

Tertiary Education in Namibia

TUCSIN PUBLIC LECTURE ON THE CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION

'Challenges for Tertiary Education' was the topic on Thursday 12 June 2008 in the Kalahari Sands Hotel for the fourth in the commemorative series of public lectures, organized jointly by KAS (Konrad Adenauer Foundation) and TUCSIN (The University Centre for Studies in Namibia). The evening produced a fine standard of academic debate from all the speakers and also from the audience.

The global challenges

The first speaker, Dr Tjivikua, Rector of the Polytechnic of Namibia, offered a superb power point presentation to illustrate his ideas. He emphasized that challenges were not necessarily problems, as he commenced with an overview of global problems today: globalization, the internet, technology, cultural diversity, crime, leadership – and, of course, spiralling food and crude oil prices. Professor Andre du Pisani, from the University of Namibia, felt that the challenge for Namibia was to maintain relevance in a changing world to produce socially responsible citizens. Teaching and research must go together and that interface is sadly lacking in Namibia. Prof. du Pisani concluded by quoting Albert Einstein: "Everything has changed except our way of thinking." The problem is that some think-tanks do not think. In terms of the thinking of Edward de Bono, the challenge for tertiary education is to move from thinking about 'what is' to 'what can be'.

Professor Monesh Gunawardana from the International University of Management considered global challenges such as world population (currently in excess of 6 billion),

anticipated to be double that amount by 2020. The oil-based civilization is in the Middle East, a politically unstable region. One third of the world has no access to clean water or basic amenities. Namibia, Prof. Gunawardana claimed, could be in a good position with uranium for a post-oil generation. Like Singapore, this country needs to see the 2 million Namibians as the most valuable resource.

Namibian challenges – controversial statistics

The need for tertiary education for young Namibians was emphasized in a bar graph from which Dr Tjivikua proved that, world wide, learners with only junior high school level experience 35% unemployment: far higher, in fact, than young people with virtually no education.

Dr Tjivikua outlined the expenditure on different types of education in Namibia. The statistics made for thoughtful consideration. There are about 409,508 primary learners in the country, upon which the Namibian Government spends approximately N\$6,000 per child per annum. On the 158,162 secondary pupils, N\$2000 is spent per child.

Vocational training consumes the biggest proportion of the training budget with a whopping N\$51,000 per student per year. UNAM ranks a close second, consuming N\$38,000 per year per student. In comparison, each Grade 10 failure has been allocated 21,000 Dollar for retraining purposes, while the Polytechnic of Namibia, trails way down the line at 12,000 Dollar per student.

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In the light of these statistics, does it make sense that the Government spends more money to train a plumber than a doctor? Or that so little is spent on practical degree courses now offered by the Polytechnic, compared to the esoteric range of degrees offered at UNAM? The essential challenge here is to answer the question: what are we training for?

The challenge of governance

How we govern measures our prosperity, stated Dr Tjivikua emphatically. Governance challenges are considerable: currently tertiary institutions do not receive good applicants from the schooling system, thus funding is diluted by being forced to spend money on bridging programmes to bring students up to par before they start their courses; it is difficult to organize funding in time to initiate projects; there are difficulties and delays in bringing first class foreign academics into the country to supplement the current shortage of skills in Namibia. Many foreign applicants find other postings before the bureaucratic procedures for work permits have been finalized.

Without good professors there are no good students; without good professors there is no research. It is research which characterizes a good tertiary institution, Dr Tjivikua claimed.

Governance is a challenge: in this Professor du Pisani agreed with Dr Tjivikua. Good governance rests upon accountability and efficiency. He queried whether there is a need to review both the composition of the university councils and the relationships of tertiary institutions to each other, to government and to industry.

An idea worth pondering by Professor Gunawardana is the notion that tertiary institutions should be facing the challenge of training wise and compassionate leadership, not only at the political level but in all spheres and at all levels of Namibian society.

The challenge of Input and Output

The challenges relate to both input and output. "You cannot manage what you don't understand and you cannot manage what you cannot measure," said Dr Tjivikua. One measurement is the Global Development Index in which Namibia ranks 6th out of 128 countries in the amount of money which the Government pumps into education but 123 in terms of the quality of the finished product – a well-educated student. This would seem to be the greatest challenge that we currently face.

Professor du Pisani teased the audience with the idea that "the paradoxes of this generation become the text books of the next." It was his opinion that tertiary education needs to be embedded in a moral and ethical framework. How does one become educated for citizenship?

Quality was the first challenge envisaged by Professor du Pisani. This involved building good faculties and institutions and receiving good products from the school system.

Quality also involved the outcome – the qualified student and the extent to which the tertiary system considered globalization. Without quality, our system is doomed to fail: ETSIP, however, does make quality the priority.

The challenge least understood in Namibia is how to determine targets and standards for performance. We need to face the reality, given where we are in the global economy; we have to agree on realistic targets and benchmarks. Society has a legitimate claim to ask what it being done with the country's resources. Professor du Pisani pointed to the White papers in South Africa which have addressed this issue to determine the benchmarks or standards. The South African benchmark, for example, determines that 50% of university staff should have PhD's. Measurement of benchmarks is the job of the technocrats: an institution should be evaluated, too, over a period of time, rather than simply using quantifiable indicators.

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Starting again – from the bottom

Professor Gunawardana stressed that the greatest challenge for tertiary education is to eradicate the weaknesses of primary education in Namibia: he felt that Science, Mathematics and Technology education should start from the first day at school. The corporate sector also has a responsibility to provide training – and also opportunities for experience. He pointed out that there was no Engineering faculty at UNAM, although that institution is providing a PhD in Nursing!

The Polytechnic was the institution effectively working towards Vision 2030, in terms of tackling human development according to the needs of society, stated Professor Gunawardana. Tertiary institutions should be joining forces to prepare, for example, 600 IT specialists and 400 engineers for the country's future needs.

Decentralisation was also essential: currently most tertiary institutions are in the Windhoek area, thus disadvantaging the regions. Tertiary education needs to be 'democratised' by establishing opportunities for empowerment in the rural areas.

ETSIP in Motion

Mr Nic de Voss considered the objectives of ETSIP, the Education and Training Improvement Programme, estimated to cost N\$2,4 billion dollars for the first 5 years. For the period 2007 – 2009 the Namibian Government has committed N\$300Million, but is hoping that the bulk of the investment will come from donor funding; it has also borrowed 15million US-Dollar for the purpose.

ETSIP tracks all phases of Namibian education, from early childhood, through tertiary and training to Life Long Learning (LLL). It requires three additional pieces of legislation, including a Higher Education Act and a Technology Act.

The Facilitator, Mike Hill, mentioned the Pupkewitz Holdings' ETSIP project, administered directly by the company, which had improved the school's position from 13th in

the region to 6th in the space of one year. All that was needed, he said, was 'the will to succeed'.

Given the inspiring ideas of the accomplished group of speakers, it seems unfortunate that the Ministry of Education could not be prevailed upon to send a representative, despite TUCSIN's earnest efforts to secure a speaker. Such a Ministry representative would have seen quite clearly that the future of education in this country is an issue close to the hearts of many Namibians, as testified by the feisty sequence of questions after the presentations.

It is heartening that our best academics can see the way forward; ironically, however, the Ministry representative could neither hear their views nor offer its own vision.