H Russel Botman*

Employability in a developmental context for a just dispensation

(Session 1C, Linking Higher Education with the Labour Market, of the UNESCO-China-Africa University Leaders Meeting on Higher Education and Society, dealing with Graduates' Employability, Paris, 24-25 October 2011)

Abstract:

The worldwide challenge of poverty is exacerbated by the current global economic slowdown, which is likely to affect even regions that have been experiencing good economic growth the past decade, such as Africa and China. The higher education sector is well placed to drive development, both in terms of the economy and society more broadly speaking. High unemployment means that universities have a big responsibility to deliver graduates that meet the needs of the labour market, but expectations need to be managed so that the old misunderstandings between employers and universities can be cleared up. Both employers and educators should take heed of growing demands for social justice.

Key words:

Africa, China, universities, graduate attributes, employability, labour market, poverty, development, social justice, HOPE Project

---

* Professor Hayman Russel Botman is the Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and a Vice-President of the Association of African Universities. He holds a PhD in Theology from the University of the Western Cape. Address: Private Bag X1, Matieland, 7602, South Africa; Tel: +27 21 808 4490; Fax: +27 21 808 3714;
Email: russelbotman@sun.ac.za

1. Introduction

The question of linking higher education with the labour market is closely related to the employability of graduates. I intend looking at this issue from three separate but interrelated vantage points: that of (1) the university; (2) the employer; and (3) the graduate. I find this approach useful in dealing with the complexity of the matter at hand. My overall framework is to place the issue of employability in a developmental context. I intend to show that this demands of us to take the aims of striving for social and economic justice into consideration.

2. Poverty

However, let me first establish a context within which to engage with the issue of linking higher education with the labour market by looking at the socio-economic situation in my country. More than 17 years since the advent of a new political dispensation in South Africa after apartheid, poverty and socio-economic inequality continue to threaten the stability of the country and the consolidation of democracy.

Large sections of the population are still being excluded from full participation in the economy and the rest of society despite the fact that South Africa's 1996 Constitution and Bill of Rights seek to correct the legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

Approximately 49% of our population live below the poverty line of R524 (€48 or $66) per month, according to Development Indicators released by our National Planning Minister, Trevor Manuel[1]. And the official unemployment rate is running at 25%, with 50% of youth aged 15-24 having been unemployed in the first quarter of this year.

Poverty, inequality and the link to unemployment is by no means a uniquely South African or African problem, or even one limited to the Global South. The key challenge facing societies all across the world at the moment is to promote accelerated human development.

Earlier this year, we witnessed the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt. Citizens rose up against repressive regimes. But their demands were not only political. They were economic as well.

This phenomenon has also been playing itself out in mainland Europe and across the Channel and the Atlantic in the UK and the US. Protesters – many of them disaffected, unemployed youth – have been taking to the streets of Paris and Athens, London and New York – in fact, all over the world – in demand of justice, specifically economic justice.

In his book, *Spheres Of Justice: A Defense Of Pluralism And Equality*, political philosopher Michael Walzer[2] shows that justice is not just a political concept, but also a social and economic one.

Let me now turn to the first point of the three-point structure I outlined at the beginning: universities, employers and graduates.

3. The university

The university is without a doubt a sphere of justice. Universities have the mandate and the intellectual resources to plan and stimulate and get involved in activities that will ensure service delivery to the poorest of the poor in society.

In 1991, sociologist Manuel Castells[3] defined the role of higher education in the knowledge economy as that of an "engine of development". He said:

> *In the current condition of the global knowledge economy, knowledge production and technological innovation become the most important productive forces. So, without at least some level of a national research system, which [includes] universities … no country … can really participate in the global knowledge economy.*

The point is that higher education produces graduates for the public good, imparts knowledge and produces professionals who directly and indirectly impact on macroeconomic institutions, the information and telecommunication infrastructure, the national system for innovation and the quality of human resources.

At one point, the World Bank decided that development efforts in Africa should be refocused to concentrate on primary education, which resulted in a dramatic decrease of 82% in per capita public spending on higher education in Africa between 1980 and the first decade of the 21st century, Cloete et al.[4] point out with reference to World Bank figures[5].

But later, the World Bank revised its position, arguing that "[a]s knowledge becomes more important, so does higher education … The quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions, and its availability to the wider economy, is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness"[6].

3.1 The case of Stellenbosch University

Let me now refer to my own institution, Stellenbosch University (SU)[7], as an example. First, a few quick facts: It is situated at the southern tip of Africa, in the historic town of Stellenbosch, 50km east from Cape Town. It is one of 23 public universities in South Africa. The country has a combined head count of 521 000 students in higher education contact tuition. Stellenbosch has approximately 28 000 students (of which more than a third are at postgraduate level), 10 faculties, 4 campuses, and a total staff contingent of approximately 2 800.

Our roots go back 152 years, but officially Stellenbosch University was established in 1918. Today, we are recognised as one of the leading research-intensive universities in South Africa. We feature amongst the top three universities on the African continent on the latest QS and Times Higher Education rankings.

In the year 2000, an important policy statement, the University's *Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond*[8], signalled a new direction. In it, "[t]he University acknowledges its contribution to the injustices of the past ... and commits itself to appropriate redress and development initiatives".

When I was appointed Rector and Vice-Chancellor in December 2006, I dedicated my term of office to the tangible realisation of this commitment. In my installation address[9] in 2007, I pointed out that the University faced the challenge of "relevance". We would have to find a way to move from "success" to "significance".

I proposed that we follow a "pedagogy of hope" at Stellenbosch. This was inspired by, amongst others, the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, which had informed the global emphasis on a "critical pedagogy" within education. The idea is that education should play a role in changing the world for the better.

My colleagues and I looked at local, regional and international development agendas, including the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We ended up distilling five themes to guide our functions as a university, i.e. learning and teaching; research; and community interaction.

These themes are to:

- fight endemic poverty and related conditions;

- promote human dignity and health;
- consolidate democracy and human rights;
- deepen peace and security; and
- balance a sustainable environment with a competitive industry.

We then developed a whole host of strategic, hope-generating initiatives – over 40 at the moment, and the list keeps growing. I will highlight a few examples in a moment.

Taken as a whole, our themes and individual initiatives make up Stellenbosch University's HOPE Project[10], which was publicly launched on 21 July last year.

By using hope as its guiding concept, Stellenbosch University is led to ask critical questions about reality, to look at problems in a scientific manner and to use science to make a difference where development is needed most.

3.2 Graduate attributes

An important aspect for Stellenbosch, along with all other universities, is the profile of the graduate that we produce. Taken together, the knowledge, skills, competencies and values make up the graduate attributes developed by higher education[11].

As Griesel and Parker[12] point out, it has long been the case that higher education and the workplace share a common misunderstanding about each other's role: "Employers sometimes voice concern over the quality of graduates exiting from universities, while higher education feels that employers are not fully appreciative of what qualities and skills these graduates do possess."

In South Africa, as is presumably the case elsewhere, "there is pressure on higher education from both government and employers to produce graduates who are employable in the sense that they have the attributes, capabilities and dispositions to work successfully", according to Griesel and Parker. They maintain "[e]arlier conceptions that relied on lists of 'key generic skills' have given way to more nuanced approaches, which emphasise practical skills, understandings, personal attributes and metacognition."

Stellenbosch aims to educate and shape people who are not only "competent and equipped for professional life" but also "well-rounded" and able to "play a leadership role in society as responsible and critical citizens in a democratic social order". To this end, we equip our students to "play a constructive role in the development of the country and society."

Our graduate attributes[13] are currently being revised. Highlights from the new proposals include that our students should not only be "dynamic professionals" but also "engaged citizens" with "enquiring minds".

We are working on embedding these graduate attributes in the curriculum, and to make students aware of their own role in attaining the desired profile[14].

Coming from South Africa, in the context of its history of racial discrimination through colonialism and apartheid, an important part of what makes graduates employable in our country's new political order since 1994 is their ability to interact across social divides of all kinds – race, culture, religion, language, etc.[15]

So, clearly, graduate attributes should go beyond technical knowledge. It should include qualities that prepare students to be agents for social good. On the level of values, universities can instil in their students an understanding of and respect for human diversity, heterogeneity and interdependence, which is becoming ever more important in the context of the societal conflicts thrown up by globalisation.

3.3 Preparing students for the labour market

Let me give you some concrete examples of how Stellenbosch University prepare students for the labour market.

Our Centre for Student Counselling and Development[16], founded in 1965, is the second oldest initiative of its kind in South Africa. The Centre's Division for Academic Counselling and Career Development helps students with academic counselling and with decisions regarding their studies and careers.

The Division has a dedicated Careers Office, which runs our Graduate Recruitment and Career Development Programme. Amongst others, prospective employers are invited to campus for lunchtime presentations to students. The main aim of the Programme is to expose students to recent career information.

Presentations by employers create an ideal opportunity to pose questions to company representatives about the career environment – what it looks like currently and also how it might change in future.

Our Careers Office also helps to sharpen students' career development skills. Undergraduate students in all year groups get the opportunity to investigate career opportunities, and to explore the labour market. Final-year students are also equipped with job-hunting skills. Workshop topics covered include CV writing, interviewing skills and entrepreneurship.

Speaking of entrepreneurship, we regularly have entrepreneurs' evenings for students on campus. The series is called Innovation Mavericks, and it entails getting successful entrepreneurs as guest speakers to give inspirational talks to our students.

This initiative is the brainchild of InnovUS[17], Stellenbosch University's highly successful technology transfer company. InnovUS manages the commercialisation of the University's innovation and intellectual property portfolio through patenting, licensing and the formation of spin-out companies.

An example in this regard is Sunspace, a company that was formed by some of our Engineering researchers and postgraduate students who built SunSat, Africa's first satellite, which was launched by NASA in 1999. Sunspace also built SumbandilaSat, the second Stellenbosch University satellite, which was launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan in 2009.

Clearly, InnovUS have the right credentials to promote entrepreneurship amongst our students. An exciting initiative in the pipeline will provide students who have an idea or research project that they would like to turn into a product or service with start-up capital in the form of a bursary from InnovUS.

InnovUS CEO Anita Nel[18] says "entrepreneurial success is highly correlated with tertiary academic achievement, probably because such an entrepreneur is generally intelligent, ambitious and possesses perseverance, a desire to learn and the ability to process large amounts of new information."

She makes the case for universities to not only promote entrepreneurship, but to themselves be entrepreneurial institutions. Why? Because: "Delivering academically astute students is just not good enough anymore. Exposing researchers and students to opportunities to follow alternative careers and develop as entrepreneurs broaden the minds of students. Entrepreneurial universities both attract and deliver broad-minded students."

But back to the more traditional model of graduates finding structured employment. At Stellenbosch University we conduct research to gauge the extent to which our students find work after graduating. Let me just mention one example. In the most recent Omega survey, which was conducted amongst final-year students last year, 25% of the respondents indicated they already had work lined up.

4. The employer

This brings me to the second vantage point I would like to explore – that of the employer. In this regard, the framing categories utilised by Griesel and Parker[19] in a relatively recent study are instructive in terms of what factors employers look out for in wanting recently graduated employees to "hit the ground running". These are:

- Basic skills and understandings;
- Knowledge and intellectual ability;
- Workplace skills and applied knowledge; and
- Interactive and personal skills.

The study concluded that in some cases, employers "rate what they get as less than what they expect". That is to say, there is a gap between the expectations of employers and their evaluation of the attributes which recent graduates demonstrate in the workplace.

In some cases, the gap was found to be bigger than in others, but in summary they found that "work and higher education may not be so far apart". In fact, their research suggest that employers "have a much more complex and nuanced view of the role of higher education than higher education itself may give employers credit for ... it is clear that employers value the conceptual foundation, knowledge and intellectual approach to tasks produced by higher education."

5. The graduate

From the graduate's point of view it is all about the student as prospective employee. I started off by sketching the context of poverty. In the context of high unemployment, it becomes a luxury to be employed, even though it could be argued that work is a right and not a privilege. Graduates should therefore understand the link between work and education well. Those who find work need to understand that they landed a job thanks to their education, and

that they are therefore obliged to use their education and their work experience to help others. In this way, society is improved overall.

At Stellenbosch University, the fact that community interaction[20] is such a strong focus of our academic work means that our students learn from their first day on campus that employability relates not only to technical subject knowledge but also has to do with the social realities that the majority of people in society face every day[21].

In our experience at SU, a university can take this core function to the next level by offering credit-bearing experiential learning opportunities in community settings, linking it to the academic output of staff and students[22].

We have found that this core function can be boosted by creating the institutional context wherein research and scientific endeavours are focused on the everyday problems communities are struggling with. By doing this in collaboration with community partners, the emphasis shifts from charity-like community service to a collaborative search for answers and solutions to life's challenges.

This is where systemic entrepreneurship comes in – the kind of entrepreneurship that not only has economic goals but is also about pursuing social good. Too often entrepreneurship is equated solely to economic growth. We need to focus on the bigger picture. We need to consider entrepreneurship's contribution to societal development. It is therefore also linked to social and economic justice.

Allow me to be bold: When reflecting on the on-going global financial woes, I am left with the nagging feeling that one of the key causes is in fact what many people would consider "entrepreneurship".

I think if we focus solely on economic growth, we're on the wrong track. We need a more holistic approach. The motivation for this was captured by former South African President Nelson Mandela, who said:

> *We do not want freedom without bread, nor do we want bread without freedom. We must provide for all the fundamental rights and freedoms associated with a democratic society.*

We need the kind of entrepreneurship that brings us both economic justice and social justice. We need the kind of entrepreneurship that bridges the divide between rich and poor, black and white, underdeveloped and developed.

We need the kind of entrepreneurship that can deal with the complexity of the challenge at hand; the kind that takes into account not just the economic sphere, but also the political, social, legal and environmental dimensions. In a nutshell – we need systemic entrepreneurship.

Let me mention one example of how a university can make a difference through promoting the kind of entrepreneurship that has a social impact. In Stellenbosch University's Faculty of AgriSciences there is an initiative called ASNAPP, which stands for Agribusiness in Sustainable Natural African Plant Products. It is dedicated to developing agribusinesses in rural Africa, and strives to empower individuals and communities.

ASNAPP operates in South Africa and several other African countries, including Zambia, where our researchers have introduced a system of vegetable production that combines conventional farming with hydroponic technologies for healthy and high-value crop cultivation.

In partnership with the Sun International hotel group, a vegetable production network has been established, allowing local groups of farmers to produce vegetables for sale to top hotels serving the international tourism market.

This has led to the emergence of successful agri-entrepreneurs. Since the project started in 2006, the farmers participating in the project in the Livingstone area have earned and income of 1 million US dollars annually. Those that have benefited include such vulnerable community members as homeless people, the visually disabled, widows and orphans.

This is an example of the kind of systemic entrepreneurship that we need. It takes a social problem and utilises knowledge transfer to come up with a solution that is not about economic growth per se, but about human development.

6. Lessons from South Africa

It can be argued that South Africa's transition from apartheid to a non-racial democracy in 1994 brought us a large measure of social justice as a country. However, we made a crucial mistake, and that was to think we had achieved our goal and could therefore sit back. The

hundreds of non-governmental, community-based and faith-based organisations in civil society that had campaigned against apartheid under the umbrella of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and other structures basically collapsed into the African National Congress (ANC). When the latter came to power at the ballot box and became the government, it had its own priorities to attend to.

Yes, in the superstructure of our new society that took shape after 1994, discrimination on the basis of race and gender was done away with. And yes, South Africa's 1996 Constitution included a Bill of Rights that makes provision not only for first-generation rights (civil liberties) but also progressive socio-economic rights (housing, water, work, etc.). But for a while, as civil society became less active, mobilisation for economic justice declined and social entrepreneurship tapered off.

We now face the challenge of rebuilding these areas, and this is something that universities have a key role to play in. One of the ways they can do so, is by instilling in their graduates the understanding that in the current era globally, one does not get training and education to go and work for a boss like in the old days. When they leave university, it is expected of graduates to seize the moment and create their own opportunities in an entrepreneurial way. And this includes the goals of social entrepreneurship, which is about realising greater degrees of social and economic justice for more and more people.

7. Conclusion

Let me in conclusion review my argument. I have shown that widespread poverty forms the backdrop against which the questions of graduate employability and linking higher education with the labour market should be seen. The uprisings all over the world that have become characteristic of the early 21st century are about bread-and-butter issues. This reveals that the yearning for social justice is a strong, universal phenomenon, which both employers and educators should take heed of.

As an "engine of development", universities are well placed to respond to this demand – by equipping graduates with both the technical knowledge and the broad attitude and values required to flourish in our era's knowledge economy, which continues to show large inequalities. For this reason, it is incumbent upon universities to promote human development – and the experience of Stellenbosch University shows that a science-for-society approach works well in this regard.

In the end, the world needs graduates and employers who are not just interested in self-enrichment, but in making the world a better place for all.

[1]http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/MediaLib/Downloads/Home/Publications/NationalPlanningCommission4/Development%20Indicators2010.pdf

[2] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of justice: a defense of pluralism and equality* (New York: BasicBooks, 1983).

[3] See Manuel Castells, *The University System: Engine of development in the new world economy* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1991); and Manuel Castells, "Universities as dynamic systems of contradictory functions", In: Muller, J, Cloete N and Badat S, eds. *Challenges of Globalisation: South African debates with Manuel Castells*, (Cape Town, South Africa: Maskew Miller Longman, 2002).

[4] Nico Cloete, Tracy Bailey, Pundy Pillay, Ian Bunting and Peter Maassen, *Universities and economic development in Africa* (Wynberg, South Africa: Centre for Higher Education Transformation, 2011).

[5] World Bank, *Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary education for growth in sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington DC: The World Bank), xxvii.

[6] Task Force on Higher Education and Society, *Higher education in developing countries: peril and promise*, (Washington DC: World Bank, 2000); and World Bank, *Constructing knowledge societies: new challenges for tertiary education*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2002).

[7] http://www.sun.ac.za

[8] www.sun.ac.za/university/stratplan/statengels.doc

[9] http://www.sun.ac.za/university/Management/rektor/docs/russel%20installation%20speech.pdf

[10] http://www.thehopeproject.co.za

[11] Hanlie Griesel and Ben Parker, *Graduate Attributes: A baseline study on South African graduates from the perspective of employers*, conducted for Higher Education South Africa & the South African Qualifications Authority, 2009.

[12] *Graduate Attributes: A baseline study on South African graduates from the perspective of employers*. 2009.

[13]http://sun025.sun.ac.za/portal/page/portal/Administrative_Divisions/INB/Home/Documentation/Documentation_SU_policy/LO_policy_for_Council.pdf

[14] The vehicle we are using for this is what we call a "Signature Learning Experience", which will be introduced at the start of our next academic year, January 2012.

[15] Griesel and Parker point out that Yorke (M. Yorke, *Employability skills development in the United Kingdom*, Adelaide, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research) argues that "employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills, and is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience ... in situations of complexity and ambiguity."

[16] http://www0.sun.ac.za/cscdnew/

[17] http://www.innovus.co.za/pages/english/home.php

[18] Anita Nel, *Why Universities Should Create Companies* (Unpublished paper, 2011).

[19] *Graduate Attributes: A baseline study on South African graduates from the perspective of employers* (2009).

[20] Internationally, the term "community engagement" is commonly used to describe the mechanism through which teaching and research is integrated into a university's engagement with and in society. Stellenbosch University (SU) prefers the term "community interaction", which offers a similar meaning, but emphasises reciprocity between university and community.

[21] At SU, community interaction exists to nurture and manage partnerships with communities. This facilitates cooperation between communities and the University. And it provides the means whereby both parties can actively and in partnership discover knowledge and teach and learn from each other. Community interaction contributes to an environment where student learning is enriched and research relevance is enhanced. It supports SU's institutional commitments to reciprocity, redress, development and transformation.

[22] SU is considered a leader in the field of civic engagement because of the extent to which community interaction has been institutionalised. It forms an integral part of governance structures, budget lines, academic work and student activities at the University. The Division for Community Interaction at SU offers a credit-bearing Short Programme on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (SPSLCE) to equip academics to design and deliver service-learning modules. Presently, service-learning modules are offered in nine of the ten Faculties of the University. This means that thousands of our students are exposed by their lecturers to experiential learning within community settings. This has tremendously positive implications for the personal growth, academic learning and professional development of students, since they are exposed to real-world situations as part of their formal education. This practice goes wider than the engagement traditionally associated with disciplines such as medicine, social work and education.