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Moving Towards an African Identity: A Personal Vision for the Future of Rhodes University

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I have been reliably informed that it was the habit of a previous Vice-Chancellor of this University to call in prospective inaugural presenters to offer them the sage words that no one else knew as much on the topic as they did. Perhaps this was meant as reassurance, possibly advice, or even licence. Whatever it was, I have chosen to ignore it. My topic is not 'the state of the discipline', my individual research interests, or even the state of the economy; at least not directly. Rather, I am going out on a limb to attempt to embrace a wider canvas in which the role of Economics and Economic History will emerge only gradually, once most of the sage heads of colleagues before me have already nodded off.

It is now 12 years since the creation of our democracy and nearly 10 years since the publication of the Government's White Paper on Higher Education in 1997. These have been turbulent times for the sector and the impact on this institution, in particular, also, has been significant. It is thus fitting to begin my lecture with some discussion of where, I believe, tertiary education, including Rhodes University, finds itself and how we as an academic community might begin to map the way forward. I thus begin by asking the very large question, "What is the purpose of the University in the new South Africa?" From here I will progress to offering my vision of how best Rhodes can respond to this vision, before taking the analysis down to the Departmental level. As a member of the Economics Department, I will then offer my views on how we can adjust teaching and curricula to meet the vision.

There is no doubt that the past two decades have brought radical changes to tertiary education throughout the world. In essence, this was the consequence of the commoditisation of knowledge. The past three decades have seen the emergence of the knowledge-based economy. Knowledge is replacing physical and tangible assets as the key driver of wealth creation and economic growth. How national governments responded to this became critical. Generally, as in the case of Britain, the transition was driven by governments anxious to precipitate their economies into the new era. At the same time, the prohibitive costs of offering free or heavily subsidised tertiary education became a fiscal burden seen as untenable in a post-Keynesian, neo-liberal environment where 'small government is beautiful'. Often, the transition was successful beyond their expectations because of the ease with which tertiary funding was slashed without serious protest from academics or political constituencies. However, the transition has not only threatened the traditional role and perception of universities in society, it has catapulted many economies onto developmental paths that now challenge the traditional concepts of society, nation, and in particular, the university.

In some respects South Africa was fortunate in catching this wave of university restructuring only towards the end of its run. There was general recognition that the apartheid system of education provided the policy underpinnings of a social system that had to be destroyed. Similarly, in attempting to address the grievous social

injustices accumulated during the colonial and apartheid eras, it was obvious that divergent calls on the fiscus would simply not allow for a blank cheque for the higher education sector. The higher education institutions, tainted by the legacy of apartheid, were now held to account to prove their *bona fides* by participating in the envisaged changes that are necessary for the reform and restructuring of the sector and of South African society as a whole.

In keeping with tertiary education elsewhere in the world the transition was to include a redefinition of the university itself. Transformation in the South African context has thus come to embrace two overlapping objectives. The first required a commitment to a new non-racial South Africa. The second entailed a 're-exploration' and restructuring of the very idea of what the university should be.

What is the purpose of the university in the new South Africa?

In a re-exploration of the idea of the university the past was a time when,

> "Academics were expected not merely to encourage their students to pursue their studies vigorously, but to foster a love of the discipline for its own sake. In all of this, matters relevant to societal problems, financial viability, and the like, were usually not thought of as being part of their concern." (Dowling & Seepe 2004: 187)

Most research was curiosity-driven and depended on the predilection of the researcher. Nor was it likely to attract public scrutiny, since it was evaluated strictly in terms of the parameters of the discipline. There was no major concern to ensure the practical relevance of research. If this appears a particularly bald assessment of the 'good old days', it is not too far from the truth.

The emergent knowledge age supposedly requires that the university undergo a transformation. Both at the national level and globally the university today is expected to play a constructive role in creating relevant knowledge and advancing technology. Mode 2 research increasingly replaces 'blue sky'**.** It is driven by the availability of research funds rather than by curiosity. Similarly, the demand is for more vocational training. Even beyond this, the demand in the traditional liberal arts is for the creation of 'life-long learners'. The presupposition is that graduates must be inculcated with the ability to periodically re-skill themselves. In turn, social demands and economic imperatives are for the massification of tertiary education**.** Increasingly, universities have to accept more under-prepared learners, students who require even more support, at a time when less funding is available for this purpose.

Manuel Castells (2001: 206) has listed four functions performed by universities throughout their history. Firstly, universities serve in the formation and diffusion of ideology within a society. Thus, objectivity, or supposed impartiality, is always constituted within broader ideological parameters. Secondly, universities serve in the selection and socialisation of the dominant elites of a society. As industrialisation undermined the old elite of family heritage, so universities came to the fore and created the vital intelligentsia to lead modern society. Thirdly, universities serve to generate new knowledge. This was not seen as a vital function and universities often have not served this purpose**.** Instead, they have concentrated on their fourth function;

training, for finally, universities serve by training the professional classes and the bureaucracy. This function ranges from the initial medieval context of training priests, lawyers and doctors to the more recently added generation of accountants, actuaries, administrators, scientists, engineers and the likes.

If we stop to review each of these functions in relation to the new South Africa, several issues immediately spring to mind. It is clear that the post-1994 state remained deeply sceptical of the capacity of the leading universities to break out of their role as ideological supporters of apartheid structures. If this is especially true with regard to the Afrikaans institutions, there is also a deep cynicism about the supposed liberalism of the English speaking universities. At one level, this is associated with the ease with which the English reed bent with the wind, but there also remains dissatisfaction with the unwillingness, or intellectual inability, of these institutions to readily embrace an African identity, an ideal deemed paramount for the reproduction of African nationalism. Government has sought to address the issue mainly through employment equity, fondly believing that altering the racial quota among academics will suffice to ring the ideological changes.

Sadly, the engagement among academics of all hues as to what is to be embraced in a new African university, pertaining to its role in facilitating democracy and a new identity as it evolves from the 'struggle nationalism' of the past, has yet to consolidate into anything meaningful. Without the required change, a suspicion hangs over the product of our institutions. Are South African universities reproducing an intelligentsia that is essentially at odds with current political leadership with the old African nationalism and with the more recent concept of the African Renaissance?
I wish to argue that the wine of a new country demands new bottles, but more on this later.

Similarly, the economically and intellectually viable core of the tertiary education system, the historically white institutions have contributed disproportionately to the generation of new knowledge. Also, the research they have undertaken is cosmopolitan, in the sense that much of its output has not aimed specifically at addressing the concerns of the political majority. Neither has it necessarily been focussed at addressing the 'relevance' of the new environment of the information age.
Here, and in the training of professionals, the historically black institutions have fallen short of state expectations, thereby forcing an uncomfortable reliance upon the previously privileged. An attempt to address this dependence through poorly planned and under-funded restructuring of the sector seems unlikely to achieve these primary objectives either.

We must recognise that no university reliant on the state for a significant part of its funding can escape the dictates of its paymaster. "He who pays the piper calls the tune". There is thus an inevitability in the process by which all South African universities will be drawn, some faster than others, into the changed identity foreseen for the sector. Which begs the question: Does this require capitulation?

It seems to me that universities in South Africa are in a far better position to negotiate their destiny than has been the case with many of their first world counterparts
over the past twenty years. There are several reasons for this. Unlike many developed countries, South Africa has a tradition of fee paying students, which means that

institutions which take a strong line on the principle of 'no pay-no stay' have an independent source of income that reduces their total reliance on state funding. The South African state, too, is playing a good sleight of hand in hoping to increase its influence over the sector, while at the same time diminishing its role as paymaster. For lack of a source of independent funding, British universities have had to capitulate to this stance. But there is no reason, within the limitations of the legislative environment, for the South African tertiary education sector not to indulge in hard bargaining. Furthermore, given that South Africa is a developing country, the deficit of well trained human capital is such that the fate of the economy, and with it that of the political state, rests heavily with the prime providers of this scarce resource.

At the same time universities need to exercise caution in their drive to generate independent sources of funding. It is important that, in their bid, if not to weaken the hand of the state, to gain a greater level of financial independence, they should not lose sight of their core functions and ethical principles. Unlimited interference by the government, on one hand, and a badly thought-through drive towards the untrammelled 'entrepreneurial university', (Bok, D, 2002) on the other, represent the Scylla and Chalybdis of tertiary education.

What then are we to bargain for with the state? There is the need to take stock of what constitutes the non-negotiable elements of the ethos, or 'idea' of the university, where state intervention should not, or will not, be tolerated. These are the elements common to universities wherever they may be located. Here there is a need to caution that academic freedom has never involved complete non-interference by the state, any more than it implies an abandonment of a wider social and civic responsibility. As in anything pertaining to the concept of value it is the ***relative*** position that is critical. Yet, I believe, there is a second element to the equation of our relationship with the state, that needs to re-enter the equation: namely our role as the sector, in the words of Castells, responsible for the 'formation and diffusion' of ideology in the society.

Many South African universities were founded in the colonial era, and continued under the apartheid state. While they played a role in the formation of ideology, this function diminished in the years following the Verwoerdian premiership, where the English-speaking institutions influenced ideology and policy hardly at all. In the years after 1970, South African universities, particularly the historically English-speaking ones, were excluded or withdrew into a limited confrontational, or – rather - passively compliant, relationship with government. We now need to re-establish the ideological connection and ensure that our input becomes creative and positive, not just in terms of the wider impact on society but also more specifically within government. We have lost a decade in this regard and cementing the relationship will be difficult. If this active ideological intervention is to succeed at all, it requires a positive contribution towards fleshing out the concept of a new South African identity that culturally and economically embraces all who are South Africans; that looks forward without ignoring or diminishing the role of the past; and that recognises and encourages the 'African-ness' of all of us.

What then are the principles that should be non-negotiable, that should define what constitutes a university irrespective of its geographical or cultural location? I am drawn here, as a starting point, to the definition of academic freedom proposed by

Davies, namely that it is the universities' right to decide who shall teach, what shall be taught, and who will be taught. This might appear to offer absolute freedom but it is clear that this ideal has never prevailed in South Africa and already in the new dispensation, as in the past, numerous pressures are being exerted on all three components.

The state is exerting pressure for equity quotas to be met in who teaches, for the 'relevance of courses', and for greater enrolment of black South African students. I have no quibble with the need to address racial quotas among staff and students, the rider being that the staff appointed must be capable of good teaching and research, and the students must be capable of benefiting from what we have to offer.

What we teach is a different matter. Here we cannot compromise. I am the first to recognise that there is an urgent, legitimate pressure for many disciplines and departments, my own included, to direct their instruction and research towards the critical problems besetting our country and continent. It is here that the call for the emergence of the African university is usually located. My argument is that how we respond to these calls and needs remains the preserve of academia.

With this said, however, I believe that this should in no way restrict the ability of South African universities to help meet the needs of our country and the continent and in the process adapt to becoming new African universities. My argument is rather that unless the initiative comes from within our institutions both the contribution we can make, and its sustainability, will be superficial and effete. Change is not something to be imposed from outside but rather has to be encouraged from within.

I am strongly influenced in this position by the writing of Gordon Graham (2002) who offers a measured and philosophical justification for the rationale of the modern university. Perhaps what makes his interpretation particularly satisfying to me as an institutional economist is that he adopts an anti-utilitarian position in reviewing the 'relevance' of university education! His point of departure is that academic value has incorrectly been subjected to the value language of commerce, namely supply and demand. Allied to this is the notion that the success of individual courses can only be established by surveying those who take them, that is, the vision of the student as customer. In our materialistically dominated world the concept of prosperity is conceived solely in purchasing power.

For Graham this is logically incomplete. Without additional <u>*objects*</u> for consumption, additional <u>*means*</u> of consumption are worthless. Wealth creation requires both. The current debate around the relevance of university degrees and courses concentrates on the contribution to <u>*means*</u> (crudely, what courses are relevant/useful to place graduates in jobs) rather than on the contribution a university education makes to and as an object of that consumption.

Education and research are not in themselves wealth creating, but "The former gives individuals the skills to create wealth, and the latter explores and opens up further possibilities for wealth creation". (Graham, 2002: 22-3) Current government and social concerns hinge largely on the relevance or usefulness of particular courses, with much hand-wringing about an oversupply of humanities graduates who are supposedly unemployable. Again, there is no doubt that not all university courses are

'useful' but other than in the traditional training of professionals this has always been the case without diminished the graduate's value to society. There is no reason to believe that this should change in the 'information age'. Graham also issues the caution that, as academics, we should not fall into the trap of shifting the emphasis to transferable skills as a means of legitimating the courses we offer. The value of a course in Classics lies in the whole intellectual experience it offers, rather than in the belief that it might simply encourage good writing skills. Here again the mistake is to attempt to explain *value* in terms of *use*.

The concept of usefulness also needs to be challenged – useful for what? Use is not an abstract concept; something is useful to a purpose. Similarly, there are no absolute degrees of usefulness. So: any university subject has its uses to some people while being useless to others. If a subject is useful to a large number of people this may enhance its social value but we cannot allow this to impress us unduly. Economics may well interest more people but this is not a sufficient argument for the scrapping of Classics. A further spin on this argument is, "The widespread belief is that
a subject may be described as more useful, that is to say, one that serves more purposes for more people, if it can be shown to be part of the social process of wealth-creation. Conversely, it is less useful if it can be shown to be part of social consumption." (Graham, 2002: 27)

This brings us back to the issue of wealth-creation. It is wrong to see it in terms of making money. A barter economy also creates wealth. Nor is wealth unique to the production process. Life is enriched in other ways too, e.g. the advancement of knowledge and understanding. So it is more than the acquisition of goods and services. At an individual level we can adopt the narrow view that the acquisition of cars and houses represents wealth creation but this does not hold for society as a whole. One of the most difficult lessons to impart to first-year economics students
is to break the perception that increased purchasing power represents increased wealth for society. At the macroeconomic level of society wealth creation and consumption are the same activity viewed from different perspectives. All the money in the world is useless if there is nothing to spend it on.

All intellectual activity is purposeful in terms of wealth creation. Some subjects may be more useful to certain individuals or to larger groups but this is not a reason for society to value them more highly. Where we go wrong is in the utilitarian presupposition that use implies value. A world of accountants with no musicians, actors, or novelists, no matter how much the accountants might earn, is a poorer one.
And yes, we all need food more than a classical education but the same argument can be applied to computers and cell phones. Another take on this is the utilitarian notion that society is more important than the individuals who constitute it – that the individual needs society more than society needs the individual. But societal needs cannot be appealed to independently of the individuals who comprise it, at least if we are to maintain a humanistic democracy.

Politicians and social planners have a firm belief that they know what is required by society for its benefit and prosperity, but this is a partial view inevitably conceived in terms of utility and purchasing power. A richer society needs both the means for securing better lives and the availability of objects which make lives better.

The South African state is in danger of forcing the tertiary education sector into concentrating its contribution on improving what it believes is the wealth of society while ignoring the *object* of what constitutes a wealthier society. It is easy to slip into the utilitarian argument that as a developing economy the priority must rest with improving the means, or generating the money and skills that will supposedly lift the majority of our population out of poverty. A single-minded pursuit of this objective, however, is far more likely to be inimical than maintaining a sound balance of goals and perspectives. In addition to the logic already offered for this, adding too strong an emphasis on what is perceived to be useful in the offerings of university education will undermine the second goal envisaged by government for the sector, namely the emergence of the African university. It will destroy the most basic of our democratic principles entrenched in the Constitution, namely the freedom of choice, speech and thought, ideals fundamental to the cultural basis of an envisaged African future. There is thus a need to defend our right to offer a wide range of disciplines and the content specific to them.

The same argument can be applied to research. All too often *applied* research is seen as more valuable because it is knowledge pursued to an end, that is, it is useful. Of course, *pure* research can lead to useful ends as well but there is no guarantee that it will. Once more we fall into the utilitarian trap that unless it has use value research is pointless and a waste of precious resources. The appeal to utility does not explain the value of science as such but only the value of the consequences. Graham offers a more plausible explanation of *value* in the pursuit of understanding. (2002: 69-73)
For him, the value of understanding lies also in the development of the mind as part of human flourishing, and hence as adding to the wealth of society. Here too then, we have firm grounds for resisting the desire within the university setting to elevate applied research above pure research, and a further reason for ensuring that pressures from business or government are not allowed to interfere with a healthy balance between the two. Here too there is a critical reason for maintaining this balance within the wider context of building an African identity.

The Intellectual Construction of an African identity.

Much of the writing on the nature of the African university takes as its point of departure the need for a radical break with the prevailing hegemony of the Eurocentric mindset. Universities in Africa were defined by imperialist, colonialist and apartheid ideologies. The desire is thus to reassert and recreate an African intellectual reality affirming and developing the culture, knowledge base and technology that were destroyed, or undermined and debased, during the colonial period. Undoubtedly, this is critical. Indigenous knowledge and wisdom stands to offer our country an intellectual and practical approach to overcoming the worst excesses of materialism and rampant capitalism. Such indigenous knowledge does not easily lend itself and should not be constrained into the utilitarian model. The affirmation of African culture and knowledge is also critical for the reconstruction of pride and dignity, not only among those negatively affected by the past, but for those raised in a colonialist mindset who cannot comprehend the social corrosiveness of their stance. Unfortunately, however, much of the thinking that has gone into establishing an African identity tends to be exclusive. It believes that unless *radical* change is instituted, transformation is impossible.

Hence the words of Prof. Dani Nabudere of the Afrika Study Centre in Uganda on the concept of a Pan-African University:

> "The challenge is that such a University must be a *new University*, not only in the approach to teaching and research, but more fundamentally, in its strategic conception and its placement at the base of African and human emancipation and liberation. In being a new University, it has to play the vital role of freeing knowledge production from the narrow class, technical, and instrumentalist dominance by a few specialists to a broader theatre of recognition of other producers of knowledge, which matters in their lives and which has validity in their cultural contexts. This is what has made the creation of such a University more difficult because its creation would not only undermine existing dominant interests, but also challenge the citadel of Eurocentric paradigms and western 'scientistic' epistemologies of knowledge."

Ideally, this intellectual stance may be correct but in the affairs of man the attainment of the ideal is usually utopian. In a global environment it is no longer possible to stand in isolation; engagement is critical. However, Africa can and must be allowed to define the terms of engagement on which its own epistemology of knowledge is created.

Is there a middle way to ring the vital changes? I believe there is. Furthermore, it is likely to be the way of reality since it is impossible that we be allowed to forget or ignore the past any more than the present. There is no *tabula rasa* on which an entirely new conceptualisation of knowledge can be built. Similarly, even if the assumption is accepted that, in falling behind in terms of economic development, the African continent has created the space to allow for the conceptualisation of an alternative path forward, the parameters within which it can do so are defined by global interaction, social reality in a communication age, and trade and financial requirements. There is little to be gained by ignoring technological and intellectual developments elsewhere in the world. How we build them into our understanding and use them for our development must be the issues we are determined to control. Not to do so is to suffer the fate of having to re-invent the wheel at a later date.

Certainly one of the most insightful contributions to the debate on the transformation of higher education in South Africa is the work of Malegapuru Makgoba and Sipho Seepe (2004, 18). Even here there is recognition that,

> "A risk exists that the unbridled and uncritical embrace of the notion of African identity in higher education can lead to the defeat and closure of the concept. Flowing from this risk, it becomes imperative for higher education to grapple with the meanings, the implications and consequences of what an African university is and ought to be."

These authors establish a context, but as Nhlanhla Maake (2004, 164) points out, they fail to really engage with what traits the African university will have in common with its Western counterpart and what should be fundamentally different. By inference this applies equally to what might/ought to be preserved in our own Rhodes context from our colonial and racial legacy. I believe that rather than attempting to develop a concept of an African university *de novo*, we have to accept the reality of history and, rather, consciously and critically build upon this foundation. We need to restore African history, social thought and culture to their rightful place and afford them primacy in the teaching and training of our students. Underlying all of this must be a commitment to democratic humanism. Nevertheless, we cannot escape the reality

that culture is neither a defined nor a static concept. Similarly, there is a need to recognise that change is a process, not an event. A new culture will evolve, whether we like it or not. The most we can and must achieve is to ensure an acknowledged, dignified and elevated position for what we mutually agree, as African academics, are the traits and characteristics that identify our "African-ness", and what we believe our students should carry forward in their intellectual development as young fricans/South Africans. It is thus the role and responsibility of Rhodes, in the words of our Chancellor, Jakes Gerwel, when he was newly installed as Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape, to "educate towards and for a changed society".

Towards a new perspective for training South African economists

What then do I believe we can do to assist in building a new African identity for the Economics Department of Rhodes University, and hence indirectly for the Commerce Faculty and the wider institution? Obviously, there are many issues I would like to address but one of the first lessons learned as a young lecturer is that there is a limit to the patience of any audience. I will thus confine myself to two matters.

As a first step I wish to recommend a contribution to creating language equality. To be truly African, we need to move rapidly towards a key fundamental of an African identity, namely parallel teaching in the vernacular of the Eastern Cape, isiXhosa. At present this remains an elusive dream. Numerous state assisted bodies are currently involved in the creation of dictionaries. It is inspiring to hear that a definitive isiXhosa/English/Afrikaans dictionary was launched a fortnight ago at the University of Fort Hare. I would like to propose a collaborative venture between the Commerce Faculty, the Dictionary Unit and hopefully the SABC's morning radio and TV programmes, in which a regular slot is allocated for the airing of five or so English or Afrikaans commercial technical terms to which listeners can respond by sms with proposals for isiXhosa equivalents. Listeners can also be encouraged to submit words already in use in the business context. Submissions will then be vetted by the staff of the Dictionary Unit according to standard lexicographic practice, with interim reports being given to ensure continued public interest and acceptance into daily usage. The end goal will be the emergence of an isiXhosa dictionary of commercial and economic terms. From here, it will become possible not only to lecture in isiXhosa, using the new terminology but also initially to translate existing textbooks into the vernacular, although the ultimate goal will be the writing of such works by local academics. It is with the emergence of indigenous writing and research that a re-conceptualisation of economics teaching and ultimately, theory, can emerge.

At the specific level of the Economics Department, I believe there is a need to engage with the philosophical and social underpinnings of African culture in its very broadest sense in order to evaluate the contribution the discipline can make to the real economic development of the country and continent. A key feature of African culture is the democratic right of the citizen to be heard in the Imbizo and of all views and persuasions to be identified and aired. In this way an informed decision was made. How can we claim to educate economists without a similar exposure to differing opinions? It is fair comment to suggest that the major failures of development initiatives throughout Africa can be traced back to the implementation of programmes and projects conceptualised essentially within a Eurocentric mindset and implemented

by colonial masters. What, then, needs to change to make Economics appropriate to a local context?

I am not going to suggest that the discipline *per se* is inappropriate in an African context but I do believe we need to recognise the historical reality of the intellectual development of Economics as essentially a product of what is today defined as the First World.

Economics is a discipline founded in the European Age of Enlightenment. What this has meant is that it drew its philosophical underpinnings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from an Euclidian and Newtonian universe revealed and measured in absolute terms. Similarly, from the 1870s onward, in response to the challenges posed by Marx and Engels to the Classical position developed by Smith and Ricardo, the marginalist revolution inspired by Jevons and Walras drew heavily on Cartesian linearity. The aim was to fashion an economic model in the image of Newtonian mechanics. Perhaps the most significant discovery of the twentieth century was that time and space are relative. Einstein's 1905 paper, "On the electrodynamics of moving bodies" established the Special Theory of Relativity. So, for the century since then, scientists have wrestled with the notion of relativity. Prompted by the work of Freud society moved towards a relativist interpretation of the social experience, although this drew very little from the work of Einstein. Rather, this view served simply to undermine the perception of there being any absolutes, so that the new century was marked by the questioning of the intellectual and moral norms which previously determined the parameters within which society operated. Unfortunately, very little of this intellectual revolution spilled over into the discipline of Economics. If anything, the teachings of Samuelson and others served rather to attempt to lock the discipline into a positivist paradigm.

There is thus at least good reason to be critical of the orthodoxy of Economics.
For many orthodox neo-Classical Economists, the current position of nearly uncontested dominance of their views in state and academic circles unconsciously feeds into an unquestioning indoctrination of students. Of course this is a charge that can be laid at the door of much education. On the other hand, perhaps this is why the English language tends to speak of the 'training' rather than the 'educating' of economists. The discipline of Economics is not alone in this regard. It is a criticism that can be levelled at most teaching in the Commerce Faculty. As Castells points out, a primary objective of university education has been the indoctrination of successive generations of an elite, and perhaps there is some inevitability to this function.
However, in a changing global environment increasingly dictated by the needs of the knowledge age, and on the cusp of creating an African identity, which requires a far greater educational throughput from tertiary institutions, we need to pause to consider the appropriateness of current educational techniques in Economics teaching. This draws me back into the debate as to what constitutes a good practising economist, and perhaps equally, a good African economist at the outset of the 21st century?

Stated baldly, are we looking for someone who has the capacity to identify the key economic indicators and to feed these into an economic model, formulated either by himself or one of the leading economists of the first world, and the ability to interpret the results in order to make predictions relating to the future of the economy? This appears to be the most visible manifestation of the species *homo economicus* and the

one most of us know whose predictions are likely to be overtaken by events proving the contrary! What goes wrong: is it the training we provide, or is it a question of the validity of theory? Perhaps it is both, but I am not proposing to be the next Keynes this evening! I will settle on the issue of moving towards the education of economists. I believe this will be of far greater value to providing good African economists for the new century.

What should be the aim of a good Economics education? In short, I believe it should be the development of an understanding of the interaction of the key forces acting upon the daily lives of citizens of a society in order that the individual economist may explain the causes of events and offer a variety of possible scenarios of future events. You will note that I make no pretension to prediction. The discipline, I believe, has strayed too far in its pursuit of the Cartesian ideal. If my view debases the currency of Economics in the eyes of politicians who have come to rely on the predictions of a few tame economists, so much the better! But how do we alter the mind-set?

The answer, I believe, comes through altering the education of economists. We need to break from the positivist interpretation of economics in the class-room. The development of an 'African economics' should be one built on a questioning and evaluating mind that is unwilling to accept any theory, whatever its origin, at face value. Similarly, its starting point needs to be the questioning of the utilitarian theory of value. It is today widely acknowledged that rampant materialism, the inevitable consequence of this value system, threatens the social and environmental fabric of our entire planet, let alone our continent. Where then do we begin to alter our educational approach?

In educational terms, most tertiary instruction in economics is best described as instrumental – hence the notion of economics 'training'. The purpose is to impart a specific body of 'facts' or 'theories' with the intention of assisting the learner to develop a particular vision of the operation of 'the economy'. Of course the larger aim is to present a particular interpretation of reality aimed at reinforcing the current status quo – hence the indoctrinatory quality of the instruction. Students schooled in this way are essentially unquestioning of that 'reality' and so much more readily embrace the consumerist society, not only enhancing their employability in it but ensuring the unquestioned perpetuation of the system.

To break with this system, or at least introduce a questioning element, there is a need for the adoption of intrinsic economic education. Bridges (1992 in Clarke & Mearman) defines the central element of this approach as, "to equip people to make their own free, autonomous choices about the life they will lead". Key here is the teaching of economics in a way that presents a variety of theoretical approaches and perspectives in order to allow the learner to recognise the range of alternative ways of viewing current economic events. More critical still is that this should encourage a level of independence and autonomy in the thinking of the learner and the 'courage of confidence to act on one's own beliefs'. This lends itself to "critical and analytical thinking, comparative thinking and intellectual open-mindedness". (Clarke & Mearman) I am not calling for the complete elimination of the instrumentalist approach but rather its tempering. I am here reminded of the famous words of Oliver Cromwell to Charles I and I make a similar appeal to my colleagues, "In the bowels

of Christ, I beseech you to think on it that you might be mistaken"! Undoubtedly, the instrumentalist approach is vital for the development of the initial knowledge base as a precursor to the intrinsic approach. My complaint is that Economics education stops short of the latter.

It is my hope that young graduates emerging from Rhodes University in the future who have an informed insight into the limitations of neo-Classical Economics, who carry with them a deeper understanding of alternative approaches and theoretical interpretations, and who are willing to use their own initiative and intellect in formulating answers to the problems generated by our emerging economy and continent, will be in a far better position to contribute positively to the development, not only of our society but to that of Africa and the world. I similarly believe that, in this way, a discipline that is becoming stultified and inward looking will once more generate minds offering revolutionary new departures able to carry the theoretical component forward into a more effective explanation of the reality of the 21st century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to thank you as an audience for your patience. More specifically my deepest and most sincere thanks must go to the members of the Economics department who have been prepared to live with a maverick economic historian for so long and who have been a sounding board to one never comfortable with the beauty of the logicality of theory.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the role of my family. To my deceased parents Dell and Peggy, who, lacking a high school education themselves, sacrificed endlessly to allow me the opportunity to explore the boundaries of my intellect. My sadness is that you cannot be with me tonight. To Melanie, Bronwyn and Christopher, no words can express my appreciation for what you mean to me – you are my life.

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