

# THE MANDELA INITIATIVE

*Dialogue and action to overcome poverty and inequality*



## Theme: Post-school Education

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### **The Poverty and Inequality Inquiry Colloquium. A Call to Action: Engaging Poverty, Inequality and Unemployment and Rethinking Social Policy and Post-school Education in the Eastern Cape**

This colloquium, held in October 2015, could in one sense be described as a move at the provincial level towards the goals spelt out by the National Development Plan (NDP): most notably towards “the elimination of poverty and the significant reduction of the current levels of inequality” (Wilson & Cornell, 2014, p.v). And, more locally, towards the goals of the Provincial Development Plan that aims to increase “the well-being and flourishing of all in [the province]” (Eastern Cape Planning Commission, 2014, p.12). It could also be seen as supportive of the goals of the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (PSET) which aims to orientate PSET towards “build[ing] a non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa characterised by a progressive narrowing of the gap between the rich and the poor” (DHET, 2013).

In another, and deeper sense, the conference could be described in Freirean terms as a reawakening of a *Pedagogy of Hope*. In contrast to pragmatic discourses that would have the world adapt to and accept as the norm growing inequality, increasing poverty and staggering levels of unemployment, the Colloquium encouraged a view of the triad “not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation” (Freire, 2005, p.12). The Consortium sought to reach beyond the notion of education as neutral and to shatter the ‘culture of silence’ that rests within technicist fix-it approaches. The hope was to create a space where the discussion could transcend the false neutrality and instrumentalism within which the role of PSET in relation to the triad is increasingly posited. The expectation was that the Colloquium would focus on the potential of PSET as it is currently constructed whilst simultaneously developing a vision of what a transformed PSET that is actively contributing towards a more socially and economically just world would look like. The aim was to provide an intellectual space where the dominant discourses on PSET could be challenged, where new discourses could be developed, and where a unity of understanding and commitment around these progressive alternatives could be forged.

As the first of future-planned colloquia, the scope was purposefully wide with the Colloquium tasked with engaging with existing as well as possible future educational responses of PSET to the triad. It is not possible in this submission to capture the full content of all the presentations and the discussions that ensued. Podcasts of the Colloquium are available on the [Centre for Integrated Post-Secondary Education and Training \(CIPSET\) website](#) as are copies of all the presentations and a more detailed report entitled, *The Role of PSET in Intervening in the Triad*.

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## **PSET as a contested terrain**

This submission distills from the Colloquium report the role(s) that PSET can play in intervening in the triple crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequality (hereafter termed ‘the triad’). Central to the discussion was the need to open discussion on the purpose(s) and function(s) of PSET in developing contexts. In the *#FeesMustFall* campaign, “students are insisting that a frank national debate be opened on both the funding and orientation of higher education”<sup>2</sup>. A similar conclusion was reached at the Colloquium with respect to both higher and further education. As stated by one of the speakers, what is clear is that “we don’t have a hegemonic view” about what development is or how it should take place in South Africa and neither do we have a hegemonic view of the role that PSET is to play therein.

Different understandings of what constitute unemployment, poverty and inequality matter and the causal relations between them are embedded in different and potentially conflicting ideological approaches to the orientation of PSET and the ways in which PSET should and could intervene in the triad. In the Colloquium, there was a clear sense that PSET need a major overhaul to play a meaningful role in the triad. As Professor Derrick Swartz said, universities tend to “reproduce and form part of the dominant logic and despite the rhetoric and innovations within them, they tend to reproduce many of the problems that we identify in the main stream economy and within education”. Salim Vally, drawing from a book edited with Enver Motala (Vally & Motala, 2014), emphasised that universities suffer from “managerialism, corporatisation, and racism”, all of which serve to reproduce inequalities and severely constrain universities from playing a meaningful role in the triad. Nonetheless, and despite these challenges, both speakers recognised that the university exists as a contested space and emphasised that agential possibilities for transformation and manoeuvre exist and must be utilised. The *#FeesMustFall* campaign exists as one such agential possibility that has become a reality. In addition, in light of the structural limitations of existing institutions it was also about identifying new institutions and forms of learning that might more powerfully intervene in the triad. Here it was noted that the CIPSET has been tasked with piloting the first community college in the country.

Future Colloquia would need to build on the work begun in this Colloquium and the theoretical work being developed within the student movement to carefully unpack these concepts and the theoretical and practical implications that different understandings have for our understanding of how PSET can best intervene in the triad.

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<sup>2</sup> A statement by academics that supports the student struggle in South Africa. Available at: [http://www.amandla.mobi/student\\_struggle](http://www.amandla.mobi/student_struggle).

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## The role(s) of PSET in the triad

Six ways in which PSET can contribute to the triad were identified at the Colloquium. These are: (i) supporting the development of a capable state; (ii) producing the skills needed for inclusive economic growth; (iii) transforming the Expanded Public Works Programme; (iv) developing active and empowered citizens; (v) growing the solidarity economy and (vi) developing and producing socially engaged scholarship. The six themes are discussed in detail in the report on the Colloquium. In this submission I focus on three themes that cut across the discussions held at the Colloquium.

First, the Colloquium noted the importance of *contributing to the development of a capable state*. Here the role of PSET in aiding with the development of a community college sector was seen as central. Community colleges are to provide education for those who did not complete their schooling and who do not qualify to study at TVET colleges and universities. An introductory pilot was proposed at two sites in the Eastern Cape for the first two years (2015–2017): one rural in Cofimvaba and one urban in Nelson Mandela Metro. Second is providing pre-service and in-service professional development of educators for early childhood development, schools and Technical, Vocational Education and T (TVET) colleges. In addition to meeting the total numbers of educators required, it was noted that a far greater understanding of the real experience of educators in schools and in colleges needs to be developed. A critical step to achieving this would require developing a far deeper understanding of the social background of learners and what this means in terms of the learning support required by institutions and educators. Another essential aspect to achieving this would be by addressing the complexities of language in instruction, especially the use of mother-tongue languages. The role of PSET in interrogating theoretically and empirically the ways in which the Expanded Public Works Programme could be harnessed to support community development and poverty alleviation was noted, as was the importance of providing training for small contractors on how to utilise labour-intensive methods of production instead of mechanisation.

Second, the Colloquium called for a *new kind of graduate* who can better understand, relate to and address the challenges of poverty. This would demand a re-envisaging of the curriculum in both theory and practice and a transformation in the teaching and learning cultures of PSET institutions. Importantly, and in line with Stuart Hall's famous quote that "the university is a critical institution or it is nothing" the Colloquium noted the importance of critical and innovative thinkers who contribute to the development of a transformed South Africa.

Third, the colloquium insisted on the development of *new and innovative theoretical and empirical work on poverty and inequality*. Particular importance was placed on empirical studies that gives 'voice' to poor and silenced communities, and theoretical frameworks that seek to

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explain and understand their experience. At the same time, it was emphasised that knowledge needs to be co-constructed *with communities* rather than – in Edward Said’s terms – constructed through ‘othering’ communities by doing *research on* communities. Here Ivor Baatjes spoke about the importance of community engagement (CE) and socially engaged scholarship (SES). CE refers to university–community partnership, or what Jen Snowball in her presentation spoke of as the ‘porous university’, and SES to higher education partnering with communities and other organisations in search of answers to the pressing social and economic problems. Highlighting the work of CIPSET, Ivor Baatjes stressed the importance of embedding the university more firmly in the community rather than, as is usual in the ivory tower approach, as separate and distant from the community.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of the Colloquium as a space that brought various players together to discuss and to extend the debate cannot be overstated. While we would need to admit, as Enver Motala said, that “we won’t solve the problems”, spaces like the Colloquium provide an opportunity to “jointly talk about the problems” and to develop “fuller understandings of the issues”.

In this sense, the Colloquium has raised more questions that it has answered. It has insisted on a more careful engagement of the triple challenges facing South Africa; raised concerns with the policy direction being adopted; acknowledged the central role that neoliberalism and capitalism have played in creating the triad and highlighted the possibilities and limitations of PSET in meaningfully intervening in the triad.

What was strongly emphasised is the importance of developing a working relationship between PSET in the province. Recognising that work at the universities have tended to be fragmented, collaboration across PSET institutions was highlighted as a key outcome and goal of the Consortium. A concrete suggestion made by the Vice-Chancellor and which had strong support from Francis Wilson was the establishment of a virtual university. This virtual university would be composed of the four universities of the Province and would engage with issues that emanate from this and other similar colloquia with a view to providing research and other forms of support for initiatives that take ideas generated forward in a concerted way. It was understood that CIPSET (Ivor Baatjes) and the Mandela Initiative (Francis Wilson) would take the initiative in this regard.

Importantly, in the face of high levels of pessimism at growing inequalities, the Colloquium represented what Enver Motala described as “hope, optimism and possibility”.

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