

What's education good for?

WITH age, it is often said quite glibly, comes wisdom. Part of this is the notion that the older one gets the more conservative and pragmatic you become.

There is, certainly, evidence to support this claim, but there are too many other social, geographical and historical variables that have to be taken into account.

In my middle age I have, nonetheless, discovered that I have a conservative tendency – alongside a distaste for colour and gimmicks in newspapers. I cling to the belief that good journalism and good writing sells newspapers, not free handouts or colour splashes.

I am probably very wrong.

We can set that aside, for now. This new conservative tendency I discovered is an almost blind faith in education as a means of emancipation, prosperity and general well-being.

I cling to the belief that the battle to get to an educational institution is as noble as actually learning to write, reading books, studying concepts and methods, contesting ideas and, of course, preparing oneself for examination or some sort of test to evaluate or measure progress in learning. Put another way, there seems to be something deeply contradictory about battling to get into university, and then doing everything possible to avoid reading, writing essays and preparing for exams.

It's like a chronically ill person going to hospital and then destroying the hospital because the pain will not go away. It really does not make sense.

This unflinching belief in education contradicts so much evidence to the contrary, least of

Economics and Reality



Ismail Lagardien

all the disastrous failures of some of the Enlightenment's promises. Without simplifying it too much, two of the cornerstone ideas of the Enlightenment of the mid-17th century stand out.

One was that formal methods of teaching and learning, and research would, somehow, liberate the world, and shift us all away from authoritarianism and religious fundamentalist social structures, among others. The other was that through commerce people would become interdependent, and moral and physical passions would be suppressed.

This latter point was made in a guide for business people, *Le Parfait Negociant*, published in 1675.

In short, and arguably quite selective but no less valid, the Enlightenment promised that if we educated ourselves, and traded goods and services, the world would be a safer and better place for all of us. That was before the horrors of the 20th century's wars, the Holocaust, genocides, ethnic cleansing, successive financial crises, poverty, unemployment, food scarcity, conflict, the growth of inequality and the destruction of our natural environment.

So much for the Enlightenment's promise of peace and prosperity through commerce and education. Where am I going with this?

One of the most startling outcomes of recent politics has been a type of celebration of ignorance and of mediocrity. This celebration is matched by anti-intellectualism among respected public figures who speak disparagingly about "clever blacks", who suggest that there is nothing to be gained from going to university and make statements that research is bunk.



TOP MAN: SABC chief operating officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng

Now add to this the dominant view that one has to be "economically relevant" to clothe, feed and house oneself. Economic irrelevance refers to the belief that there are people who produce goods that nobody wants and

consume what they themselves don't produce.

Let me try to state this in crisper terms. There is a growing belief that education, especially higher learning, is unnecessary, that, as Hlaudi Motsoeneng would have us believe, being intelligent runs in the blood and trumps actual learning, that schools have to be burnt down and that we live in a society which tells people they are "economically irrelevant" for being unproductive consumers.

This is all very hard to digest. As a teenager, before I had to force my way back to education over and over again, I worked on a construction site, as a stevedore, in a car wash and sold things.

By the time I did, actually, make it to the London School of Economics and after I failed my very first exam, I had only one objective during that bitterly cold winter of canned soup, baked beans on toast and pasta, and sleeping on a minky mattress in a grim North London room. It was to not blame anyone and go back to the books, read and write.

I did not work hard because I wanted a better job. I knew that I had an opportunity to emancipate myself from terrible ideas, false beliefs, myths, mysticism and mediocrity.

I came to see education as an exploration of an infinite and complex world, while remaining open to self-criticism and development. One should, of course, not generalise from personal experience.

I did mention, at the outset, that this was a conservative tendency that I had. What I would say about South African politics is this: our drift from education will destroy not just our economy, but our very humanity.

As libraries burn in our country, I am reminded that the burning of books in Chile during the 1970s and Germany during the 1930s led to unspeakable violence, cruelty and fascism. Part of me thinks that we can prevent this slide.

Dr Ismail Lagardien is executive dean of business and economics at NMMU.