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Let's protect our universities

In two weeks' time I will have the privilege of moving from the Business School to the central Nelson Mandela Metro University leadership.

Some people ask and implicitly expect that I bring a "business sense" to the university. It all depends on what one means. The relation between a public university and a "business" is an ambiguous one. And so it should remain.

There are those who proudly and forcefully argue that universities are in fact businesses. They sell educations. The degrees are the products; the students are the clients and eventual "outputs"; the lecturers are the human capital. Knowledge is not creatively generated - there is talk of "knowledge production" akin to factories of consumer goods.

In this economist paradigm, vice-chancellors like to call themselves CEOs. Traditional academic and collegial deans become "executive deans". Faculties are business units. Cross-faculty co-operation is primarily a financial decision. Old-fashioned rotating heads of academic departments become academic managers. (It sounds more important and pays a little better.)

Once you embrace this paradigm, interesting changes start to happen: in the name of participative management, academics are required to take on more and more operational responsibilities. "Decisions must be taken on the ground." This means more meetings and more forms. It gives academics a false sense of power, control and even accomplishment.

However, slowly but surely their primary focus on the academia is eroded. The sideshows easily become the main show. No wonder stress levels are high and job satisfaction among academic staff relatively low. Bright young people hardly aspire to live a compromised life like that.

The reason for this management speak cannot be laid at the door of universities themselves. It is to be sought in major societal shifts. Religion was the dominant sphere of western societies in the Middle Ages. The very title "professor" stems from the "profession of faith" in Catholic cathedral centres of learning. Politics became the dominant paradigm after the rise of democracies in Europe in the 17th to 19th centuries. Universities were seen as nationalist projects.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, the post-1989 triumph of capitalism and the power of digital money, the business paradigm now dominates. Everything is seen in commercial terms: from sport to religion. Consumerism determines our metaphors and psychological well-being. "Value" is determined in pragmatic and monetary terms.

This is where the healthy tensions arise. A public university is technically not a business in the normal sense of the word. It has no shareholders. It declares no profits. It cannot function without massive taxpayer funding that makes up anything between 35% and 80% of total

income. The rest of its income is derived from student fees, public and privately funded research, donors and project funding, augmented by a limited commercialisation of its knowledge.

The pragmatism and efficiencies that make or break a private business do not fit well into the intellectual character of a university. A module in social theory where students are required to read the texts of dead European males like Comte, Marx, Parsons and Jung cannot be defended on efficiency terms. Why study the history of economics - struggling with original works written by Smith, Ricardo and Samuelson - if all you need is knowledge of laws like supply and demand? Latin for lawyers was such an efficiency stumbling block. So are chemistry and physics for medical students who now focus on applied knowledge only.

It makes huge business sense to remove such "unnecessary" stuff from the curriculum, and replace them with "what the real world wants". The only problem is that what the world wants today is outdated by the time the student completes her studies. The intellectual agility to move beyond boundaries is exactly stimulated and shaped by reading the classics and focusing on the tough basics.

Yes, there are types of learning where a direct application and pragmatic curriculum work and are in fact required. Vocation, technical and some aspects of professional education work like that. (A great proportion of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University falls into this category.) But the moment that becomes the norm for all university education, you destroy those seemingly useless knowledge forms that - historically speaking - always provided the breakthroughs for practice as well.

And yes: public universities must be sustainable, including financially stable. We have a duty to spend our public funds wisely and in line with sound accounting and business principles. You cannot in the long run spend what you do not have. The academy is itself subject to resource constraints and hard decisions about focus areas are required. There are rational indicators for the balance between staff and capital spending. We must be no fools.

But we must jealously protect the intellectual project called a university.

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