

# A mutually beneficial relationship

*If universities are to be engaged in building a globally competitive economy, then industry and the private sector must engage with higher education and assist with investment of resources, writes Ahmed Bawa*

**T**HE recent debacle over artist Andries Botha's elephants raises so many issues. On the one hand it raises the way in which our transforming society deals with the issue of freedom of artistic expression.

We should all be very worried if the creativity of our artists, poets, novelists and musicians is curtailed and constrained by socio-political concerns. We will suffocate slowly as a nation. What is a society without its own art and its own music?

Botha is also an academic at the Durban University of Technology. In the same way that I might do a study in particle physics and publish my findings, Botha produces artistic artefacts.

Both are pieces of work that help us think about our society, about the world in which we live and about the universe in which we exist. We depend on the principle of academic freedom to do this work and, as with all freedoms, this comes with powerful responsibilities to be borne by the academic – the scientist and the artist.

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom provide the basis for the production of knowledge that is unfettered – that speaks to truth.

The public university system depends heavily on funding from the national government – to the tune of R20 billion in 2010. One must naturally assume that the national state should have much control over the way the universities function and what they do.

The writers of our national constitution, however, understood that there was danger in this. They saw that to function optimally universities must operate within a framework of institutional autonomy on the one hand and under conditions of academic freedom on the other hand. State control of the universities versus institutional autonomy – this is a tension that has to be discursively explored.

So let's think about a process that addresses the emergence of a new social compact between the universities and the various elements of our multi-layered democracy: the government in all its layers, the private sector, communities, the not-for-profit sector, and so on.

A social compact that will help us produce a set of pillars that will underpin our navigation over the next 50 years about the roles of



The controversy of sculptor Andries Botha's elephants in Durban's Warwick Triangle has raised the issue of the role art plays in society. Attempts to suppress such expression, argues Ahmed Bawa, would suffocate society.

higher education in society and what is required by the universities for these roles to be achieved.

Universities are social institutions created and maintained through the public purse because there is a belief that this expenditure provides value to the public good. Students pay fees at universities because these institutions also contribute to the private good of individuals. It is a well known fact in studies done around the world that individuals with higher education qualifications earn more on average than those without, and with higher job satisfaction.

And hopefully the sum of these

private and public goods adds collectively to improving the quality of life of the people, the global competitiveness of the economy, the quality of our democracy, and so on.

So, what do universities do that makes them such important social institutions?

Universities are knowledge-intensive institutions. They are expected to generate new knowledge through the performance of research. They are expected to produce this knowledge in an unfettered fashion so that the knowledge they produce can be depended on to be without bias. So that it is not seen to be serving some end and be-

ing influenced by that end – whether it is knowledge that is likely to influence policy or lead to new industrial products.

And they solve problems through the application of existing and new knowledge.

They are designed to pass on existing and new knowledge to students through the processes of learning and teaching. How this teaching and learning occurs is extremely important. The process has to enhance the capacity of students to become lifelong learners so that they are able to learn through the rest of their lives.

Perhaps most importantly, they

are expected to prepare young people in their charge to be good citizens – to understand the responsibilities they bear as members of a highly educated elite, to understand that they will be key figures in all sectors of society – the economy, the government, the professions, and so on. They must address the key challenges of our society, addressing the race and gender imbalances that permeate our society.

During the years of apartheid there was indeed a social compact – both explicit and implicit – between the state and the universities.

One of the elements of that social compact was the science effort

to produce the atom bomb – six and a half of them eventually. There is not a social compact at the moment.

So we must ask: Can we have a social compact that unites the efforts of the universities, the government and other social sectors to address some of our key challenges – such as the safety, security and education of the children that live on our streets? That says in five years, every child in South Africa will study mathematics up to Grade 12; an anti-Verwoerdian, postcolonial position.

As we tackle some of the powerful challenges that we must address, there has to be a national

discussion about the importance of institutional autonomy and academic freedom so that we can arrive at a common understanding of these fundamental underpinnings of a properly functioning university system.

Discussing a social compact will also help us develop a common understanding of what we expect from students at universities that teaching/learning and research depend on certain levels of stability and peace, that there ought to be a celebration of diversity and difference in ideas and thoughts and where young people that come to these institutions are expected to develop the capacity to bear the responsibility for learning.

And what would such a conversation between universities and local industries result in? The creation of the Sugar Milling Research Institute at the old University of Natal or the powerful link between Wits and the mining industry made perfect sense. This direct link is uncommon now.

It is a complicated discussion but one that has to happen.

Sterling attempts by the government to facilitate such links have only attained partial success.

If our universities are to be engaged in the processes of building a globally competitive economy, then industry – and the private sector more generally – has a responsibility to engage higher education and assist with the investment of resources.

And notwithstanding recent moves by provincial and local governments to connect with universities in KwaZulu-Natal, there is not enough of this. This ought to be a dynamic interface between the universities and the challenges of development – and once again, with the investment of resources.

Let's be clear that the rights of institutional autonomy and academic freedom come with responsibilities – all rights come with responsibilities – but there has to be a broad-based social understanding of what these rights and responsibilities are. A process to develop a social compact will also address the way in which our multi-layered democracy will address some of our key social challenges. This will inject enormous energy into our knowledge-intensive institutions.

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