

Guest Editorial

An Open Letter to the President of the Republic of South Africa, His Excellency Mr. T. M. Mbeki

6 April 2005

On Higher Education Policy in Contemporary South Africa

Dear Mr. President:

1. First, kindly allow me to note with appreciation that you have not followed the trend that has become very prevalent in South Africa, of calling yourself 'doctor' on the strength of an honorary degree. You would otherwise have demanded to be addressed as 'Dr' many times over because of the many honorary doctorates that you hold, and which you richly deserve. I know you do not do so, because you respect the age-old tradition that an honorary doctorate appears behind your name together with the letters 'h.c.' to signify that it is a qualification conferred as an honour without satisfying the academic requirements that usually go with such a qualification. Incidentally, this practice spreads to other inappropriate usage of titles, as in 'professors' who continue to use the title without the authority of the university where they once served. I wish more South Africans would remember that, and follow your lead.
2. I am very sorry that you are not with us today, Mr. President. In fact you also missed out on the razzmatazz, as the Minister of Education so charmingly described it, of the launch of the new brand image and personality of the new University of South Africa last week. Today, you are not able to attend either. I guess the affairs of state are keeping you away from this great university. During this, my fourth year on Muckleneuk Ridge, I can almost 'see' you at work in the opposite hill, not such a distance away. From time to time I hear the Presidential jet droning past our neighbourhood, taking you to places far away, or bringing you back home from some far corner of this Continent in your indefatigable pursuit of peace, human dignity and development for Africa.
3. Oh, I must also sincerely apologise for being guilty of an unthinkable breach of protocol, and misdemeanour the other day, when, perforce, I had to slip out of your much valued Presidential Working Group on Higher Education held at Union Buildings on Thursday 31 March 2005. I had to attend a pre-arranged meeting with my colleagues in the College of Law. I could not work out how I could stay away from the meeting without causing offence to my colleagues. I know that you will understand, because you have always emphasised 'service

delivery' in the execution of our duties as South Africans. I was pleased to hear that you announced at the end of the meeting the establishment of a ministerial Higher Education Task Team which you will chair. It is in part because I missed a very interesting part of the meeting that I now write to you. Indeed, your task team offers me an opportunity to express in writing what I failed to say during the meeting. I trust that you will consider my humble opinions and suggestions, especially when you draft a policy for higher education funding.

4. In fact, Mr. President, higher education policy in our country is in a mess. Please do not hear me wrong. I do not wish to ascribe blame. I believe all of us must take a share of responsibility. But the fact is that higher education policy is detailed and comprehensive, is at times very prescriptive, is often incoherent and contradictory as to other aspects of public policy, and it is ineffective. I guess you have also gathered that, hence your task team.
5. The South African Universities Vice Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) has demonstrated, and the Minister of Education has acknowledged, that public funding for higher education is fast diminishing and that there is no prospect of additional public resources being made available for higher education. In fact, I can tell you that at a meeting with senior officials in the Treasury, we were told in no uncertain terms that higher education was not a priority of government! Although I do not have figures at hand I have reason to believe that private sector provision for higher education is also dwindling. How does this impact on the quality of higher education?
6. It means that only a few privileged universities have managed to renew or upgrade key facilities like libraries and laboratories. They have not been able to equip their institutions with modern equipment to enhance the learning environment, or advance research and create an environment conducive to scientific enquiry, to intellectual inquisitiveness, and to social development. As university managers we feel the pressure to deliver more with less. Our academic staff has to produce quality tuition at a time when lecture rooms have never been so full. We are told that we must undertake academic planning, a euphemism for capping, as the system cannot fund uncontrolled growth. And yet, we have to balance that against the imperatives of equity and access, to give more opportunities to deserving students and increase the pool of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds without losing those who are from previously advantaged backgrounds.
7. One of the democracy dividends we have to contend with, and rightly so, is the high expectations that there are in society. Young people expect to get a place at a university of their choice. Many are too poor to afford university education through the means of their own families. They look to universities to make it possible for them to enrol and to make a success of their studies. From what you have been saying, there are expectations on universities from government and from society at large. It is expected that universities will

graduate the most ready-made candidates for the world of work. There is criticism that many of our graduates can hardly read or write, even after three years at university. This is very hard for me to believe. If, however, any of it is even remotely the case, then universities must share the blame with the schooling system which churns out more and more students who are not intellectually ready for the rigours of higher education. And yet, miraculously, many of our students excel in their studies.

8. The higher education environment is no different from any workplace that is regulated by and protected by our labour laws. This also means that university staff, be it academic, professional, administrative and service – all have expectations of the university to advance their careers, to enable them to earn a decent living, and to be able to function in a fair and just workplace environment. We have to contend with a brain drain and demoralised academics. Universities cannot cope with the prevailing competition for the best brains. Yes, academic remuneration must be improved as a matter of priority. But where do the resources come from? Our staff are unionised and much time and effort is devoted to negotiations and consultations in order to find agreed solutions to problems. But many of these require even more financial resources than are available. Students too are assertive. They demand free education and they put pressure on the available facilities and resources. I can tell you Mr. President, it does not help when ministers make public statements blaming universities for fees which I presume have been properly agreed in accordance with the governance processes of the institutions. Monies owed to universities by students who renege on their payments run into hundreds of millions of rand – money that could be utilised to improve facilities, and improve pay and conditions of employment for staff. Indeed, we should move towards a situation where young South Africans can choose a career as academics because of their love of learning and scholarship. But, we are not there yet.
9. Finally, I come to the challenge of drop-out and throughput. There is understandable concern about the high wastage associated with students who fail, and fail repeatedly, and others who drop out of education without any qualification. There are many reasons for this. There can be no doubt that in many instances the environment in many of our universities is alienating and demeaning of the dignity of some of our students. It may well be the case that our students are naturally rebellious, which many of us can identify with. The strange thing is that this phenomenon is as prevalent in historically black institutions as it is in the previously white ones. It may well be that our academics need to learn the art and the joy of teaching, and must be encouraged to cultivate relationships with their students and serve as mentors and role models. Even more important, our students must learn responsibility. This is a moral question. We need to inculcate in our students the drive and the commitment to succeed in the face of adversity. They need to learn that no

one succeeds without application and discipline. We must help them to understand that society will provide the opportunities but that they must take them and use them responsibly. Our young people must also be encouraged to learn responsible behaviour. W. E. B. du Bois was surely addressing a similar malady among his own people when he stated in one of his essays;

The vision of life that rises before these dark eyes has in it nothing mean or selfish. Not at Oxford or at Leipzig, not at Yale or Columbia, is there an air of higher resolve or more unfettered striving; the determination to realise for men, both black and white, the broadest possibilities of life, to seek the better and the best, to spread with their own hands the Gospel of Sacrifice – all this is the burden of their talk and dream. Here, amid a wide desert of caste and proscription, amid the heart-hurting slights and jars and vagaries of a deep race-dislike, lies this green oasis, where hot anger cools, and the bitterness of disappointment is sweetened by the springs and breezes of Parnassus;¹⁾ and here men may lie and listen, and learn of a future fuller than the past, and hear the voice of time . . .

10. And now to a matter that I know is very close to your heart. You have recently been stating and restating the role of universities in Africa. You addressed this theme at the University of Cape Town last November and more recently when you officially opened the 11th General Conference of the Association of African Universities held in Cape Town in February. You referred to the role of universities in deepening democracy and in ‘ensuring that we achieve and consolidate peace and stability on the Continent’. You state that research ‘engenders the values of inquiry, critical thinking, creativity, and open-mindedness, which are fundamental to building a strong democratic ethos in society’. Mr. President, we have also noted your calls for an African oriented intellectual tradition in our research and curriculum. Of course, beyond the phrases, not much has been done to determine what exactly this means, and how it will fit in with the clamour for an enhanced and diverse African scholarship, and for public life and discourse characterised by critical engagement by intellectuals and scholarly minds. I hear that you decry the lack of visibility of our scholars and intellectuals in public life and in contributing critically to public policy. But I believe that you should understand that it is not for lack of good minds that you do not see them, but partly the result of an academic tradition that is cloistered and that demurs at self-seeking publicity. The truth of the matter is that universities in this country do produce outstanding scholarship, if one judges by the number of doctoral graduates and research masters produced even by a university such as UNISA. The scholarly output is diverse and relevant for the most part. Academics are conscious of their duty to enhance their research output and to produce new knowledge and new scholars.

11. Frankly, none of what you set out to achieve in your State of the Nation Address to Parliament on 11 February has any chance of realisation unless we have a fully functional, effective and efficient higher education system in our country. The level of training that is required to bridge the skills deficit, to build the capacity of the public service machinery, and to give effect to the Government's Human Resources Development Strategy, will not be possible without the recognition of the catalytic role of higher education in development. But I hear you say something more profound: the search for a social adjustment, in shaping a quality of intellectual life in society and to make better people of all South Africans, something that Du Bois so elegantly calls 'that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilisation', is what is lacking. We should never be in want, as Du Bois observed about his Deep South, and 'stunted by the death of criticism, and starving for lack of broadly cultured men'. That will neither enhance democracy, nor stimulate critical enquiry, nor advance development – what Du Bois, with an Enlightenment tone, calls 'civilisation'.
12. But you were right to raise three critical questions about higher education policy in South Africa during your Presidential Working Group meeting the other day. You asked the questions as to whether society was clear enough in its expectations of higher education; whether we know what resources are necessary to produce such outcomes as we shall determine, and finally, whether we are providing resources sufficient to enable higher education to produce the expected outcomes. All of these are critical questions. But higher education can never function in isolation from the challenges society faces. Higher education must be sustained by the goodwill of the society it seeks to serve. That society must express confidence in its capacity to produce public good, and to dream its future. Government has a vital role in creating that environment, by its public investment in higher education, by seeking and drawing together partners from the private sector, and by generating the confidence of the society. Unless we do that, we should never be surprised that Africa does not feature among the 200 best universities of the world. Whatever we may make of the methodology and criteria for so determining this ranking, we cannot but recognise that we are some way from the league of world-class universities.
13. I believe that Africa has taken the first step on a very arduous route by calling the Dakar Conference of African Intellectuals. The initiative by the Chairman of the AU Commission, His Excellency Prof. Alpha Oumare Konare, to nominate an advisory committee and to report to the Summit of Heads of State and Government in July, is commendable. The final report of the Commission of Africa, 'Our Common Interest' is also a timely contribution. It notes that higher education

ought to be the breeding ground for skilled individuals whom the Continent needs. Higher education and research institutes can also improve the accountability of governments and build participation and citizenship. As well as providing skilled staff, they also generate independent research and analysis that supports the vibrant debate that can greatly improve the effectiveness of government policy and other services.

It is therefore fitting that the Commission should back up that strategy with a call for some US\$500m per year, over ten years, to revitalise Africa's institutions of higher education. The Commission also asserts that the proposals to strengthen tertiary education would serve to develop African leaders, who are the key drivers for progress and sustainable development.

14. May I suggest that the starting point must surely be that government should declare books tax-free? That will assist universities in our country to recover large amounts of money that they pay for importing academic literature which is otherwise not available in our country, for the licenses which we must subscribe to, and for VAT we pay on books in South Africa. I know that this could be a great incentive to restock and equip our libraries. This would then open a whole world of learning and knowledge to our students and our researchers.
15. Mr. President, by government policy, the University of South Africa has been declared the 'single, dedicated distance education institution' and one of the new institution-types, a comprehensive university. We therefore welcome the recently released policy statement on distance education published by the Minister of Education for public comment and consultation. We shall definitely make our views known. But there are already some bothersome trends in public policy which disadvantage distance education. We believe that there is hardly any understanding or commitment to the special type of distance education in our higher education system. I cite only a few examples: there is the tenacious and unresolved issue of so called 'active students'. We find that the notion of 'active' applicable to contact institutions, is being applied willy-nilly to distance education. We continue to insist that in distance education we have students of drive and maturity, who also bring into the learning process their own insights and experience. We must build and nurture this by developing our student-centred approaches to learning. UNISA has pioneered the creative and innovative design of learning materials, and is investing in technology assisted learning. The university is also investing in a network of learning centres in different regions of the country in order to bring distance education closer to our students and to spread learning opportunities across the country. In distance education, therefore, we make a prior investment, and by and large students have what is necessary to make a success of their studies. To then be expected to subscribe to a notion of 'active' that is indeterminate for distance education students is to place an

unbearable burden on both the students and the university, well beyond what is reasonable and in a manner calculated to turn distance education into something that it is not. UNISA Executive Management has received a report of a study undertaken by the Bureau for Market Research, Student Satisfaction Survey 2005. In that report we note with satisfaction the very high scores the university enjoys from students on matters like examination processes (81 per cent), use of teaching equipment (83 per cent), quality, delivery and despatch of study guides (82 per cent). Those that scored lowest include matters relating to availability of academic staff (62 per cent), discussion forums, study groups/peer groups (62 per cent), contact sessions (63 per cent), availability of prescribed textbooks in the library (62 per cent) and the SRC (55 per cent). What this survey demonstrates is that academic staff are not coping well with the pressure of work in an institution as large as UNISA. That means that contact sessions with students, as well as availability of staff to students becomes a problem. What it also emphasises is that there is a high level of satisfaction with regard to all the processes critical for delivering distance education to students.

16. The second demonstration of this lack of understanding is illustrated by recent statements by the Minister of Education. In her address to mark the launch of UNISA's new brand image last week, the Minister of Education, the Hon Mrs. Naledi Pandor, MP surprised us all by her assertion that distance education should not be offering what she called 'undergraduate programmes that attract few students and that are offered by contact institutions'. The contradiction becomes apparent in the statement that immediately follows:

Is it cost-effective for a distance education institution to spread its academic offerings over a wide range of course offerings or should it be concentrating on developing high quality courses in targeted areas of focus with the view of meeting the needs of large numbers of students in South Africa and elsewhere in the Continent?

17. This is the contradiction: to start with, presumably the purpose of having distance education has to do with the fact that students have chosen distance education because they could not access contact institutions for a variety of reasons. It is either that they cannot afford the higher cost of fees in contact institutions, or that work and other domestic commitments precludes them from attending a residential institution. Finally, it could be that students, especially mature students, feel more relaxed with the affirming and flexible environment of distance education. The second contradiction is this: clearly these high volume course offerings are precisely the ones that policy suggests that universities should reverse with the 40:40:30 ratios. The less popular courses may be the ones that have been designated for development, skills development, scientific knowledge and drivers of the economy. After all, that

is what the steering mechanism of the Funding Framework seeks to achieve. Distance education is not in competition with residential universities. It offers a unique opportunity to a particular and self-selecting band of students who would otherwise not have had the opportunity.

18. But maybe, the underlying point must be addressed. It is that universities must be trusted to do planning and to evaluate their strategic options. They are both conscious of public policy and are responsive to market needs, and to their academic mission. No university would persist with course offerings that have no rationality or justification either in terms of cost effectiveness, or in terms of strategic intent. If that were so, UNISA would have closed down the department of African Languages, to give but one example, and what would that be saying about this country's commitment to its Constitutional values?
19. Mr. President, I know that you have never set foot in this institution in more than five years. I want to assure you that UNISA is a very proud institution. With the support of Council and our dynamic Chairperson Dr. Matthews Phosa, transformation is an ever-present reality here. We now have an exciting statement, *UNISA 2015: An Agenda for Transformation*. That statement sets out in the clearest and most succinct terms the vision and mission of the university, our values and strategic goals. We are now engaged in a process of developing a 10-year strategic plan which will give effect to the vision and mission statement, determine the shape of the institution in 10 years time, and the strategy to realise our goals. I dare to predict that the curriculum of this university will set the trend and blaze the trail in creative and imaginative Africa oriented curriculum. Of course, there are many other challenges we face. Alongside that we have a change management team at work, and are reshaping the curriculum and research priorities. We are proud to be the university that equips the most disadvantaged students with the means to realise their visions and thereby serve society. We now have a new brand identity signifying our determination to cast away the past and to forge boldly into the African future. The environment that we need to succeed is only partly about funding, important as that might be. What we need is a demonstrable commitment from government and the private sector, to higher education and its place at the centre of government's national development strategy.
20. Allow me, Mr. President, to commend you warmly for the step you have taken, and to wish the task team every success.

Yours truly

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PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
University of South Africa.

NOTES

1. According to the Oxford Dictionary: A mountain in central Greece held sacred by ancient Greeks, as was the spring of Castalia on its southern slopes. It was associated with Apollo and the Muses and regarded as the symbol of poetry.