral in ensuring that universities are able to decide on the philosophies they use to train students and respond to modern-day challenges. In addition

to this, universities should be at liberty to decide on their priorities to strengthen the focus on their mission and vision. More importantly, universities should be able to remove themselves from issues that do not serve their agenda of achieving transformation. Recently, Rhodes University took a decision to abstain from participating in global rankings. Pieterse (2022: 1) explained the decision as such: “Rhodes University's decision to abstain from participating in global rankings reflects the University's commitment to addressing the genuine needs of the (South) African education sector without subscribing to a one-size-fits-all approach to excellence”. She further argued: “Global international rankings suffer from weaknesses in data, contain arbitrary processes and indexes, and undermine validity. They present Western, North American universities as the pinnacles of education ideals” (Pieterse, 2022: 1). Supporting the stance taken by Rhodes University, Ntshoe and Selesho (2014: 1558) argue:

“Looking at the university rankings, the legacy of the past is still in the present as HDIs that are theoretically classified as research institutions are products of past policies and practices. These institutions were established for certain population groups and offered primarily programmes and qualifications in the social sciences and generally received inadequate government funding prior to the 1994 democratic elections.”

University ranking is one example that could be a hindrance to the transformative agenda which does not redress the imbalances of the past. However, what needs to be stated categorically is that this article does not argue that Rhodes's stance is a model, but rather that it does indicate how universities can exercise their institutional autonomy. Important to emphasise is that the transformative agenda should guide institutional autonomy. Institutional autonomy should respond to the imbalances of the past. So, institutional autonomy is not easy because it means speaking truth to power. This is so because governments at times have conflicting responsibilities in that they must ensure good relations with international communities and thus become very sceptical on views that upset those international communities. But this institutional autonomy is not irresponsible autonomy but rather a demand to ensure that the public mandate is achieved even by governments. It is about holding everyone involved accountable to ensure that true transformation is achieved. Institutional autonomy defined by ubuntu is therefore about public accountability.

So, institutional autonomy is not to shy away from the mandate to transform but to be able to choose the university's focus with an understanding that universities are accountable to the communities they serve. In an African setting, accountability is inscribed in *isintu* (ways of being *umuntu* – a person). In essence, *isintu* is the practice of ubuntu. So, the correct behaviour is inscribed on *isintu* – cultural practices – and is understood as ubuntu. *Isintu* is kept safe in cultural practices and languages which are inclusive of proverbs. It is important to correct

people's behaviour because according to Ramose (2005: 46), peace is preceded by justice because "peace without justice is the dislocation of *umuntu* from the cosmic order". Making sure that people do the right thing is about ensuring that everyone lives well and in harmony so that they are aligned to the cosmic order. Ubuntu therefore is about justice that is premised on ethics where people should behave according to the prescript of *isintu*. This is what students should be taught – accountability to the communities they will be serving.

Public accountability is not to tiptoe around the government but to stand with the community because they are the public. The government has a mandate from the public, but it is not the public. This also requires academics to speak truth to power since academics are thinking from and for the community; they are not separate from the community and should, therefore, have a strong voice on public funding. It must be noted that African governments can work against transformation by not believing enough in African knowledge as Ndlovu-Gatsheni points out,

"What African governments wanted was not critical support but subservience and sycophancy. With their ears finely tuned to the voices of foreign experts and deaf to local voices, African states simply didn't care about local debates, except when they threatened state authority" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a: 177–178).

This reflects the legacy of the past that made Africans doubt everything about themselves and believe everything that comes from outside. While this institutional autonomy is critical, it must be guided by public accountability from governments and universities. This means that universities that are mandated with a transformation agenda must be close to communities in terms of philosophies and culture. Grounding our universities on ubuntu means that fundamentally, they will be centred on public accountability. This accountability is not market-driven but community-driven. Scholars have the difficult task of providing alternative solutions to real-life situations, not abstract thinking which is traceable to Western thought. It is important not to fall into the trap of post-colonial seduction that questions everything but leaves us with nothing. The contemporary world needs solutions as we face the epistemic crisis. This is the role of universities in an African context, to provide solutions.

## CONCLUSION

This article is a response to the scrutiny and spotlight that universities are under because of the unemployability of the graduates they produce. This is indicative of the decadence of Western epistemology that promised to produce experts to lead societies. Instead, this has produced graduates who are detached from the lived experiences of communities and who think in

abstraction most of the time. The pursuit of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability opens up the possibility of fostering a culture that will transform the attributes of our graduates. Bringing ubuntu as a grounding philosophy to institutions of higher learning fosters new kinds of graduates who are trained in learning, graduates who understand that life is in motion, and therefore agility is a demand. Above all, graduates who understand that their qualifications are not for their individual benefit but for the benefit of the communities that nurtured them. As such, they should be of service to those communities. Lastly, ubuntu is not only relevant to the African context; it is a theory that can be consumed by the rest of the world to address the global challenge. Indeed, the greatest gift Africa will give to the world will be to give the world a human face (Biko, 1978).

The concepts of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability relate to the policies of higher education as well. This has not been discussed in this article because the focus is the transformation of knowledge production centred on ubuntu. The article recommends that there should be interrogation of policies as a means to complete the decolonisation project.

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