

Universiteitsopvoeding nie net van ekonomiese belang (14-12-2007)



Prof Yusef Waghid, Dekaan van die Fakulteit Opvoedkunde, het Donderdagoggend meer as 375 graduandi toegespreek wat hulle grade in opvoedkunde en teologie ontvang het. Hy het tydens sy toespraak die graduandi aangeraai om nie hulle nuutverworwe kennis as ‘n ekonomiese kommoditeit te beskou nie, maar om dit te gebruik om “krities met ‘n verskeidenheid kwessies om te gaan”.

“Die ekonomiese belangrikheid van hoër onderwys is onbetwisbaar. Maar om die ekonomiese funksie as die enigste een van die Universiteit te beskou, is onvanpas en onverdedigbaar. Daar is byvoorbeeld ‘n lank bestaande epistemologiese tradisie dat die Universiteit die plek is wat aan ondersoek en wetenskap vry van utilitaristiese eise gewy is. Dan is daar weer dié wat vir persoonlike vervulling in hoër onderwys betrokke is en vir die intrinsieke waarde eerder as die ruilwaarde van ‘n Universiteitsgraad,” het hy gesê.

“Die vraag wat my egter interesseer gaan nie oor die ekonomiese, wetenskaplike of persoonlike funksie van hoër onderwys nie, maar eerder oor sy openbare (burgerlike) rol om demokratiese optrede te verbeter.”

Hy het telkemale in sy toespraak die Brasiliaanse opvoedkundige en invloedryke opvoedkundige teoretikus, Paulo Freire, aangehaal. Freire, wat ‘n dekade terug oorlede is, het geglo dat opvoedkunde ‘n demokratiese en bevrydende streef moet wees. Prof Waghid het die graduandi aangeraai om Freire se raad te volg en om nie hulle sienings aan ander voor te skryf nie, maar om krities met mekaar om te gaan en te wys dat hulle opvatting van die wêreld een van vele moontlike opvattings is.

“‘n Enkele absolute en heersende (dominante) opvatting van die wêreld lei menigmaal tot die na die kantlyn uitskuiwing van die stemme van die onderdruktes,” het hy gesê.

Die Dekaan het aan die studente gesê dat hulle, net soos Freire, moet verstaan dat “lyding te alle tye en in alle kontekste onaanvaarbaar is”. Hy het met verwysing na Iris Marion Young, ‘n politieke teoretikus bekend vir haar werk oor geregtigheid en verskil, gesê dat dit uiters belangrik is dat studente vir sosiale geregtigheid moet veg, maar dat dit aftakeling van die strukture van onderdrukking en dominasie sou vereis wat volgens Young in uitbuiting, marginalisasie, magteloosheid, kulturele imperialisme en geweld manifesteer.

“Graduandi wat geloofwaardige posisies in die werkplek inneem, moet begin om die sosiale strukture en prosesse af te breek wat in baie gevalle mense van minder bevoorregte groepe daarvan weerhou om spesifieke werkgeleenthede te bekom, of om ‘n loopbaan vir hulself na te streef,” het hy gesê.

Volgens prof Waghid beteken die ontvangs van ‘n universiteitsgraad nie dat die student “op ‘n passiewe wyse voorverteerde inligting ontvang sonder om aktief met die inligting om te gaan nie”.

“In hierdie opsig dink ek veral aan die baie graduandi van die Universiteit wat voorhou dat hulle geleer het, maar nie eers begin om daaroor te dink hoe hulle opvoeding kan reageer op, of soos Greene sê, in hulle ‘n ‘wawyd wakkerwees’ opwek dat iets gedoen moet word vir diegene wat in tragiese nood verkeer – mense wat swaarkry onder ontnemings soos die agteruitgang van die familie, die verval van buurte, werkloosheid, siektes soos MIV/Vigs en verslawing. Dus het hierdie graduandi nog nie ‘n gereedheid om te leer getoon nie – om regverdig op te tree en op die omstandighede te reageer van diegene wat dalk aan sommige van hierdie kwesbaarhede lei nie, het hy gesê.

Hoewel hy glo dat ‘n universiteitsopvoeding studente ook moet help om die realiteite en probleme van die samelewning te kan hanteer, maan hy egter daarteen dat te veel hooi op die vurk van hierdie burgerlike rol gelaai word.

“Universiteite moet nie akademiese ondersoek om eie onthalwe laat vaar nie en moet ook nie die verenging van wetenskaplike navorsing tot ‘n blote instrument vir iets anders duld nie – dit wil sê bloot tot net wat die burgerlike samelewing vereis nie,” sê prof Waghid.

Hy het ook Giroux en Searls Giroux in sy toespraak aangehaal toe hy vir die studente sê dat die opgang van neoliberalisme en die korporatiewe kultuur in elke aspek van die burgerlike samelewing nie alleen ekonomiese mag in die hande van slegs ‘n paar mense konsolideer nie, maar ook op ‘n aggressiewe wyse die behoeftes van die samelewing aan die mark ondergeskik stel.

“Tenoor die werklikheid van karige besoldiging vir werk en die verwering van maatskaplike voorsiening vir ‘n stygende aantal mense verloor die burgers hulle openbare stem en word hulle omvorm tot inskikklike werkers, gedepolitiseerde verbruikers en passiewe burgers.”

Om hierdie rede is dit belangrik “dat universiteite hulle opvoeders verdedig as intellektuele wat hulle akademiese vryheid uitoefen deur standpunt in te neem oor kontroversiële kwessies, die rol wat hulle speel in die vermindering van menslike swaarkry te ondersoek, en aansluiting te vind by gehore buite die Universiteit of by kwessies waardeur hulle in hulle daagliks lewens gekonfronteer word.”

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University education not only of economic importance

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Prof Yusef Waghid, Dean of the Education Faculty, addressed the more than 375 graduates who received degrees in the fields of education and theology on Thursday morning. During the speech he advised the graduates to not only see their newly acquired knowledge as an economic commodity, but to use that knowledge to “engage critically with multiple issues”.

One cannot dispute the economic importance of higher education. But, to see the University as performing only this economic function is a misplaced and indefensible idea. For instance, there is a long-standing epistemological tradition that the University should be a place devoted to enquiry and scholarship free from any utilitarian demands. Then there are those who engage in higher education for personal fulfillment and for the intrinsic rather than the exchange value of a University degree,” he said.

“The question I am interested in, however, is not the economic, scientific or personal function of higher education, but about its public (civic) role to enhance democratic action.”

Throughout his speech he quoted Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and influential educational theorist, who died a decade ago, and who believed that education ought to be a democratic and liberating endeavour. He advised the graduates to follow Freire’s advice and to “not impose their views on others but to engage one another critically and to show that their reading of the world is one of many possible readings”.

“One absolute and hegemonic (dominant) reading of the world often results in marginalising the voices of the oppressed,” he said.

The Dean told students that like Freire, they need to understand that “suffering is unacceptable at all times and in all contexts”. Quoting Iris Marion Young, a political theorists renowned for her work on justice and difference, he said that it was vital that students fought for social justice, but this would require the dismantling of structures of oppression and domination which according to Young “manifests in exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence”.

“Graduates who take up credible positions in the work place should begin to break down those social structures and processes which often exclude people from disadvantaged groups of securing particular jobs, or of making careers for themselves,” he said.

According to Prof Waghid, receiving a university degree does not mean that a student “passively receives predigested information without actively engaging with such information”.

“Here, I specifically think of many University graduates who claim to have learnt, yet do not begin to even wonder how their education could respond to or, as

Greene says, awaken in them a ‘wide-awareness’ that something must be done for those who remain tragically in need – who suffer deprivations such as the family deterioration, neighbourhood decline, joblessness, illnesses like HIV/AIDS and addictions. Hence, these graduates have not shown a readiness to learn – to act justly and to respond to some of the conditions of those who might suffer vulnerabilities,” he said.

While he believes that a university education should also help students deal with the realities and problems in society, he said he remained cautious about overextending this civic role.

“Universities should not abandon academic inquiry for its own sake and should not tolerate reducing scientific research always to a mere instrument for something else – that is, to what civil society alone demands,” said Prof Waghid.

Quoting Giroux and Searls Giroux in his speech, he told students that the ascendancy of neoliberalism and corporate culture in every aspect of civil society did not only consolidate economic power in the hands of a few, but aggressively subordinated the needs of society to the market.

“Against the reality of low wage jobs and the erosion of social provisions for a growing number of people cause citizens to lose their public voice and be fashioned into compliant workers, depoliticised consumers and passive citizens.”

For this reason, he said, it was important “that universities defend their educators as intellectuals who exercise their academic freedom to take positions on controversial issues, examine the role they play in lessening human suffering, and make connections to audiences outside the University or to the issues that confront them in every day life.”

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