

Dialogue Needed On Unam Debt Problem

THE ISSUE of the repayment of debts by Unam students has, through coverage in the press (The Namibian, September 27), quite rightly become one of national rather than Unam-internal concern. I do not wish to take sides and 'condemn', as is sadly the verb by default for any statement of opposition in current discourse in Namibia, either Unam management or organisations representing student interests in this matter.

I do, however, feel that before the mindset of confrontation becomes ineradicable and that of constructive engagement unattainable, we should give consideration to all possible solutions to what is, after all, a highly problematical issue.

Tertiary education is costly. It is also vital for the development of the country. Crucially, students - the clients - are generally not in a position to pay for the services they require, and which the country requires them to receive, precisely because they do not yet have the qualifications which will allow them to generate the necessary funds.

These three factors in conjunction constitute a dilemma ("There's a hole in my bucket, dear Lisa ...") on the horns of which the country can only

suffer damage.

One possible response is to say that since students can't afford to pay, they should not be required to do so.

Another is that since students stand to benefit from the education they receive, they should indeed be required to pay. A third is that students should pay - later.

I submit that this third option should be explored in Namibia, as indeed it has been elsewhere (eg Australia).

In essence, the state would fund tuition fees, books and basic living expenses, subject to the successful completion of previous years of study.

Once a graduate earns more than the national average (not a very significant amount in Namibia), he or she would be subject to additional taxation until such time as the study debts had been worked off.

I feel that such a system would be just in that it would not burden students with debts at a time when they are least able to pay, but would nevertheless require a contribution from them when the benefits they have already received translate into financial gain.

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