

Pushing the Envelope: Downturns, Wrong directions and Additional avenues

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Abstract

This article takes a rather unorthodox approach for a presidential address at an academic conference. It looks beyond the windows of the ivory tower to take cognisance of what lies outside the walls of academia to engage with what is really happening and what really matters. It is indeed a case of pushing the envelope – going beyond the limits of what is regarded as the norm and acceptable – and in so doing suggests ways in which we can manoeuvre our discipline to consider embracing a different approach regarding where we are at. While historical research is at the core of what we do and is in effect what keeps our academic institutions afloat, it cannot and must not be an end in itself. What I argue for is that we take account of the situation we find ourselves in in terms of our South African university community and by that, I mean our student cohort, and reflect upon what it is we can and need to do. The article reflects on the downturns, considers the wrong directions and proposes additional avenues.

Keywords: History; teaching; education; illiteracy; universities; critical reading skills.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel volg 'n redelike onortodokse benadering wat betref 'n voorsittersrede by 'n akademiese konferensie. Dit kyk deur die vensters van die ivoortoring, sodat daar kennis geneem word van wat buite die mure van die akademie lê, ten einde betrokke te raak by dít wat werklik gebeur en wat werklik saak maak. Dit toets die grense deur verder te gaan as die norm en wat as aanvaarbaar beskou word – en sodoende stel dit maniere voor waarop ons ons dissipline kan manevreer om 'n ander benadering ten opsigte van ons huidige posisie te omhels. Terwyl historiese navorsing die kern is van wat ons doen, en dit in wese ons akademiese instansies kop bo water

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laat hou, kan dit nie en moet dit nie 'n einde in sigself wees nie. Ek voer aan dat ons moet ag slaan op die situasie waarin ons onself tans bevind wat betref ons Suid-Afrikaanse universiteitsgemeenskap; dit wil sê ons studenteliggaam, en ons moet besin oor wat ons kan en moet doen. Die artikel neem die afdraaipaaie en verkeerde rigtings onder die loep, en stel ander weë voor.

Sleutelwoorde: Geskiedenis; onderrig; opvoedkunde; ongeletterheid; universiteite; kritiese leesvaardighede.

Introduction

This article is a slightly revised version of the presidential address presented at the nineteenth conference of the Historical Association of South Africa (HASA), the second held at Rhodes University (RU) and also the second organised and hosted by Alan Kirkaldy. The first HASA conference was held in Grahamstown in 2008 and this, the second, in 2023, was held in Makhanda. Both these names are telling of a past described by Colin Bundy in a keynote address at a conference on the Eastern Cape, as one which has a 'brutal record of warfare and dispossession', 'salient missionary encounters', and identity formation as regards both 'African and Afrikaner nationalism'.¹

It was here, in this very location in 1812 that the first namesake, Colonel John Graham, Commander of the Cape Hottentot Corps in the Zuurveld and later administrator, established the regiments headquarters on the site of the present-day Church Square and founded the city of Grahamstown. The second namesake, Makhanda ka Nxele, on the other hand, was a leading Xhosa warrior, war doctor, Christian convert and prophet who unsuccessfully attacked the settlement's garrison in 1819. He was exiled and imprisoned on Robben Island and drowned while attempting to escape.² Just on two centuries later, in October 2018, the city was officially renamed after Makhanda in accordance with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendation that geographic features should be renamed as a 'symbolic reparation to address an unjust past' – a past which Jeff Peires refers to as having 'a hundred years of bloodshed'³ and which Ben Maclennan described as one of 'concentrated brutality and totally alien viciousness'.⁴

However, Bundy also referred to the Eastern Cape region as a 'distinctive place of education' where 'nineteenth century colonists and twentieth century white English-speakers invested a great deal of cultural capital in replicating what they

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1. C. Bundy, 'Lessons on the Frontier: Aspects of Eastern Cape History', *Kronos* (2004), 9-21.
 2. B. Maclennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986).
 3. J. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856-7* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989), 12.
 4. Maclennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror*.

could of the [British] metropolitan models'.⁵ He also refers to the fact that the establishment of education in the Eastern Cape was of great significance for the African majority, claiming that in Xhosa communities, 'being schooled or non-schooled assumed a decisive cultural significance' ensuring that the 'social identity of an educated African elite crystallised here earlier than anywhere else in southern Africa'.⁶ Yet, not unlike this region – the contestation of education persists with over a century of inequality, with the persistence of alien systems and brutal injustices.

It is to education, and in particular this replication of the British metropolitan models in university education, and its subsequent evolution – or devolution in colonial, segregationist, apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa – that this article turns. The history of universities as a genre of historical writing is well established⁷ and has a solid profile within South Africa at the respective tertiary institutions.⁸ Maurice Boucher, Bruce Murray, Howard Phillips, Bronwyn Strydom, Paul Maylam, Albert Grundlingh, and Janeke Thumbran are among those who have made and continue to make considerable contributions to the South African university history genre.⁹ The ongoing significance of this genre is also apparent in the fact that in 2022 Saleem Badat launched a country-wide research project that seeks, among other aims, to provide an account of the origins, expansion, and development of all South African universities during the colonial, segregation, and apartheid eras and the post-1994 period.¹⁰ But the project also considers what gave rise to these universities, what circumstances shaped the 'definitions of their purposes, goals, objectives, roles, functions and objects' as well as examining how they were constituted, how they were shaped by place and time, and how and why they have changed.¹¹

5. Bundy, 'Lessons on the Frontier'.

6. Bundy, 'Lessons on the Frontier'.

7. B. Strydom, 'Broad South Africanism and Higher Education: The Transvaal University College (1908–1919) (PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, 2013).

8. Examples include M. Boucher (Unisa), B. Murray (University of the Witwatersrand), H. Phillips (University of Cape Town), P. Maylam (Rhodes University), B. Strydom (University of Pretoria), A. Grundlingh (Stellenbosch University) and S. Badat (University of Durban Westville).

9. M. Boucher, *Spes in Ardius: A History of the University of South Africa* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1972); B. Murray, *Wits, the Early Years: A History of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and its Precursors, 1896-1939* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1982); H. Phillips, *The University of Cape Town, 1918-1948: The Formative Years* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1993); B. Murray, *Wits, the 'Open' Years: A History of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1939-1959* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1997); Strydom, 'Broad South Africanism and Higher Education'; P. Maylam, *Rhodes University, 1904-2016: An Intellectual, Political and Cultural History* (Grahamstown: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2017); and A. Grundlingh, *Stellenbosch University: 100 Years*, (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University Press, 2018).

10. University histories, <https://stias.ac.za/fellows/projects/the-historical-origins-and-development-of-universities-in-south-africa/> accessed June 2023.

11. University histories, <https://stias.ac.za/fellows/projects/the-historical-origins-and->

Yet while the origin, history, current changing crises of these tertiary institutions in the broader context continues to be deliberated, this article takes a rather unorthodox approach for a presidential address at an academic conference. It looks beyond the windows of the ivory tower to take cognisance of what lies outside the walls of academia to engage with what is really happening and what really matters. It is indeed a case of pushing the envelope – going beyond the limits of what is regarded as the norm and acceptable – and in so doing, suggests ways in which we can manoeuvre our discipline, History, to consider embracing a different approach regarding where we are at in this moment of time.

While it is agreed that historical research is at the core of what we do, and HASA conferences and others are indeed evidence of this endeavour and is in effect what keeps our academic institutions afloat, this cannot and must not be an end in itself. What I am arguing for is that we take account of the situation we find ourselves in in terms of our university community and by that, I mean our student cohort, and reflect upon what it is we can and need to do. The article reflects on the downturns, considers the wrong directions and proposes additional avenues.

Downturns

The current state of South African universities in the wake of events such as #Feesmustfall in 2015-2016, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2022 and the local declining socio-economic climate has become a topic of great concern and contestation. Already in a 2018 seminal article authored by R. Swartz, M. Ivancheva, L. Czerniewicz and N. Morris, appropriately titled ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Dilemmas Regarding the Purpose of Public Universities in South Africa’,¹² this dire situation (even prior to Covid) is deliberated. During Covid in 2020 an account presented by Gerald Ouma and Tawane Kupe entitled ‘Uncertain Times: Re-imagining Universities for New, Sustainable Futures’, stated that universities operate in environments that are ‘increasingly unstable, unpredictable and competitive’ and are therefore ‘susceptible to larger economic and societal trends’.¹³ And more recently, in his book *Corrupted*, Jonathan Jansen takes a bold political economic lens in assessing the university domain, pointing to the chronic dysfunction of South African universities. He indicates that durable solutions need to include the ‘de-politicisation of university councils and appointments of academics with integrity and capacity to manage and lead these fragile institutions’.¹⁴

[development-of-universities-in-south-africa/](#), accessed June 2023.

12. R. Swartz, M. Ivancheva, L. Czerniewicz and N. Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Dilemmas Regarding the Purpose of Public Universities in South Africa’, *High Educ*, 77 (2018), 567-583.
13. G. Ouma and T. Kupe, ‘Uncertain Times: Re-imagining Universities for New, Sustainable Futures’, Paper presented at a special meeting of the USAf Board, 24 July 2020.
14. J.D. Jansen, *Corrupted: A Study of Chronic Dysfunction in South African Universities*

These now fragile South African institutions of higher learning have a long, robust historical trajectory. The oldest ones originated essentially as an admixture of the imperial university model¹⁵ and have in some form or another adhered very much to their initial conception as places of ‘teaching, learning, research and public duty’.¹⁶ However, ‘what constitutes the purpose of the university [today] is subject to ongoing debate and negotiation’.¹⁷ According to Swartz et al,

The multiplicity of conflicting but co-existing narratives about what universities should do in South African society – producing excellent research, preparing a labour force, or addressing societal inequalities – exposes persisting tension surrounding the purpose of a public university.¹⁸

This is however not only a parochial concern as the purpose of universities is also under scrutiny across continents, with the existence of some of the most prestigious being questioned as they are regarded as being in a ‘state of crisis’.¹⁹ Strydom also makes the point that the issue of the balance between a liberal education and preparation for the professions has been an ongoing issue not only in the twenty-first century but also throughout the twentieth.²⁰ Yet what makes the South African situation concerning is that it remains one of the most unequal societies in the world,²¹ and public higher education must be seen as a space to redress these ‘systemic inequalities’.²² The first White Paper on Higher Education introduced in 1997, soon after the democratic dispensation, called for ‘the establishment of a single, national coordinated system that would meet the learning needs of South African citizens and the reconstruction and development needs of the South African society and economy as the apartheid era ends.’²³

The massification of education, which was already a feature after the Second World War in the 1940s, particularly in postcolonial states, was also seen as a means

(Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2023).

15. Maylam, *Rhodes University*.

16. Jansen, *Corrupted*.

17. Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 567.

18. Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 567.

19. B. Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). See also ‘Universities a Crisis on All Fronts, *Counterfire*, 24 January 2024 available at <https://www.counterfire.org/article/universities-a-crisis-on-all-fronts/> accessed January 2024.

20. Strydom, ‘Broad South Africanism and Higher Education’.

21. The World Bank, ‘New World Bank Report Assesses Sources of Inequality in Five Countries in Southern Africa’, 9 March 2022 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/09/new-world-bank-report-assesses-sources-of-inequality-in-five-countries-in-southern-africa> , accessed June 2023.

22. Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 570.

23. Education White Paper 3: Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education at <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:9019> , accessed May 2023.

to address the social injustices integral to the post-apartheid state.²⁴ However, a declining economy, decreased government financial support, increased fees and the persistent exclusion of the majority of students, plummeted the university fraternity into a crisis with the outbreak of the #Feesmustfall action in 2015.²⁵ While there were some initial gains, including the flagging of concerns and the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training, the disillusionment with both government and institutions was to follow, leading to a continuation of sporadic uprisings and strikes in subsequent years.²⁶

Yet while university administrations contended with these challenges, a new management style and verbiage was emerging more evidently with the introduction of the corporatised university.²⁷ R. Dlamini argues that in order to contend with shrinking government subsidies, universities redesigned ‘their identity according to corporate culture’.²⁸ Performance management, rankings, ratings, branding and a focus on the so-called ‘core or main’ business became the order of the day. This corporate-speak made it increasingly apparent that in order to survive, university management had to adopt a more managerial-type stance. In some instances – and from the research interviews conducted by Swartz et al – it became evident that the universities need to shift their focus from teaching, research, and community engagement towards income generation. This entailed broadening the number of enrolments, offering hybrid classes to accommodate increased student numbers, attracting more foreign students due to the higher fees they pay and offering additional online courses to generate funds.²⁹ The book by N. Chetty and C. Merrett, *The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University* is a case in point.³⁰ It focuses on the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the subtitle: *Academic Freedom, Corporatisation and Transformation* encapsulates the concern regarding universities embracing managerial policies and corporate behaviour. Putting it bluntly, Chetty and

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24. Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 568 and 570.
 25. S. Booyesen, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonization and Governance in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016).
 26. University of Pretoria Attains Court Interdict for Striking Workers, 27 February 2024, https://www.up.ac.za/news/post_3211659-university-of-pretoria-obtains-court-interdict-against-striking-workers, accessed February 2024; UCT Strike Begins <https://groundup.org.za/article/uct-strike-begins/>, accessed February 2024. See also Booyesen, *Fees Must Fall*.
 27. R. Dlamini, ‘Corporatization of Universities Deepens Inequalities by Ignoring Social Injustices and Restricting Access to Higher Education’, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32, 5 (2018); Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 572 and 574.
 28. Dlamini, ‘Corporatization of Universities Deepens Inequalities’.
 29. Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 77, 575, 579.
 30. N. Chetty and C. Merrett, *The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University: Academic Freedom, Corporatisation and Transformation* (self-published in 2014), deals with these concerns at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

Merrett argue that collegiality and custodianship for the greater good gave way to 'line management, legalism and industrial relations'.³¹ They point out that the 'greatest concern is indeed the hold and influence of a global trend of managerialism imported from the commercial world'.³² This is also evident in the global North with reference being made to a dire need to avert 'market ideology and managerial diktat'.³³ According to Swartz et al, the very question of 'core business of a university is problematic'. They claim it is an oxymoron that public institutions have not traditionally been associated with business practices.³⁴ As for Chetty and Merrett, in their 2015 paper they suggest that universities have become 'places of bureaucracy obsessed by measured outputs, rankings and what can be quantified' and in this instance they function as 'research units' rather than offering 'inspired teaching'.³⁵ They also forewarned, much like Jansen in 2023,³⁶ that that this trajectory, both locally and abroad, has the potential to:

... turn universities into academic factories dominated by contracted executives with short-term careerist or ideological agendas who believe they are the equivalent of CEOs, backed by a phalanx of managers and a hierarchy of lesser enforcers.³⁷

Added to this is a pushback from academics as regards their teaching roles. Many feel that teaching does not matter anymore as it is only subsidy-driven research output that does. The increased number of students, with the increased discrepancy in the student staff ratio along with the addition of hybrid and online teaching responsibilities has become increasingly demanding and frustrating. This has resulted in some academics taking the dire teaching situation seriously along with excessive workloads to the detriment of their research, while others have opted for the managerial bean-counting of research production at the expense of their teaching. This situation in itself has caused a rift and increased tensions among academics in an already embattled zone. That there is a tangible downturn within the university fraternity cannot be denied.

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31. Chetty and Merrett, *The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University*.
 32. N. Chetty and C. Merrett, 'The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University', Paper presented at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, 29 October 2015.
 33. 'Universities in Crisis on All Fronts', *Counterfire*, 24 January 2024. <https://www.counterfire.org/article/universities-a-crisis-on-all-fronts/> accessed January 2024.
 34. Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place', 568.
 35. Chetty and Merrett, 'The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University'.
 36. Jansen, *Corrupted*, 3.
 37. Chetty and Merrett, 'The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University'.

Wrong directions

While universities have been undergoing a series of downturns within the walls of academia and continue to do so, this article now turns to move beyond these walls of higher learning to consider what, for me, really matters, namely the dire situation in what awaits the universities. Besides the impact of Covid-19 on the teaching of school learners over the last few years,³⁸ which has now become a problem that the universities must address or redress, there does not appear to be much hope for the generation of university entrants to come. Basic education has literally failed us – a factor that was made very apparent in the latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) released in May 2023.³⁹ This study is an assessment of reading achievement in over 50 countries world-wide and the results show that 81 per cent of Grade 4 learners in South Africa – that is four out of 5 learners – cannot read for meaning.⁴⁰ This reflects on an ‘ailing basic education system’,⁴¹ which is a dire situation given that one of the major keys to address inequalities and empower the younger generation is through quality education.⁴²

While the Minister of Basic Education, Minister Angie Motshekga, responded to the PIRLS survey by indicating that she believed Covid had had a ‘negative and dire consequence’ on the education system, she also admitted that ‘Even before the pandemic, the education system faced significant historical challenges, such as poverty, inequality and inadequate infrastructure’⁴³ – a situation that has not been redressed since the democratic dispensation of three decades ago. Yet the issues with basic education go even deeper – 80 percent of public schools are not functional; teachers are unqualified or underqualified; infrastructure is rundown or lacking and

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38. F.M. Reimers (ed.), *Primary and Secondary Education during Covid-19: Disruptions to Educational Opportunity during a Pandemic* (Harvard University, Cambridge MA, Springer Publications, 2022); and S. Tadesse and W. Muluye, ‘The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Education Systems in Developing Countries: A Review’, *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 10 (2020), available at <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=103646>, accessed June 2023.
 39. K. Singh, ‘International Study Reveals 8 out of 10 Grade 4 pupils in South Africa Can’t Read for Meaning’, *News 24*, 16 May 2023. <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/just-in-international-study-reveals-8-out-10-grade-4-pupils-in-south-africa-cant-read-for-meaning-20230516>, accessed June 2023.
 40. Singh, ‘International Study Reveals’; N. Spaul, ‘From Bad to Worse: New Study shows 81% of Grade 4 Pupils in SA Can’t Read in Any Language’, *Daily Maverick*, 16 May 2023, at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-05-16-from-bad-to-worse-new-study-shows-81-of-grade-4-pupils-in-sa-cant-read-in-any-language/> accessed June 2023.
 41. Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 572.
 42. R. Sommer, ‘South Africa’s Children’s Grim Prospects in a Failing Education System’, *Mail and Guardian*, 20 April 2023; Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz and Morris, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, 572, 568.
 43. Singh, ‘International Study Reveals’.

resources are inadequate and the Eastern Cape still has over 400 ‘mud schools’.⁴⁴ Added to this are issues of overcrowded classrooms, poverty, load-shedding and an abysmal Grade 12 certificate where you can matriculate with ‘40% in two of six subjects and 30% in three others’.⁴⁵ It is hence questionable whether today’s matric certificate can still be regarded as proof of preparedness for further higher or tertiary education. Many fellow lecturers, teaching assistants and tutors are acutely aware of this.

In 2020 Amnesty International reported that South Africa’s broken and unequal education system was perpetuating poverty and inequality.⁴⁶ As Omphemetse Sibanda points out, ‘The yearly reality is that inequality in our public education is maximally maintained instead of being chipped away’.⁴⁷ Compounding this issue is the imminent exodus of teachers from the education system. According to a survey by Research on Socio Economic policy (RESEP), Stellenbosch University and Allan & Gill Gray Philanthropies, one in every two teachers will retire in the next 10 years, a situation which is apparently unprecedented in South Africa’s history.⁴⁸ What is even more concerning is that many of these teachers – both black and white – became teachers in the 1980s and 1990s when other vocations for women were relatively limited. Teaching and nursing were seen at the time as being the ideal path to follow professionally, and in some communities these were the only options open to women. Other vocations for women opened up later, such as social work, counselling and therapy-related options. There were however a few outliers who ventured into other careers.⁴⁹ Generally the women who went into teaching back then were genuinely dedicated and committed to the calling of the classroom, but they are now all reaching an age of over 60 and are being forced to retire.

Added to this attrition rate is the prevailing unemployment crisis which according to the South African Human Rights Commission currently stands at the following statistics:

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44. Sommer, ‘South Africa’s Children’s Grim Prospects’.
 45. Online Career Guidance, <https://www.onlinecareerguidance.co.za/2023/12/20/grade-12-pass-requirements/> accessed June 2023.
 46. Amnesty International, ‘South Africa: Broken and Unequal Education Perpetuating Poverty and Inequality’, 11 February 2020 at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/south-africa-broken-and-unequal-education-perpetuating-poverty-and-inequality/> accessed June 2023.
 47. O. Sibanda, ‘Our Education System is Broken and Nobody Seems to be Doing Anything About It’, *Daily Maverick*, 19 January 2023.
 48. RESEP, ‘The Challenge and the Opportunity: Half of All Teachers in South Africa will Retire in the Next Ten Years’, https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RESEP-TDD-Policy-Brief-Demand-and-Supply-of-Teachers-1PP_WEB-2.pdf accessed May 2023.
 49. P. Andrews, ‘The Legal Underpinnings of Gender Oppression in Apartheid South Africa’, *Australian Journal of Law and Society*, 92, 3 (1986), 92-104.

RACIAL GROUP	POVERTY PERCENTAGE ⁵⁰
Black	64%
Coloured	40%
Indian	6%
White	1%

This nationwide predicament is untenable and so the promise to utilise education, which dates back to the inception of South Africa’s democracy, as a resolution to address these imbalances, remains unfulfilled and is becoming critical.

At the dawn of the South African democracy, Nelson Mandela proclaimed that education was integral to addressing past inequalities. He famously stated: ‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world’.⁵¹ The current South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, has reiterated this standpoint. In his 2023 State of the Nation address he declared that ‘access to quality education for all is the most powerful instrument we have to end poverty’.⁵² However, numerous challenges continue to hinder school children in South Africa from accessing this powerful tool, despite the constitutional guarantee in Section 29 that every person has the right to ‘a basic education’, which the state is obligated to ‘make progressively available and accessible’.⁵³

It is to education, and more specifically, the role of our discipline that forms the focus of the remainder of this article.

Additional avenues

It is here, when considering additional avenues, where the envelope needs to be pushed; where we need to go beyond the norm of what is considered acceptable. I am also going to renege somewhat on my own stance in my previous presidential address for HASA in Bloemfontein in 2018, in a paper entitled ‘History “through the looking glass”’.⁵⁴ Here I reflected on how History had been bounced around within the school curriculum throughout the post-apartheid period – first as a standalone, then as a merged social studies concoction, then jettisoned to the periphery of schooling and

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50. R. Nqola, SA’s Poverty Statistics, 22 June 2021 <https://www.power987.co.za/featured/sas-poverty-statistics-64-black-6-asians-1-white/>, accessed May 2023.
 51. Mandela Exhibition, https://mandelaexhibition.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Mandela_EDU_Introducing-Mandela_power_point_FINAL.pdf, accessed June 2023.
 52. President Ramaphosa Identifies Education Priorities during 2023 SONA, <https://www.education.gov.za/ArchivedDocuments/ArchivedArticles/President-Ramaphosa-2023-SoNA-0223.aspx>, accessed May 2023.
 53. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Section, 29, 1996. <https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/saconstitution-web-eng.pdf> accessed May 2023.
 54. K.L. Harris, ‘History “through the looking glass”’, *Historia*, 63, 2 (November 2018), 1-16.

then, most recently, into deliberations about a central and indispensable position of compulsion. I cautioned against this government directive.⁵⁵

In 2018, the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, made the announcement about introducing history as a compulsory subject at school in grades 10, 11 and 12 from 2023.⁵⁶ This was based on a study undertaken by a Ministerial Task Team, including some historians, that had deliberated on the following four mandates:

- advise on the feasibility of making History compulsory;
- where History should be located in the curriculum (for example, whether it should be incorporated into Life Orientation or not);
- review the content and pedagogy of the History curriculum with a view to strengthening History in the curriculum;
- investigate the implications (for teaching, classrooms, textbooks, etc.) of making History a compulsory subject.⁵⁷

The activities of the Ministerial Task Team included country-wide provincial consultations; an appraisal of the training of history teachers at universities throughout the country; a review of the prevailing teaching system, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) system; as well as a comparative analysis of a dozen countries in Africa, the East and West.⁵⁸

Deliberations and dissidence prevailed throughout the Task Team process, a factor that was also evident in the final report. While the report stated that ‘the time is ripe for a completely restructured and overhauled curriculum’,⁵⁹ it also claimed that it was ‘against the exercise of wholesale changes or a complete overhaul of the CAPS syllabus and content at this present time’, arguing that it was ‘too soon’ for such steps.⁶⁰ Rather, it recommended that the focus should be on the use of the CAPS syllabus as the ‘basis of strengthening the content in the interim’ indicating that the team hoped this would in future be looked at by the Department of Basic Education.⁶¹

What was noteworthy, was the point made that the status of the discipline of History should be restored within the Department of Basic Education, as was the case

55. Harris, ‘History “through the looking glass”’, 1-16.

56. R. Pather, ‘Education Task Team – History Should be a Compulsory School Subject from 2023’, *Mail & Guardian* 31 May 2018, at <https://mg.co.za/author/raeesa-pather>, accessed June 2018.

57. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team for the Department of Basic Education, February 2018, 8.

58. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team.

59. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team, 73.

60. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team, 84.

61. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team, 85.

with the disciplines of Mathematics, Science and Technology.⁶² The Task Team presented four scenarios on how History could possibly be reinstated. The first was to make it a compulsory fifth fundamental subject. The second was that History would become a replacement for Life Orientation from Grade 9. Thirdly, it was suggested that History could be integrated into Life Orientation; and fourthly, that History replace Life Orientation completely.⁶³ The Task Team concluded its report with a number of recommendations, the key one being that History should be made compulsory and that it should be a stand-alone subject. This was then couched in the context of a number of considerations for Basic Education to address, including: ‘capacity, teacher training, content, textbook alignment, planning as well as budgetary and cost implications’.⁶⁴ Passing reference was also made to the involvement of universities in the process as well as the importance of Africa-centeredness when revising content. In the final analysis the Task Team recommended a ‘phased approach’ with the year 2023 as a target.

As I indicated in my 2018 address, this should have been an occasion of ‘unrestrained celebration, a true “wonderland” for all those involved in the teaching of the discipline of History because it guarantees a future for the study of the past, a future for many of our graduates, a future for our discipline’.⁶⁵ That this recommendation has as yet not transpired is partly due to the mixed reactions that Minister Motshekga’s announcement elicited in academic, educational and popular circles – with strong overtones of politicking also playing a role.⁶⁶ The cautionary reaction of two academics steeped in history education, namely Linda Chisholm and Michelle Friedman, is of relevance. They stated that the Task Team’s proposal faced steep challenges, one of the most important being the ‘availability of enough well-trained history teachers to meet the demand’ indicating it would be ‘hamstrung by two things: the low status of history and teacher education in general in universities; and ongoing budget cuts’.⁶⁷

It is to this ‘low status’ of History that I believe our focus should now turn. Even though the introduction of History as a compulsory school subject is still pending – if it has not totally dissipated – I do believe it is at a nexus which could possibly be utilised to address the broader dismal South African educational problem.

62. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team, 114.

63. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team, 123-129.

64. Report of the History Ministerial Task Team, 130-134.

65. Harris, ‘History “through the looking glass”’, 7.

66. M. Noor Davids, “‘Making History compulsory’: Politically Inspired or Pedagogically Justifiable?”, *Yesterday & Today*, 15 (July 2016) at <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2016/n15a5>; and Harris, ‘History “through the looking glass”’, 7-8.

67. L. Chisholm and M. Friedman, ‘South Africa Wants to Make History Compulsory at School, But is it doable?’, *Huffpost* at <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/staff-reporter/south-africa-wants-to-make-history-compulsory-at-school-but-can-it-a-23450247/>, accessed June 2018.

As noted above, four out of five learners cannot ‘read for meaning’ and the study of history could be instrumental in turning this around with its key emphasis on critical thinking. As C. Bertram points out, as History educators we need to focus more on the development of ‘cognitive skills of understanding and analysis’.⁶⁸ Also, as I have argued elsewhere, the skills of the historian’s craft include the ability to ‘read critically, analyse, select, collate and formulate logically’⁶⁹ – and it is to this ‘critical reading’ that we as historians and History educators must turn to address and develop this glaring weakness as regards reading for meaning within our student cohort.

Moreover, in a recent international study concerning the skills that the job market will require in the next decades for 300 diverse occupations, it was clear that there is an ever-increasing demand for ‘foundational skills’ such as critical thinking, reading comprehension, active listening and speaking. The study also indicated that the ‘least important skills include science programming and technology design’.⁷⁰ In other words, ‘soft skills’ will be most needed for human work.⁷¹ This view on critical reading is corroborated in a commentary on the ‘Myth of jobs that don’t exist yet’, indicating that educators would be ‘wise to invest in foundations of a good education, the soft skills of the liberal arts such as critical reading, communication, creativity and collaboration’.⁷² Furthermore, many studies indicate that the twenty-first century individual should be able to access information and critically evaluate and interpret it. What creates this obligation is the ‘information bombing and political and commercial perception management brought about by virtual networks, the media and globalization’.⁷³ Therefore, it is argued that ‘critical thinking and its sub-component, critical reading’, are becoming increasingly critical in a world where the individual needs to distinguish ‘right from wrong and the truth from propaganda in life and texts’.⁷⁴

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68. C. Bertram, ‘Knowledge, Pedagogy and Assessment in the Old and the New Further Education and Training History Curriculum Documents’, *Education as Change*, (December 2006), 36.
 69. K.L. Harris and R. van der Merwe, “‘What’s in the box?’ Archives, History Skills and Honours Students’, *Yesterday & Today*, 23 (July 2020), 30.
 70. T. Bates, ‘Humans Wanted: Online Learning and Skills Development’, 10 April 2018, available at <https://www.tonybates.ca/2018/04/10/humans-wanted-online-learning-and-skills-development/>, accessed June 2018.
 71. Bates, ‘Humans Wanted’.
 72. D. Newton, ‘Myth of Jobs that Don’t Exist Yet’, *Forbes Daily*, 2018, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereknewton/2018/12/28/the-myth-of-jobs-that-dont-exist-yet/?sh=5cc232ec70ec> accessed June 2023.
 73. S. Yildirim and Y Söylemez, ‘The Effect of Performing Reading Activities with Critical Reading Questions on Critical Thinking and Reading Skills’, *Asian Journal of Education and Training*, 4, 4 (2018), 326-335.
 74. Yildirim and Söylemez, ‘The Effect of Performing Reading Activities’, 326.

In 2022 the government introduced a ‘2030 Reading Panel’ which brings together respected experts and thought leaders to address the issue of ‘reading skills’ among South African children. Its express aim is to help meet the national goal of ensuring that by 2030, all children can ‘read for meaning’ by the age of 10 years.⁷⁵ But I do believe that as historians we need to lobby for our place in this space. Critical thinking and reading skills are thus of multiple importance and integral to what we as historians do. I now believe wholeheartedly that we need to embrace our subject as a ‘compulsory’ discipline and lobby for the support to empower the teaching of history to address the literacy and thinking crisis South African education faces. We need to emphasise these skills more than the content and teach history to develop reading for meaning!

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