

Prof Yusef Waghid, Dean of the Faculty of Education, was the speaker at an alumni-function in Durban recently. The article is a shortened version of his speech themed “Alumni of the Knowledge Society - A perspective”

Universities as agents of the public sphere



alumni of our University are empowered individuals embedded in the knowledge society distinguished by the extraordinary degree to which the University is linked to society. There is a mutual link between the University and the modern society which I refer to as the knowledge society.

Political, economic and cultural forces are ever increasingly becoming incorporated into university life. Problems, demands and resources associated with every institution in our society now appear on university agendas, calling for relevant research and teaching.

In this country, our University is called upon to help with

enormous social problems - improving business organisations, capital investments, protecting the natural environment, preserving human rights and cultural diversity, resolving crises of governance, and promoting democratic citizenship.

Thus, the emerging knowledge society is in fact driving the University's expansion. I now offer a brief account of how we respond:

Our Vice-Chancellor, Prof Russel Botman, articulates the mission of this University as an Afrocentric one - a university which can potentially equip its graduates with universalistic forms of knowledge, embodying abstract and general truths (rationalisation and scientisation) and at the same time respond 'consciously' to societal development, particularly against the backdrop of globalisation and Africa's underdevelopment both scientifically, technologically and culturally.

Clearly an Afrocentric University would be one where its academics and students work to present

the conscience of this society because they not only shape the conditions under which future generations learn about themselves and their relations to others and the world, but also because they engage in pedagogical spaces that are by their very nature moral and political, rather than simply profit-maximising and technical.

For the University to enact its civic role, it commits itself to produce graduates who can engage in critical reasoning.

has an educative value whether ethical, aesthetic or political, which helps to shape the autonomy of the person doing research.

It is this kind of personal autonomy that would enable alumni to engage in autonomous activities of benefit to society. In this way the cultivation of 'pure' academic inquiry would invariably have useful, applied and practical qualities.

In other words, this would mean that our Afrocentric University would still produce highly skilled professionals and researchers as a necessary workforce that can simultaneously attend to the demands of the knowledge society without necessarily being dictated by it - instead the University is shaped by the requirements of the knowledge society.

Integrally bound to the University's Afrocentric commitment surrounding higher education in this country is the possibility of achieving a Pedagogy of Hope - our critical consciousness and social justice agenda.

For the University to practice critical reasoning is

to recognise that there are multiple readings of the world with which people ought to engage carefully and critically. To have a single reading of the world is tantamount to advancing an education with answers as if ready-made and prepackaged truth claims are constantly available for different understandings of the world.

One absolute and hegemonic (dominant) reading of the world often results in marginalising the voices of the oppressed. Our Pedagogy of Hope (of enabling the marginalised to develop their language or 'form of life') is in fact a move towards respecting cultural differences. Only then will liberation for all communities be forthcoming and critical reasoning be practised.

Thus, for the University to enact its civic role, it commits itself to produce graduates who can engage in critical reasoning - who can reflect on and engage critically with multiple issues and not perform as technicians executing decisions they have acquired expertly at the University.

In this way, the idea of the university as a producer of 'enlightened citizens' not disconnected from wider social and political concerns would not necessarily be sacrificed. The University that instills into its graduates a capacity for critical judgement and an appreciation of the good life from the vantage position of the many would prepare them for participation as informed citizens in democratic societies. If this happens, universities would become important agents of the public sphere, initiating social change for the many rather than just uncritically responding to it.

We would like to believe that our alumni would further connect with the University at the aforementioned two fronts: in the cultivation of our Afrocentricism and Pedagogy of Hope. ■