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Don't kid yourself about BAs

Jonathan Jansen: "So what's the difference between a BA degree and a large pizza?" one of my student leaders recently asked a large group of parents inquiring about sending their child to university. "A large pizza can feed a family of four," she joked. I laughed, then cried.

Laughed, because of the obvious wit of the comparison. Cried, because this is one of the most misleading pieces of information about BAs in South Africa today.

It was not that I had not overheard "BA jokes". At my previous university, there was rampant talk among female students of a "BA man-soek" specialisation (BA find-a-husband). After all, what other reason could you have for doing a BA than to prowl the campus for a life mate?

Sadly, many parents buy into this myth about the uselessness of a BA. The actuarial science degree gets you a specific job, as do degrees in marketing, optometry or accountancy. With this common-sense, though often wrong understanding of a degree, parents guide their children away from a BA towards "something more practical" or "something that can get you a job".

The truth is I have seen as many BA students get good jobs as I have seen BComm Accounting students without jobs. In fact, I would argue that a BA from a good university is likelier to get you different kinds of jobs - not a bad option in an economic recession - than a single-career job that comes with a degree in physiotherapy or in law.

Why is that? A good BA qualification from a good university would have taught you generic competencies seldom learnt in narrow occupational degrees. A good BA would have given you the foundations of learning across disciplines like sociology, psychology, politics, anthropology and languages. A good BA would have given you access to critical thinking skills, appreciation of literature, understanding of cultures, the uses of power, the mysteries of the mind, the organisation of societies, the complexities of leadership, the art of communication and the problem of change. A good BA would have taught you something about the human condition, and so something about yourself. In short, a good BA degree would have given you a solid education that forms the basis for workplace training.

The head of Johannesburg's Stock Exchange, a gentle man called Russell Loubser, taught me a valuable lesson the other day. I was talking to this astute businessman about the training function of universities when he gently chided me, the education man, with timeless wisdom. "No professor," he said, "you educate them. I train them."

This is where the American colleges get it right when they talk about a liberal arts education in the undergraduate years. There is more than enough time for the occupational training that comes later and is best done in the workplace.

What we fail to do at South African universities is educate young minds broadly in ethics, values, reasoning, appreciation, problem solving, argumentation and logic. Locked into single-discipline thinking, our young people fail to learn that the most complex social and human problems cannot be solved except through interdisciplinary thinking that crosses these disciplinary boundaries.

Anyone who thought HIV/Aids was simply an immunological problem is the victim of the kind of narrow training restricted to the biomedical sciences. The syndrome is as much a sociological, economic, political and cultural problem as it might be a problem of virology. Do not get me wrong: HIV causes Aids, period. What I am arguing is that its resolution will take more than an injection, and that is the broader value that a BA degree can offer a well-educated youngster.

So the next time you hear people make jokes about a worthless BA degree, tell them about Bobby Godsell (the BA graduate who served as the CEO of AngloGold Ashanti), Vincent Maphai (the BA graduate who rose to serve as chairman of BHP Billiton), Clem Sunter (the famous scenario planner and former chairman of the Anglo American Chairman's Fund), Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (the former deputy president of South Africa) or Saki Macozoma (the chairman of Stanlib and Liberty Life).

The list of highly successful graduates with BAs, or equivalent degrees, is endless.

Then go out and buy your family a large pizza.