The role of higher education in developing and retaining the best managers for the public service: A South African perspective

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Abstract

The challenge facing a country from the so-called south, such as South Africa, is to secure the highest quality of leadership for the economy in general and for the public service in particular. The question that guides this article is: 'Are institutions of higher education suitable learning providers for equipping the public service with the best?' The article investigates issues such as the fundamental purpose of institutions of higher education, the competencies that the management cadre of the public service in a developing country such as South Africa require, and the providers of learning that are involved in equipping public servants. It is argued in this article that if universities stick to their fundamental 'idea', namely to transport new ideas into the minds of their students, and in this specific case into the minds of managers in the public service, they will undoubtedly be a suitable provider of learning. If public service managers are inspired by new ideas about their profession or vocation and the challenges they face, they will most probably be motivated to meet those challenges in new and innovative ways.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly accepted that people, in other words staff, play a significant role in the operations of public institutions. The leadership echelons of these institutions are no exception. In fact, the management cadre is usually regarded as crucial for the effective and efficient execution of public functions and the delivery of public

services. The challenge facing a developing country such as South Africa is to secure the highest quality of leadership for the economy in general and for the public service in particular.

An analysis of the 1996 census shows that roughly 1,6 million adults in the 25-39 age group have matriculation certificates. However, labour market trends indicate a need for more graduates (Kistan 2002, 169). Formal education and life-long learning are usually regarded as the most appropriate means of meeting these challenges. In fact, most senior public officials have qualifications obtained from institutions of higher education. Some of them are still studying part time. However, Kistan (2002, 169) points out that an assessment of enrolment trends suggests that `both in terms of size (ie numbers of students enrolled) and shape (ie enrolment in different fields of study), the higher education system is not meeting this need' for more graduates.

It is common knowledge that many senior public officials who have received a formal education also attend in-service training courses, specialised short courses or development programmes offered by a variety of service providers, including institutions of higher education. Although a wide variety of service providers (e.g. institutions of higher education, the South African Management Development Institute [SAMDI] and private consultants) are active in the field of education, training, leadership development and structured life-long learning, this article focuses specifically on the role of higher education in developing and retaining the best managers for the public service. The question that will guide this article is thus:

`Are institutions of higher education suitable learning providers for equipping the public service with the best managers?'

The article attempts to answer the following questions:

- What is the fundamental purpose of institutions of higher education?
- What competencies do the senior management cadre of the public service in a developing country such as South Africa require?
- Which providers of learning are involved in providing learning to public servants?
- Are institutions of higher education capable of providing the best managers for the public service?

THE FUNDAMENTAL PURPOSE OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In order to answer the question whether institutions of higher education are suitable providers of learning to equip the public service with the best managers, it is necessary to clarify the concept `higher education' and to provide some clarity on its purpose. Higher education may be defined in many ways. As the context of this article is the South African situation, we start with a definition formulated by the South African National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), namely

that higher education consists of `all learning programmes leading to qualifications that represent a level of learning which is higher than the present matriculation or higher than the further education certificate in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)' (NCHE 1995, 4). The key concepts in this definition are the following:

- learning programmes
- qualifications
- level.

According to the NCHE higher education refers to learning programmes that lead to qualifications at a level higher than the present matriculation or further education certificate. This definition does not tell us anything about the purpose or content of these programmes. That is why we add another dimension to this definition, as put forward by Kozminski (2002, 366): `Higher education is one of the key vehicles that transport new ideas into the minds of people.' It seems that we can define higher education as learning programmes that transport new ideas into the minds of people and lead to qualifications higher than the present matriculation or further education certificate. This definition implies the existence of institutions offering these learning programmes. In South Africa, institutions of higher education include universities of technology, colleges and specialised schools. This is perhaps why Froneman (2003, 41–42) refers to a `higher education system'.

For the purpose of this article we will focus on universities, therefore a more appropriate question to guide our discussion might be:

`Are universities suitable learning providers for equipping the public service with the best managers?'

A literature review (Newman 1959; Rothblatt 1997; Short 2002; Turner 1996) on higher education and institutions of higher education reveals a lively debate about the purpose of the university as an institution. This debate has intensified since the publication of the controversial book *The idea of a university* by John Henry Newman, originally published in 1852 and, more recently, in 1959. Within the context of this article we need to obtain clarity on the purpose of a university in order to determine the appropriate role of universities in the education and training of public service managers.

What is the purpose, goals or `idea' (see Newman 1959) of a university specifically and institutions of higher education in general? In his book *The modern university and its discontents,* Rothblatt (1997, 1) follows Newman's example by referring to the idea of a university. By idea, then, he means `an inherent purpose, embedded, as it was, into the university and possibly its history' (Rothblatt 1997, 1).

In this particular work Rothblatt argues that it is not as easy to identify the idea of a university as one might think it would be. We might say that the idea of a university is education, but then a few other questions would arise, such as: What kind of

education – liberal, vocational, technical or research-related (Rothblatt 1997, 2–3)? What should the object of the teaching be – culture, citizenship, leadership or career? Who will be the recipients – young men, young men and women, mature students or postgraduates? Will they study full time or part time? The purpose can even be formulated in negative terms, such as `A university is not the place for this or that purpose because it is the place for something else' (Rothblatt 1997, 2–3).

Our literature survey reveals that there is indeed a variety of sometimes conflicting points of view on the idea of a university. Knowing that each possible purpose has a multiplicity of nuances, we nonetheless choose to group them in four categories for the purpose of this article. In developing the categories, we have considered the categories identified by two authors, namely Froneman, a South African scholar, and Short, an American scholar. In an article on change in higher education institutions, Froneman (2003, 41–42) proposes the following categories:

- The intellectual pursuit of knowledge (seeking knowledge for its own sake)
- Knowledge of education for society (knowledge for ethical purposes)
- Public goals such as the development of national capacity (e.g. when governments are interested in supplying the skilled labour that markets desire)
- Private goals (providing in the market demand for educated labour).

Short (2002, 143–144) refers to four broad functions of `the US university' related to the basic mission of advancing knowledge and preparing people to use it. They are as follows:

- To provide a general education for all students. (In other words: how to conduct one's activities as a citizen and as a person. This relates strongly to Froneman's second category.)
- To provide for the education of specialists. (In other words: how to carry out a particular human activity or profession. This one corresponds with Froneman's fourth category.)
- To provide for the education of researchers. (This one does not form part of Froneman's list. We regard this category as important because it focuses on building the capacity of the scientific community in particular and the scholarly community in general.)
- To provide for the education of educators. (Like the previous category, this one is also not mentioned by Froneman. We regard it as important because it also focuses on building the capacity of the scientific and scholarly communities.)

For the purposes of this article we have combined the categories identified by Froneman and Short into the following list:

- To pursue knowledge for its own sake
- To build the research and education capacity of the scholarly community

- To provide a general education for all students or society in general, because it is good (advantageous) to be educated
- To provide in the market demand for the education of specialists.

The above categories of the purposes of higher education serve as a framework for the summary of our literature survey on this topic. The literature survey indicates that these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive; in other words, a particular university may strive to fulfil all four purposes simultaneously.

Knowledge for its own sake

The literature survey has shown that the acquisition, extension, dissemination and teaching of universal knowledge have traditionally been regarded as core purposes of a university (Newman in Rothblatt 1997, 14–15; Turner 1996:3). This emphasis on knowledge for its own sake is well illustrated by Professor Starling, a professor of medicine at University College Hospital. In his testimony before the Royal Commission on the University of London (1912–1913), he stated that the main idea of a university is `the acquisition and making of knowledge for its own sake and not for the sake of the money which may be gained by knowing how to do certain things' (Rothblatt 1997, 17). Independent basic research seems to be the principal driving force of a university and an important mechanism for the acquisition and extension of knowledge (Gibbons 1998, 29; Rothblatt 1997, 26–27; Turner 1996, 3; Uebersfeld 1998, 361). Derrida (2002, 202) as quoted by De Beer (2005) adds an important condition to this role of the university, namely a strong emphasis on truth:

> This university demands and ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic freedom, an unconditional freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the truth . . . The university professes the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth.

These words of Derrida imply that the purpose of a university is more than `knowledge for its own sake' – it includes knowledge for the sake of the truth. In order to profess the truth, a critical mind seems to be indispensable. Traditionally, it was this type of knowledge that represented the highest and best from scholarship and science and formed the core of university teaching to students `able to assimilate and make good use of it' (Turner 1996, 3; Uebersfeld 1998, 360). The purpose of a university is thus to teach students the knowledge and methodologies of the various disciplines (Uebersfeld 1998, 360), enabling them to ask those critical questions leading to truthful knowledge. The question to be answered in this article is whether the university with `an unlimited commitment to the truth' (Derrida 2002, 202) can also be an institution that provides in the needs of the market. De Beer (2005) seems to believe that these two purposes are not reconcilable because the `important issue of

academic freedom, as the freedom to pursue truthful knowledge at all cost and without conditions, becomes threatened when the powers of the economy, the powers of the politicians, as well as cultural powers block academic freedom, and determine and prescribe how such freedom should be understood'.

To build the research and education capacity of the scholarly community

The purpose of a university that is most often neglected, is its duty to build the research and education capacity of the scholarly community. It seems to be the task of a university to build a `culture of research that [puts] a premium on originality and [stresses] the importance of discovery and a division of intellectual labour' (Rothblatt 1997, 16). Rothblatt (1997, 16) points out that it was the lack of such a culture at universities in England and Scotland that frustrated Newman in his lifetime during the nineteenth century. We have said previously that a university is a place where knowledge is created. If this is true, it makes sense to train lecturers and researchers in the craft of research by facilitating their participation in the creation of knowledge (Uebersfeld 1998, 357). This kind of training is vocational because it teaches the lecturer and researcher the `tricks of scientists' trade', namely the practice of gathering, systemising and sharing new knowledge about non-obvious things (see Pauw 1995, 8–10). The training should not be restricted to the lecturing and research staff members of universities, but should also be aimed at enriching students and scholars in general. Gibbons (1998, 61) refers to this as a process of creating a cadre of knowledge workers: `people who are expert at configuring knowledge to a wide range of applications'. De Beer (2005) formulates this role of the university slightly differently and places greater emphasis on the fundamental role when he states that a `university constitutes the place where human minds should be shaped so that they can see beyond ... beyond violence, poverty, crime, injustice, race and culture'. Perhaps we can add `beyond the market', since this differs from the purpose of providing for the market demand for the education of specialists. This purpose aims at providing society with intellectuals.

To provide a general education for all students or society in general, because it is good to be educated

The literature review shows that the provision of a general education for society is indeed one of the core purposes of a university (Light 1993, 260; Rothblatt 1997, 14; Turner 1996, 3). Rothblatt (1997, 14–15) refers in this regard to the time of Newman when `society' was limited to members of an elite, including `public leaders in church and State, in the military and the bar'. Since the foundation of the first universities in medieval times, universities have been teaching institutions (Fourie 2003, 31). At first, small numbers of students were socialised to their

future roles by exposure to curricula driven by study of the great works of the past, a particular expansion of outlook, turn of mind, habit of thought, capacity for social and civic interaction, and ideas and values that contributed to the maintenance of political stability (Light 1993, 260; Rothblatt 1997, 14–15; Turner 1996, xv). University teaching proved to be the teaching of so-called universal knowledge to the elite (Rothblatt 1997, 16). This situation started to change considerably after World War II when higher education expanded from educating the elite to providing mass education (Duderstadt 2000, 1).

As institutions of mass education, universities have started to play an important role in the uplifting of societies undergoing transformation (Kozminski 2002, 366–367). According to Kozminski (2002, 366) universities should still provide general education, but their role now also includes the fostering of new skills, values and knowledge. A crucial value that is fostered by providing general education to society is that of life-long learning (Gibbons 1998, 38). According to Uebersfeld (1998, 357), life-long learning plays a crucial role in ensuring that society becomes a place where knowledge is created. It seems that society is gradually trying to share the role of the university, namely, in the words of De Beer (2005), the pursuit of `truthful knowledge'.

Gibbons (1998, 38) states that the university is the provider of general education to equip learners with practical skills in problem solving, interpersonal communications and learning to learn. In fact, learners are supposed to be trained as knowledge workers to become skilled at the creative use of knowledge that `may have been produced anywhere in a global distributed knowledge production system' (Gibbons 1998, 60). The emphasis is thus not so much on learning the facts and memorising specific information, but more on the ability to change information into new knowledge and to apply that knowledge in new ways (Nolte 2004, 128).

We believe that a solid general education based on a commitment to the truth will cultivate a critical mind and foster knowledge in all fields, irrespective of the immediate profitability (Uebersfeld 1998, 357). Furthermore, we believe that such an education provides society with intellectuals who will most probably contribute to the economic development of society and a civic culture (Gibbons 1998, 38).

To what extent can general education at institutions of higher education help the public service to retain the best managers? According to Kozminski (2002, 367) general education:

- raises learners' awareness of the necessity to change in order to keep up with the world
- endows learners with intellectual capital (knowledge, skills and capabilities) and social capital (position, contacts and prestige), which enable them to accelerate and to catalyse multiple processes of transition in their work and social environment

- produces a culture of debate and rational argument that enables the wisdom needed by managers in the public service to surface, to accumulate and to influence human actions.

If Kozminski is correct, general education seems to form an invaluable foundation for any vocation-specific knowledge that managers in the public service may acquire during their careers.

To meet the market demand for the education of specialists

It is common knowledge that students (from school-leavers to mid-level and senior managers) nowadays enrol at universities mainly in preparation for some or other occupation. Uebersfeld (1998, 360) refers to this process as the `professionaliza-tion of studies', which translates itself into a widespread demand for vocational or professional education. The topic of this article implies that universities might be expected to supply the demands of the so-called vocational market for a workforce with specific skills, knowledge and attitudes.

Supplying this market demand as a purpose of the university seems to stand in direct contrast to the purpose of knowledge for the sake of truthful knowledge. Turner (1996, xv) points out that an institution that educates and trains specialists for a vocation or a profession is, according to Newman, virtually by definition distinct from a university. In his inaugural address at the University of South Africa, Pauw (1995, 2) posed the question of whether university education should be vocational or scientific. He stated that vocational education in the fields of medicine and law has existed since the Middle Ages and concluded that university education can be both scientific and vocational (Pauw 1995, 10). Pauw argued that science adds value to the knowledge of vocations, not only through the truth and probability of propositions, but through the thoughts and mental activities of those individuals who have certain skills at their disposal (Pauw 1995, 10).

Pauw's observation of the-long standing presence of vocational education at universities is confirmed by Short (2002, 142) who claims that practical or mission-oriented knowledge `is usually organized in academic units labelled by its association with particular human activities: engineering, law, medicine, business, agriculture, public administration, education and other such fields of study. Sub-units in each of these fields bear titles that reflect sub-categories of practice in each field . . .'. It seems that Public Administration as a university subject with a vocational focus is in good company in this regard, with its sub-categories related to different fields of practice such as public human resource management, policy analysis and public financial management.

Our literature review reveals a definite shift from universities as institutions pursuing only truthful knowledge to institutions that engage in the following:

- pursuing useful and profitable knowledge (Turner 1996, 291)
- providing expertise and the union ticket for consulting (Turner 1996, 292)

- that should be relevant and make a contribution to national economic performance (Gibbons 1998, 2)
- providing greater and greater numbers of technologically competent people to enable societies to modernise (Light 1993, 260–261)
- facilitating technology transfer (Gibbons 1998, 30)
- providing ongoing professional training (Uebersfeld 1998, 358)
- facilitating the professionalisation of the studies requested by learners and employers (Uebersfeld 1998, 358)
- providing learning, through life-long learning, to the majority of mid-level and senior employees during several periods in their professional lives (Uebersfeld 1998, 358).

The crucial question in this regard is whether a university is capable of meeting the full scope of the so-called market demand for professional or vocational education. Pauw (1995, 7) makes a very important statement in this regard. He says that scientific knowledge is always due to be falsified (according to Popper), therefore the practice of professions cannot have a scientific foundation. If professional practice were founded in science, Pauw argues, scientific education would not have been adequate, because a profession, like an art, also consists of skills that are not easily explicable. Polanyi (1958, 53) explains this as follows: `An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice.' This implies that education to equip the public service with the best managers cannot be provided solely by a university. Short (2002, 143) observes that `the full scope of mission-oriented inquiry does not reside within the university; almost anyone who is a practitioner of these various fields may be engaged in some form of knowledge-creation that pertains to his or her own practice or to the field as a whole'. Experienced practitioners are supposed to be the masters who pass on the art of being a proficient public servant to the apprentice public servant.

Is it possible for university teachers to teach not only scientific knowledge and skills, but also vocational knowledge and skills? Uebersfeld (1998, 360) observes that the majority of `teaching staff members do not have – and are not supposed to have – this know-how'. Pauw (1995, 9–10) agrees. He is of the opinion that universities cannot be expected to provide vocational coaching. He restricts the role of the university to scientifically inspired vocational education in public administration. As a consequence of the university's inability to offer vocational coaching in the full sense of the word, it is necessary to enlist the aid of professionals from enterprises, persons who have not only the know-how, but also the skills resulting from the practice of their know-how within their enterprises. The result should be a growing partnership between universities and enterprises, inter alia in the form of internships (Uebersfeld 1998, 360).

What is the purpose of a university in the twenty-first century? The literature survey reveals that the pursuit of truthful knowledge is still regarded as the main purpose of a university. In order to sustain this purpose, a secondary purpose has to be fulfilled, namely the vocational training of scientists in order to build the research and education capacity of the scholarly community. These two purposes complement each other. The third purpose, the provision of a general education for society at large, has an ethical dimension since it implies that it is good to have a solid general education. The last purpose is more controversial, namely providing for the market demand for the education of specialists by means of scientifically inspired vocational education.

Competencies that the public service in South Africa requires from its middle and senior management cadre

Universities are expected to meet the demand of the public service for the education and development of officials, specifically public service managers. Therefore it is necessary to determine exactly what the required competencies are and whether the education, training and development aimed at the acquisition of these competencies are part of universities' mandate. A Senior Management Service (SMS) programme was launched in the South African public service in 2001, with the aim of developing managers in the public service (Fraser-Moleketi 2000). According to Ms Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Minister of Public Service and Administration, the aims of this programme include the following:

- *placing greater attention on the career management and development of senior public servants*
- *emphasising stronger management skills and competencies as opposed to narrow technical skills*
- *increasing the diversity of senior management*
- *focusing on new initiatives related to remuneration, mobility and termination of service*
- *introducing formal mechanisms to assess performance.* (Fraser-Moleketi 2000).

Minister Fraser-Moleketi adds a very important qualification, namely that `the need for highly qualified managers relates specifically to translating policy intentions into practice' (Fraser-Moleketi 2000). Thus, the public service needs public managers who have more than just conceptual abilities. They need to have an inclination for practical results. Does it fall within the `idea' of a university to fulfil this need? Aspects of the aim of the SMS that may be of importance to providers of learning are `the development of senior public servants' and the `emphasis on stronger management skills and competencies as opposed to narrow technical skills'.

Chapter 5 of the *Senior Management Service: Public Service Handbook* provides us with a competency framework for the SMS (South Africa 2003). This framework is applicable to the SMS throughout the public service from national to provincial

levels. It focuses on so-called critical generic competencies rather than on functional or technical competencies. A set of eleven generic competencies expected from senior managers has been listed in the SMS handbook. The following are the competencies and their definitions (South Africa 2003):

- **Strategic capability and leadership**: provide a vision, set the direction for the organisation and inspire others in order to deliver on the organisational mandate.
- **Programme and project management**: plan, manage, monitor and evaluate specific activities in order to deliver the desired outputs.
- **Financial management**: compile and manage budgets, control cash flow, institute risk management and administer tender procurement processes in accordance with generally recognised financial practices in order to ensure the achievement of strategic organisational objectives.
- **Change management**: initiate and support organisational transformation and change in order to successfully implement new initiatives and deliver on service delivery commitments.
- **Knowledge management**: promote the generation and sharing of knowledge and learning in order to enhance the collective knowledge of the organisation.
- **Service delivery innovation**: explore and implement new ways of delivering services that contribute to the improvement of organisational processes in order to achieve organisational goals.
- **Problem solving and analysis**: systematically identify, analyse and resolve existing and anticipated problems in order to reach optimum solutions in a timely manner.
- **People management and empowerment**: manage and encourage people, optimise their outputs and effectively manage relationships in order to achieve organisational goals.
- **Client orientation and customer focus**: deliver services effectively and efficiently in order to put the spirit of customer service (*Batho Pele*) into practice.
- **Communication**: exchange information and ideas in a clear and concise manner appropriate for the audience in order to explain, persuade, convince and influence others to achieve the desired outcomes.
- **Honesty and integrity**: display and build the highest standards of ethical and moral conduct in order to promote confidence and trust in the Public Service.

As could be expected, an analysis of the definitions of these competencies shows that the competencies are of a purely vocational nature (with the exception of two, namely knowledge management, and problem solving and analysis). This does not mean that theoretical knowledge or scientific skills and truthful knowledge will not be useful in the accomplishment of these competencies. The competency framework for the SMS provides a definition of each competency and a detailed description of the four proficiency levels of the competency, namely basic, competent, advanced and expert (South Africa 2003). An analysis of the descriptions of the proficiency

levels of the various competencies discloses verbs (including conceptualises, defines, articulates, understands, demonstrates, evaluates, monitors, designs, develops, uses, integrates, identifies, analyses and resolves), suggesting that the responsible public service manager will require scientific competencies (gathering, systemising and sharing new information). Notwithstanding this observation, one can safely conclude that the competency framework for the SMS of the South African Public Service is overwhelmingly vocational in nature. Consequently the question guiding this article, namely whether a university is a suitable learning provider for equipping senior public servants with vocational competencies, is still relevant.

Providers of learning involved in equipping public servants

Which bodies are currently involved in the education and training of managers in the South African public service? It seems that two sectors are dominating this field, namely the higher education sector, including universities and universities of technology, and employers who provide in-service training.

Higher education

For many years South Africa had a binary higher education system consisting of universities, with their emphasis on scientific education, and technikons, with their emphasis on vocational education (Pauw 1995, 3–4). This distinction existed despite the fact that universities also offered vocational education for the so-called professions (e.g. medicine, law, engineering and accountancy). As a result of this binary system there were no less than 21 universities and 15 technikons at the time of the democratic election of 1994. One university (the University of South Africa) and one technikon (Technikon SA) were dedicated to distance education, while the other institutions were residential (Grobbelaar 2004, 37). The college sector, consisting of approximately 120 colleges of education, 12 agricultural colleges, nursing colleges and other mono-disciplinary colleges (Grobbelaar 2004, 37), was not regarded as equal to universities and technikons. As they played no direct role in the education of senior public service managers, these institutions do not form part of this discussion.

Since 1994 the higher education landscape in South Africa has experienced some fundamental changes, starting with the establishment of the NCHE in 1995 to investigate the nature, goals, governance and funding structures of a post-1994 higher education system. Eventually this investigation and subsequent discussions led to the National Plan for Higher Education, published in February 2001 (Grobbelaar 2004, 45). This plan led to the merging of institutions and the incorporation of parts of institutions into other institutions. By the end of 2004, eleven universities (previously 21), six universities of technology (previously 15 technikons), five comprehensive universities and two other higher education institutions had been formed (Grobbelaar 2004, 52).

Public Administration as a subject is currently taught at various universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities (like the University of South Africa). At the University of South Africa (Unisa) – a comprehensive distance education university – scientifically inspired education in Public Administration is offered through various three-year bachelor's degree programmes (e.g. BAdmin, BA & BCom), honours degree programmes (e.g. BAdmin Honours, BA Honours & BCom Honours), a master's degree in Public Administration (consisting of course work as well as a dissertation of limited scope), a research master's degree (MAdmin, MA & MCom) and research doctorates (DAdmin, DLitt et Phil & DCom). The vocational education component currently consists of a three-year National Diploma in Public Management and another one in Local Government Finance, a one-year BTech degree in Public Management and another in Local Government Finance, an MTech degree comprising course work and a mini-dissertation, and a research MTech degree (Unisa 2006d).

An assessment of the undergraduate learning programmes and degrees that may be used to equip senior public managers shows that there are three categories or streams. The first stream consists of the BA degree with Public Administration as a major subject. The primary purpose of the BA degree is to

> . . . provide BA graduates with the knowledge, specific skills and applied competence in a number of fields traditionally associated with the Humanities to give opportunities for continued personal intellectual growth, gainful economic activity and valuable contributions to society.

> A second purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with graduates in a number of learning fields in order to ensure that innovative and knowledge-based economic and scholarly activity is widened.

> A third purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with people who can understand the constructive role they need to play in their society and who are empowered to play that role. (Unisa 2006a, Online)

A student enrolling for the BA degree must offer a minimum of ten semester modules (out of a possible 30 modules) in Public Administration. The other modules are from other subject fields. A characteristic of this degree is the emphasis on personal intellectual growth, valuable contributions to society, and the widening of innovative and knowledge-based economic and scholarly activity. This degree certainly falls within the category of providing `a general education for all students or society in general, because it is good to be educated' as previously discussed.

Another degree which can be offered with Public Administration as a major subject, is the BAdmin degree. The primary purpose of the BAdmin is to

> . . . provide BAdmin graduates with the knowledge, specific skills, applied competence and the necessary attitudes in the fields of development and public administration to make them lifelong learners, employable workers/entrepreneurs and contributors to development and public administration in various public and civic contexts.

A second purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with graduates in development and public administration to widen the leadership base of innovative and knowledge-based economic and scholarly activity.

A further purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with people who can understand the constructive role they need to play as change agents in the field of development and public administration. (Unisa 2006b, Online)

A student enrolling for the BAdmin can offer a minimum of nine semester modules (out of a possible 32 modules) in Public Administration. The other modules are from other subject fields.

The major difference between the BA and BAdmin degrees is the scope of study. The BA degree focuses on society in general, while the BAdmin degree focuses on the field of public administration and development studies. However, the overall composition of the degree where the sum of the Public Administration modules is only nine out of a possible 32 modules, is still that of a general formative degree. The BAdmin degree falls just outside the boundaries of the education-of-specialists or professional category. Both the BA degree and the BAdmin degree can be regarded as of a theoretical nature.

If one looks at the Master's in Public Administration (MPA) degree, this can certainly be regarded as a professional degree educating the specialists in the field. The MPA programme consists of Public Administration dominated coursework and a research project. The coursework are supposed to facilitate a high level of theoretical engagement with practice related problems.

We regard the National Diploma and BTech as falling within the vocational category. The purpose of the National Diploma in Public Management is `to train and educate learners to master current and future managerial and development skills for the public service which includes all spheres of government' (Peninsula Technikon 2006a, Online). This diploma consists of 19 year modules, all within the field of Public Management. The purpose of the BTech in Public Management is `to provide learners with a normative and philosophical base for research and public sector vocation so as to prepare them to eventually assume management positions' (Peninsula Technikon 2006b, Online). This degree consists of six year modules, all from the same subject field.

As the explanation above should clearly show, students studying on the vocational side do not receive the same general education as those studying for the more scientific degrees in the qualification spectrum. Their education focuses only on one vocational field, in this case public management.

In addition to the binary formal learning programmes that lead to degrees and diplomas, institutions of higher education in South Africa also offer non-formal learning opportunities. These are usually done through centres that employ academics and offer programmes to meet the specific needs of `industry'. For example, the University of South Africa has a Centre for Public Administration and Management (CePAM), which is housed within the Department of Public Administration and

Management and offers various short learning programmes, courses, workshops and seminars to officials in the local, provincial and central government sphere, amongst others (Unisa 2006c, Online). This Centre operates on business principles and its primary aim is to generate profits. With the four possible purposes of a university in mind, these activities fall purely within the category of specialised vocational education on a non-formal basis.

Training by the employer

Higher education institutions are not the only providers of education and training for senior managers in the public service – the public service has its own provider of education and training, namely the South African Management Development Institute (SAMDI). SAMDI was established as a department in October 1999 to `enhance the prestige, performance and professionalism of public servants' (SAMDI 2006, Online). SAMDI's mandate is to `provide such training or cause such training to be provided'. The result of this mandate is that various institutions of higher education are contracted by SAMDI to provide specific training on their behalf. Such training is usually done by the universities through their various centres.

SAMDI's courses cover the entire vocational spectrum of the South African public service. Their courses cover aspects such as the following:

● Management and leadership development
● Organisational development
● Good governance
● Financial management
● Your rights
● People management and empowerment
● Service delivery (SAMDI 2006b, 7).

As this article focuses on the role of higher education in retaining the best managers for the public service, it makes sense to pay specific attention to the programmes in the category `Management and leadership development'. One of the programmes in this category is the Presidential Strategic Leadership Development Programme (PSLDP). This programme has been aligned with the SMS competency framework and consists of eight modules. Although the programme has been developed by SAMDI as part of its range of programmes aimed at meeting the specific needs of the public service, it seems not to offer it independently from the higher education sector. Although the SAMDI Training Directory (SAMDI 2006b, 14) states that a certificate of competence will be issued after the successful completion of the programme, and that this specific programme is accredited through the North West University (Potchefstroom Campus), it is not clear who will issue the

certificate. However, it seems that the preferred entrance qualification for this programme is a degree and that the possibility exists that the programme may be recognised as the equivalent of an honours degree (SAMDI 2006b, 14).

It is clear that the South African public service, through the agent of SAMDI, needs to be in control of the vocation-specific curriculum and training of its staff at all levels. However, it seems that the public service does want to align its programmes with the programmes offered by universities. The fact that a degree is used as entry qualification for their PSLDP shows that the value of general or even vocational university education as foundation for high-level vocation-specific training is recognised.

Are universities suitable learning providers to equip the public service with the best managers?

In this article we have started by assessing the purpose of institutions of higher education. In this process we defined higher education as learning programmes that transport new ideas into the minds of people and lead to qualifications higher than the present matriculation or further education certificate. We also decided to focus specifically on the university as an institution of higher education. We discovered that `learning programmes that transport new ideas' may be categorised in terms of four different purposes, namely

- the pursuit of truthful knowledge for its own sake,
- building the research and education capacity of the scholarly community,
- providing general education to society, and
- meeting the market demand for professional and vocational education.

Although it might happen that a university may offer a learning programme only focusing on the pursuit of truthful knowledge for its own sake, without meeting the market demand for professional and vocational education, the opposite might not be equally true. That is why we believe that if we want to offer professional and vocational education for the public sector, all these purposes or modalities of education should be present simultaneously in one university and even in one academic department. We also believe that programmes supplying the market demand for professional and vocational education have to transport `new ideas into the minds of people' to be truly on the level of higher education. We believe that a university that equips public service managers with the competencies needed to be the best, can only be successful if its learning programmes always transport new ideas that originate from scholarly and practice-based research.

Without the presence of academic freedom, which enables a university to pursue truthful knowledge relating to the work of the public service, and specifically managers in the public service, universities will not be able to enrich learning programmes with non-obvious knowledge that practitioners do not have. Without learning programmes that include a focus on the development of the research and

education capacity of the scholarly community (the third-year module `Reflective Public Administration' offered at Unisa is an example of such a focus), the pursuit of truthful knowledge will also be extremely difficult.

Although our analysis of the competencies needed by the SMS of the South African public service has shown a strong vocational bias, we have also identified the need for scholarly competencies that are usually facilitated by degree programmes at universities. As the entry requirements of the PSLDP show, there is indeed a need for the competencies facilitated by degree programmes aimed at the general education of society. It makes sense that vocation-specific non-formal training should build on the general scholarly foundation of a bachelor's degree including modules from a variety of subjects. We believe that the width and generality of knowledge and scholarly skills that form part of a BA or a BAdmin degree will facilitate an openness for new ideas among managers.

We have also shown that vocational education is an integral part of the programme and qualification mix of universities, with the advantage that universities are able to address the knowledge needs of their vocational focus directly. However, it is not the task of the university sector to teach public service managers the `tricks of their trade'. That should be done by mentors in the work situation. It is the task of universities to transport new ideas and critical thinking about their vocation to public service managers.

Are universities suitable learning providers for equipping the public service with the best managers? If universities stick to their fundamental `idea', namely to transport new ideas into the minds of their students, and in this specific case into the minds of managers in the public service, they will undoubtedly be a suitable provider of learning. However, the learning provided by universities need to be supported by practice-based research and supplemented by coaching and mentoring by experienced senior managers in the work situation. If public managers are moved by the new ideas about their profession or vocation and the challenges they face, they will most probably be inspired to meet those challenges in new and innovative ways.

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