

Graduation Ceremony Speech

Quo Vadis the B.A. degree: Perceptions and visions ¹

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Today is a very special day for all the graduates assembled to have a B.A. degree conferred on them. It is a day on which to celebrate the reward for hard work and for realized dreams.

This is a very homogeneous group of people – in the sense that they will be receiving B.A. degrees, and for that reason it would be highly apposite to share some cherished thought and ideas about the B.A. degree.

I want to offer some kind of perspective on the often much-maligned B.A. degree – on what it is and what it is not, on what it means and what it does not mean, and I would like to look also at the B.A. graduate: who and what is this person and what can one expect of a B.A. graduate?

1. Preamble

A global perspective would be necessary at the outset, for at the end of the twentieth century we have become inevitably and irrevocably part of the global village, indeed, we have increasingly become part of the 'electronic cottage', and what is happening in this country is a spin-off also of global forces, albeit with a distinctly South African local flavour.

We are living in exciting times – although many people would perhaps prefer to exchange excitement for stability and security. The age in which we find ourselves is described by some historians as the post-industrial age. In his book *The Third Wave* (1980) Alvin Toffler (of *Future Shock* fame) says that "a new

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civilization is emerging in our lives ... it brings with it new family styles; changed ways of working, loving and living; a new economy; new political conflicts; and beyond all this an altered consciousness as well" (1980:23). He goes on to say that

Humanity faces a quantum leap forward. It faces the deepest social upheaval and creative restructuring of all time ... the emergent civilization writes a new code of behaviour for us and carries us beyond standardization, synchronization and centralization, beyond the concentration of energy, money and power (1980:23-24).

This is said of the whole world out there, and in South Africa this is made immeasurably more complex by other forces at work too.

In the movement of the world away from the Second Wave, or the industrial era, Toffler sees mankind as suffering a battering at the hands of a giant wave of *change*, for in the transition of one wave of civilization to the other there are colliding waves of *change*, and the challenge of the times lies in how successfully we are going to ride and crest the wave. We have gone beyond the industrial revolution, we are living in the centre of the electronic revolution, and we are experiencing, as an unavoidable concomitant of all this, a social revolution the like of which we have not seen in the world and then more particularly in this country. All this represents profound change.

The theme of my story is indeed *change*.

Who is going to be responsible for effecting and monitoring, for managing this change? What should the individuals look like who are going to be responsible?

The responsibility for change ultimately and unavoidably lies with us, and our children – we have to accept the challenge and run with it. We have, through a creative engagement with the forces at work in society to work towards the reconstitution, ultimately, of civilization itself – we have a destiny to co-constitute. God gave mankind a sacred mandate, the cultural mandate to subdue the earth and be a steward over it, and in the complex, dangerous and exciting world in which we live, I would like to suggest that the qualities that we would like to associate with a good B.A. graduate are indeed the qualities needed in the world ahead of us. A B.A. graduate is uniquely positioned to accept the challenge and to engage with it creatively. The people who are going to be makers and creators and survivors in the decades ahead are going to have open minds, to be critical thinking, are going, in the specific South African situation, to have a real sense of history, of cultural and social understanding and perspective, and are going, in the final analysis, to have a real sense of vision based on understanding and acceptance of the world and the forces operative in it.

2. The university and the Baccalaureus Artium

Bobby Godsell (of Anglo-American), at a seminar on the employability of B.A. graduates held at the HSRC's Centre for Science Development on 18 and 19 February 1993, referred to 'the university' in its present guise as a feudal institution. He did not mean by this that the university as a system has lost its relevance, but that the university has a special task, which is to provide creative education to students in order to equip them to be able to face the hazardous (in every sense of the word) world in which we live. He stressed that no degree in itself offered a guarantee of employment – a degree (and in this instance then the B.A. degree) simply offers one a basis on which to build for life (but more about this later). Students attending a university are indeed highly privileged, because at a university one can share in the true community of the intellect, a privilege not available to many.

In his important social critique of America, Allan Bloom states, towards the end of the book *The Closing of the American Mind*, that "Our problems are so great and their sources so deep that to understand them we need *philosophy* more than ever" (1987:382), and he states unequivocally that

Human nature, it seems, remains the same in our very altered circumstances, because we still face the same problems, if in different guises, and have the distinctly human need to solve them, even though our awareness and forces have become enfeebled (1987:380).

It is my unshakeable conviction that a good B.A. graduate will be able to help solve the kind of fundamental and pervasive problems referred to above. I firmly believe, also, that it is precisely through what one learns as part of the B.A. that one's awareness and forces will gain new vigour, and one will be able to shake off the enfeeblement Bloom warns about. In a world in which the natural sciences have become the acme of aspiration, and in which people tend to regard only the natural sciences as important or capable of problem-solving, the humanities have paradoxically (inevitably?) become more indispensable than ever. Two of the most powerful fields in contemporary natural scientific endeavour are biotechnology and micro-electronics, or computerization. The former has such frightening potential that urgent questions about ethical considerations are being asked, while the latter, the increasing insistence on computerization, has the most shattering potential for dehumanization that the world has known. Surely it goes without saying that fields such as these need the philosophical, ethical and psychological underpinnings to be offered by the humanities, to say nothing of the communication skills that are a concomitant of them.

The humanities explore and express what it means to be *human*, and when we are considering what we need to know in order to act effectively, it is to

our own peril if we ignore or devalue *a whole range of ways of analysing, understanding and describing such actions*. For a scientist or a businessperson to dismiss or devalue the humanities is as self-limiting – foolishly and unnecessarily self-limiting – as for a scholar in the humanities to disdain the operations of natural science, or of commerce and industry (Cartwright, 1993:3).

In the quotation above certain assumptions are made about the humanities, and the most important of these is the fact that the humanities do research on and give expression to what it means to be human in the most profound sense of the word – and some ways of doing this are given.

The centrally important issue in education in the humanities is that the first and crucial concern is that this training is a developmental process and not merely a matter of mastering factual content. The good humanities scholar develops *key skills* which make a different person of him or her. The key skills include openness of mind, an ability to think logically and analytically, an ability to think laterally and creatively, an ability to interpret and synthesize and above all good communication skills. These enable the humanities scholar to turn learning into a lifelong process of creative engagement with reality, to make of learning an essentially holistic activity. These key skills, which make up the core of a good B.A., enable the student of the humanities to cope with a world in which new knowledge accumulates at a breathtaking pace (and existing knowledge becomes redundant as quickly), to integrate whole new systems of knowledge, because the *modus operandi* for doing this has become part of the intellectual equipment of the person, because the right kind of mindset has been developed. The stress is therefore almost entirely on the process and not on the product of learning or course content. John Cartwright of the University Cape Town maintains that the different languages or discourses of the world (and there are as many languages or discourses as there are fields of human endeavour) can be understood and manipulated by a good training in the humanities, so that a student will be empowered for the rest of his life to be part of the world at a level of creative engagement with reality – this once again underlines that this kind training deals with the *how*, and not as in many ‘content’ courses, the *what*.

Education in the humanities depends centrally on argument – and not argument simply about ‘facts’ but about the framework of assumptions itself which directs us and regard one set of possibilities as facts, some as probable, and others not (Cartwright, 1993:4).

3. Employability

At the seminar on the employability of B.A. graduates referred to above, Bobby Godsell of Anglo-American made the crucially important remark that people's

aspirations about the job market are shaped by perceptions of feudal professions – the idea that there is a whole neat little row of jobs and that people will, on completion of a particular course of study, slot neatly into one of these. Nothing could be further from the truth, especially in view of the historical juncture at which we find ourselves. It is perhaps on the one hand daunting and on the other hand challenging to remember that most of the jobs which will exist by the end of the twentieth century have not been invented yet – Godsell makes the point most emphatically that education is a matter of *how* to learn (not primarily *what* to learn), and working is a matter of *how* to do, not primarily *what* to do. In a paper by Colin Gardner of Natal University the positive challenge of this situation is underscored when he says that to see the world of work as a matter of one person specifically trained for one job is cripplingly inadequate, philosophically, psychologically and politically, because it presupposes a world that is both static and mechanistic, it implies that situations do not change and that human beings are at their most efficient when they have been moulded and programmed. The view leaves no space for human consciousness, self-awareness or creativity, the very qualities most prized in humanities graduates. In line with this, it is thus suggested by people in industry that B.A.'s are very valuable in the very sense that a good B.A. graduate is above all trainable and retrainable, and can move with change. This is borne out by the fact that many large companies appoint humanities graduates in important management positions precisely because they are capable of thinking laterally, of making creative interpretations and coming up with novel and innovative solutions. It is illuminating to see that Anglo-American's Clem Sunter, who has become known as Mr. Future Scenario, is a humanities graduate, with a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. His scenario-building for the country rests on the premise that 'The future is not what it used to be' – it used to be fairly stable and predictable, but in line with what I said at the beginning, it has steadily become less so, and it needs daring, innovation, perceptiveness and a fundamental understanding of people and political, economic and social processes to be able to do this. In the future it is less and less going to be a matter of the formal sector being able to absorb job-seekers – the emphasis is going to be on finding and above all creating jobs – and while daunting, this is also exciting, stimulating and ultimately liberating.

In a research project undertaken by the Law Faculty of Natal University (Pietermaritzburg) and which can be fruitfully applied to any field in the humanities, it was found that perceptions about what constituted certain jobs could vary a great deal – ranging from students to lecturers to employers. In a questionnaire to students and potential employers, the employers were asked

- * what qualities would be most desirable in potential articled clerks and other employees; and
- * what they really found in people they appointed,

while students were asked

- * what they would regard as the most important qualities of an employee; and
- * what qualities were really found in these students.

In a very brief résumé of some of the findings, it emerged that where students chiefly rated things like knowledge of the subject content, level of motivation and apposite conduct very highly, the skills looked for by employers were more things like leadership and management skills, the ability to apply knowledge, communication skills, the acceptance of high standards, and a realistic perception of one's real place in the organization.

So where does this leave the B.A. graduate?

It has been suggested most emphatically that a job should not necessarily emanate from the main subject content of a student's degree, but perhaps rather from the whole array of perhaps even secondary skills that the student has acquired, and in this sense it has been stressed that a student who has come into contact with a wide range of reading and skills is well-equipped for any task. Such a student will perhaps in addition to having studied languages for their communicative and generally formative value, also have studied information studies and computer studies, with a view to making the optimal use of his abilities. A student in any other field would do well to polish his or her communicative skills, and to become involved in student activities too – employers stress that students who have been involved in organized student life and in committee work are highly regarded in that they have already shown their ability at some practical enterprise. Prospective employers also strongly advise students to try to do vacation or part-time work – with the stress not necessarily on the *kind* of work, but the *fact* of work, the proving to a potential employer that you are willing to get out there and do something.

Colin Gardner has summed this up in the following terms:

"To be a really good employee (or employer) in transitional South Africa a person needs considerable stores of understanding, tolerance, moral insight and imagination" (Gardner, 1993:5) – a view further strengthened by Cartwright (1993:5), when he says of qualities like the above that they are applicable in a wide variety of work and career situations, and, "unlike the skills provided by specifically vocational training, they do not go out of date".

4. A responsible work ethic

Now we have outlined this mythical beast, the fully-rounded, creative-thinking, coping, communicating B.A. graduate. It would be a wonderful feeling to leave

the University and be this creature that employers would give their eyeteeth for, but there is more to it, and that is the question of pride and self-respect, because those are the qualities which would encase the skills above in the kind of setting that would sell them. One has to develop this sense of pride in one's work, one's sense of responsibility – and have respect for the self and for others (in line with the love commandment). Employers do say that they would love having people with these skills to work for them, but the bottom line is that people then really have to produce, to do this. Skills that are claimed have to be demonstrated in action, and honed to ever greater effectiveness, if not perfection. Our country, with its special kind of agonies, needs all the humanities graduates that it can get, but nobody is going to queue up and implore you to come and work for them (there are far too many people out there clamouring to get in, anyway). The key lies in exploring possibilities, looking into every prospect, creatively engaging with opportunities, and grasping the future, making oneself indispensable in whatever circle of work one finds. The message therefore is – go out and create work. The door is not locked, open it and enter into the exciting, real world out there. Do not allow the B.A. to stand for Blow All – it does mean a lot. Do not let it stand for Bad Attitude – demonstrate that the B.A. graduate is a hard worker, but more importantly a coper. Let it stand finally for *Baccalaureus Artium*, the choice that you opted for on coming to university, and be proud of a qualification which engages with reality at the most immediate and also the most profound level. The humanities graduate is uniquely positioned to serve humanity and to fulfil his or her vocation within the larger scheme of things.

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