

## **LMIP Policy Roundtable – PRETORIA, 17 February 2016**

### **Presentation by Viren Roopnarian**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

I would like to thank Dr Mutereko from UKZN and Prof Wedekind from the HSRC for inviting me to speak at today's conference.

My name is Viren Roopnarian and I am from the Paper Manufacturers Association of South Africa – commonly known as PAMSA. I have widespread experience in all areas of industry - my last position was at Group level being responsible for the recruitment, training, and appointment of chemical engineering graduates to suitable positions within the industry.

One of PAMSA's main roles is to promote education for our industry in order to ensure its long term sustainability and profitability. To this end I have been seconded by PAMSA to lecture at the Durban University of Technology in the Department of Chemical Engineering. I have to say that with this arrangement and more specifically because of my direct involvement with universities, there has been a remarkable improvement in the quality of graduates entering the industry, and graduates have managed to find employment with little difficulty.

#### **OPENING STATEMENT**

Unemployed graduates is a perennial problem - we read about this matter every year in the newspapers and everybody has an opinion on the best way to deal with the problem, but there has been very little progress in this regard. Another issue that is closely related to today's topic of discussion is the problem of high dropout rates of first year university students – I would also like to touch on this issue as well.

My views and recommendations seek to address both problems as they have similar origins and I know that by addressing one problem, it would have a positive impact on the other.

But before I even start off I would like to put one matter to rest – that of the quality of matriculants who enter universities.

#### **Quality of matriculants who enter Universities:**

There is never ending discussion about the quality of today's matriculants and their lack of readiness for university studies. These endless discussions lay the blame on the teachers (or the lack thereof), lack of facilities and textbooks, students attitude and their addiction to cellphones, and the list goes on.

It is common knowledge that the standard of the matric examination papers is lower than those of over 10 years ago. But the crux of the matter is that the drop in standard was to be expected because the HG exam papers and the SG exam papers were combined into one examination paper. Naturally the degree of difficulty had to drop in the new exam paper as this would enable a wider distribution of student marks. This is not necessarily a bad thing - statistically speaking if the results are plotted on a graph we would have a normal distribution resembling the Bell shaped curve.

Now if the standard of assessment was maintained at the very high levels as in the old HG exam papers, then there would be a skewed distribution of marks - my estimate is that the overwhelming majority of marks would lie in the region of 40 – 55%. Can you imagine how difficult it would be to shortlist applications for acceptance into university!

So it is best to leave the matric teachers and examiners alone and let them carry on with what they are doing.

*The solution to the problem of unemployed graduates lies within the university itself.*

### **Unemployed graduates: Causes**

Now getting back to the main purpose of today's meeting, I would like to start off by saying that the problem of unemployed graduates is only a symptom of a wider malaise that exists in our Higher education system; we must also realize that a problem cannot be solved by addressing the symptoms because it would only be a matter of time before the problem will surface again. It is therefore imperative that we get to the root cause of the problem so that we can remedy it once and for all.

From my knowledge and experience I have to say that this issue is not difficult and complex as it may seem – I believe that the solutions are there for all to see - all that is required is a change in mindset, a change in focus, and a change in strategy.

We have to move away from the practice of doing the same things year after year after year and expecting different results each time. Einstein's famous words come to mind.

A starting point would be for us to adopt a wholistic view of the situation - we must look at all the roleplayers in the recruitment process and all the factors that influence employment. The main roleplayers would be the Economy, the Employer, the Graduate, and the University.

**ECONOMY :** In a growing economy graduates will experience little difficulty in obtaining employment but when the economy stagnates then obviously finding employment becomes a very big challenge. I will not venture into this discussion as universities do not have direct influence over the economy. But it must be said that in the long term universities do have the ability to influence the direction and the strength of the economy, and this can only result in more jobs and better career prospects for graduates.

**STUDENT:** The second roleplayer is the student himself. Factors that matter are: ***Knowledge, Attitude, Communication skills, and Aptitude.***

I want to dwell on this point – does the student's aptitude match the job requirements? I say this because if the student's capability does not match the job requirements then he would not be successful even though he has the qualification.

My younger son attends DHS – that's the Durban Boys High School in Musgrave. This school is known internationally for excellence in academics and sport - all past pupils have gone on to succeed in their chosen careers. There are many good reasons as to why DHS learners are successful, but the one reason which stands out to me is that the school conducts psychometric tests on all Grade 8

pupils. These tests highlight the learner's natural strengths and potential, and learners are encouraged to take this into consideration when choosing subjects and careers.

My view is that universities should offer free psychometric testing when students register, so that students learn more about themselves, and can then use this information to make a more informed decision regarding choice of study. When a student's choice of career dovetails with his inner strengths and potential, then finding employment is the least of his worries – his biggest worry will be deciding what car to buy.

The last factor regarding student input is the effort put into ***Preparing for the interview.***

In my experience I have found that many graduates do not come fully prepared for the interview and have little idea as to what is required from them or what the career is all about. As an Employer I can attest to the importance of preparing for the interview - I will not employ someone who does not come fully prepared for the interview.

There are countless articles and journals available which give guidelines on how to prepare for interviews – all of which are good. Any graduate who is going for an interview would do well if he studies these articles and prepares thoroughly for the interview.

**EMPLOYER** The third roleplayer is the employer: Employers want the best persons to work for them. Qualities that Employers look for in candidates are: a ***Positive attitude, Good responses to questions which would indicate preparation, Ability to relate academic knowledge to the real world, Good academic record.***

Of course the very first thing that matters is to get invited to an interview; in almost every instance the Employer looks at the graduate's academic record before inviting him to an interview. So it is imperative for students to maintain a good academic record.

**UNIVERSITY:** The fourth roleplayer is the university – the main questions being what are the university's inputs which would determine whether a student succeeds in finding employment.

**The first factor in this regard would be the Lecturer - his approach to his job, the quality of his lectures, the quality of assessments, and his communication skills – does he communicate clearly in the language of instruction?**

As mentioned earlier a good academic record is the ticket that gets the student invited to the interview, and it is his display of knowledge and his ability to relate it to the real world, that will determine if he succeeds. This is where lecturers can play a crucial part in contributing to the graduate's academic performance - but sadly this is not happening. I find that little or no effort is made by universities to assist students academically most especially in the crucial and lifechanging first year of university study.

In fact very little or no attention is given to the job that lecturers are being paid to do, that is to teach! As a qualified educator and as a parent who pays university fees, it worries me that formal teaching, learning and assessment skills are virtually non-existent at universities.

The main cause of this situation is that it is a compulsory requirement by university management for all lecturers to pursue research - this requirement puts the lecturer under extreme pressure and has a negative impact on his ability to perform his job. It would really make more sense if the lecturer is compelled to master his didactic skills first, before he embarks on doing research.

My recommendations to improve knowledge transfer and the pass rate of first year students are as follows:

**The easiest solution** would be to raise the university entrance requirements, but this is not recommended as it is very simplistic and does not consider factors such as enrolment numbers or society's need for access to higher education.

**The best way to address this problem** is to focus on the most important staff member at the university: he is the lecturer who teaches first year students. He/she plays an enormous role in getting students to adapt to the academic demands and the social demands of university life. It is the lecturer's ability and attitude towards teaching that will determine the quality of learning and the pass rate of first year students.

The major part of the university's efforts must be focused on this all important individual in order for him to do his job well. He must be a formally qualified educator who is competent in the art and science of teaching first year students; he must be a specialized educator who has the ability to teach large student numbers. He must be able to assist students from all walks of life. He must be provided with assistants during lecture periods if he says that is what he needs. In fact the list is endless as to what can be done for him to achieve his goal of effective knowledge transfer and a high pass rate.

This unique individual must be well paid and must be spared from management pressure of doing research, as this will only divert his attention from his key performance areas and will lead to a drop in efficiency.

**My second recommendation is that all lecturers who teach second year subjects must have work experience** - this is very important as the lecturer will be able to relate the syllabus to the working situation. This will improve students understanding of the syllabus and its application in the real world; for this is what employers are looking for. I want to rephrase John Kennedy's famous quote and say "Ask not what the company can do for you; rather say what you can do for the company!"

The other important inputs by universities which influence success in the job market are:

- i) **Academic and extra curricular facilities which enhance students persona**
- ii) **Student support centres such as student counselling that assist students who are experiencing difficulties**
- iii) **Departmental structures that facilitate contact between students and employers**
- iv) **Allocation of resources – how well are resources being utilized** – are we allocating adequate resources to those areas that need it most? Or are we spending in areas that do not really count in the bigger scheme of things. Do structures that facilitate contact between employers and students receive adequate support in terms of staffing and budgets?

On this point I have observed that universities do not consider qualifications in business management when making management appointments. I find this very strange because University budgets run into hundreds of millions of rands of parents, sponsors and taxpayers monies, and we have to be sure that resources are utilized efficiently and effectively. It would make sense for management to have these qualifications as it would empower them to perform their duties more efficiently and more effectively.

I recommend that management staff members be encouraged to pursue these qualifications. In this way we can be certain that resources are allocated and utilized more effectively.

The benefits of this will be seen in gradual improvements in all areas of the university.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

I would like to conclude by briefly summarizing my views and recommendations:

1. My first recommendation is to introduce psychometric testing to all first year students. This will enable students to know more about their strengths and weaknesses, and they would then be able to make more informed decisions
2. Secondly ensure that all lecturers who teach first year students are qualified and competent in the field of education. This will result in more effective transfer of knowledge and which will result in a higher pass rate.
3. Number 3 - ensure that all lecturers who teach second year subjects have work experience. Students will be able to relate the syllabus with the working world – this will definitely improve their chances of landing a job.
4. The last recommendation is to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to the structures and the departments that facilitate contact with potential employers.

Thank you.

**VIREN ROOPNARIAN**

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