

NAMIBIAN ACADEMICS AT THEIR FINEST

'Challenges for Tertiary Education' was the topic on Thursday 12 June for the fourth in the commemorative series of public lectures, organized jointly by Konrad Adenauer Foundation and TUCSIN. The evening produced a fine standard of academic debate from both speakers and audience and, ironically, the academic speakers who made presentations proved absolutely that the future of tertiary education – in their hands – is a thought-provoking topic.

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, spiraling food and crude oil prices.

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

Namibian challenges:

Controversial statistics

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 our Government spends approximately N\$6,000 per child per annum. Of 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 contrast, each Grade 10 failure has been allocated N\$21,000 for retraining purposes, while the Polytechnic of Namibia, trails way down the line at N\$12,000 per student.

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 upon 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 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.

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 123th 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 needed to be embedded in the 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 (Education and Training Improvement Programme), however, does make quality the priority.

Governance was a challenge: in this Professor du Pisani agreed with Dr Tjivikua. Good governance rested upon accountability and efficiency. He queried whether there was 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.

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 using simply quantifiable indicators.

Namibia’s last challenge is 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'.

The challenge of resources

Professor Monash Gunawardana looked initially at global challenges such as world population, anticipated to be doubled by 2020. The oil-based civilization is based 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.

The challenge for compassionate leadership

An idea worth pondering was 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 of Namibian society.

Prof. Gunawardana stressed that the greatest challenge for tertiary education was to eradicate the weaknesses of primary education in Namibia: he felt that Science, Mathematics and Technology education should start immediately. The corporate sector also had 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. Tertiary institutions should be joining forces to prepare, for example, 600 IT specialists and 400 engineers.

Decentralisation was also essential: currently most tertiary institutions are in the Windhoek area, thus disadvantaging the regions. Tertiary education needed 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\$300 Million, but is hoping that the bulk of the investment will come from donor funding; it has also borrowed US\$15 million for the purpose.

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