



The UKZN Griot: Of Education and Commodification

BY:

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Many students in South Africa demand free education. They object to paying fees even though the taxpayer covers two-thirds. The argument justifying wanting someone else to pay their personal debt is couched in the discourse of 'unnecessary commodification'. In any society, no matter the economic system, someone is paying. Someone needs to pay or society will go belly up. Greece recently failed because citizens did not pay their taxes. UKZN is owed R800 million partly because many students don't pay their fees while some upcountry students have trashed their campuses in the full glare of the global media.

Let's look at who pays when some don't pay in terms of conditions of service being considered increasingly across the world where everyone pays in different ways (see my Griot column, Of Bulls and Bears (<http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/files/articles/Griot/ukzn%20griot%20-%20of%20bulls%20and%20bears.pdf>) and Of Educators and Fordism (http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/files/articles/Griot/ukzndaba%20june%202011%20page12_1.pdf))

- Academics are required to raise sponsorship to be taxed by universities to help pay their costs.
- Academics are sometimes penalized for not raising funding, which means that either they will find their career mobility constrained or they will spend more and more time trying to raise funds at the expense of educating their students, doing research or conducting administrative duties.
- Disciplines will be further commodified into the cash cows and the dead cows. Dead cow disciplines such as philosophy that are the *raison d'être* of the academy will atrophy and be buried. The symbolic cost will be incalculable.
- The cash cows are massified beyond classroom sizes or the ability of the academy to deliver 'decent education' which means that graduates won't be able to secure 'decent work'.
- Dead cow lecturers are told to take on supervision in cash cow disciplines, whether or not they know what they are doing in those disciplines. Cows don't like being milked by amateurs.

- Commodification also means that the hugely oversubscribed disciplines/classes are the first to lose lecturing staff because they are not needed as they are deemed to be cash cows already paying their way, now assisted by surplus lecturers from dead cow disciplines.

- Simultaneous with the loss of lecturers, tutors, mentors and university support divisions is the loss of administrators, PAs and secretaries. No-one will answer the phones (<http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/files/articles/Griot/ukzndaba%20march%202012%20page11.pdf>), return emails or respond to walk-ins. Lecturers will hide or leave campus as soon as they can. Just look at the number of vacant parking spaces where once there were none.

- Departments become budget-less and monthly HOD stipends are less than a week's waiting tips in a restaurant. HODs do serious work because they are committed to their profession, but they pay a significant price in stress, time and diminishing research output. Then they are again punished by ratings and promotion committees for falling behind in their publications.

- Cleaners' working time and wages get cut, messengers are retrenched and surviving academics do more and more dogs-body work when they should be doing research, consulting with students and developing curricula, let alone raising funds. The stress means that many take early retirement, and the brain drain takes its toll.

- When students trash their campuses the cost of repair has to be factored into the next year's budget – everybody pays including the taxpayer.

- Having brought the institution to the brink of financial crisis, whole systems break down, illness rates go up, and delivery fails, graduates are tarnished with an associated institutional media image and the institution loses credibility.

Everybody pays including those who don't want to pay because they don't understand that everyone always pays. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Just ask academics about the requests they get free advice from members of the public. Such requesters – wanting something for nothing - are always astonished when told that there is a cost factor to the institution in responding. Their attitude is that we are paid by the taxpayer and so therefore anyone can demand unpaid work at any time from us over and above our already stressful working lives. When some students demand free education they are asking other students (or their parents or taxpayers or even their lecturers) to subsidise them. Connect the dots ...

This brings us to the discipline of economics. Quite simple: you can't expect to hit the jackpot if you don't invest in the system. Communication is key and a lack of it may be a factor in student frustration. The communication issue aside, here's an illustrative anecdote from when I taught film and TV production. Movie lights are more expensive than gold and they have a limited life span – 36 hours. Students were told to use them carefully and wisely. However, within minutes of allocating the brand new lights, students were back in the equipment store wanting another one because they had already broken the one given them. This continued until we changed our policy. Each student was given ONE bulb as part of their registration fee. If they broke that one, then they personally paid for the replacement. They thereby learned to value what they had and to protect their pockets by behaving responsibly. Not one bulb thereafter was ever broken.

So, the moral of the story, breaking glass and burning infrastructure is not going to resolve the problem. Students need to earn their way through university by waitering, tutoring, car-guarding etc and not assume that university is their employer. Difficult, I know, given the prevailing inequalities and economic lethargy, but the university cannot solve structural societal problems; it's a two way street in searching for solutions.

*Keyan G Tomaselli is located in The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He never trashed anything even though he was among the thousands of campus-based anti-apartheid activists sjambokked, shot at and detained by the security police. For this generation, street protests were a form of communication, not destruction. And, university top management and academics were usually part of the marchers, leading from the front.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.