

Message

from the IKMD Executive Manager

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The changing world of academics in the knowledge economy

Academic environments, such as research institutions and institutions of higher learning, are changing both rapidly and gradually depending on which area of the globe these are situated. This change is bringing about a whole range of questions and issues around traditional cultures that are embraced in these institutions. These relate to the winds of transition from a post-industrial society to a knowledge society.

The change agents are described as being knowledge production and utilisation as crucial pillars of the knowledge economy. These changes are creeping into the academic environments of South Africa, and they are either silent or ignored, or escape notice entirely because of their insignificant impact currently.

If the latter is correct, is there a need to even bother about considering the change? Will these changes remain insignificant forever? Do they need attention anyway? These questions cannot be answered here, as they are broader than the scope of this Newsletter.

Although these issues are many, only a few are highlighted here. These are: diminishing protection of autonomy research and tertiary institutions, university vs. centres of excellence, university vs. multiversity, permanent vs. contract employment (casualisation of academics) legitimizing knowledge vs. democratizing knowledge, science vs. technology, science knowledge vs. public knowledge. The list is long and endless.

The question that is posed here is this: Have we (South African Academics, General Public, Government and Industry) seen these changes and issues around us? I would take a bold step and say **YES** we have seen these issues around us and I will attempt to show why I think this is so.

Diminishing Protection of Autonomy of Research and Academic Institutions

Research and tertiary institutions are no longer accountable to themselves. The social and economic impacts of these institutions are questioned everyday. People such as students, graduates and from the industry have questioned the relevance of knowledge imparted by universities to the necessary skills for the industry and job market.

Research institutions have been questioned around the social impact of the research they produce. How does this research translate in aiding the alleviation of poverty, economic growth and many other social and health problems? These questions seem to be increasing everyday. Therefore, is this not a sign that the autonomy for these institutions is diminishing as well?

University vs Multiversity

The country has three kinds of universities, implying multiversity. The restructuring of the higher education sector in South Africa has led to: Traditional Universities as in the Mode 1 theory, Universities of Technology and the Comprehensive Universities in the Mode 2 theory. There is also a growing trend of the Virtual University as part of Mode 2 theory.

Contract vs Permanent Employment

More and more of the employees in research and tertiary institutions are employed on contract, something referred to as *the casualisation of academic labour*. This has led to diminishing of continuity and stability within these environments. Is this casualisation of academic labour going to be a trend in the knowledge economy? And what are the implications?

Legitimatising Knowledge Production vs Democratising Knowledge Production

People have often questioned the integrity and legitimacy of knowledge produced within the science institutions on various issues around health in particular. These debates in the country usually take the form of radio talk shows or other group discussion forums. There has been a sense of tension or conflict around legitimising traditional knowledge. There are strong signals towards democratising knowledge which means that everybody has the ability to produce knowledge, and free access to information and knowledge should be available.

Science vs Technology

In the Mode 1 theory, science would be considered ahead of technology but in Mode 2 theory technology is ahead of science. This cannot be simply stated as in this paper, but is posed as such for argumentation and debate.

In conclusion

Without arguing and debating these issues I suggest that the knowledge economy needs some changes in producing and legitimising knowledge. Some people in the country, from the scientific world as well as the general public have come up with amazing innovations. This means what is important in the knowledge economy is knowledge that is leading to innovation and not the legitimacy of knowledge as such.

References

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