

HESA STATEMENT TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION SUMMIT

Higher Education South Africa (HESA) welcomes the Report by the Ministerial Committee on *Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (2008), commonly referred to as the Soudien Report. It is HESA's view that the Report:

- a. provides a platform for the Sector to debate and engage on issues of transformation;
- b. provides important sign-posts for the Sector to work towards and assess the journey traversed since 1994;
- c. is like a mirror through which we view our achievements and weaknesses (blind-spots); and
- d. gives HESA the requisite impetus to forge a common approach and an action plan to address the transformation challenges, and at the same time reinforce good transformation practices within the sector.

In response to the Report HESA has compiled and analysed responses from 14 institutions. The Report, to be published soon, has been provided in draft form to the Ministry of Higher Education and Training. It must be stated that while the higher education sector is not unmindful of the limitations of the Report, and is not uncritical of the methodology and epistemological assumptions adopted by the report, it nonetheless has resolved to welcome the Report. What is critical for us, however, is to move society forward and construct a higher education system that can serve the developmental goals of this country and prosper the intellectual attributes of our people. We also wish to acknowledge that the sector response we offer should not be understood as suggesting that there is a uniform, uncritical and uncontested view within the higher education sector about these matters. What we assert, however, is a commitment to building a higher education system worthy of the name.

This commitment can be framed in terms of the following foci:

First, a transformed HE system in which the student and staff bodies of institutions reflect diversity as well as social cohesion, in which all forms of discrimination barred in terms of South Africa's Constitution and our Bill of Rights have been eliminated, and in which freedom of speech is treasured and protected, as is freedom of association, as a necessary condition for institutions to develop to their full potential.

Second, transformation of the HE sector should be embedded in significant changes in respect of the core functions of teaching/learning, research and community engagement of HE institutions.

Third, the policy goals and targets contemplated in the Education White Paper 3 - *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), are still relevant, and a critical question remains: how far has the sector progressed in attaining the targets envisaged in this policy?

Fourth, that racism and sexism as forms of inequality and exclusion are endemic in our society. They are not just physical but are brutal violence of the mind. Diversity of thought and cultures constitute the material out of which the university thrives. It is critical, however, that all of us have a common understanding, as well as analytical tools for defining racism and all forms of social discrimination in order to enhance understanding and develop appropriate strategies.

Against this background, HESA would like to reposition the debate on transformation of higher education by posing the following three questions:

- a What is the purpose and value of Higher Education in South Africa?
- b What kind of a South African university would we all like to see to give effect to this purpose?
- c What kind of attributes (social, emotional and intellectual) does such a university espouse?

I will attempt to provide some answers and/or pointers to these three difficult questions. With regard to the first question, I would like to borrow extensively from the observation made by Dr Saleem Badat, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Rhodes University. In his presentation to the HER-SA Academy in 2009, Dr Badat¹ summed up the value of higher education as follows:

- a The first is to cultivate highly educated people. Universities must provide imaginatively and rigorously designed and implemented academic programmes. Our graduates must be in a position to critique and construct alternatives, and communicate effectively orally and in writing.
- b The second key role is to contribute to forging a critical and democratic citizenship. Our societies require graduates who are not just capable professionals, but also sensitive intellectuals and critical citizens.
- c The third key role is to actively engage with the pressing development challenges of our society. This role is carried out through teaching/learning, research and community engagement functions of the university.
- d The fourth key role is to contribute to the intellectual and cultural development of the public as critical citizens, through informed social commentary and critique and public engagement around ideas.

- e The final key role of HE is to creatively conduct different kinds of rigorous scholarship –discovery, integration, application and teaching – and rigorous research, which has different purposes (fundamental, applied, strategic, developmental), aims and objects.

We do not believe that there is any dispute within the sector about such an understanding of the purpose of higher education. But that does not mean that within that broad common understanding there are no emphases that might distort the common picture. Given South Africa's current socio-economic and political dynamics, it is more important than ever before that higher education in South Africa is seen to provide clear, cohesive and firm guidance and leadership on matters that impact on the generation and development of a "critical citizenry" that is so fundamental to the welfare of any society and country.

The next question is: what kind of a South African university would we all like to see to give effect to this purpose?

As a starting point, universities will always be characterized as institutions with a multiplicity of goals as set out in the Education White Paper No 3: *A Framework for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997). These goals are as follows:

- To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives,
- To address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy,
- To contribute to the socialization of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens, and
- To contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge.

Inferring from these aspirations above, a good South African university is one where a variety of views are encouraged and engaged. It is a university where the workers, students and academics can freely express their views on any issue impacting on the well-being of the university. It is a place where academics and all other members of the university community are driven by the imperatives to advance the mission of the university and ultimately South African society. Universities do not prosper in environments where power dynamics serve to exclude ideas not in accord with the prevailing norms, but rather only where ideas are contested by other ideas, and truth is the winner. The "politicization" of the academic spaces does not advance intellectual rigour and social vibrancy in our institutions, but may lead to intellectual "ghettoisation."

WEB du Bois captures this spirit of the university in his essay, *Of the Wings of Atlanta*. He refers to the historically African American universities of the South overcoming an

environment of discrimination and social exclusion by adopting “an air of higher resolve... the determination to realize for men (sic), both black and white, the broadest possibilities of life, to seek the better and the best.” He goes on to say that

Amid the heartrending slights and jars and vagaries of deep race dislike, lies the green oasis, where hot anger cools, and the bitterness of disappointment is sweetened by the springs and breezes of Parnassus; and here men may lie and listen, and learn of a future fuller than the past, and here the voice of Time...¹

Once again we can draw from du Bois when he says that the function of a university “is not simply to teach breadwinning, or to furnish teachers for public schools, or to be a centre of polite society; it is above all, *to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization*”.²

Higher education should apply itself to creating an environment in all our institutions, that is conducive to scholarly enquiry. Clearly, persistent social discrimination and a culture of alienation and marginalization are inimical to the pursuit of learning and the achievement of excellence in scholarship. More fundamentally, though, what the Soudien Report refers to as epistemological transformation is critical: the idea that all sources of knowledge including African and indigenous knowledge systems must become the foundations of knowledge, curriculum reform as well as critical and relevant research – and should more commonly be explored at all our universities.

Regarding the third question: what kind of attributes (social, emotional and intellectual) does such a university espouse? The overarching objective of a university is to prepare its students and graduates for citizenship. It was indeed as true in Cicero’s day, as it is now, that:

Unless the citizen today is able to think and communicate clearly about issues pertaining to the community, democracy cannot work as it should... modern democracy requires everyone to envision frameworks for justice, discern assumptions, relate principles to particular concrete situations, make connections with precedent, revise hypotheses, form judgments independently, articulate opinion to others and so on.ⁱⁱ

A good South African university should aspire to attain this ideal, and anchor its teaching/learning, research and community engagement activities around an unwavering commitment to **the pursuit of the truth**, informed by the founding preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), i.e.:

¹ Du Bois WEB: THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK; 1994 (first published 1903): Dover Publications;51

² Op cit, 53

- a. Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- b. Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
- c. Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
- d. Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations

A good South African university is one that values and cherishes academic freedom as a cornerstone for cultivating and nurturing students with enquiring minds, scholarship that is courageous and fearless, and that dares to push the boundaries of knowledge – as did Galileo, the 16th century astrophysicist, the reputed founder of modern science, who embraced the Copernican revolution!

In our humble view, a transformed South African university should demonstrate the purpose and value of Higher Education as described earlier. It should encourage and tolerate diversity of views from all South Africans, irrespective of race, creed, gender and class. It should also seek to foster a culture of engagement guided by the ultimate objective of pursuing the truth in all its manifestations across disciplines. It should aspire to attain through its own internal policies and cultures, the realisation of the policy goals and targets contemplated in the National Plan for Higher Education (2001), the Higher Education Act (1997), and the Education White Paper No. 3 - *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997).

Going beyond the recommendations made in the Soudien Report, HESA is of the firm view that 15 years after the report of the National Commission on Higher Education, *A Framework of Transformation* (1996), the Education White Paper No. 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), the Higher Education Act (1997), and the National Plan for Higher Education 2001, higher education's objectives and purposes are crying out for review. One hopes that the outcomes of the Summit will direct the Minister, in collaboration with the sector, to assess progress made, perhaps in a manner that is much more focused on the maturing democracy that we have become. Such a review must establish the university as an essential element in our development agenda, that must be treasured and never be trifled with – lest we put at risk our common future.

End

ⁱ Saleem Badat, *Valuing the role of Higher education in society: An address at the HER-SA Academy to 80 women from universities throughout Africa*, 2009, 1-3

ⁱⁱ V. James Mannoia Jr, *Christian Liberal Arts: An Education That Goes Beyond* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 27.