

Source: DAILY DISPATCH

Date: 24-Nov-2004

Topic: 25

Ref No: 5831



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The politics of learning

How much interference can universities take before they cease to be universities?

asks Professor Jonathan Jansen.

THE historically white universities remain, for the moment at least, the most viable option for creating world-class African institutions that can compete with leading universities elsewhere and that could deploy their significant resource base to resolve urgent problems of development.

To systematically erode this capacity in favour of a racially-motivated policy of redistribution is short-sighted in the extreme and will, for sure, drag all institutions down to the lowest common denominator – a situation in which we all lose.

Where, I often muse, will Cabinet Ministers send their children in 20 years' time? At the rate we're going, the answer is: outside of South Africa.

Second, the historically black institutions have been so devastated by a combination of apartheid underdevelopment and post-apartheid corruption, that any simplistic notion that these entities could be salvaged to become universities is naive at best and, in effect, pernicious given the long-term development!

The historically black universities would need massive injections of sustained funding to build adequate libraries, recruit world-class professors, attract outstanding graduate students, and develop the kind of intellectual life that distinguishes universities from other kinds of institutions, like prisons, hospitals and mental asylums.

The levels of recurrent funding required for bringing all universities to the same or sim-

ilar levels will simply not materialise; in the same way that all the rhetorical excesses about Further Education and Training (FET) colleges will remain just that – since the macroeconomic commitments of government have ruled out any possibility of the transformation of this sector.

It is appropriate at this juncture to reflect on the disturbingly poor quality and credibility of higher education leadership after apartheid, and how this has additionally contributed to the demise of the South African university.

In the historically white universities we have a leadership which, with few exceptions, has yet to find ways of acting credibly by building a strong and diverse academic and intellectual community of scholars. It is such perceived inaction that exposes these institutions to the political claim of stalling transformation and to the punitive effects of the more coercive instruments of the state.

In the historically Afrikaans universities there remains a serious contestation about the ownership of these institutions.

For the next decade, schools and universities will be the primary sites of contestation for the assertion of racial privilege and power in the conservative Afrikaans community – and language will serve as the most potent flag-bearer of such contestation.

What is equally disturbing is the behaviour of the leadership of historically black universities.

It is worth reminding our-

selves that some of these institutions were – resources apart – thriving sites of intellectual production during the anti-apartheid years. Several had attractive reserves during the 1980s and even the early 1990s.

But since then, corrupt and inept leadership has slowly stripped several promising HBUs of both their material and intellectual assets to become, well, non-universities.

I hope every citizen felt understandable disgust when the Mail and Guardian last week published the salaries of the heads of our universities.

How does a vice-chancellor earning R2 million to R3 million turn away students who cannot afford to study at his institution? What do such salaries say about the university councils who hire and pay vice-chancellors? What damage does such behaviour do to the argument for greater autonomy of institutions when such corrupt behaviour is allowed to fester within the public sector?

But the future existence of the university is also undermined by growing corporatisation, rampant managerialism,

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and state control.

At the 2004 TB Davie Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town, I mentioned a university in which: The entire place has been transformed into a commercial centre, in which every "management" meeting is consumed with balancing the budget, in which the response to external intervention is one of compliance and consent; in which teaching is equated with technology; and the mechanics of research confused with the elegance of scholarship.

I argued that a university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energises its scholars, and inspires its students. It ceases to exist when state control and interference closes down the space within which academic discourse and imagination can flourish without constraint.

The university ceases to exist when it imposes on itself narrowing views of the future based on ethnic or linguistic chauvinism, and denies the multiplicity of voices and visions that grant institutions their distinctive character. And the university ceases to exist when it represents nothing other than an empty shell of racial representivity at the cost of academic substance and intellectual imagination.

Whether South Africa has any universities (in the ways imagined) in the next 30 years will depend crucially on the decisions made today.

The most critical and realistic scenario is to create a two-tier university system consisting of a small group of high-powered research universities designed to enjoy a substantially increased investment in research and postgraduate education, and a larger group of high-quality teaching universities designed to create opportunities for a broad base of students within a programme that has strong academic development thinking infused into the curriculum.

What will also be required is a new generation of higher education leaders selected not because of political expediency and racial preference but on the basis of leadership credibility.

In the 21st century, capability is simply not enough – as George Bush is busy finding out.

Professor Jansen is dean of education at the University of Pretoria. This is an edited excerpt from the Hoernlé Memorial Lecture of the South African Institute of Race Relations, delivered by Professor Jansen in Braamfontein, Johannesburg on Wednesday, November 17.