

CHAPTER 8

The Contribution of Higher Education to Reconstructing South African Society: Opportunities, Constraints, and Cautionary Tales

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The changing role of higher education in creating knowledge and strengthening nations raises particular challenges for developing countries. In the contemporary context, strengthening developing countries entails a 'dual development imperative': On the one hand, the basic needs of the majority poor must be addressed, by providing adequate social services and through the substantive redistribution of opportunity and wealth. On the other, it is necessary to engage as effectively as possible in both the new knowledge society and the highly competitive global economy. These two goals are in tension, governed as they are by opposing redistributive and global discourses and practices. The case of South Africa is particularly informative in addressing these contradictory demands.

With the political victory over apartheid, expectations were high for a fundamental transformation of society that would reduce the embedded inequalities that sharply divided the social structure of South Africa. The large-scale reconstruction of the higher education system was identified as an immediate policy goal, as a precondition enabling the role of higher education in building the new society. Then higher education could contribute towards national development and other priorities of the new democracy. The policy framework for progressive transformation was impressive. However, for numerous reasons, progress towards the dual development imperative and higher education policy goals has been very uneven. Current conditions in South African society and its higher education system can be characterized as ambiguous. They reflect a combination of tenacious continuities with the apartheid past