

Response/Input on the Occasion of the Beyers Naude Memorial Lecture, University of Pretoria, September 2005

As a high school teenager roaming the streets of the Steenberg/Retreat townships in Cape Town I found myself dodging recruitment from the Ugly Americans (a Cape Town gang, not the Bush Administration), on the one side, and the local evangelical church, on the other. It was during this time of wandering that a friend nervously and with ample warning gave me a copy of the banned publication *Pro Veritate* and it made a significant impact on my life. Through this publication I met Oom Bey, and I can say confidently that his testimony as a white Afrikaner saved a generation of angry, black youth like myself from the self-destruction of reactive racial hatred.

Ek wil net vir Tannie Ilse se, baie baie dankie vir hierdie wonderlike man wat u met ons gedeel het. U sal nooit verstaan wat 'n groot impak hy op duisdende jong mense van my geslag gehad het nie.

I wish to declare seven theses in connection with the theme of this Lecture, *Access*, in the context of higher education.

- 1. that the single most important factor influencing access to higher education—is the quality of school education. If the foundations of learning are weak, all subsequent learning is compromised and there is little higher education can do to correct this.**

We have come full circle; we know concede the limits of academic development, that romantic notion that universities could make up for 12 years of under-preparation for a broad range of disadvantaged students. The future of the country's development lies in improving the education quality in the school system, especially the foundation years, which in turn guarantess the robustness of the higher education system.

- 2. that granting access to university without the enabling financial resources to enable and sustain such access (retention), is to frustrate a generation of promising students from entering key professions (e.g. teaching)**

The withdrawal of the provincial bursaries—without consultation or planning-- to support new teachers had a devastating effect on Faculties of Education, causing some to close and others to be whittled down to nothing more than a small department or an insignificant programme area. The prioritization of NSFAS support for new teachers, given the decline in numbers, is something that must be urgently explored. The point is that access without support is to defeat the very goal of retention and success for a new generation of university students.

3. that granting access to university without responsibility, is to dangerously escalate the human and financial costs of higher education

Yet thousands are enrolled on the basis of senate discretion i.e. without endorsement. There is a limited case to be made for senate discretion. The problem is its abuse; in fact, some of our universities would have to shut down if this facility was removed. Universities have to take responsibility for selection at the point of access that guarantees success and support to talented and promising students.

4. that granting access to higher education without integrity, is to threaten the very idea of the university

Our universities, some of them, walk the thin line between being modern institutions of higher education and low-level service colleges. The determination of access requires integrity or the nature of the university itself comes under threat.

5. that granting admission to higher education (physical access) without granting access to knowledge (epistemological access) is to directly threaten the viability of our democracy in a still fragile state

In some universities, and in many programmes, the institutional curriculum looks exactly like it did before 1994. It would be unwise to cite specific examples that I recently encountered, but the point is that we are in danger of producing engineers without ethics, doctors without passion and teachers without commitment unless the very question of 'what knowledge is of the most worth' becomes part of curriculum deliberations within universities.

6. that granting equity of access to students without accelerating equity of access to staff (administrative, academic, leadership) is to undermine the capacity for institutional transformation

In the former white universities it is well known that the deracialisation of the student body has not been matched by the deracialisation of the academic staff. This problem is not likely to disappear soon, but it seems to be that the lack of progress on this front is likely to come biting the hands of university leaders unless some creative ways are found of diversifying the academic body.

7. that demanding equity of access for academic staff without simultaneously raising standards of achievement for *all* academic staff, is to reproduce the mediocrity that characterized South African universities (black and white) since their inception

The single most important challenge facing universities is the quality of the professoriate, and I have written much in formal and informal outlets. Access is meaningless if our young people do not enjoy exposure to high quality scholars and researchers for this is the primary mechanism for retaining and promoting a new generation of students, workers and citizens.

The problem of access is however not only an obligation of government. It is also a responsibility of every citizen who is privileged to serve those disadvantaged by virtue of poverty and marginalized from educational opportunity. Oom Bey in his personal life made a huge difference in the lives of some of the senior academics here today, by making funds available to enable thousands of young people to enjoy a university education within and outside the country; that service of Oom Bey is well-recorded.

In conclusion, as I prepared for today I re-examined many of the tributes paid to Oom Bey after his death. I found one particularly moving and meaningful: it read, "The only evidence I have that the Christian God might actually exist, is the life of Beyers Naude."

Coming from Max du Pree, I'll accept that.

**Jonathan D. Jansen
University of Pretoria**