

Why are we afraid of excellence in education?

By

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I

The *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* for 2010 were recently released. Recognised as a robust measure of quality (recently refined and updated), the Rankings included only one African university - the University of Cape Town (UCT) - in the top 200. The oldest of our universities, Cape Town came in at 107, an improvement of 39 places over 2009 and 33 over 2008 when it ranked at 179th place. No other South African or African university feature. With twenty-three universities in our country the news ought to jolt us out of any sense of complacency and put renewed pressure on our government's lack of ambition for our institutions of higher learning. In response to a parliamentary question I had asked Higher Education & Training Minister Blade Nzimande dismissed the Rankings as biased towards the West and English, both points of which are simply untrue.

Other middle-income countries with universities ranked in the world's top 200 included Korea, Turkey, China as well as the much more wealthy on a per capita basis, Singapore. India, Mexico, Russia and Thailand featured earlier but they seemed to have slipped back. Our colonial cousin and destination point for our diaspora Australia has done very well in the university league. The world top ten universities are (1) Harvard University; (2) California Institute of Technology; (3) Massachusetts Institute of Technology; (4) Stanford University; (5)

University of Cambridge; (6) University of Oxford; (7) University of California at Berkeley; (9) Imperial College London; and (10) Yale University.

Jonathan Jansen recently wrote in the *Mail & Guardian* (27 August to 2 September 2010) that Cape Town is the only university with anything approaching a vibrant intellectual culture in South Africa. He remarks that ‘whether it was the fascinating debates on the core curriculum during the time of Mahmood Mamdani, the bitter debates on affirmative action led by David Benatar or the more recent stand-off between Max Price and Neville Alexander on race-based admissions policies at that institution, it is a place boiling with intellectual foment as Nobel laureates and troublesome intellectuals criss-cross that campus regularly.’

Instead of having our other universities become as vibrant, we got into a rut, says Jansen, which ‘reduced many of our universities to degree machines and diploma mills’. He offers a number of reasons for this; (1) the creeping managerialism that turned the scholarship of teaching and inquiry into a mechanical parade of ‘measurable units’; (2) a university leadership that does not understand the true purpose of a university; (3) the massification of universities with underprepared students and; (4) the exit of scholars of standing from academe who find the ‘sheer demand of work with low intellectual returns singularly unattractive’. I would add: a Government that does not have any ambition to turn our universities into centres for new ideas, for they fear a genuinely educated citizenry that will challenge it more.

Gareth van Onselen points out that what Jansen fails to do is point out why intellectual vibrancy and alertness are necessary. He argues that its importance can be associated with two things, namely: (1) to better grasp and therefore master the nature of the world that we live in; and (2) to achieve human progress by way of original thought, innovation

and insight. Universities are and must remain the home to intellectuals and their students with the irreducible freedom to test outrageous hypotheses subject only to the demands of evidence and the rigours of sophisticated analysis. On this front we are sorely lacking because the poor grounding in the real demands of education, which is get people to think and judge for themselves.

Education must be about stretching the brain. It is about having to master all of the facts about an issue, learn how to frame non-trivial and compelling questions based a sophisticated reach of analytical rigour and the search for answers wherever that takes one. It is a journey of discovery into the unknown and the gaining of insight into the human condition. It is something that money cannot buy. Education should not simply be about economic success, as important as that may be. It is to culturally enrich our young people in the best that literature, history, the arts and the sciences offer. The philosopher A.C. Grayling in *The Meaning of Things* (London: Phoenix, 2007, p.158) describes what I mean best:

Education in these pursuits opens the possibility for us to live more reflectively and knowledgeably, especially about the range of human experience and sentiment, as it exists now and here, and in the past and elsewhere. That, in turn, makes us better understand the interests, needs and desires of others, so that we can treat them with respect and sympathy, however different the choices they make or the experiences that have shaped their lives. When respect and sympathy is returned, rendering it mutual, the result is that the gaps that can prompt friction between people, and even war in the end, come to be bridged or at least tolerated. The latter is enough.

The returns are individuals with the knowledge, insight, wisdom, ethos and skill to fill leadership positions in the fullest range of positions a

modern society requires, from judges to police captains, entrepreneurs to corporate executives, trade unionists to student leaders, public servants to politicians, in the richness of our shared history and cultural diversity, unafraid of excellence and ambition on the world stage.

Training on the other hand is about skill acquisition. Education requires but is not the same as training. Grayling (pp.159-60) is helpful on this score too:

Young children need to be trained in multiplication tables, reading, spelling and writing, exactly as an athlete trains his body: it takes coaching, repetition and practise. When children have acquired skills they can use by reflex, it gives them the confidence and the materials to profit from the next step, which is education proper: the process of learning to think and to know how to find and use information when needed. ... education involves refining capacities for judgment and evaluation ... learning is only a means to an end, which is understanding – and understanding is the ultimate value in education.

To support our universities into the top 200 requires an ambition on the part of our tertiary sector leadership to become really good. It requires a step by step building process where universities fill vacant posts with the best academics and administrators, admit the best students and lay the foundations for an orderly, culturally busy and intellectually enriching space for young people to thrive in the rounded fullness as students, citizens and leaders. It requires meticulous planning and proper budgeting, an unrelenting attention to detail and the full support of government.

Our universities are not the same. The best ones tend to be the older ones. They were also preserved under apartheid as largely and, at most of the older institutions, for whites only, leaving a cultural legacy not always friendly to black people. Our younger universities created (or

remade in the case of the University of Fort Hare) in the 1960s were frozen along ethnographic lines and struggled against great odds to rise above what their planners intended for them. Led by Kader Asmal when he was education minister, the university landscape changed by a process of mergers between some universities, technical and teacher training colleges leaving us with the 23 universities we have.

The trick of course is to build the weaker universities into stronger ones rather than the reverse. There are some universities of technology that do not remotely resemble the likes of the Indian Institute of Technology or come close to a scaled down version of global best practise of say the Nobel Laureate rich *California Institute of Technology* (Caltech) or the more broad-based but equally prestigious *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT). Every university of technology must offer the basic sciences like chemistry, biology, physics and mathematics and some, strangely, do not. To build these up as assets of quality will require much more money (which government would have if it curbed wasteful spending) and the slow and cumulative building process that aims to achieve quality.

II

Even their names are dull. South Africa has 50 colleges that few individuals know about. Students rarely carry their pride of attendance by wearing American-style T-shirts or sweatshirts with the college's name emblazoned for all to proudly see. I walk through our airports and have never once come across an advertisement for this or that college or this or that educational offering. The University of South Africa (UNISA) is everywhere but, for example, Tshwane North is nowhere, and for a very good reason: the only time our colleges make the news is when there is trouble. Quite simply, our colleges have a negative brand

as misgoverned and inferior institutions, which is no brand at all. The *Mail & Guardian* 3-9 September ran the headline 'FET in trouble: 30 of 50 are high risk.'

Director-General Professor Mary Metcalfe is quoted as saying that 30 of the 50 colleges are broke. Some will not have sufficient funds because of the in-built and extraordinary problem of having salary costs exceed their income, something that any person responsible for household accounts never mind an institution would find intolerable. Being broke means that no academic planning can take place, staff would have to be retrenched and teaching and learning compromised. Metcalfe's departments appointed a task team to help and support the colleges undertake 2011 planning, budgeting, staffing and then populating them with students. It appears to be a rather limp rescue effort.

What is the vision? Higher Education & Training Minister Dr Blade Nzimande says that the colleges 'are being prioritized by government as a key instrument for stepping up both general vocational education and the development of skills for particular occupations.' He continues: 'I see them as playing a particularly important role in the expansion of apprenticeships, learnerships and other forms of training requiring both theoretical and work-place practical instruction.' He hopes that colleges 'become educational institutions of choice and not just a fallback for young people who fail to get into university'.ⁱ At the opening of the FET College Summit Nzimande declared that 'today we begin a journey in which we commit to making public FET colleges institutions of excellence and to challenge the widespread perception that they are poorly resourced, second-choice institutions.'ⁱⁱ

At the recent FET College Summit Nzimande goes on to outline six key clusters of activity for government: (1) a significant expansion of the sector to reach an enrolment of 1 million by 2014; (2) expansion of opportunities in curriculum programmes in order especially to attract

student who fail to achieve university admission; (3) training partnerships with industry funded by the dreaded Sector Education and Training Authorities or SETAS; (4) establishing work-place programmes for FET graduates; and (5) introducing quality interventions to improve management capacity, materials development and the introduction of formal qualifications for lecturers.

Nzimande remarks on the financial limitations facing the achievement of the mission, naming the problem as 'limited exchequer funding.' By calling on FET College–SETA collaboration he draws attention to a potential source of funds, the *National Skills Fund*, which is in part disbursed by the SETAS acting as granting agencies. Worth pursuing I believe are the following (1) to continue to use the National Skills Fund that has a revenue line based the 1 per cent skills levy; (2) to spend the overwhelming quantum – say 98 per cent - of the funds on apprenticeships and learnerships in areas of skill-acquisition as defined by the private sector and publicly owned companies; (3) to house the delivery of the training programmes at our FET Colleges; and (4) with the 2 or so per cent remaining to use it to finance ongoing research at an appropriate institution that measures progress with industry skills plans and training quality.

Once these proposals are accepted two other problems require solutions: (1) how not to pull the rug out from ongoing excellent – there are some very good ones - SETA-funded projects by providing transitional funding to take these to their natural conclusion over the next 2 to 3 years; and (2) getting the buy-in of the trade unions and business that money for training should be spent almost exclusively on quality training and education for the over 2.8 million young South Africans who face no future and not on the salaries and fancy cars of the fat-cats. To do this Nzimande needs to confront the some of the union bosses and entrenched SETA management head-on, a tricky if not impossible thing

to do in the light of the major tensions in the Congress Alliance. The issues though must be confronted.

The fact is that this is a very risky pathway to increasing the funding required estimated to be in the region of R14 billion over the next 5 years to bring the vision to life. There is no money to fund the dream. Here is a practical illustration: in November 2009 I sent Minister Blade Nzimande an application prepared by False Bay College for a new campus in Mitchells Plain and an expanded one for Khayelitsha. After a period of silence I sent Minister a letter of enquiry (30 March 2010) to ask for an update. Nzimande responded with the news that his Department identified False Bay, Orbit and the two Tshwane colleges for refurbishment through something called the RMB 200 Million Project sponsored by the Government of the People's Republic of China. Using foreign assistance to rescue our FET colleges when there is monumental waste in spent and unspent national skills and SETA billions is one point to make. The other is that nothing comes for nothing, especially as China is fast becoming a global neo-mercantilist power in need of natural resources. Foreign assistance is one thing. Foreign assistance to bailout government mired in wasteful expenditure is quite another.

III

I recently published a book titled *Nature's Gifts: Why we are the way we are*.ⁱⁱⁱ In the book I devote a chapter to what I call ways of learning. I tell the story of my children's natural sense of curiosity which they expressed from a very young age as an innate desire to know how things work. I wrote about this innate curiosity all children have:

The elements of curiosity that drive discovery science we observe in innocently naïve forms among almost all children.

Most children are curious and most particularly like bugs. It is a fascination with the world that sometimes extends to plant life; animals, wild and domesticated; the Earth; and the galaxy. It is the excitement of discovery, of finding out something they did not know before. And then along come school and the teacher. Teachers are in a special position to stimulate thinking school-going children, especially when it comes to the puzzles about the origins and evolution of life. The question is, what do they do with their special position to fire the imagination of the young? Do they stifle or ignite innate curiosity? What do teachers do in our classrooms? Do we really know? Do we really care?

Later in the book I tell the story of the great South African botanist Eddie Roux who was known more for his politics and the highly original book *Time Longer Than Rope*.^{iv} In 1964 Roux was asked to address a gathering of first-year students at the University of the Witwatersand on the subject of evolution: 'It is amazing,' he started his address,

that it be thought necessary before an audience of university students to defend the theory of evolution. This is not an audience of Transkeien tribalists still steeped in witchcraft nor indeed a meeting of the *Boere Vereniging of Verkeerde Vlei*, which many years ago collected the sum of £20 and sent it to the University College of the Orange Free State with the request that it should use this money to disprove the theory of evolution. This is a meeting of some of the fine flower of Western civilisation who have qualified to enter this institution of higher learning known as the University of the Witwatersrand. Most of you have not taken university courses in botany or zoology, but I must assume that all of you have some knowledge of the changes that occurred in human thought since Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published just over 100 years ago.

‘If there are some of you,’ Roux continued,

who have not yet assimilated the modern view of man’s place in nature which places him a little lower than the angels and a little higher than the beasts, and which traces his ancestry back to *Pithecanthropus* (the ape man) and even further back to those interesting man-apes who left their bones at Sterkfontein, not twenty miles from here, – if there are any of you who have not yet assimilated this modern view, then I must blame your teachers at high school who have been too afraid of the school inspectors or the *dominees* on the school boards to teach what every student in this modern world is entitled to know.^v

I quote these long passages in full because of their cumulative power and because I have yet to encounter a more compelling moral injunction for excellence in teaching than is contained in the final sentence. To teach what every student is entitled to know about our place in the universe means that those of us who teach at every level of education must know what that modern view is and, on that basis, challenge students to rise to the best of intellectual ability and rigour of which they are capable. I call this the Roux Test and it is a challenge to everyone today, whether at school or at university; in the natural or social science or humanities, at a time when knowledge is fragmented, bitty and displaced by the epistemological nihilism of postmodernism.

I once applied the Roux Test to the teaching of Life Sciences at high school level by asking a parliamentary question about the number of teachers in the life sciences who are qualified to teach in the life sciences. The Department of Education could not answer the question about teacher qualifications in discipline specialization. What they could tell me is how many teachers teaching science have a teacher’s diploma or not and not whether the science teachers have a science qualification or not. Whether they were too lazy to really look or make the effort to find

out or whether they simply fudged the issue thinking they would get away with it is not certain. But the numbers they came up with were alarming enough:

Table: Number of Science teachers per province

<u>Province</u>	<u>Qualified REQV1+3</u>	<u>Unqualified REQV 12-</u>	<u>%</u>
E. Cape	1 334	216	
Free State	692	273	
Gauteng	2 671	179	
KZN	1 510	405	
Limpopo	2 498	386	
Mpumalanga	674	60	
Northwest	209	44	
N. Cape	922	72	
W. Cape	842	76	
TOTAL	11 352	1 711	

Source: *EMIS Mathematics and Science survey 2008*

Were we to apply the Roux test to every teacher, lecturer and professor at every level of education, whether primary or secondary school, college or university, in every discipline there is, I wonder what we will find? I asked the *Ministry of Higher Education & Training* what the average qualifications are for college lecturers and await the answers, but I am certain the news will not be good. I am also unsure how well qualified university lecturers are at some universities or in some disciplines at all universities to teach what they teach. I am alarmed by the idea that somehow we can separate research from teaching for a good lecturer must one way or another be immersed in some level of research to advance their fields and take students along with them. Brazil opted for the North American model of requiring all university academic staff to have PhDs and perhaps we should be doing the same. It raises a fundamental issue about our tendency to invest in things and not people.

IV

Why are we surprised when we succeed at something like the World Cup? It is because we are not very self-confident and self-assured as a people, especially those who come from the more oppressed and exploited parts of our historical experience. The first sixteen years of education and training have not succeeded in instilling confidence in at least two generations of young South Africans and we therefore do not believe in ourselves and sadly lack ambition. The best vision the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) for example can come up with is a strategy to destroy and to take, to be the grooming vehicle for those who would staff what the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) calls the 'predatory state'. It is not a vision to educate and to grow, to succeed and prosper or to excel and become the best we can be.

In order for education and training to instill confidence we must have an unyielding commitment to excellence, for only with a mastery over the disciplines like mathematics, science, literature and history can we successfully navigate our various ways through the demanding requirements of living in the early 21st century what with its now global challenges of climate change and economic globalization. Whenever I have raised the issue of excellence in education in Parliament I am almost immediately accused of being elitist and desirous of protecting the privileges of the few and thereby denying opportunities to the many. My retort is that it much better to extend excellence to as many individuals as we can and therefore lift the overall quality of our education system rather than to lower our sights and settle for mediocrity. Make more students meet rigorous standards through a demanding education system rather than have them leave universities

with half-baked degrees. Students need to be intellectually stretched and pushed.

There are of several reasons why we do not have a culture that celebrates excellence. The first is the persistence of an apartheid era ethos in the formerly oppressed sections of society that everyone must suffer equally, misery must be spread to all and that democracy means equality of distress rather than that of opportunity. This has been compounded by one strand of Marxist theory that welcomes the immiseration of the people as a prelude to revolution, the belief being that the poorer people become the more likely they are to revolt. Look very closely at the thinking on the left spectrum of our politics to find this theory of regression. COSATU's recent proposal for the equality of mediocrity across our schools is the most recent example.

The second is widespread cultural resistance to the idea that entrepreneurship whether economic or social are good, worthwhile and legitimate pursuits. The thinking also has its roots in apartheid. Because the majority of South Africans were not allowed to trade and run businesses freely, it was assumed that those who did and made good money were able to do so because they had to be doing something illegal or were collaborating with the regime, or both. In those days working as a teacher or a lawyer or a nurse brought great status and the jobs held in high esteem, whereas those in business were seen to be exploiters, thieves and collaborators.

The third reason is the dog-eat-dog Social Darwinism that has accompanied our democracy, which is why it has become necessary for leaders to remind us (without much success it seems) of our higher social selves in the philosophy of Ubuntu and the repeated and largely fruitless call to moral regeneration and social cohesion. The ethos of the survival of the fittest is rampant in the corporate, the party political and the non-governmental world to such a degree that we do not recognize

or embrace excellence when we see it, nor do we honour in a non-partisan fashion those leaders who excel in their accomplishments. We tend to step on one another to get ahead.

The fourth reason is has to do with what Franz Fanon called the 'colonisation of the mind' and Steve Biko the 'psychological imprisonment' of the soul of people. Instead of cultivating the real freedom that rests on having self-confident, independent and freethinking citizens requiring minimal normative regulation by the state and the law, our ruling elite, despite public utterances, wants to stay in power on the backs of pliant, subservient and fearful citizens cowering in fear of the might of the state. And make no mistake: many individuals among the current generation of young ANC leaders easily slip into their default state of being bullies and thugs to the great alarm of the more senior constitutionalists and democrats in their ranks, unfortunately it appears, to be a shrinking minority.

This current government is pushing the state onto society increasingly: (1) an information bill that gives some bureaucrat the right to decide what is in the national interest and what is a state secret and what is not; (2) a proposal for a media tribunal that stifles the fourth estate, make editors look over shoulders and discourage journalists from getting to the bottom of the rot that has set into our society; (3) a lack of commitment to having a strong and meaningful parliament by the appointment of commissars of control to its key committees; and (4) a decline into the nether world secrecy, manipulation and violence to deal with opponents and a diminishing protection of the real democratic spaces to which we all contributed in all of our various ways. Is all lost? No, not if we all stand up to be counted.

Notes

ⁱ Blade Nzimande, 'Bridges to a better life' *Mail & Guardian* Supplement *Training for Life* 3-9 September 2010 p.4.

ⁱⁱ Blade Nzimande, 'Address at the Further Education and Training College Summit' (Boksburg, 3-4 September 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilmot James, *Nature's Gifts: Why we are the way we are* (Johannesburg, WITS University Press, 2010).

^{iv} Eddie Roux, *Time longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).

^v Eddie Roux. nd. 'Evolution'. Unpublished paper, Wits Senate Archives, p 1.