

# South African Union Of Students (SAUS)

## Document Three

### *Policy Paper On Curriculum Change, Research & Academic Matters*

---

#### **Introduction**

As students it is important that we have a say in what we are taught and how we are taught, as education is an important sphere through which ideology is transmitted in society. Apartheid produced a system of higher education in which curricula, research and teaching were fashioned to produce graduates for a labour market that was rigidly segregated by race and gender. Critical thinking was not generally encouraged, and discipline-specific learning and teaching ruled. Specific forms of knowledge were also produced to bolster apartheid ideology and history. And methods of learning and teaching were extremely authoritarian and hierarchical, with the teacher holding all power in the learning relationship.

The little research that has been done on the nature of curriculum change in post-apartheid South Africa shows how such transformation has been directed by market imperatives as the logic of neoliberalism has come to shape higher learning. As government has adopted the Growth, Employment And Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) and argued that the best way to meet 'the development needs' of the country is to promote an export-driven, globally competitive economy, communities have never become the driving force of curriculum change and the needs of this economy have begun to be prioritised. In this context, science and technology have been prioritised over the humanities, and research funding has come to prioritise the needs of South Africa becoming a globally competitive economy.

Subsidy cuts to institutions have also resulted in academic departments needing to be run as businesses and generating their own income, leading to the restructuring of curricula according to the interests of those who are able to fund academic programmes, usually big business. Over the last few years, our campuses have become littered with the names of big corporations as private capital has flowed in for the establishment of various academic programmes. As this has happened, a language of 'multi-skilling' and 'responsiveness to global trends' has seeped into the discourse around curriculum change, even our own. While as students we might value the pursuit of interdisciplinary study and knowledge production, we cannot adopt the language of big business that seeks to make young people sources of cheap labour by 'multi-skilling' them. In the world of big business, 'multi-skilling' is a well-known way of exploiting people by paying them the salary of one person for doing the jobs of many. As students we need to be careful about how we describe our positions on curriculum change that seeks to bring different disciplines together and to offer students a

rich and varied learning experience as opposed to an experience of frustration at having to do too much for too little.

In the context of the growing naturalisation of the logic of the market, the 'academic freedom' to learn, think and teach independently has come under threat. As curriculum change has happened according to the needs of the market, students are faced with participating in this debate from the position of wanting to learn in an independent and critical environment, but at the same time wanting to be employable on graduation and/or able to contribute in a socially significant manner to the development of the country. SAUS is faced with the challenge of facilitating a process around curriculum change that will speak to the need for the continued production of critically thinking, astute graduates knowledgeable in a range of fields who are able to contribute to the development of the country in some way on graduation, preferably through paid employment.

This paper is a start at developing a policy position for SAUS on curriculum change, research and academic matters that speaks to the above concerns. As it is a beginning, and because it aims to bring various groups together and develop productive networks in the sector, it both outlines SAUS' existing approaches to the subject and proposes areas for further research and development to be left to the research and policy unit to further refine.

### **'Development Needs' - In The Interests Of Big Business Or Poor Communities?**

To say that we are wanting to change curricula in the interests of 'the development needs' of the country is meaningless today when we consider that communities speak about their basic needs as 'development needs' and big business and government speak about their export-orientated macro-economic framework as meeting the 'development needs' of the country. As SAUS we need to clarify for ourselves what we see as the priorities for a developmental strategy.

Historically, SAU-SRC and SATSU have prioritised the interests of communities and the need to understand 'development needs' from the standpoint of the poor rather than from the position of big business. Today, government argues that it is only through a neoliberal macro-economic approach that the needs of the poor can be met. SAUS needs to debate its position on government's approach in an informed manner that speaks to the direct effects of government's strategy for higher education and for students. The research and policy unit should be tasked with facilitating this debate.

### **The National Skills Development Strategy**

In trying to ensure that graduates are employed, SAUS should engage with this national strategy in an attempt to fashion curricula to meet the skills needs of the country. Any research into the skills needs of the country must, however, also explore the reasons for the continued unemployment of large numbers of

graduates. A key strategy to addressing this problem could be the creation of learnerships through partnerships between academic programmes and civil society and big business. The research and policy unit should dedicate some time to exploring the possibilities opened up by this already existing national strategy for new ways of thinking about curriculum change.

### **Community Service/Engagement**

In transforming curricula, research programmes, and methods of learning and teaching, SAUS prioritises the interests of communities. What does this mean in concrete terms, however? The research and policy unit needs to spend some time conceptualising how community service/engagement could be integrated into curricula, and what SAUS means when it states that students should be responsible and responsive to communities.

There are various options for how SAUS could conceptualise community service/engagement, dependent on our understanding of the various other aspects of our role and work e.g. the way we choose to frame free education. Any discussion or debate about community service/engagement needs to take place in the context of SAUS' broader perspective on higher education being resolved. A possible start to this discussion could be whether we choose to use the term 'service' or 'engagement' to describe the relationship between students and communities. It has been argued that while 'service' denotes a hierarchical relationship in which students are subordinate and subservient to communities, 'engagement' implies a more equal form of relation. Such debates need to be engaged to elaborate a definition for SAUS of our relationship with communities.

It is also proposed that the research and policy unit explore the successes and failures of the experience of compulsory community service in the field of medicine as a case study through which the bigger issue may be explored.

### **What About Critical Thinking?**

There has been no real attempt at transforming curricula, and methods of learning and teaching to encourage critical thinking amongst learners as opposed to the rote learning that characterised apartheid learning and teaching. Learners also occupy a subordinate role to teachers, and there is little space for critical engagement with the content matter of courses, making little room for innovation and creativity. Curricula and methods of learning and teaching need to begin encouraging critical thinking and experimentation with ideas outside of the authoritarian culture inculcated by apartheid. The research and policy unit should facilitate the exploration of this matter together with progressive academics, who have also often been prevented from introducing new approaches in the classroom.

## **Interdisciplinary Approaches To Learning & Teaching**

In the interests of producing graduates and knowledge that are able to grapple with the complex problems of society today, problems which originate in a number of different ways and which open themselves up to different forms of analysis by different disciplines, it is important that interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production and learning are explored. SAUS needs to conduct research into this that is able to distinguish between approaches that do indeed seek to build interdisciplinary practices and those that tend to use the discourse of interdisciplinary study to argue for the production of 'multi-skilled' graduates who are able to perform the jobs of many for the price of one person. While interdisciplinary approaches are certainly important for the holistic development of the student and for the production of holistic solutions to problems, they should not be used as a way of making the student a form of cheap labour.

Some concrete proposals to consider as a start to developing such an approach are:

- to integrate a subject from the humanities into all non-humanities courses;
- to bring together academics and students in the discussion of ways of approaching interdisciplinary learning and teaching.

## **Making Curricula Speak To The Problems Of Secondary Education**

SAUS is supportive of curricula making central to their aims the success of disadvantaged students by incorporating ways of addressing the inadequacies of the secondary education system. SAUS should actively foster partnerships with academics to explore the possibilities for enhancing the quality of secondary school curricula and teaching, and for integrating into existing tertiary education curricula means to address any learning difficulties and backlogs that students from disadvantaged schools might face. The research and policy unit should investigate possibilities and developments in this regard.

## **(Re)Making Histories**

There is a lot that still needs to be done in documenting the histories of the oppressed in South Africa, and in recording the histories that are currently being made. SAUS should consider tasking the research and policy unit to begin documenting the history of student struggle and organising in South Africa. A living history project could be set up under SAUS through which students are capacitated and resourced to write up the history of student struggle in South Africa. This is a project through which students could potentially come together with past student leaders, academics and activists in the shaping of a new way of documenting history.

## **Research**

The research and policy unit needs to conduct studies on the nature of research funding in the higher education sector as well as the content of research

programmes. SAUS needs to develop an understanding of and approach to the issue of research in the higher education sector.

### **Towards The Concept Of Knowledge Communities - A 'People-Driven' Strategy**

In trying to take forward the discussion about curriculum change, research and academic matters, it is important for students to come together with academics who have much more experience and skill in this regard. However, this skill and expertise should not be allowed to give academics greater power in the decisions made around what is taught and how it is taught. Instead, communities of learners and teachers need to be encouraged in which the needs and views of learners are able to come into contact and engagement with the knowledge, skills, expertise and views of teachers to produce holistic solutions to the problems still remaining from apartheid. SAUS should play a proactive role in facilitating such meetings.

SAUS should also try to open up spaces for such discussions to other stakeholders, such as workers and community members. If the needs of the poor are to be considered in the transformation of curricula, then the voices of the poor surely need to become part of these discussions. SAUS supports the development of knowledge communities, that is, spaces in which various stakeholders come together in the remaking of curricula and approaches to research, learning and teaching.