Valuing the *purposes* of higher education

Arthur E. Levine of Columbia University writes that 'in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the Yale Report of 1828 asked whether the needs of a changing society required either major or minor changes in higher education. The report concluded that it had asked the wrong question. The right question was, what is the purpose of higher education?'

Levine adds that questions related to higher education 'have their deepest roots in that fundamental question' and that 'faced with a society in motion, we must not only ask that question again, but must actively pursue answers, if our universities are to retain their vitality in a dramatically different world'.

For good reasons, national higher education systems display highly different and diverse institutions, with universities characterised by different missions, varied social and educational purposes and goals, differing size, different academic programmes, differing admission requirements, and varying academic standards as appropriate to their purposes and goals.

The meaning of higher education and universities cannot be found in the content of their teaching and research, how they undertake these, or their admission policies. Instead, the core purposes of higher education and universities reside elsewhere.

The first purpose of universities is to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our accumulated scientific and cultural heritage.

This means that we "test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations", we dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we "reinvigorate" knowledge and we share our findings with others.

We undertake research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the "most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge". At the same time we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind.

We "operate on both the short and the long horizon". On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and "contemporary problems" and seek solutions to these. On the other hand, we "forage" into issues and undertake enquiries "that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit" (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:3).

Above all, we ask *questions*. We don't immediately worry about the right answer or solution. Instead, we worry *first* about the right *question* or the better question. It is as Einstein has said: "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

The second purpose of universities is the *dissemination of knowledge* and the formation and cultivation of the cognitive character of students. The goal is to produce graduates that ideally: 'can think effectively and critically'; have 'achieved depth in some field of knowledge', and have a 'critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves'.

Our graduates should also have 'a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times'; be 'able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it'; have 'some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems'; and be able to 'communicate with cogency'.

The final, if somewhat newer but increasingly accepted, purpose of universities is to undertake *community engagement*. We must distinguish between a university being responsive to its political, economic and social contexts and community engagement. Being alive to context does not mean that a university is necessarily engaged with communities, however we may define these. While sensitivity to economic and social conditions and challenges is necessary for community engagement, it is not sufficient.

At different moments, in differing ways and to differing extent, community engagement has encompassed community outreach, student and staff volunteer activities and, more recently, what has come to be termed 'service-learning'.

Service-learning has tried to build on the core knowledge production and dissemination purposes of the university. Instead of being an add-on, disconnected from the University's core activities, as community outreach and volunteerism have been, service-learning seeks to become a 'curricular innovation' infused in the teaching and learning and research activities of the University.

As has been noted, 'service-learning…engage(s) students in activities where *both the community and student* are primary beneficiaries and where the primary goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance student *learning* through rendering this service. Reciprocity is therefore a central characteristic of service-learning'.

The goal of service-learning is 'integrating community service with scholarly activity such as student learning, teaching, and research. This form of community engagement is underpinned by the assumption that service is enriched through scholarly activity and that scholarly activity, particularly student learning, is enriched through service to the community'.

To effectively undertake its diverse educational and social purposes, a university must have a commitment 'to the spirit of truth' and must possess academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary conditions, they are also rights with which duties are associated.

In the African context, we must recognize, as Andre du Toit urges, 'the legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation as threats to academic freedom'; and that 'the

powers conferred by academic freedom go hand in hand with substantive duties to deracialise and decolonize intellectual spaces'.

Other duties on the part of universities include advancing the public good and being democratically accountable. They also encompass bold engagement with economic and social orthodoxies and resultant public policies that may seriously misunderstand and distort the purposes of universities, stripping them of their substance and leaving them 'universities only in name'.

At the same time, an enabling policy framework that encompasses thoughtful state supervision, effective steering, predictability in policy and adequate public funding is vitally necessary for higher education to realize its social purposes. However, while an enabling policy framework is vitally important, it is on its own not enough. Such a framework must be also supported and reinforced by wider economic and social policy frameworks. Otherwise, the promise of higher education will be undermined by unsupportive economic and social environments and financial constraints.

For example, the Higher Education and Training Ministry's goals of increasing enrolments and participation rates and access, equity and redress may be handicapped by the inadequacy of the state budget devoted to higher education. Similarly, equity of opportunity and enhancement of quality may be retarded by inadequate funding for programmes of academic staff and student academic development at institutions.

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Valuing the *role* of higher education in society

The role of higher education in society must give expression its key purposes of producing and disseminating knowledge and community engagement. However, universities roles also cannot be isolated from the context and conditions in which they find themselves, and must engage with local, national, continental and global challenges.

These challenges include economic growth and development; the ability to compete globally; job creation and the elimination of unemployment and poverty; the effective provision of social services and the threat of HIV/AIDS and other diseases. They also encompass the imperatives of equity and redress; social justice; the democratisation of state and society, the building of a culture of human rights, creating a vibrant civil society, and promoting a culture of vigorous and critical intellectual public discourse.

Higher education must play at least 5 key roles.

The first, quite simply, is to cultivate highly educated people. Universities must provide imaginatively, and rigorously designed and implemented academic programmes that take into account two issues.

One is the kinds of knowledge, competencies, skills and attitudes that our graduates require to function in a rapidly changing society and world. Our programmes must enable students to graduate as professionals who can think theoretically and imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives, and communicate effectively orally and in writing. Our task is not simply to disseminate knowledge to students but to also induct them into the making of knowledge.

A second issue is the social and educational experiences of students who, because of the imperative of social equity, must come from increasingly diverse social backgrounds. Our students must be afforded not simply equity of access, but also equity of opportunity and success, through effective teaching and learning and academic development programmes.

The second key role is to contribute to forging a critical and democratic citizenship.

Our societies require graduates who are not just capable professionals, but also sensitive intellectuals and critical citizens. Our academic programmes together with our institutional culture and practices must therefore ensure that we keep ethical questions in sharp focus, and that we advance a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights that is conducive to the development of critical discourse, cultural tolerance, and a humane social order. As Prof. O' Connel, Vice-Chancellor of UWC has put it, we are 'tasked with the arduous formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry. Nothing less will suffice'

Increasingly the trend is to approach higher education in terms of promoting economic growth and producing workers for the economy. Higher education must certainly cultivate graduates that can contribute to economic development. However, reducing its

value to economic growth, and calls that universities should concentrate on professional and vocational programmes and prioritise 'skills' denude it of its much wider social value and functions.

Higher education has an intrinsic significance as an engagement between dedicated academics and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances. It also has immense social and political value. As Martha Nussbaum argues, education is intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the 'cultivation of humanity'.

However, there are additional ways in which higher education can contribute to the promotion of social and human rights and democracy.

First, rights, democracy and citizenship are also important issues for research. Second, community engagement is a 'means for…building democratic commitments and competences in all concerned'. Finally, universities can through their own ethos, structures, processes and practices serve as models for the promotion of human rights and of democracy.

The third key role is to actively engage with the pressing development challenges of our society.

Through teaching and learning, universities can develop awareness of economic, educational, health, environmental and other problems, and through research they can confront and help contribute to their management and resolution.

Community engagement can serve as a 'means for connecting universities and communities with development needs' and 'for staff and students to partner with communities to address development aims and goals'. Mutually respectful and reciprocal partnerships with communities can create opportunities for economic and social advancement, while also enriching research and learning and teaching.

The fourth key role is to contribute to the intellectual and cultural development of the public as critical citizens, through informed social commentary and critique and public engagement around ideas.

Universities have the responsibility, writes Stephen Jay Gould, to 'convey the power and beauty of science to the hearts and minds' of the public. Gould notes, there is a 'long and honourable tradition of popular presentation of science', and we should not mistake 'equating popularization with trivialization, cheapening, or inaccuracy'. He adds that 'the concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all people'.

The final key role of higher education is to creatively conduct different kinds of scholarship - discovery, integration, application and teaching - and research, which has different purposes (fundamental, applied, strategic, developmental), aims and objects.

Today, knowledge, science and information play a critical role in economic development and are prized for the advantage they can confer on businesses and countries. This means that the knowledge takes on new and great significance. For this reason, writes Castells, 'if knowledge is the electricity of the new informational international economy, then institutions of higher education are the power sources on which a new development process must rely'.

Unfortunately, the competition for economic advantage means that certain kinds of knowledge and research, (natural, medical and business sciences and engineering) are privileged. The eminent scholar, Thandeka Mkandawire, rightly argues that 'attempts to improve Africa's prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford. It is 'vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place if Africa's development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed'.

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