

BLACK UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Universities Colleges which have hardly been in existence for more than a decade, with the exception of Fort Hare, are now autonomous. That is, they have been granted university status by parliamentary legislation. On the other hand white universities served much longer probation periods before being promoted to independent university status.

Was the time ripe for promotion of the Black colleges to University status or is the whole idea premature? Or is it perhaps because the turnover from the high schools is adequate (quantitatively and qualitatively) to feed the five independent universities? Perhaps there are other motives which led to the prevailing status of the Black universities.

Here it is perhaps advisable to give a bit of historical background. Immediately after the Nationalist Party came into power, it began to apply its apartheid policy to the universities. This went through two successive stages, first, separating White from Black. The Second, deviding Blacks into their respective ethnic groups.

Before implementing the first stage, the government appointed a three man commission to advise it regarding the provision of separte facilities for Blacks. This was in 1943. The commission consisted of Dr J.E. Holloway (Chairman) Secretary for Finance and former Professor from Pretoria University; Dr R.W. Wilcocks, Rector of Stellenbosch University and Dr E.G. Malherbe then the principal of Natal University.

After investigating the whole position in all its financial as well as education aspects, the Commission recommended, as a first step, that the two Black institutions, viz. Fort Hare and the Black Section of Natal, should be extended and developed into full-fledged institutions. In the meantime, in order to guarantee academic standards, Fort Hare was to continue its association with Rhodes University and the Black Section in Durban its association with Natal University.

As a second step, and only when the number of matriculants coming from high schools warranted it, another purely Black institution would be established in the Transvaal probably in association with either the University of Pretora or the Witwatersrand University. The commission considered that differentiation on ethnic lines was irrelevant at university level.

The Commission did not recommend that Blacks should be prohibited from attending the White Universities. There was to be academic freedom, i.e. Blacks could choose whether they wanted to attend at Black institutions or at White universities which were prepared to accept them.

The Commission report proved to be totally unacceptable to the government. The government therefore proceeded with legislation, (a) to prohibit Blacks from registering at White universities except by special ministerial consent and (b) to establish new colleges designed to cater for Blacks according to their ethnic origins. These colleges would submit students for examinations as external students of the University of South Africa.

All the legislative enactments regarding the higher education for Blacks were named University Extension Act. However, instead of extending the rights and powers of the universities it had the effect of limiting them. Consequently Black students lost the right to sit at the feet of teachers of their choice - a right which students of different nations have enjoyed for many years.

Again, by parliamentary legislation the Black colleges were turned into autonomous universities.

In spite of the term autonomous, according to the Act, the Minister not only appoints the University Council but also every member of the academic staff. Even the financial transactions e.g. a loan by this government - appointed Council, are subject to Ministerial control. Moreover, the Minister shall decide which Black students should attend the respective universities according to their ethnic origin. Thus Tribalism and not autonomy is the operative word.

Another feature is that each university has two councils - a White one and a Black one; and two Senates - a White one and a Black one. At the moment the White councils and Senates are in the saddle while the black ones are purely advisory. Presumably at one stage in the future the Black Councils and Senates will be in control with the White ones advisory.

Some of these universities e.g. Ngoye and Turfloop are situated in remote rural areas. Consequently they are far from the major African communities which are in urban areas, e.g. Soweto and Kwa-Mashu.

Another assumption underlying this obsession for promoting tribalism at university level is that those who go through these institutions should serve their ethnic group maximally. The question which we should ask ourselves is are they? We know that the value of education lies in promoting and preserving cultural aspects which that particular society treasures very much. Is the syllabus set in a manner which shall promote the pride and dignity of the Black people?

Concerning the Curriculum, at the moment behavioural Sciences are primarily concerned with Western culture with very little attention, if any, being paid to the Black culture. Hence it is not amazing that Black students qualifying in Social Science find it difficult to implement in Black society what they have gained at university.

Thus today it is our duty to explore and find means of making these institutions that we find ourselves relevant in promoting black consciousness.