

Source: THE HERALD(EP HERALD)

Date: 23-Nov-2004

Topic: 25

Ref No: 5860



1

ID: 03159809-01

Source Page: 4

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GOVERNMENT PLAN FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION

The great SA university debate

With many South African universities and technikons, including UPE and the PE Technikon, set to merge next year under the government plan for tertiary education, the question is asked: When does a university cease to exist?

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

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

Where will cabinet ministers send their children in 20 years' time? At the rate we're going, the answer is: Outside South Africa.

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 potential of the country.

The historically black universities would need massive injections of sustained, multi-year funding to build adequate libraries, recruit and retain world class professors and standing graduate students, and

develop the kind of intellectual life that distinguishes universities from other kinds of institutions – like prisons, hospitals and mental asylums.

By which I mean: We hold students against their will when they feel they are entitled, as post-apartheid beneficiaries, to pass; we entertain all manner of social illnesses under the guise of promoting the academic project and the madness of managerialism has displaced the power of intellectual community as the distinctive feature of university life.

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

The levels of recurrent funding required for bringing all universities to the same or similar levels will simply not materialise; in the same way that all the rhetorical excesses about further education and training 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 ourselves 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 historically black universities of both their material and intellectual assets to become, well, non-universities.

I hope every citizen felt understandable disgust when the Mail and Guardian published the salaries of the heads of our univer-

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1

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sities. How does a vice-chancellor earning R2,3-million turn away indigent students who cannot afford to study at his institution? What do such salaries say about the university councils who hire and pay the 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, managerialism, and State control.

At the 2004 T B 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 post-graduate 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.

□ This is an edited version of the 40th Hoernle memorial lecture that Prof Jansen, dean of education at the University of Pretoria, delivered at the South African Institute of Race Relations.