



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

**ADDRESS : NADEOSA 10TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE,
COCKTAIL & DINNER AND COURSEWARE AWARDS FUNCTION¹**

Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

There is general consensus continentally and internationally, that the acquisition of knowledge is the basis for sound socio-economic development. Initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals adopted at the Lusaka Summit in 2001 and NEPAD, support and promote the importance of education in growth and development, with international consensus on education for all by 2015.

Yet it is in the area of tertiary education that there is a growing interest and investigation of the role that it can play in providing much needed access, and as a vehicle for “catching-up” and maximising Africa’s growth potential. In 1999 UNESCO and the World Bank brought together experts from 13 countries and created a task force to examine tertiary education in developing countries. The Task Force report entitled *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* argued the importance of higher education in a knowledge economy, stating:

The quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions and its availability to the wider economy, is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness.²

¹ Keynote address delivered by professor N Barney Pitso at the CSIR Tshwane, on the occasion of the NADEOS 10th Anniversary Conference, Cocktail& Dinner and Courseware Awards.

² THFHE (2000) in Higher Education and Development in Africa. David Bloom, David Canning and Kevin Chan. Harvard University. 2005. Pg 11

Higher education, including Distance Education is also a crucial rite of passage in the development of citizens. That is where character is formed, identities shaped and lasting friendships made. Higher education also promotes independence of thought, which is vital to a healthy democracy.

In a subsequent draft paper entitled *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New challenges for tertiary institutions*, Volumes I and II, the World Bank asserts:

Through the transmission of democratic values and cultural norms, tertiary education contributes to the promotion of civic behaviours, nation building, and social cohesion. This, in turn, supports the construction or strengthening of social capital, generally understood as the benefits of membership in a social network that can provide access to resources, guarantee accountability and serve as a safety net in times of crisis... Tertiary education can also play a crucial role in promoting social mobility. It is important to provide adequate and equitable tertiary education so that the entire citizenry can maximise its participation at all levels, creating new education opportunities for all groups in society, especially the poor..... In terms of public social benefits, tertiary education promotes nation-building through greater social cohesion, trust in social institutions, democratic participation and open debate, and appreciation of diversity (gender, ethnicity, religion or social class differences)... There are also strong social service benefits associated with improved health behaviours and outcomes.³

With that in mind, we need to place African Higher Education in context. Currently, Higher Education in Africa has less than a 45% participation rate and less than 2% in some developing countries. Enrolment rates in Sub-Saharan Africa are by far the lowest in the world; up from just 1% in 1965⁴ to a current 5%⁵. The present enrolment rate is the same as that of other developing regions 40 years ago. Moreover, gender disparities have traditionally been wide and remain so.⁶ South Africa's participation rate in higher education is 17%, and the aim is to reach a target of 20% by 2010. Compared to participation rates of over 60% in developed countries, African figures are dismal. In addition, Africa has to deal with an almost irreversible brain drain and a scientific revolution and digital divide that have left Africa at a competitive disadvantage. Quite frankly, the amount needed for new investment in

³ World Bank (2001a and 2001b) paper on *Constructing Knowledge Societies – New challenges for tertiary education*

⁴ The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (TFHE) (2000): *Higher Education in developing countries: Peril and Promise*. World Bank, Washington DC.

⁵ Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa. David Bloom, David Canning and Kevin Chan. Harvard University. (2005) pg 5

⁶ Ibid, pg 5.

higher education is unaffordable and cannot match required levels, and this is where distance education has assumed a growing importance, especially in Africa, where it is seen as a viable and affordable alternative to contact education, especially given the plethora of constraints that impede the rollout of higher education in Africa.

In acknowledgement of the growing significance of distance education in Africa, the African Council of Distance Education (ACDE) was established at Egerton University in Kenya in 2004. (And I am very pleased to see that Dr Fred Barasa, the newly appointed Executive Director of the African Council for Distance Education is here with us this evening.)

The mission of the ACDE is to “promote the use of methods of open and distance learning to increase access to education and training in Africa.”⁷ The ACDE committed itself to the following goals.

- a) to promote open and distance learning, flexible learning and continuing education in Africa
- b) to promote research and training in open and distance learning in Africa
- c) to contribute to the development of policies essential to the advancement of open and distance learning
- d) to provide a forum where individuals, organisations and governments can deliberate on policy matters on open and distance learning
- e) to promote the development of appropriate methods and technologies in education and training relevant to open and distance learning
- f) to provide a forum for interaction, sharing and dissemination of ideas on open and distance learning.⁸

The ACDE provides a forum for the exchange of ideas, for dialogue and for mutual support in the pursuit of quality and excellence in an African articulation of its own educational needs and aspirations. The ACDE also seeks to promote cooperation, collaboration and networking among all distance education providers in Africa, but also internationally, to the benefit of Africa. Indeed, the ACDE has made it clear that

⁷ Ajaga NJI PH.D. Mission report on the Inaugural Conference of the ACDE at UISA 9-12 August 2005. pg 3.

⁸ Rachel Prinsloo. ACDE Conference Position Paper on Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning. August 2005,

it supports the “immediate strengthening of the university system across Africa including the creation of specialised universities, where needed, building available teaching staff.” There is already evidence of what can be done through such co-operation. The African Virtual University, for example, is offering Computer Science Degree programs from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Melbourne (Australia) and from Universite Laval in Quebec (Canada), as well as a Business Studies Program from Curtin University in Perth (Australia). The AVU also offers eight to ten week certificate short courses from universities such as New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) and Indiana University of Technology.⁹

But though we accept that we are a part of the global village and we acknowledge the potential inherent in technological applications, especially for distance education, levels of education are unlikely to improve or be effective where offerings remain alien to the world view, culture and languages of Africans. Distance education does indeed offer opportunities such as increased access, accessibility, shared expertise, partnerships that utilise respective strengths and competition that leads to growth and discovery. However, it is also true that those same opportunities pose serious threats. Terry Evans observes: “Globalisation presents nations with a dilemma: they access the world, but the world invades them.”¹⁰

Prof G Dhanarajan, of the COL, Canada asserts that “The internet and the web make it possible for education beyond borders to take place, but...[the] curriculum has not kept pace with a global classroom. Curricula design, not surprisingly, is mostly responsive to local needs and non-local learners suffer serious disadvantages. There is also a danger of creating new forms of imperialism, with one or two countries dominating large parts of the educational market with their view and interpretation of knowledge and information.”¹¹ So there is an imperative to ensure that we understand the African paradigm within which we operate and which, by all feasible means, we must seek to promote. By highlighting the importance of courseware, functions such

⁹ <http://www.foundation-partnership.org/pubs/bandwidth/indec.php>

¹⁰ Terry Evans, Globalisation, post-Fordism and open and distance education, *Distance Education*, Volume 16, No 2, 1995

¹¹ Dhanarajan, G. Distance education: promise, performance and potential. *Open Learning*, Vol.16, No.1, 2001.

as this one, which acknowledge excellence in courseware development, make a valuable contribution to ensuring the African foci of our educational offerings.

In addition, shortcomings in technology, both in the infrastructure and the skills required for its application, could have a stifling effect on even the most promising of partnerships. In the rather cynical words of Mukasa (1990): “Why talk about Africa leap-frogging into the information revolution of the 21st Century when it has not yet caught up with the industrial revolution?”¹² While technology holds out the hope for increased access to education, it simultaneously poses a constraint in the pursuit of that same end. That is why initiatives such as this conference, that can contribute to the effective growth and rollout of ICT in African HE institutions, and particularly distance education institutions, are to be welcomed.

Ladies and gentlemen, collaboration within Africa is one of the most effective measures available to counter the threat of random forays into Africa by unscrupulous operators. It is equally important to ensure that we conduct an “audit” if you will, that we develop an accurate database of current partnerships and collaborative efforts in Africa, and ultimately, that we work together to maximise efficacy in collaboration and eliminate duplication and duplicitous partnerships. That is why associations such as NADEOSA are important. The National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning provides a forum for South African organisations and individuals who are committed to increasing access to an affordable, cost effective and quality learning environment. These aims are focused on producing that kind of human capital that I mentioned earlier. NADEOSA is committed to collaboration amongst distance education providers in South Africa and to facilitating an understanding of the role and function of DE amongst policy makers. At a time when we are faced with a DE policy that might have a significant impact on DE courseware, operations, and provision, this awareness-creation assumes a new relevance. Other aspects such as research, quality and professional advancement are of equal importance in ensuring a form and quality of education that is relevant to the constituency it serves. NADEOSA is playing a supportive role in assisting South African DE to work

¹² Mukasa, S. (1997). African telecommunications network development: Leap-frogging progress? The Ohio State University Center for Advancement in Telecommunications (CAST). Working File 1990-012. November

towards a more functional and cohesive platform that will provide a firm foundation for all collaborative efforts, regionally, continentally and internationally. Furthermore it will provide support and lend impetus to the work of the ACDE and its efforts to promote collaboration in Africa and abroad.

That Africans are indeed amenable to collaborative relationships in distance education, particularly on a regional level, is evidenced by such associations as DEASA (the Distance Education Association of South Africa), ZADE (Zambian Association for Distance Education), WADEA (West African Association for Distance Education, and SAIDE (South African Institute for Distance Education).

When it comes to the Southern African Development Community, by ensuring close co-operation and general agreement in our striving for harmonised standards for such vital aspects as access, assessment and quality in higher education, SADC countries will be far better placed to critically evaluate, monitor and assess educational offerings and prospective partnerships, to determine their genuine value and merit, and to make appropriate value-based judgements.

The SADC Protocol aims “to achieve the equivalence, harmonisation and standardisation of the education and training systems” in the region, and expresses the intention to “progressively move towards equivalence, harmonisation and eventual standardisation of education and training systems.”¹³ Such broadly stated aims are however quite nebulous, and more precise guidelines have been offered through the establishment of eight technical committees within the region, covering areas as diverse as research and development, to lifelong learning. The goals set out under the Protocol mirror similar attempts in Europe to create a fluid system that allows for student access and mobility throughout the European Union.

However, if we aim to achieve regional harmony, or even continental consonance, then we will have to break down the barriers that pose a hindrance to shared experience. We will have to elevate the reality that all learning is interdependent and that knowledge silos are antithetical to learning. The organisation of knowledge or

¹³ Par 5.1, Protocol on Education and Training. www.saqa.org.za

learning areas must be revisited to ensure greater coherence and meaning. This should logically lead to the breaking down of barriers between learning systems in our different African countries. The Bologna process in Europe has revolutionised higher education, enhanced shared systems, adaptability of courses, credit transfers and mutual recognition of qualifications. The sooner we ease the intellectual traffic between our countries the better; or we shall forever be trapped in the colonial divides where the first call and loyalty is to former colonial countries.

We must share research and research expertise. There can be no reason why African scholars cannot set up research networks and collaborations by research teams in various fields. They could have regular research conferences, publish their research together and benefit from each others advantages. Likewise, by so doing, new research fields will open up, new research priorities will emerge. A new generation of academic leadership is called for. Newly transformative ideas of leadership with Africa as its reference point are called for. We cannot afford to have failed academic leaders in Africa. The academe is a school for leadership inasmuch as it is a nursery for academic excellence, and a sanctuary for idealism. The cloistered existence can only be for a time and purpose. Beyond that, academic leadership calls for engaged leaders worldly enough to dream of a brave new world. In that brave new world, ICT will most certainly play a pivotal role. In examining the various roles and functions of ICTs in addressing educational needs, this conference is making a useful contribution to the body of knowledge that will ultimately inform African ICT initiatives in Distance Education.

