

# DAILYMAVERICK

Opinionista - Jacques Rousseau

The conundrum of university - level remedial education - where do we start?

Caught between “the rocking of the cradle and the rolling of the hearse” as far as new university students are concerned, the national dilemma of bringing students up to scratch to enter universities should not be left to cram into the little space between secondary and tertiary education.

While my focus in last week’s column was on the question of universities as elite institutions, Dlamini’s column, and Molefe’s response to it, addressed the issue of whether universities should be engaged in remedial education and if so, to what extent.

As should be clear from my previous column, I’d argue that in an ideal world, universities would not be engaged in remedial education. But we don’t live in such a world, and it is a fact that students arrive at university with vastly different levels of preparedness for tertiary education. What many outside of universities don’t seem to realise, is that this disparity no longer manifests along exclusively racial lines – the sad fact is that many students, of all races and classes, get to university needing remedial education.

One solution for this is a radical upgrade in entrance requirements. But this would be socially and politically disastrous, because it would result in mostly white universities, where stereotypes are simply reinforced, and where universities play a far lesser role in social redress than I believe they should. As I argued last week, the fact that creating intellectuals should be the primary task of a university does not mean it should be their only task.

So, something needs to be done. The question is whether universities can do anything without compromising intellectual standards, and, more crucially, whether it is their job at all? Because as much as national government might appreciate the fact that universities have a social conscience, the fact remains that by the time students get to university, much of the harm has already been done.

If universities are to encourage critical and creative thinking, of the sort that intellectuals rather than those with technical skills (equally valuable, but in entirely different ways) excel at, students need to develop certain skills. These are difficult to summarise, but they include being able to see beyond the given or surface level, to understand the basics of critical thinking and to have a sense of how knowledge claims are developed and justified.

But much of one’s basic epistemology and habits in reasoning are already fairly well established by the time you get to university. To the extent that a student has picked up bad habits along the way, you’d need to start his university education undoing much of that harm before trying to lay new foundations, and before teaching the subject material the student has registered to learn.

The harm that has been done is not only the fault of outcomes-based education. We cannot ignore the fact that we are living in what Herbert Simon dubbed an “Attention Economy”, where the bombardment of signals and information we are exposed to result in your first victory as an educator being simply getting a student to read or to listen for the entire 45 minutes of a lecture.

And this raises quite a practical problem, regardless of the meta-debates around racial redress in a country such as ours. If we are to engage in remedial education at university, where do we find the time or the

curricular space? Something has to give – either subject-specific content must be sacrificed (resulting in weaker graduates), or we need to lengthen the period of study, making time for this remedial education.

I would hope that few people have appetite for the former course of action. And the main problem with the latter is quite simply that university study costs a large amount of money, bringing us right back to the class problem – and, therefore, the race problem, at least in South Africa. While I've said that students from all classes get to university ill-equipped for success, it remains true that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be more so, and that these students will often be black.

Making this point on Twitter resulted in my being told that the “causal theory of learning was discredited centuries ago”, and that “stupidity is evenly distributed, not as a result of apartheid”. While I'd agree that stupidity is evenly distributed, that's obviously not the same thing as readiness for tertiary study. And as far as I can tell, the latter is certainly related to apartheid, regardless of what the “causal theory of learning” might say.

I have not personally encountered this theory, and Google is not very accommodating on the subject. But, if it's premised on the idea that antecedent factors have little effect on a student's chances of success in education, then it sounds like straightforward nonsense.

Some South African citizens still grow up in houses without books and have parents who are ill-equipped to help them with their schoolwork or university assignments. Some South Africans have to commute further than others to get to school or university. Some might have a less reliable electricity supply, or more irregular Internet access. In fact, many do, and in the years I spent dealing with the readmissions process at UCT, I've come across hundreds who cited exactly these sorts of factors as being causally relevant to their struggles at university.

These students were often black. The fact that their circumstances were suboptimal is certainly at least partly, and probably mostly, the result of apartheid. And we know that education is in crisis in South Africa – so much so that smart folk like [Jonathan Jansen are even prepared to bring in the nuns](#). While I'd not recommend the nuns, seeing as they tend to be accompanied by beliefs that, in my view, run completely counter to critical thought, I can certainly endorse the call to start taking primary and secondary education far more seriously.

And yes, tertiary education should also be taken more seriously, at least insofar as it relates to addressing the fact that students need remedial education. But we should take on this burden with great reluctance, in that it will of necessity crowd out time spent on our core business at the university – the creation of elite thinkers, who should be able to emerge from any class, race or gender. We should remind ourselves that it is a privilege, not a right, to be at university.

But we should also remind ourselves that this privilege should be available to all – and that making it so is best achieved before students even arrive at university. In schools, in other words.

**DM**