

Universities: Conservation or transformation?

In December 1996, the Department of Education published a Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation in South Africa. The Department invited written comments on the Paper, and the following memorandum (now an FMF *Briefing Paper*) was submitted by Professor ML Truu, of the University of Pretoria, in his personal capacity. In a nutshell Professor Truu is convinced that in its desire for Transformation (whatever that may mean) government will sacrifice the qualities of Conservation. Conservation of excellence, of standards, and of impartiality will be jettisoned. Professor Truu writes:

1. General

This *Briefing Paper* reflects only my personal views and is in no way related to any organisation with which I may be associated. Although the government's Green Paper refers to three groups of educational institutions, the comments below are made with only the universities in mind, unless otherwise stated.

After having read the Green Paper, one is left with a sense of bewilderment, for in spite of its title, the authors of the Paper seem to have missed the essence of what university education is about. Bewilderment turns into disappointment, and worse, when one refers to the Report of the National Commission on Higher Education, on which the Green Paper is largely based. Two things then become evident. First, the real reason for launching this inquiry into higher education was political, not scientific.¹ Second, the drift of the inquiry is characterised throughout by administrative (or bureaucratic) rather than scientific (or academic) considerations. The spirit of the exercise seems to be encapsulated in the old saying: "The best helmsman is on the shore." Quite seriously speaking, a more appropriate title of the Green Paper might have been the following: An Administrative Framework for the Transformation of Higher Education into a Political Instrument of the Government.

As I believe that the (further) politicisation and bureaucratisation of South Africa's universities would be not only a retrograde but ruinous policy, most of the comments that follow here are perforce rather critical. In fact, given an obviously fundamental difference of opinion, I expect a summary dismissal of this *Briefing Paper* by the Department of Education. But this has no bearing on my reason for writing it, which was motivated by considerations of principle, not utility. In other words, I feel it would have been remiss of me to remain silent in the face of a potentially lethal threat to the South African universities. However, I believe that points 9 and 10 below are (almost) uncontroversial, and would therefore like to draw attention to these points in particular.

2. Co-ordination

"Higher education must be planned, governed and funded as a single coordinated system" (p17, 1.2.1). This is an intrinsically incompatible objective, for in practice there are important functional differences between universities, technikons and (vocational) colleges, the trio of educational institutions to which the above quotation refers. This actually seems to have been realised by the authors of the Green Paper too (see for example p11, 1.4 and 1.5). The term "co-ordination" that frequently recurs in the Paper, has a particularly sinister connotation in recent history. It signifies the Nazi German policy of **Gleichschaltung** during the 1930s, which sought to submit all persons, organisations and activities (including education) to central government control. Another term repeatedly used in the Paper is "plan", or "planning", which again harks back to the central planning under the failed Soviet system of "real socialism". In the field of higher education, there was in fact little difference between the authoritarian policies of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. For example, Lord Bullock writes: "Hitler showed the same inveterate distrust of experts, particularly economists, as Stalin did."² It would be most unfortunate, to say the least, if higher education in

South Africa were forcibly transformed (i.e. “planned” or “co-ordinated”) into compliance with the dismal Nazi-Soviet tradition.

3. Proactive government

The word “proactive” is rather ill-advisedly used to justify the envisaged government control of higher education in South Africa (see p37, introduction and 1.1). This usage reveals a fundamental misconception of how the pursuit of scientific knowledge (normally the main function of a university) really takes place. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the adjective “proactive” means “anticipating events (as opposed to responding to them)”, while the verb to “proact” means “to act in advance, to anticipate”. No government, organisation or individual has the gift or power to anticipate future knowledge, and then to follow a “proactive” policy based upon it. Lord Robbins, appointed by his government to investigate higher education in Britain, remarked with great learning: “*By definition new knowledge cannot be predicted in precise terms – if it were otherwise it would not be new knowledge.*” (Emphasis in the original).³ The notion of a “proactive government”, particularly in the field of higher education, is pure fiction. Unrestricted scientific inquiry remains the most prolific source of useful knowledge, something that the authors of the Green Paper have apparently failed to grasp.

4. Politics and education

As under dictatorial governments, the envisaged “co-ordination” of South Africa’s universities would mean investing the state with “directive” and “steering” powers over higher education (p16). The goal seems to be establishment of the supremacy of politics in the field of higher education, for example: “The transformation of higher education must be conceptually located, and carried out, within the broader process of South Africa’s political, social and economic transition” (p13, 3.1).

Two major similarities between the Nazi-Soviet universities on the one hand, and those envisaged in the “transformed” South Africa on the other, are (i) courses of study prescribed or approved by the educational authority and (ii) the politicisation of science. According to the Green Paper, teaching and research in South African universities today are characterised by “academic insularity and closed-system disciplinary programmes”, which should be changed in the light of African circumstances (pp4, 5, 15). Expressed briefly, the following happened in Nazi Germany: “German universities, once famous for their scientific research, now became the homes of racist science.”⁴ A similar fate may well overtake the “co-ordinated” South African universities too. The democratic viewpoint has again been strikingly expressed by Lord Robbins: “Without weakening the sense of duty to their local societies, we must seek to make our young men and women citizens of that republic of the mind which knows no frontiers.”⁵

5. Equity

The authors of the Green Paper demand “equity of access” to the university for all prospective students, and no reasonable person would oppose this. But they also demand “equity of outcome” (p20, 4.3), whose precise meaning remains unclear in the Paper. However, if it means that students, once admitted, should pass their examinations irrespective of academic performance, then no reasonable person could agree with that. Exactly what is the “articulation gap” and how should higher education “respond systematically” to it? The Paper mentions “student support services which include career guidance, counselling and financial aid” (p20, 4.5), but are the students themselves also expected to make an effort to succeed in their studies? Is it reasonable to expect them to show a willingness to work? The Paper remains silent on this aspect of equity.

6. Comparativism

One of the fatal logical flaws that permeates the Green Paper is the fallacy of “comparativism”, a spurious yet often used argument in serious discussions. The “problem” that the authors of the Green Paper address is the following: “The present system perpetuates an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for students and staff along lines of race, gender, class and geographical discrimination. There are gross discrepancies in the participation of students from different population groups and indefensible imbalances in the ratio of black and female staff compared to whites and males” (p4, 2.1.1).

It should not be misleading to say that the authors’ double objective appears to be a student and a staff configuration that, *mutatis mutandis*, would have the same distribution of race, gender, class and geography as the national population. In other words, when the *composition* of the total population is compared to that of its academic subset, the two should be the same. The fatal flaw in the reasoning is that it ignores the fact of life that “birds of a feather flock together”. Most human activity is selective, not random; thus it would be only realistic to expect that the representation of various population groups differs between different occupations and modes of training. In the present case, not every member of the (adult) population has the same interest, ability, job and income aspirations, etc. to study and work at university. Naturally, this principle also applies to the relation between the total population and its other subsets, such as athletes, churchgoers, smokers, non-smokers, and so on. The main economic disadvantage of comparativism is that it ignores the principle of specialisation, on which all forms of productive activity are founded.

7. Redressing the past

An even more emotional - and equally fallacious - argument is that education policy should somehow be used to redress, or undo, South Africa’s past history of *apartheid*. In the words of the Green Paper, here the goal is “to reverse the inequities of the past” (p52, 4.6). Seeing that *apartheid* has in fact been abolished and as it is literally impossible to remake the past, the relevant question is surely whether the present policy stance should be either forward-looking or backward-looking. The authors of the Green Paper select the latter option, which would leave South Africa unprepared to face the future in a rapidly changing world. A comparable situation exists in the erstwhile socialist states in central and eastern Europe. There, too, policy-makers had the choice between trying to redress the communist past that was once forced on them and facing up to an uncertain future in a competitive environment. Without any known exception, they chose the forward-looking policy stance. This is, in fact, normal human behaviour, for as the mathematician G.J. Whitrow has pointed out: “the emergence of *Homo sapiens* has been correlated with a strong increased tendency to look forward”.⁶

8. Education and economic growth

Should its recommendations prevail, the Green Paper will not so much mark the end of the negative *apartheid* era in South African higher education, as the beginning of a new descent into academic decline, decay and misery. This would have a deleterious effect on economic performance too, as the authors of the Paper actually seem to realise: “there is a high correlation internationally between quality higher education training and research, on the one hand, and national economic growth and competitiveness, on the other” (p22, 5.6). The link between education and growth is human capital formation, which comparativist and backward-looking policies can only harm.

9. Campus discipline

As far as I could see, the matter of campus discipline was not explicitly addressed in the Green Paper, although paragraph 6.7 may allude to it. However, the issue of student *rights* is raised in the Paper time and again, and it would be not only desirable but essential to establish a code that sets out student *responsibilities* too. This need not be anything out of the ordinary; a signed undertaking by

students to respect the laws of the land - like everybody else - would be sufficient. At the same time, it should be clearly spelled out what are the channels of communication available to students who consider themselves aggrieved, for one reason or another. Low-level terrorism is almost invariably perpetrated by student organisations that claim affiliation with some leading political parties, including the governing party, in South Africa. It is no less than the civic duty of these parties to call their campus followers to order, or to sever any links between themselves and their purported followers who keep causing campus unrest. If considered necessary, university staff may also be required to sign an undertaking of lawful behaviour. The matter demands serious consideration, sooner rather than later.

10. Post-graduate study and research

The matter of “Research and Postgraduate Study” is addressed on pages 34 to 36 of the Green Paper. This is almost certainly the weakest aspect of the university sector in South Africa. Probably all local universities are sufficiently equipped to train students up to (and including) the Honours-degree level, in many cases a Master’s degree by course work too. But the opportunities of taking a Master’s and a Doctor’s degree by *research work* (or thesis) are woefully inadequate. Most Master’s and Doctor’s candidates enrol on a part-time basis, and many never complete their degree. For decades already, it has struck me forcibly that all economically developed countries are far superior to South Africa in this respect. One wonders how many Nobel Prizes have been lost to us for lack of advanced teaching and research facilities. Even a single full-time postgraduate school, jointly funded by taxpayers and private business, would serve to mobilise South Africa’s top brainpower much better than at present, to the great advantage of society. This is certainly a matter that merits further investigation.

I myself differ with (the implications of) just one point in this section of the Green Paper (see the last point in paragraph 14.3 on p35). The principle of affirmative action (etc.) should no longer operate at this, the highest, level of South Africa’s education system. Academic excellence *alone* should determine the access to this category of post-graduate study and research. Even if *all* the resulting staff and students happened to be white males, black females or *any* other combination of humanity, intellectual ability alone should be considered in this context. Those who still cannot freely compete at this level, should choose their vocation elsewhere, rather than be “the fly in the ointment”.

Finally, I would like to remind the authorities that they are a trustee, *not the proprietor*, of the South African universities. Their proprietorial attitude towards the universities is therefore completely out of place.

References

1. National Commission on Higher Education, *A Framework for Transformation*, 1996, p.306
2. A. Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin*. London: Fontana, 1993, p.388.
3. L. Robbins, *The University in the Modern World*. London: Macmillan, 1996, p.20.
4. A. Bullock, “Hitler’s Germany”, ch. 59 in Taylor, A.J.P. and Roberts, J.M. (eds.) *History of the 20th Century*. London: Purnell, 1968.
5. Robbins, op.cit., p.16.
6. G.J. Whitrow, *The Nature of Time*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.34.

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