Higher education is more than just about the economy

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Abstract

This essay addresses the question, ‘What is quality in higher education?’ In so doing it raises many interesting and vexing questions in relation to education. For example, is ‘quality’ in higher education the same as, for example, ‘quality’ with reference to the quality of clothing or the quality of meat in local butcheries? Furthermore, is it correct to assume that if certain things, such as criteria or standards, which are measurable and quantifiable are in place, then quality in higher education will be assured? Or in a more Derridian vein, does the measurement and achievement of quality in higher education in fact deconstruct quality in the negation of quality; or stated differently, does quality defined negate quality? Also, does the achievement of quality in higher education provide the ideological justification of a wider democracy, and even more pertinently, should it?

These are some of the questions that need to be considered in reflecting critically on the many issues in quality assurance in higher education. This essay does not set out to address these questions directly but rather endeavours to sensitise us to the importance of considering these questions when deliberating on quality assurance in higher education.

PROLOGUE

As a prologue to this essay I would like to juxtapose the following two observations in raising the question – what is quality in higher education?

In reflecting on the course of human history, H. G. Wells (1972, 10) commented: ‘Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe’.

On the 8th of August 2006 it was reported that students at the University of Zululand had gone on strike because they claimed that the university was not responding to the demands of the market place in providing students with qualifications that would ensure their employability in the market place.

My response to the Peters and Besley article is entitled, ‘Higher education is more than just about the economy’.

The theme of the symposium, ‘Higher education quality assurance in South Africa widens democracy or not?’ raises, I believe, many interesting and vexing questions in relation to education. For example, what is meant by ‘quality’ in
higher education? Is ‘quality’ in education the same as, for example, ‘quality’ with reference to the quality of clothing or the quality of meat in local butcheries? Furthermore, is it correct to assume that if certain things, such as criteria or standards, which are measurable and quantifiable are in place, then quality in higher education will be assured? Or in a more Derridian vein, does the measurement and achievement of quality in higher education in fact deconstruct quality in the negation of quality; or stated differently, does quality defined negate quality? Also, does the achievement of quality in higher education provide the ideological justification of a wider democracy, and even more pertinently, should it?

These are some of the questions that need to be considered in reflecting critically on the many issues in quality assurance in higher education. However, I do not propose to address these questions directly. Rather, I would hope that my response essay to the Peters and Besley article will sensitise us to the importance of considering these questions when deliberating on quality assurance in higher education.

Dramatic changes in society and the economy, as well as the political frameworks developed by governments in response to forces associated with globalisation, have had a major impact on the reform of higher education systems internationally. One of the characteristics of the global economy is the emergence of the knowledge society, a term which refers to the shift from the production of material goods to information processing activities in advanced capitalist societies (Castells 1996). The knowledge society has not only given rise to an increased reliance on science-based production and continuous technological innovation, but has also led to a demand for workers with multiple and transferable skills to engage with new and complex tasks and technologies (Leadbeater 2000). In this context, there is the expectation that higher education will contribute to enhancing the nation state’s competitive edge in the global marketplace by developing innovations in knowledge and technology and producing the new ‘smart’ workers, who will take up key positions in the knowledge economy (see Gibbons et al. 1994).

The perceived relationship between investment in higher education and national economic advantage has led to increased state intervention in higher education in two main areas. First, in order to enhance their national skills base, governments have developed policies to increase the proportion of citizens attending higher education. Mass systems of higher education have been constructed and mechanisms have been developed to facilitate the access of those socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups which have been historically excluded from postsecondary education. Second, governments have attempted to monitor and enhance the ‘quality’ of higher education by introducing new forms of measurement to assess institutional performance, and by creating new relations of accountability between universities and external stakeholders.

The South African society has also witnessed these developments in the
transformation of its higher education system after 1994, not least in regards to issues of quality in higher education. In this context it is important to note that conceptions of quality in higher education are a prime means by which a society communicates a sense of its goals for higher education. Conceptions of quality in higher education affect what lecturers teach and how they teach it, as well as what researchers study and how they study it. Furthermore, conceptions of quality in higher education influence the nature of communications between researchers and practitioners. Conceptions of quality in higher education have a broad impact on how practising educators in higher education think about what they do, and such conceptions affect how they describe the nature of higher education and their role in it, to the public. Conceptions of quality in higher education also have far reaching affects on scholarship, educational practice and public views on the purpose of higher education.

In recent times, the turbulent policy of higher education, evaluating the quality of the services universities provide has become an overriding priority. Yet quality, as the students of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance will, recall, does not easily lend itself to definition. Indeed the fate of the writer of that work suggests that the challenge of definition leads to temporary insanity. Perhaps some food for thought for those of us who speak so easily of ‘quality’ in higher education?

The proliferating literature on quality distinguishes between three interlinked categories which are usually subsumed within the overall term. They are: quality management, quality assessment and quality control. Within this general framework, we have witnessed of late in South Africa that it is only through a complex approach – and no less complex methodology – that a university can handle the issues posed. A university can attain a so-called acceptable level of quality once human resources, budget, teaching, research, organisation and management are brought together in such a way as to achieve the establishment’s goals. In turn, assessment of quality is feasible only when the complete and overall performance of the university is taken into account.

Also, in any program of evaluation or assessment involving quality, the objective – namely the improvement of quality in a particular establishment – should be explicitly stated and universities should take an active part in the whole evaluation process. As a means to get the institution thinking about its own role, purpose and goals, to encourage academia to ask questions about the quality of its own performance and the ways of improving it, few techniques are more powerful than self-evaluation.

But this exercise in self-evaluation as regards quality in higher education is where we encounter the problem surrounding the question posed by the theme of this symposium, namely, ‘Higher education quality assurance in South Africa widens democracy or not?’

Amongst the more enduring beliefs that contemporary society ascribes to higher education, one of the most widespread must surely be that higher education should place democracy on a surer footing. It is of course axiomatic that a well
educated citizenry is a sure bulwark against demagogy, extremism and intolerance. But this is where we encounter what I believe to be a crucial question, and that is, what do we understand by ‘... an educated citizenry’? And it is this question, I would want to argue, that should dominate, the discourse on the role of higher education in society, in regards to issues of accountability and quality control, and the impact of economic and social policy on higher education in society.

This is the context that I wish to set in responding to the Peters and Besley essay entitled, ‘Building public knowledge cultures’. The essay itself nowhere addresses the theme of this symposium directly. There is no discussion on higher education quality assurance in South Africa, and whether this evaluative exercise in fact contributes to a more encompassing democratic dispensation in South African society. Or, to what I have referred to as a more ‘educated citizenry’.

Their essay draws from their recently published book entitled, ‘Building knowledge cultures’ which focuses on the relation between education, knowledge and economy, and then goes on to propose a theory for the development of ‘knowledge cultures’ designed to provide an alternative to mainstream neo-liberal accounts, in arguing for the recognition of plural institutional knowledge cultures and their enhancement.

In developing their notion of ‘knowledge cultures’, Peters and Besley provide and incisive and insightful critical analysis of recent claims for what is referred to as, the ‘knowledge economy’. Houghton and Sheehan (2000, 1) describe the knowledge economy as one in which knowledge is the key source. In other words, the knowledge economy is one in which the generation and the exploitation of knowledge has come to play the predominant part in the creation of wealth. It is not simply about pushing back the frontiers of knowledge; it is also about the more effective use and exploitation of all types of knowledge in all manner of economic activity. Furthermore, the knowledge economy emerges from two defining forces; the rise in what is called, knowledge intensity of economic activities, and the increasing globalisation of economic affairs. The rise in knowledge intensity is driven by the combined forces of the information technology revolution and the increasing pace of technological change. Globalisation is being driven by national and international deregulation, and by the IT related communications revolution.

Peters and Besley, however, find the concept of the ‘knowledge economy’ problematic and limiting. Problematic because the concept would seem to convey versions of neo-liberalism and the neo-liberal project of globalisation, and limiting because the concept militates against a social democratic version of the knowledge economy. Consequently, they argue that claims for the ‘knowledge economy’ need careful assessment because amongst other things, references to the ‘knowledge economy’ also fail to consider what knowledge is in epistemological or cognitive terms. As a result, they coin the term ‘knowledge cultures’ because they hold that knowledge and the value of knowledge are rooted in social relations. This allows them to conclude that because knowledge and the value of knowledge are rooted in social relations, an analysis of the ‘knowledge economy’ is simultaneously an
analysis of social relations, and what they call ‘knowledge practices’. According to Peters and Besley, such ‘knowledge practices’ arise out of epistemic communities and embody culturally preferred ways of doing things, often developed over many generations. ‘Knowledge cultures’ are, therefore, based on the shared practices of epistemic communities which leads them to conclude that knowledge production and dissemination require the exchange of ideas and such exchanges, in turn, depend upon certain cultural conditions, including trust, reciprocal rights and responsibilities between different knowledge partners, institutional regimes and strategies. They use the term ‘knowledge cultures’ (in the plural) because there is not one prescription or formula that fits all institutions, societies or knowledge traditions. In fact, Peters and Besley conclude that their reference to ‘knowledge cultures’ implies that the ‘economics of knowledge’ ultimately depends upon philosophical and cultural concepts and analyses.

Peters and Besleys insight into the significance of ‘knowledge cultures’ is derived from the belief that it is more constructive to focus on the concept of a knowledge society rather than a knowledge economy. This is because, ultimately, the primary beneficiaries of higher education must be the public. A more highly and broadly educated public lifts the society culturally and socially, and inevitably those benefits also result in a stronger economy.

The concept ‘knowledge society’ points to the rights of knowledge workers as citizens, focusing on the subordination of economic means to social ends, while the concept ‘knowledge economy’ points to the economics of knowledge and information, and of education. The knowledge society and the knowledge economy are, however, not mutually exclusive concepts. By developing a society-based-model of higher education and knowledge dissemination, society will enjoy multiple benefits, not least of which will be economic growth.

And what this means is that we need to broaden our view of what the knowledge economy is because as Peters and Besley argue, the ‘economics of knowledge’ ultimately depends upon philosophical and cultural concepts and analyses. This is taken up in their reference to the significance of what they refer to as ‘knowledge cultures’ in society. And here I understand them to include questions that have to do with the relationship of education to society, and the role that education should play in determining society’s goals for itself vis-à-vis the economy and issues of social transformation and the education of society’s citizenry.

But what does it mean to educate society’s citizens?

And in responding to this question I want to share a few thoughts on the nature of education but in so doing I am reminded about Wittgenstein who on one occasion said: ‘I remain silent about those issues that matter to me’. Perhaps I should remain silent because education does matter to me, and I suspect that education matters to Peters and Besley. But let me break my silence for a moment in time.

Education is a contested concept. In entering this contestation, I would argue at
the outset that education is not an abstract concept or substantial phenomenon as asserted in certain discourses in education (see, for example, Dearden 1972; Dewey 1998; Hirst 1970; Marshall 1995; Peters 1979; Phillips 2000; Popkewitz and Fendler 1999; Zecha 1999). Instead, education is, I would argue, the outcome of human agency as a matter of personal engagement.

This concept of education is far removed from that crude idea that the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills is education. Education is not the same thing as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, though it is recognised, that the mastery of knowledge and skills is an inherent feature of education. The empowerment of a person with knowledge and skills does not necessarily make for an educated person. What is important, is the use that persons make of their knowledge and skills, their value to them personally in their thinking and living; it is what the acquisition of knowledge and skills has done to their minds, to their attitudes, their ideas, their values, their ideals, their motives and intentions, that will allow them to be considered as educated persons.

Education should not, therefore, be regarded as the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills. Instead, education should be seen as that attempt to bring influences to bear that will empower the person’s character, abilities and capacities with a sense of personal meaning. Education is, therefore, an activity directed at self-empowerment whereby persons are equipped for the task of living meaningfully, and guided in their aims and actions by their experience of human agency as a matter of personal engagement.

In focussing its attention on human agency, education concerns itself dynamically with the formation of ideals, thereby fostering an appreciation of the highest standards in motive, judgement and action. As a result, education encompasses a person’s experience of existence, of the arts, of the finer achievements of technology and science, and of beauty. In being responsible for the formation of ideals, education contributes to the formation of character which includes the promotion of a respect for, and the valuing of individuality within the community, and of the community itself. Education means leading out the individual nature in each man and woman to its true fullness and so bringing about the expression of their individual uniqueness within the community.

These observations indicate that education has certain ethical implications. Education implies a commitment to what is thought and experienced to be valuable and meaningful. Education, therefore, has to do with living life meaningfully and this involves much more than the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of knowledge or skills for the sake of professional and vocational competency. Education involves personal transformation and change, a continual becoming. In this, education reveals itself to be a process in which education and change are dynamically dependent, for without education there can be no change and without change there can be no education. In the educational encounter between persons, knowledge and understanding are passed on in such a way that they develop a life
of their own in the unique experience of each person while at the same time bringing about a transformation of how a person sees their community, and hence feels about their community and the world at large.

It is thus evident that the ethical nature of education means that education is not only concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, or with professional and vocational skill competence, but also with assisting a person in learning how to think, how to understand, to appreciate, to make use of knowledge and to discover its inherent values, its usefulness, its clarifying and revealing powers, its insights, its truth.

The discourse on education in the 21st century is making its demands on persons and society as a whole. In this discourse persons are confronted by the demands of a technocratic dispensation which requires them to obtain the necessary knowledge and skills that will enable them to maintain and develop society’s scientifically, technologically and sociologically determined functions, and to promote the national economy. Such a technocratic dispensation regards persons in terms of their pragmatic value for the advancement of the technocratic order which it is believed represents the symbol of humankind’s advancement toward a more efficient and better world. In this technocratic world, education is directed at the attainment of pragmatic ends which are mainly concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and skills in response to the demands of the market place and the state. As a result, education is reduced to mere training and vocational preparation, that is, to the technocratisation of persons without due regard for their need for self-empowerment as persons as a matter of personal engagement. Such a need is inter-subjective in nature in that it reaches out to other persons for purposes of empowering the self with an own identity. This means that education is not concerned primarily with the acquisition of knowledge and skills for professional and vocational preparedness, but instead is concerned with a person’s self-empowerment as this is realised in relation to other persons. In this inter-subjective experience of self-empowerment, I argue that a person:

- should not be treated as an object or thing which is evaluated in terms of its utility value and productive capacity – instead, a person’s worth should be vested in their personal identity;
- needs to become someone with his or her own unique identity and not merely regarded as some useful or productive thing;
- needs to have his or her dignity and uniqueness acknowledged and respected;
- requires an interpersonal relationship of love in action in order to invest his or her existence with personal significance;
- Needs to be supported in the responsible expression of his or her freedom.

In recognising the inter-subjective nature of human experience, education, as a matter of personal engagement, therefore, also emphasises a person’s need for a form of social engagement in which he or she struggles to give form, character and meaning to the experience of his or her own unique existence. In this form of social
involvement persons are empowered to develop their own voice while at the same time acquiring their own personal disposition that allows them the opportunity to change themselves, to change others and, by implication, to change their world and society as a whole. In other words, in the act of self-empowerment, education is directed at helping people to become autonomous persons, engaging in thought and activity which is their own, in the sense of not being determined by causes beyond their control. Such autonomous persons will exercise a critical disposition in relation to themselves, others and the world, and in acting independently will aspire to that most noble possible view of education, namely, that of the educated person whose empowering practice will be directed at a better life for all.

The decade ushering in the 21st century witnesses to continuing and accelerating change in all spheres of human endeavour. In this climate of change, educators are compelled to seek new and more meaningful ways of understanding their place and task in society. In this search, it is suggested that educators remain true to a vision of education as a matter of personal engagement in the exercise of human agency.

The most important reconciliation that has to occur in the 21st century is between the ethical principles of human nature and the factual foundations of the natural sciences. During the last two centuries values and facts have become increasingly divorced from each other. In the process people have become estranged from the object of their study. Philosophers such as Goethe, Nietzsche, Hegel, Schiller, Schopenhauer and, Credo Mutwa, Kwasi Wiredu and Paulin Hountondji in an African context, have all tried to effect a synthesis (between values and facts) based on the primacy of human values.

It would seem, however, that at present much of our educational endeavour negates the primacy of human values; this is because this endeavour is moulded to the dictates of a scientific paradigm that is naturalistic, objective, analytical and directed at operational and functional ends. In the ensuing estrangement a person becomes an alienated self. It is this estrangement that needs to be addressed as a matter of utmost urgency. This will require creative thought and innovative action. In addressing this sense of estrangement and alienation, educators will need both courage and inspired determination. They should not allow their vision of the primacy of human values to stagnate within existing political and social structures. Instead, they should be prepared to participate in the transformation and renewal of educational form and substance so as to ensure that human concerns and aspirations are neither neglected nor altogether ignored. This will mean that in their striving for transformation and renewal, educators will confront the future with a flexibility of vision that will seek to bring about innovation and change in the interests of persons and ultimately society as a whole. This in turn, will require that educational discourse be rooted in a commitment to change so that educators may be free to enquire, explore and be creative.

Educators stand in the service of education systems that are prescriptive in function. Prescriptive education makes independent and critical thinking extremely
difficult. Conformity is demanded or expected, and this leads to mediocrity and the
demise of creative endeavour. This demise in turn results in the neglect of human
concerns and aspirations. Education systems today do not just neglect human
concerns; in these systems there is simply not enough respect for the dignity, worth
and uniqueness of a person’s existence as a human being. Education systems tend
to kill innovation, stifle creativity and in so doing estrange and alienate people
from themselves. The constant compliance required by an education system leaves
a person little, if any opportunity to develop a value system and self-concept based
on internal rather than externally imposed criteria. And the resultant damage done
to the human spirit may prompt one to conclude that education systems are perhaps
the most authoritarian and dangerous of all the social inventions of humankind.

The problem of the survival of the human spirit, as well as the environment in
which that spirit is housed, during the present epoch, constitutes the problem of
lifting a person’s quality of existence. the discourse on quality in education can
significantly impact on those attempts that are directed at addressing this very
human problem. However, in order to do so, the discourse on quality in education
will need to ensure that it gives place to an educational mandate which not only
acknowledges, but also practices education as a matter of personal engagement in
the exercise of human agency.

In this response essay, I have argued that education is vulnerable to
ideologically driven educational practices which emphasise that persons be
educated for the maintenance and development of socially determined functions,
and the promotion of the national economy. When it comes to higher education,
such utilitarian practices regard persons solely in terms of their utility value for the
advancement of a new social and economic order which some believe represents
the symbol of humankind’s advancement. The exploitation of resourceful persons
to such ends is, however, depersonalising in that it negates the exercise of human
agency as a matter of personal engagement.

As educators we, therefore, have to ensure that if the discourse on quality in
higher education is to inform our policies and practices in higher education, that it
is directed by an educational discourse which is not altogether corrupted by
ideologically and utilitarian driven educational policies and practices which only
emphasise the performative demands of an economic and technological rationality.
Instead the discourse on quality in higher education should be informed not only
by economic and sociological considerations, but also by an educational mandate
which is concerned with education as a form of personal engagement in the
exercise of human agency. Such an educational mandate will be concerned with
virtues that sustain a human/e world and that are at the same time directed at, in the
words of Jickling (1992, 8), ‘. . . the optimal development of people, with an
emphasis on autonomy and critical thinking’.

If we fail to include such a mandate for education in the discourse on quality in
higher education, then there is a real danger that educational policies and practices
in this discourse will be corrupted by the performative demands of an economic
and technological rationality. If this happens, the discourse on quality in higher education will be informed by an economic and technological, rather than by an, educational perspective on the quality of human existence which finds expression in matters of personal engagement in the exercise of human agency.

Peters and Besley have warned of, and reminded us about, the shortcomings of such an economic and technological perspective on human existence, shortcomings which fan the neo-liberal project of globalisation while at the same time militating against a social democratic version of the knowledge economy. Policy makers in, and practitioners of, quality assurance in higher education need to heed these warnings and take note of the theory for the development of ‘knowledge cultures’ which Peters and Besley propose in their article, a theory designed to provide an alternative to mainstream neo-liberal accounts of human progress. In so doing, they will ensure that the practice of quality assurance in higher education will lead to the emergence of an educated citizenry in society, and the consequent widening of democracy in society in the realisation of an authentic form of social justice, or is this all perhaps only wishful thinking?

REFERENCES


