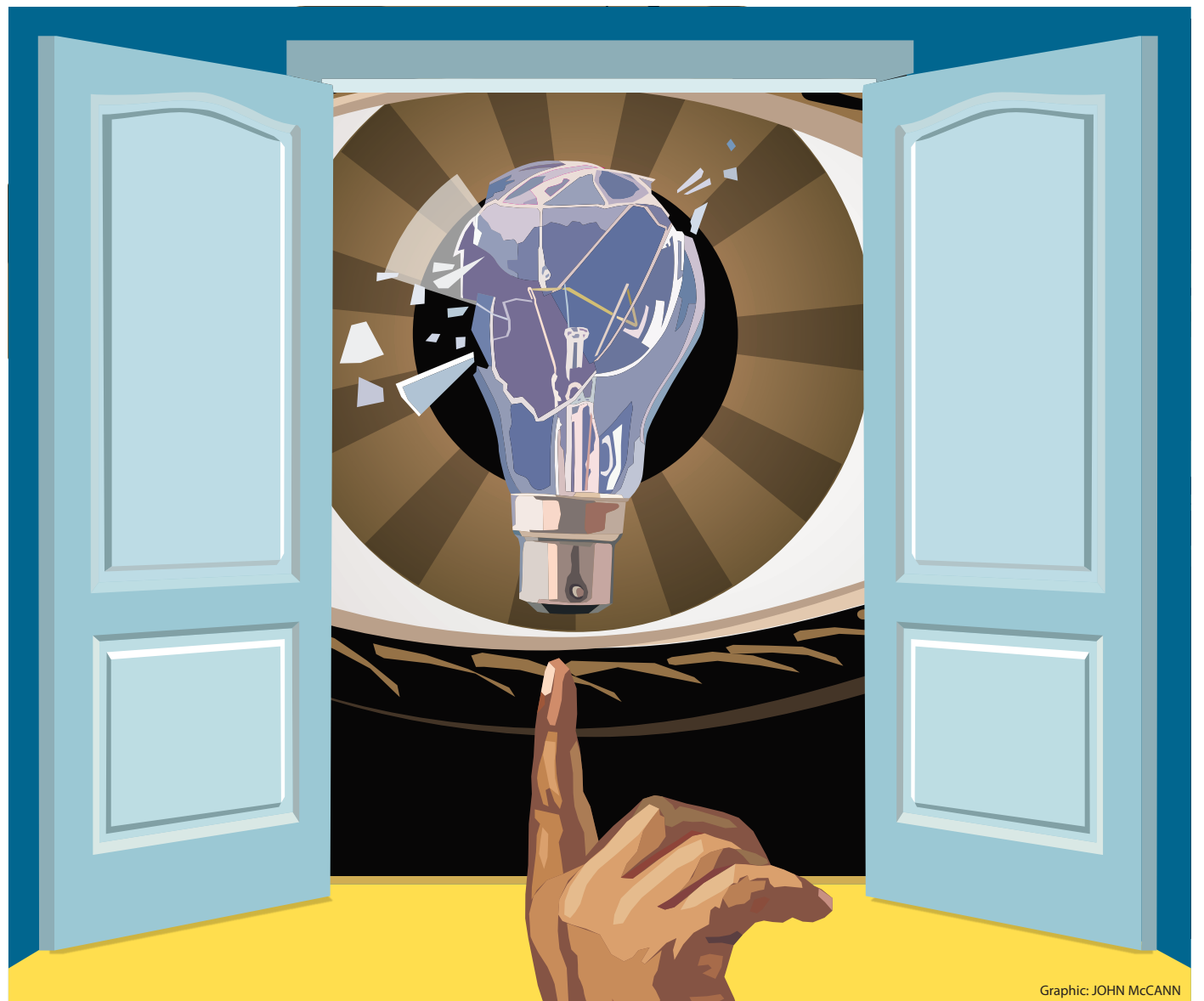


Education



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Educate for real change

Universities need to produce graduates who act and think independently and research must be pertinent and humane

Yusef Waghid

Since the Soweto uprisings in 1976 and the first democratic elections in 1994, higher education in South Africa has come a long way. The National Plan for Higher Education (2001) together with the Education White Paper Three: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997) promised so much in relation to issues such as access, equity, diversity, research capacity enhancement and new institutional identities, yet our progress has not always been satisfactory.

Three of these matters — access to and diversity in higher education and the enhancement of research capacity — remain a particular challenge to institutions, especially universities. Youth Day (June 16) is an opportune moment for us to reflect on them and how they can be addressed.

Access to higher education is primarily associated with the production of graduates with the competencies and skills to be responsive to the human resource needs of the country.

Have students become sufficiently responsive? It seems university education is mostly linked to the achievement of some technical qualification as if students with a first, second, third (master's degree) or fourth degree (a doctorate) would be adequately qualified to act responsibly.

It seems as if many of the students have become merely technicians of learning, who can confidently ply their professional expertise yet have not developed the knowledge, competencies and skills to act autonomously in the pursuit of lasting change.

Technicians of learning are reliant on what grand masters or professors taught them without them yet having come to speech, to use the words of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière.

Elaborating on this idea, Gert Biesta from Brunel University, London, argues in an

essay in Rancière, *Public Education and the Taming of Democracy* that for students having come to speech implies they can learn without professors' explanations.

He goes on to say that students who articulate their equal intelligences "can see and think for themselves and are not dependent upon others who claim that they can see and think for them".

Apart from being associated with the production of graduates, access to higher education is seen by some as a way of improving diversity at universities, especially historically white universities.

Diversity has exclusively and wrongly been associated with an enactment of demographic difference — the more people there are of colour, the more diverse an institution has become. Not at all.

Diversity, in my view, is also connected to what French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault refers to as dissonance in and through "free" pedagogical action. This form of dissonance highlights the idea of discomfort that can open up possibilities for people to look at things differently, with the aim to develop alternative human experiences such as conjuring up new "truths" or "vicissitudes" instead of looking at things in a fixed way.

Applied to universities, this means that when lecturers and students engage pedagogically their minds are not entirely made up on what counts as good teaching and learning.

Good teaching does not involve merely looking at universal blueprints of pedagogical action. Rather, good teaching involves pursuing action that is "nearby

and all around oneself", to use the words of Foucault.

This implies that lecturers and students should never be completely comfortable with their own presuppositions about good teaching and learning — they should be in a state of deferment or suspension about what this entails.

As noted earlier, university education seems to focus on churning out people with degrees who lack the competencies to bring about lasting social change.

In a sense the same applies to the country's research capacity, which appears to be concerned with the production of doctorates, papers and books that bear no relevance to the human condition.

To emerge as legitimate and, by implication, "genuine" researchers, students would have developed the capacities to respond justly to inhumane conditions.

They would have to become reflectively open to the new, which requires a certain tolerance and willingness to wait and see, to listen to others with a desire to understand them. In this way, lecturers will come to learn from their students, and vice versa, and practice justice towards them.

The point is, when lecturers act with openness, they perceive their students as engaged, "a process that brings the person into the world and the world into the person", as Columbia University's David Hansen remarks. Hence, being open does not mean it is something that happens to students; rather, it is something in which they are engaged.

As we commemorate Youth Day next week, we remind ourselves of our collective responsibility to act in the interests of ourselves and our students.

This implies that autonomy, dissonance and reflective openness in relation to the curriculum discourses are but a few ways in which we can ensure that our pedagogic encounters remain responsible, relevant and progressive.

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