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the responsibility of english universities in south africa

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Like all institutions subsisting from public funds or from student fees or both, universities have certain basic responsibilities towards the country in which they are situated, towards the various publics which they serve, and also towards the world of learning of which they form a part. Whether the university is in South Africa or any other country, and whether the language medium of the university is English or any other language, these basic responsibilities are the same. In addition, however, there is no doubt that a university in South Africa has responsibilities which derive from the nature of our country. Further still, there are particular responsibilities devolving upon certain of our universities which happen to teach through the medium of English, but before commenting on these special responsibilities, it is necessary to consider the other and more general responsibilities.

Many universities in the Western world like to regard themselves as the traditional places of learning, composed of a community of scholars, both teachers and students, engaged in the mutual exchange of knowledge and the pursuit of the truth. They look upon this as an ideal state, to be approached as closely as possible, bearing in mind such complicating factors as the essential necessity for educating and training professional graduates in medicine, engineering, law dentistry, architecture, education and the like, the physical and financial limitations under which they operate, the material attractions of life outside the university, the limitations imposed by the schooling received by the students, the pressing social and economic problems of the day, and many others.

No modern university can hope to achieve the ideal state because of these constraints, and because in the ultimate ideal state the university would become non-productive in the public sense and would revert to the kind of monastic centre of learning of the dark ages where the world's knowledge was stored out of reach, or might even consume all its intellect in seeking out the answers to intellectually stimulating but relatively unimportant questions. The modern term for this aspect of the university would be its relevance in the society or community and the modern university must not only be relevant — it must also provide a service.

The search for the truth nevertheless is an integral and absolutely indispensible function of the university, and it means that the university must engage in research, either to discover new truths, or else to establish the validity or otherwise of accepted so-called truths. The search for new knowledge is most clearly seen in the pure and applied sciences. In physics one seeks the truth about the structure of matter, the origins of the universe, the behaviour of materials. In medicine one seeks the true causes of disease, of abnormalities, of good health, and today virtually all the pure sciences are banding together to try and discover the very nature of life itself. The social sciences set out to understand the behaviour of people and to track down the factors that cause this behaviour. The engineers and architects look for more knowledge about the earth, materials, people and the needs of people.

The attempts to test the validity of "accepted" truths permeates he whole of research in the sciences, but is perhaps best typified by research in the humanities, typically in history, where even recorded history is utterly dependent upon the knowledge and veracity of the recorder. How much more necessary it becomes to seek out the truth when the history has not been formally recorded but resides only in the memories and impressions of people. Even the sciences enter this area, when they attempt to record the history of the earth or of **homo sapiens** from the scanty geological and anthropological fossils that are found from time to time.

Not only are universities responsible for conducting research of this kind, but it also is

their duty to store their finds, record their findings and make all of these known to the world at large. Conversely, it also falls upon them to be continually aware of the discoveries, theories, statements and research plans that others are responsible for — in other words, the interchange of knowledge is not confined to those within a university, but must take place between all universities as well. It is important to remember that although the catch phrase "publish or perish" is applied in a derogatory way to the pressure on academics to expect promotion in terms of the number of publications they can muster, nevertheless the need to publish the results of research in universities is paramount, and merits the serious concern of all universities.

Following upon research is the modern injunction placed upon universities and other similar institutions to be relevant to the era and area. It is symptomatic of a troubled world to seek solutions quickly and close at hand to the many sociological, psychological, material and economic problems that surround us. The call for relevance swept through the United States of America in the 1960's and resulted in many courses of study being scrapped or thoroughly revised in an effort to meet the problems of the day. There is no doubt that universities find it difficult to throw out courses or parts of courses which have become an established part of a curriculum. A continual sifting is essential, yet great care must be exercised to retain one of the most important properties of a university course, and that is that it must be based upon and derived from fundamental knowledge. The problem that faces those who draw up a course is the fact that fundamental knowledge continues to develop as a result of research, while the areas of applicability of a course continue to expand at the other end — an increasingly greater range requires to be covered as each year goes by. It is only by developing quicker and more efficient methods of imparting or gaining knowledge that the need can be met. Coupled with all this is the limitation imposed by the sum total of intellectual knowledge and understanding that can be absorbed successfully by a student in a fixed period of time.

A further responsibility of a university-at-large is the duty of opening up new areas of study and research as the world's knowledge advances, or as man's interests and needs change. This is most likely to happen, and to succeed, in a centre where the research leading to this new area has been carried out, or where the subject itself has the greatest relevance. For example, although research into tropical medicine might have been carried out in a university of tremendous prestige in Europe, it would clearly become important for courses in tropical medicine to be offered in a university located in a country where tropical diseases abound.

All these responsibilities fall squarely into the laps of the South African universities, and to a greater or lesser extent, they are recognised and accepted. South African universities in general, however, do not enjoy financial and intellectual support to the same extent as the universities of high prestige in Europe and America do, and consequently have to devise special means of meeting all these responsibilities. In the first instance, if they are to push forward the frontiers of knowledge at an appropriate pace, it is necessary for them to concentrate their efforts into areas which lend themselves particularly to research because of their relevance to South Africa or because of the existence of resources perculiar to the country. Study and research in minerals and mining are obvious ones, and so with leather, agriculture, fisheries and a dozen other topics in applied science. Sociology and economics are relevant in any country, and South Africa with its problems of race and poverty has particular need of persons with not only a good training in these areas, but persons who are prepared to devote their careers to finding out more and more about the local situation, and planning its future.

South African universities suffer from remoteness from the world's major centres of study and research and although travel to Europe and America no longer consumes inordinate periods of time, such journeys consume a great deal of money. It is their responsibility to engage the best possible staffs, as measured on a world scale, and this proves to be a very difficult task. One basic reason is the reluctance of promising and proven young academics to move away from the centres of excellence in Europe and America for fear of losing touch with developments in their subject, and the other is the absence of obvious financial advantages in emigrating. Very little

can be done about the latter by any individual university since university salaries and financing in South Africa are a matter of Government policy which also has complicating relationships between university salaries, school teachers' salaries and civil service salaries. The question of remoteness can be partially met by providing very attractive research facilities, and opportunities for travel, both of which involve money.

South African universities have serious responsibilities in the matter of relevance and this applies as much to the sciences as it does to the humanities. It is tempting to employ an eminent physicist or engineer who is one of the world authorities on space flight and to encourage students to undertake research in this field, but as this field of knowledge is not relevant to South Africa, this would be wasted effort since the graduates would have to emigrate to America in order to find employment. The money and effort would be far better placed for example, in the study and design of rural areas for agriculture and housing for our Black citizens.

The English universities in South Africa carry all these responsibilities, each having particular problems of its own, but they also have to shoulder a number of additional responsibilities because they happen to be English language universities in South Africa, and are peopled predominantly by the sons and daughters of English-speaking South Africans.

Their responsibilities in respect of the proper training for the professions is no different from those of the Afrikaans-language universities — modern, well-conducted and relevant courses with a proper inclusion of fundamental knowledge, and filled out to a suitable degree to include application in the professional world. They carry out appropriate research and their graduates, both with a first degree or a higher degree, are in great demand. However, their staffing experiences differ somewhat from those of the Afrikaans universities, whose staff members are virtually all Afrikaans-speaking South Africans with a sprinkling of European and an occasional American. About one-fifth of the staff of the English universities are from Great Britain, North America or Australia and these universities advertise very widely in those countries in the hope of attracting new blood with fresh minds and experience. This is not a policy of snobbery, but because Afrikaans-speaking academies often do not feel at home in the English universities and the field from which to draw new academic staff is painfully limited. Added to this is the fact that very considerable numbers of English-speaking graduates seek their further education in universities in Europe and North America, and since these are usually the best graduates, they find career opportunities abroad which are difficult to resist. Very often the oversea advertisement serves really to entice South Africans back home again, and it is my belief that the English universities have the very real and serious responsibility to do exactly that. This can only succeed, of course, if the academic conditions encountered by returning South Africans are attractive and satisfying, so that the problem of providing a good academic climate for its staff is a more severe one with an English university. The need for providing travel funds is so much the greater, and so is the need for supplying research facilities for students.

Apart from the purely pragmatic matter of professional education and practical training, the English universities carry with them the major responsibility for the English language, spoken and written, in our country. The standard of the Departments of English in the English universities is of fundamental importance, particularly because of the influence these departments have upon the school teachers destined for English-language schools who take their degrees at these universities. It is the responsibility of the whole university to foster English, no matter what degree course is concerned, since the most prevalent language for communication in the world in which South Africa moves is English. The fact that except in the case of the departments for languages other than English, the papers and books published by English university staff are written exclusively in English and many appear in journals in Great Britain and North America.

In the humanities, there are certain areas of research which need active and vigorous prosecution in English universities. I am referring to history and political science. It is a matter for regret in South Africa that the forebears of Afrikaans South Africans and those of English South Africans were at war with one another on and off for 100 years or more,

and although modern times have swept away the greater part of the enmity once felt, the fact remains that one of the most difficult tasks facing an intellectual today is the writing of South African history without bias or prejudice. I believe it is the responsibility of the English universities in South Africa to undertake on a broad front a deep and intimate study of the historical events in our country and to publish these without prejudice and bias.

Political science is an area of study which for no obvious reason has not been vigorously studied and taught or researched in English universities until relatively recent times. English South Africans are frequently accused of failing to play their part in government, and the English electorate are accused of political apathy. It is possible that the English universities carry a large measure of responsibility for this situation, which I believe to be true. English South Africans have involved themselves largely in professionalism, commerce and industry, and left government largely in the hands of Afrikaners, whose universities have always given the art and science of government a correctly important place in their academic world. The English universities owe it to English-speaking South Africans to develop in them interests and skills in government and political thought, in order that the government of our country may be shared more widely by its citizens of various origins.

There is one area, however, which cannot be described as a science or as a profession or as one of the humanities, but one encompasses the whole attitude, but one which encompasses the whole attitude of a university towards its functions. I refer to ideal university and the freedom of the academic. It is a peculiarity of the English universities in South Africa that they all see themselves as aspiring to the ideal of a community of scholars, exchanging knowledge and seeking new knowledge, and regarding it as their right to be able to select their scholars, both teachers and students, on academic grounds alone. They consider that legal or other constraints placed upon this right, and upon other rights such as access to books or knowledge relevant to their studies, constitute a curtailment of the ideal of academic freedom. This is not to say that Afrikaans universities do not cherish their academic freedom, but it is my understanding that they define this freedom in a different way, and are prepared to modify their definition in terms of their loyalties and sense of national duty. I believe that every citizen of a country should develop a proper sense of national duty, academics as well as everyone else, but it is my conviction that one's adherence to an ideal should not be diverted by that sense. It is perfectly reasonable and proper to be a loyal citizen while still regretting the non-attainment of the ideal, and to continue to strive for the restoration of those lost rights.

I personally believe strongly in academic freedom as seen by the English academic, and since the English universities subscribe to this ideal, I believe it to be their responsibility to keep alive the principle and to continue to make every effort to attain it. It is well known, of course, that there are two areas of conflict in South Africa, and that the first of these is the restriction on all universities against the admission of Black and Brown students. This is the major area and is of course in direct conflict with the country's policy of apartheid in the universities. I believe it is the responsibility of the English universities to press continually for the removal of this restriction.

The second area of conflict is the widespread effect of severe censorship which denies to the university not only the censored works, but all the works of banned persons. Already there are many areas of study in the sociological and political fields where South African scholars cease to be aware of what is happening elsewhere in the world, and through this lack of awareness are even ignorant of the extent of their ignorance. Universities, to fill their role adequately, must know what developments are taking place elsewhere in the world, but in such critical areas this ceases to be possible. I believe it is the responsibility of the English universities to continue to press for a change in the censorship procedures to free the universities from this restriction.

The English universities have not had an easy time and although their physical needs are quite well provided for, their responsibilities in the normal run of university duties are quite taxing. Adding to these the responsibilities resulting from their particular ideological situation as I have described it, their task is formidable indeed.