

The role of the University in society : “What it is good for”

The Universities of Newcastle and Stellenbosch have both appointed Professor Chris Brink as Vice-Chancellor, and both place emphasis upon their social engagement. Through examining these two institutions and their historical and social contexts, this research seeks to examine the significance of civic engagement in higher education.



Newcastle University

Newcastle University was established in 1963 out of the Universities of Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne Act. Unlike the other “redbrick universities” Newcastle was not a direct result of the 1963 Robbins Report, recommending expansion of the UK higher education system, but the product of a split from the University of Durham.

Newcastle University Ltd.

UK universities and students, including Newcastle and those studying there, are increasingly regarded by academics and commentators as becoming more marketised than ever, prioritising economic self-interest.

Numerous events have fuelled this phenomenon; the 1992 expansion of universities increased competition in the sector, whilst reductions in Government funding and increases in tuition fees led to demands for “value for money” and “quality assurance” manifested in the form of league tables and assessment exercises.

This commercialisation has been warned against since the 1960s by prominent academics such as Asa Briggs and most famously by E P Thompson in his 1970 publication, *Warwick University Ltd.*

A solution?

In light of this, Vice-Chancellor Professor Brink argued that universities should not only ask themselves what they are good at, but crucially, what they are good for.

The answer to this question, Brink believed, lay in the form of the Civic University; an institution which benefits its local and wider society through research, output and interaction.



A sense of civic duty is a trait professed by universities around the world. Professor Chris Brink’s appointment as Vice-Chancellor at the Universities of Stellenbosch and Newcastle exemplifies the significance of this attitude.

Through interviews with Professor Brink and other senior figures in higher education, and through the examination of archives at Newcastle and Stellenbosch universities, this research has shown that the attainment of these ideals is not without significant opposition, contradiction and compromise. Despite these challenges, it is clear that universities seek recognition as working for the public good.

Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch University, located in the heart of the South African Winelands in the Western Cape, was established in 1918 as an Afrikaans University, out of Victoria Boys College and a theological seminary. Teaching, administration and research was all conducted in the white minority language of Afrikaans.



Professor Brink

Professor Chris Brink, a South African born logistician, took Rectorship and Vice-Chancellorship of Stellenbosch University in 2002. Amid much opposition he set about reforming much of the University’s culture in an attempt to increase levels of diversity.

Die bliksem in vir Brink

In 2007 he left Stellenbosch to become Vice-Chancellor at Newcastle University, promoting social engagement through the development of the “civic university.”

A troubled past: A troubled present?

By the 1940s Stellenbosch had gained a reputation as the “cradle of Afrikaaner Nationalism,” producing all but two of the apartheid leaders of South Africa, including “architect of apartheid” Hendrik Verwoerd.

Despite the fall of apartheid in 1994, and the subsequent changes in race laws introduced by Mandela’s ANC government, Stellenbosch remained an exclusive, white institution.

The tradition of Afrikaans at Stellenbosch is deep rooted and perceived to be under attack. Consequently the *Taaldebat* (language debate) is vehemently contested by many, not least the Convocation (alumni body), who brought a legal battle against the University in 2017.

A change

In 2002 Professor Chris Brink was appointed as Vice-Chancellor and began to de-racialise Stellenbosch University, most controversially and significantly through reforming the University’s language policy; increasing the number of courses offered in languages other than Afrikaans.

The changes to the University’s culture introduced by Brink faced opposition from many fronts, from the Afrikaans press to alumni and students.

