

*development
dialogues*



* monograph 19



isandla
institute



OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTH AFRICA

DOES HIGHER EDUCATION PRODUCE THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND PEOPLE NEEDED FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT?

*monograph 19

ISANDLA INSTITUTE / OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION

About Development Dialogues

Development Dialogues is a joint initiative of Isandla Institute and the Open Society Foundation – South Africa. The aim of the public dialogue series is to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue among key development stakeholders in South Africa. In doing this, the organisers seek to make a (rather modest) contribution to enhancing the quality of debate in the development sector. Through *Development Dialogues*, Isandla Institute and the Open Society Foundation intend to bring about creative and constructive multi-stakeholder meeting opportunities that push stakeholders to think beyond the confines of their immediate interests and theoretical paradigms.

This monograph captures the speakers' inputs and discussions at the *Development Dialogue* on 'Does higher education produce the knowledge, skills, competencies and people needed for South Africa's development?', which took place on 17 June 2009 at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town.

Published in 2009



Isandla Institute
PO Box 12263
Mill Street, Gardens 8010
South Africa
Email: admin@isandla.org.za
Website: www.isandla.org.za



OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTH AFRICA

Open Society Foundation for South Africa
PO Box 23161
Claremont 7735
South Africa
Email: admin@ct.osf.org.za
Website: www.osf.org.za



In introducing the topic this afternoon, I feel quite honoured and pleased to introduce two high calibre education activists and advocates. I think the discussion that we will engage in is both timely and necessary (*does higher education produce the knowledge, skills, competencies and people needed for South Africa's development*) today.

I wondered how we might frame this question in the light of recent developments; we have a change in political leadership and a new ministry for higher education. In addition, we want to reflect on the fact that we sometimes talk about South Africa's development as if it is a state-packaged product that we have to aspire to. How do we operate within a new set of confines determined by a global economic slowdown where people have to do business differently? How do we address the fact that conceptual skills sets required might be quite different from that which is outlined for reaching targets and outcomes that may already have been determined? I don't want to go into a huge amount of detail mostly because I don't know the education environment very well.

Why are we starting with higher education reform as opposed to focusing on basic education with early childhood education, primary care and into high school as a higher priority?

How might we create an environment for some of these fundamental questions to be addressed, as opposed to making assumptions about where interventions need to happen?

One of the challenges is the tension that is currently confronting the education sector, why are we starting with higher education reform as opposed to focusing on basic education with early childhood education, primary and secondary education as a higher priority. Perhaps that is something that we want to reflect on. How might we create an environment for some of these fundamental questions to be addressed, as opposed to making assumptions about where interventions need to happen?

What I particularly like about Isandla Institute's Development Dialogues is that it's exactly that, a dialogue. It is not about someone promoting (or pushing ideas) it is about a contestation of ideas. It is about engaging in a necessary debate. ■





I went to a graduation at UCT last week and Max Price was apologising for the graduation for being so long: it wasn't! One of the things he did at the end was to make the graduates hold up their diplomas and wave them to their families and friends on the other side, just to say thank you for the support and for the incredible sacrifices that they had made. I realised how wonderful a ceremony it was. There were parents from the rural areas who clearly had sacrificed everything to get their children into that university. There were also children from the townships watching their brothers and sisters get their MA's. The culture of the graduation ceremonies has shifted quite dramatically as it was probably 70 or 80% black people, but I might be wrong in terms of the numbers. I found it really moving to be amongst so many smart young people.

I just thought that it wasn't so long ago when I was graduating in that very same hall, to an all white campus. Every student who graduated was white. An audience like this would have been entirely white. Just imagine somebody came and said everybody here with a skin a little bit paler, "out please, we don't want you here"! How on earth did we ever conceptualise something like that and make it work? Such an incredible waste of human capability and of human possibility: what this country has lost along the way in terms of contributions of human resources and talent.

Here in the Western Cape, we've got CPUT, UCT, Stellenbosch University and UWC, so many smart people and so much brain power in this part of the world alone, if we can't get it right to fix our schools and our universities then I don't know what we are going to do as South Africans. Then there is

As South Africans what do we think it is that our higher education sector is going to do for our country?

something wrong. I also thought back to our own graduation years when we were in Students for Social Democracy, and where we understood that the white English liberal university was there to create "the technical, managerial and ideological skills for the ruling class" - and by the ruling class we understood not just apartheid but capitalism as well.

In some ways, it's still the same set of questions. If you actually read the question that you are posing here today: how do we now further the technical managerial and ideological skills of the ruling class? Except now we assume that we are on the side of the ruling class and of course it is different because we're building and constructing as opposed to having to oppose and to destroy. I think the Universities are not in crisis like our school system which is in a severe crisis. But I don't think I see a vision for higher education. If someone said to me, as South Africans what do we think it is that our higher education sector is going to do for our country? I don't think any of us would spark and immediately say we've got a bold living version of what that vision is.

Because we don't have a vision, we certainly don't have a plan for what we are going to do. We also don't have the buy-in. It is one of the things that amazes me. Why are we so pragmatic and gradualist in our approach to policy?



We added little bits, tweaked a little bit and we merged a little bit. Not only can we say that we don't understand what we want from higher education, we can say higher education, as it stands today, is very poorly funded and very fragile. They operate on an annual budget. How do you run an institution of hundreds of millions of Rands when you don't know what your budget is for the next year? You can barely develop three year rolling plans and you're always on the margins of being financially viable. So, what you do all the time is squeeze the students and add the financial burden that you're facing onto the students who certainly can't afford it.

In answering the question "are we producing the skills?", my answer is no. As a society, we are not producing the architects, engineers, accountants, teachers, social workers, change managers. All the surveys show that we need them but we're not getting them from the universities. Even on the level of teachers, there is such a limited discourse coming from the teacher training colleges, which are now based at the universities. If you said to them, what are your plans for teaching? Are you going to be up it? How are you going to get foundation phase teachers who can actually speak the vernacular at those base levels where we need

Because we don't have a sophisticated academic and intellectual discourse, people get away with loosely throwing around phrases like 'neo-liberalism and managerialism'.

them? What are universities doing to provide those skills? I don't see much of a plan.

Have the universities helped us understand this transition? I don't think so either. Where does President Zuma come from? Where does the battle between the working class and the class project of 1996 come from? Have universities thrown light on this transition for us? I don't think we have those kind of tools and debates out there, again especially in the public discourse. What are the priorities and the limitations for a society in transition like ours? What are the class formations, racial changes, demographics and how do we understand them? Because we don't have a sophisticated academic and intellectual discourse, people get away with loosely throwing around phrases like 'neo-liberalism and managerialism'. This doesn't help deepen the debates or deepen the ability of the left to actually cope with the changes. It makes it harder to understand precisely that the university system is failing to engage with our society, a society which is reinforcing a tendency in our democratic movement not to respect intellectuals.

One of the problems of academic freedom and autonomy (of which I'm a strong supporter) is that one is not going to be able to claim it unless you show that you're engaging. Many in the Universities think academic freedom means you can just simply sit and comment from a distance rather than to engage. For me, engaging means being the best and for example being able to contribute to the international understanding of the universe in a way that nobody can do in the Northern Hemisphere because they don't see the stars as we do: it is not about 'lowering the standards' and is exactly about striving for excellence.





Are universities contributing to changing attitudes? The answer again has to be no. The Soudien report that has recently come out, clearly shows that at all our universities (particularly the white English universities), black people don't feel like they belong. They feel alienated. Whatever the reasons and whatever your take on it, there's a problem that needs to be dealt with.

It is quite clear that universities have shifted demographically, from a black intake of 190 000 in 1993, we now have 450 000 black students in our universities. Wits is about two thirds black, UCT probably about half and Stellenbosch about 25%. It does seem like places like UCT have hit a ceiling in terms of admitting black students and we need to understand what that ceiling is about. Obviously one of the reasons is that the school system is poor. It is not feeding people through but we need to look at that more.

Part of the demographic problem is the inequality. About 60% of white learners get to university, with about 12% of black learners. There is already an inequality even before looking at the throughput. If you look at management studies for example, I think for every 83 white students who get through in 5 years, there are about 33 black students who do it and similarly in the humanities or languages, I think for every 62 white students, there are about 25 black students who avoid drop out. The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

The university is a social institution that belongs to us all.

The Soudien report clearly shows that at all our universities black people don't feel like they belong.

says that Government has decided the cost of getting working class children into universities is too high. Are we taking seriously what it actually does cost to get people to university? The major reason why people drop out is financial, despite the fact that National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has expanded dramatically.

Lastly, we indeed had some managerialism coming out of the mergers; it has mostly been a really administrative, technical process that has not improved the management and certainly has not improved the ability of the universities and technical universities to position themselves and understand their niche.

I think this is a good time to engage; I think since Polokwane we have had an open policy, space and environment. We need to engage and defend academic freedom and at the same time, we need to put pressure on the universities to transform. The university is a social institution that belongs to us all. We are not getting it right and it does require all of our interests and support in making it better. ■



I spoke to someone from SASOL who told me that South Africa was trying to import 5 000 welders. Welders are not produced by higher education but in the Further Education and Training (FET) system. The fact that we can have such a shortage of people who within six months of training could be doing the job tells us that we've got something seriously wrong with the post-school system. At a higher level, management skills, engineering, health professionals are in desperate short supply and we have to conclude that the Higher Education system is not delivering those skills adequately.

The question that I ask is, is the problem actually in the schools? Part of the answer is yes. The reason why we're not delivering enough of these skills is because the key bottleneck is the children coming out of school. Graeme Bloch reported on some of the figures of the failure rates at university. I will disagree with him slightly about the analysis of why, but essentially across the country, only about 30 to 40% of the people who start university finish. At universities that are fortunate enough to recruit better scholars, the rates are better. At UCT, on average 70% complete a three or four year degree and there's an apparent racial component to that which reflects in fact not the race, but the schools they come from. People from private schools have about an 80% completion rate of their degrees. People from township schools have approximately 50% completion rate. Black students from non-township schools have about a 66% completion rate. It's a significant difference. But interestingly, of those that drop out, you find about 20 - 30% of them did not need to drop out; they are dropping out for financial reasons.

The much larger group (three quarters) are

excluded because they are failing continuously. Well, you may ask, why don't we select them better? Because we don't have a good enough prediction test. Matric is not a good predictor. When we select a group of people, what we try to do is to get our threshold for admission at a level where we think at least 50% of them will succeed. In other words, we know at the start that perhaps 50% of them won't make it. But if we have a much higher threshold, we would have a higher success rate but we would probably have fewer black students coming through the system. We need a larger intake because we know there are kids with potential whose schooling hasn't prepared them sufficiently to get through. With the support that we can give them at university, some of them will get through. But if we didn't give them a chance in the first place, we would even have fewer graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The schooling system is the bottleneck. If we were to drop our admission criteria any lower, we could take in a few more but we would have 70 - 80% failure rates in that group and that is not fair on the system, not fair on the kids because it damages their self esteem. It is also not fair on the families who pay fees and make sacrifices to do that. So the poor quality of the vast majority of schools is the first bottle neck.

But there is more. The paradox we are trying to address in this forum is why is it that we have significant graduate unemployment? Why is it that the system is producing lots of graduates many of whom are not finding jobs, if we have such a skills shortage? Well, one needs to unpack who are those graduates that are not finding jobs. At face value, when you look at the statistics, it looks like it's the black students who are not finding jobs and you





may think it reflects racism amongst society and employers. That's not really the case as most employers are desperate to find competent black graduates. There are pressures on affirmative action and BEE.

Furthermore, when you look at the graduates from a place like UCT, the employment rate amongst African graduates is higher than amongst white graduates. We do surveys at the time of graduation, and African students have the highest proportion that has been promised jobs. So it is not racism. When you unpack the statistics, what you find is that it reflects the universities that people come from. It is the graduates from the historically disadvantaged universities, which happen to be almost entirely black African, that are struggling to find jobs. The employers (when you interview them) say that the quality of the training is not good enough and there are some particular skills that they complain about. A study that was commissioned by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) in 2007 reported that many graduates lacked soft skills such as communication, general language skills especially in English and this caused them firstly not to be successful in interviews, and once they were selected they are found wanting in the writing and communication skills that are needed in the high level jobs. We're not talking about employing plumbers and electricians. These are people who are in jobs where they have to communicate, manage, lead, represent the organisation, write reports and it's those skills that they complained about.

They also complained about their ability to find and use information, the ability to find appropriate information to solve problems, an understanding of economic and business realities and a lack of openness and flexibility. This suggests these

It is the graduates from the historically disadvantaged universities, which happen to be almost entirely black African, that are struggling to find jobs.

graduates had come out of learning systems which were still much more rote learning systems rather than systems that were about problem solving and dealing with uncertainty.

You'll be interested that employers rated the graduates very highly for the way they interacted with other cultural groups in the work place. That does seem to be one of the things that the higher education system is getting right, at least from the employers point of view. It may well be the case that at universities, there is still a lot of social segregation and there is a lot of discrimination all around. But the universities are nevertheless significantly integrated; you heard about UCT's diversity at graduation, more than 50% black, and it is by no means the most integrated. The residences are compulsory integrated. You are allocated randomly to a residence to ensure that there is a thorough mix. And so, in fact people are living together, not as much as we'd like but it is a different university experience from the one we had 10 years ago.

If it is the case that graduate unemployment relates to the university you studied at we then have to ask why that it is. It may be that employers are right about the skills. We have a problem with quality in parts of the higher education sector and we need to work on it. It would be wrong to ever say about a whole university that it is good or bad. Departments go up and down, universities go up and down, and



even UCT has accreditation reports about some of its departments that are embarrassing. The important thing is to have quality assurance systems not to say who is good and who is poor, but to ensure incremental improvement in quality. It is also the case that some universities are taking students who shouldn't be taken into university in order to meet government set targets and to secure their subsidies, and that compromises the overall quality of their degree and what they are producing.

Graeme talked about lack of vision and the need for something revolutionary to happen. I think we indeed had a massive revolution in the higher education sector. The mergers and the change of the higher education landscape from 36 institutions to 23 was hugely disruptive and expensive. It may not have been the right revolution. But we've got the mergers and we should live with them and make the best of them. We also need to take stock and say, if we did get it wrong, how do we fix it? I think what we got wrong is that we have a dislocation between what was the theory of the mergers and what the practice was. The theory was that the mergers would create a higher education landscape that was broadly differentiated into three categories of institutions: research universities, comprehensive universities (less oriented to research) and universities of technology (the old technikons which converted into universities of technology). But by making them all universities, we blew the differentiation that was meant to occur.

Then you create a funding formula which funds the 23 institutions on exactly the same basis. The way in which the institutions are evaluated results in everyone wanting to be a UCT or Wits, i.e. a research university, internationalised, with more post

graduate students. But that's not what the country needs and part of the reason why we're failing is because we're not doing that differentiation. If you look at the United States, they recognise that they have a school system that is quite uneven. They use 2-year community colleges to raise the education standard of many school leavers from weaker schools to the point where they can cope at university. So one of the things we should be reviewing is what it means to have a differentiated higher education system. How do we implement that? I also think we need to recognise that our top universities operate in a very competitive world because higher education has become so globalised. Our academics are more mobile and if we don't have at least a few world class universities in SA, then SA will have no world class academics and the children of middle class families will go to university abroad. We can't pretend that this threat doesn't exist.

Lastly, should higher education be providing vocationally oriented skills and at what point? Are we training institutions providing skilled professionals to fill employers' needs? This attitude has driven the investment in those faculties that concentrate on Science, Engineering and Technology. But is that right? I think the first job of the university is to provide the generic qualification that ensures a good general education – a BA or BSc. The professional qualification should come later or at least the professional qualification should incorporate subjects from the humanities, arts and social sciences. I would argue that a critical function of universities is to prepare citizens, leaders and people who can think. They will find jobs because they think analytically, creatively, they communicate well - but only if they have a high quality education. ■





AFTER THE INPUTS, THE FLOOR WAS OPEN FOR QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS. ISSUES THAT WERE RAISED INCLUDED:

- How has the lack of funding, particularly state funding, affected critical thinking, innovation and research for the benefit of society?
- Why do universities employ inexperienced students to lecture postgraduate studies?
- Does generic education have anything to do with people being employed in their non-academic disciplines?
- How do we balance the need to have a South African curriculum?

IN RESPONSE THE SPEAKERS MADE SOME CONCLUDING STATEMENTS:

Max Price

I will not say the quality of our teachers is anything less than what it used to be. Before, you could not be a professor without the PhD. Today, one cannot have a lecturer's job without the PhD. As a general rule, the PhD is an entry qualification to an academic credit. The quality of our staff is much higher. One of the things that has happened is that the pressure to do research and publish is much greater than it ever was and there's sharp competition amongst universities. The consequence is that people are spending less time on teaching and they are using graduate students. I think curricula in general are well oriented and they are addressing the South African issues very well. We might argue if it is appropriate to teach Latin or Greek at a university? It is but it shouldn't dominate the curriculum. I don't think we should apologise for preparing our graduates to be global citizens.

Universities are public institutions. There should be more medical schools and there should be more engineering schools. I don't think it's a disaster though.

Graeme Bloch

Let me just say that on jobs, networks are what works for white graduates. White graduates do better and faster because they have networks whereas black graduates really struggle to find those networks except in the state. I've just seen at some of our universities of technology in Gauteng, where students are told to go look for a job on practical for a year or else they don't get their certificates. And if they don't have a network, how do they get jobs? they drop out at the final hurdle.

Students are an elite. There needs to be struggle and I think we need to get away from this thing that indigenous knowledge or African knowledge equals knowing about plants. Indigenous knowledge can both be working class and expert. To understand HIV and how this virus operates, you need the best research. We must start setting that quest for excellence as part of the struggle for working class curriculum.

Slogans and not understanding and looking at the complexities isn't going to help. I don't think we've been very good as a country in understanding the question of excellence and quality. I think it means we need to be confident about the ability of human beings. The diversity does not mean the dropping of standards. It also means we need a plan. We need to say, what is it that we require of higher education? We should be more generous to higher education and get the best research.





DOES HIGHER EDUCATION PRODUCE THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND PEOPLE NEEDED FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT?

17 JUNE 2009

CENTRE FOR THE BOOK, CAPE TOWN

ABOUT THE PANEL:

Graeme Bloch is DBSA education policy analyst. He is a graduate of the University of Cape Town where he specialised in economic history. He is a member of UCT Council, serves as director on Lafarge Education Trust and is a judge in the Impumelelo Innovation Awards. He has published widely, in particular on education, in both academic and more popular publications. Recent books include 'Education, Growth, Aid and Development (ed with Chisholm and Fleisch) and 'The Toxic Mix: What is wrong with SA's schools and how to fix it' (Tafelberg, Sept 2009).

Dr Max Price is Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town. From 1996 to 2006, Dr Price was dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand. He has degrees from the universities of the Witwatersrand, Oxford, and London and has published extensively in the fields of public health policy and health science education.

Zohra Dawood is Executive Director of the Open Society Institute for South Africa. She has degrees in law, one in African Government and Administration and a Master's Degree in Economic History. In addition to her responsibilities for South Africa and African programmes for the Open Society Institute, she has been appointed to head up OSI-NY's efforts in Indonesia as country director, where she heads up an OSI entity that seeks to institutionalize democracy and an open society in the largest Muslim country in the world.



**DOES HIGHER EDUCATION PRODUCE THE
KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND PEOPLE
NEEDED FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT?**



www.isandla.org.za



OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTH AFRICA

www.osf.org.za