



## **A STUDENT UNION FOR A NEW SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>**

This conference marks a very important milestone in the history of the student movement in South Africa, heralding as it does the first broadly representative student union of both university and technikon students in our country since 1994. So I must offer my hearty congratulations; firstly for having the foresight to unify and align your student movement with the changing dynamics of higher education. Second, to the union leadership-in-waiting, upon whose shoulders a weighty task shall rest, to lead, guide and direct the nearly 100 000 student population in our country in both the public and private sectors and in the FET sector, and thereby to ensure that the mandate given to them is executed in a creative and productive manner. The challenge is to create a student movement that transcends the traditional divisions of our society based on political ideology, social hierarchies, determined by class, race, language and gender - and even systems that reflect those hierarchies: universities, universities of technology and FETs.

Traditionally and world wide, Higher Education institutions have been, and continue to be agents of change. At their best, students can serve as the conscience of the nation, and behave in a manner that takes responsibility for the future. For that reason they speak the truth, speak with courage and correct the wrongs of society. At

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their best students have traditionally been driven by idealism, by the power to dream, and the will to realise those dreams. Students often give voice to issues that herald changes - not only in policies and practices of institutions, but even governments. This country has been no exception and indeed this continues to be the case. In the old regime student and student unions were routinely banned, imprisoned, tortured, murdered by the agents of the system, driven underground or into exile, or in many other ways rendered ineffective because of their opposition to the apartheid dictat and to the universities that betrayed the confidence of students because they subverted centuries of the hallowed university traditions like institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

The Freedom Charter (1955) states unequivocally that “the aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people, and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace.” This vision has become part of the agenda of our democratic state. The reason that it is, is that many years ago it formed part of the cornerstone of our struggle, and even in prospect, imposed upon future generations whose task it would be to reconstruct the new South Africa. The challenge we face today therefore, is how this revolutionary ideal could shape and inform education policy today, and the way that we implement and practice it.

Under apartheid, education in South Africa had been deeply fragmented and divided along race and language lines. Whites enjoyed first world education in first world facilities while the rest of the population had to endure a deliberately imposed inferior standard of education, with limited resources and facilities and mostly, poorly qualified educators. This legacy continues to dog democratic South Africa. For example, even in 2000, six years after democracy, the Department of Education’s Register of Needs Report (2000) found that only 20% of Government schools had libraries, only 57% had electricity and only 12% had computers for learning.<sup>1</sup> Clearly this is a situation that needs ongoing attention.

Today, higher education success rate is put at 15% and some 50% of students drop out of our higher education institutions. That at a time when access to higher education has greatly increased and set to reach 20% age participation rate by 2010 already. The sad thing is that many of the students, who enter higher education, fail, drop out or never complete, are the previously disadvantaged. They find the cultural and

intellectual environments in many of our institutions alienating, are deprived of affirmation, or never inspired enough to take their studies seriously. Equally too many white graduates who complete, emigrate to ply their trade in Australia, Europe and North America. The result is that this country, ten years after democratisation, is experiencing an acute skills shortage of dismal proportions in all the critical areas of our human, scientific and economic endeavour.

The White Paper on “Education and Training in a Democratic South Africa: First Steps to Develop a New System” (1994), recognised the main transformation needs that had to be addressed, as the following:

“Increasing access and retention of black students, achieving equity in public funding, eliminating illegal discrimination, creating democratic governance, rehabilitating schools and raising the quality of performance.”

We know that education was the backbone of the system of inequality that was inherited. We should also have realised that naturally the transformation of the education system would also become the battlefield for the reconstruction of the new South Africa. The critical question was the extent to which the education system represented the deepest hopes and aspirations of the people of South Africa, especially when those hopes and dreams were themselves part of the contested territory. This, of course, is not a new dilemma for leaders who must implement change. The dilemma is both the extent to which change can be undertaken without at the same time disrupting the orderly character of education; and being able to do so within available resources.

In 1974, British education policy analysts published a book entitled *Education or Domination* (1974) to challenge the domination of the education debate by analysts and politicians, and to attempt to present a common person’s view of the changes that were necessary in education. Education was too important to be left only to the ‘experts’, they argued. What Ken Worpole, for example, observed in this study, is that transformation in education becomes meaningful only to the extent that the self identity of the educator also undergoes change. When any aspect of the schooling system changes, then the entire system demands reappraisal (1994:177). The system gets re-oriented towards serving the community needs; it serves the people. This is

supported by two education activists, Paulo Freire and Myles Horton in *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian popular educationist, believes that change begins by an awareness of change. When the mood of the people changes from resignation to taking charge of their own education, then they begin to take their history, their destiny, into their own hands. Now education is no longer that which was imposed on them. It is no longer, as he puts it, “official education.” The purpose of education changes with the transition. It is now “to create an education system that “enlarges and amplifies the horizon of critical understanding of the people, to create an education devoted to freedom” (219). Education will reflect the hopes and aspirations of the people when the educators, parents and learners begin to ask questions, and demand their own role in shaping their education system, and Freire puts it bluntly:

But the school can be changed not exclusively by a decree, but by a new generation of teachers, of educators who must be prepared, trained, formed (220).

The lesson for us is simple. Students must also change their mindset, and realise that we are now in a new dispensation. We should no longer fight the battles of apartheid when apartheid as a system of government was destroyed some 16 years ago, if we accept that FW de Klerk’s address on 2 February 1990 was an act of surrender. The times we are in require much more sophisticated tools and strategies of struggle as we seek to reverse the legacy of apartheid and advance the gains of democracy.

The new South Africa established a tradition of transparency and inclusiveness from the inception of its new democracy. It is said that the Freedom Charter evolved by means of popular participation, as did our new constitution. In this sense, increased student participation in HE not only makes sense, but it also asks of students the same courage, open-mindedness, creativity, determination and responsibility displayed by those who forged our new dispensation.

So as we come into the new decade of education reform in South Africa, we are still faced with an inherently unequal education system. And as I have just said, the education system lays the foundation for the kind of society we want. The aims of higher education in a democratic South Africa are elaborated in the White Paper (1997). They can be summarized 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-dependant society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy
- To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens
- To contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge.” (1997 s 1.3)

So at one level, education is necessary for society to reinvent itself by a mixture of linkages and commitments to a social and cultural system that was built over time; as well as to chart its own course and shape its own future. Equally important though is that education is more than mere individualism, although individual development and advancement are critical impetuses to growth. Education has a social factor. It has an element of solidarity and it is a means of social cohesion. Education continuously reshapes that social system and introduces new ideals for its reformation. Education cannot just be about the past and the present. Were it to be so, it would spell the death of society and community as we know it. Education is designed to contribute to the social, moral, scientific and technological norms of society. Fanon says that “we ought to uplift the people; we must develop their brains, fill them with ideas, change them and make them into human beings” (197).

We do not often acknowledge what great strides have been made since our democratic dispensation. We are very hard on ourselves simply because our expectations are so high. However, even while we recognise and acknowledge the transformation in the HE environment, there remains suspicion amongst key role players, including the Student unions. In fact two eminent African scholars, Adebayo Olukoshi of CODESRIA and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza of Penn State University attribute this to what they call the “decomposition of the old social contract between the university, the state, and society in which higher education was valued as a public and intellectual good which, moreover, dovetailed into visions of nation-building and national development” (2004:3).

I would say that the time is now, for all stakeholders to put aside these suspicions and work towards a HE environment that truly expresses and realises the vision that we have for our country – one that we can all be proud of at that. One that will enable us to say with pride and satisfaction: “I was a part of building that.” This of course, places a rather serious burden on your shoulders as students, student representatives and leaders of the new union.

As student leadership you too need to respond to that challenge. As future leaders of this country, you need now to start forming in your own minds, the distinction between what I suppose could be called “bread-and-butter” issues, which are those issues that impact on the everyday day lives of students, and the bigger picture, which is the vision that this country has for its citizens to become, as the Council on Higher Education (2004) so eloquently put it : “ a citizenry capable of participating effectively in democratic processes, and thus enhancing the project of democracy; with producing intellectuals who can engage with the most intractable problems of society and so develop more generally the ability of citizens to participate politically, economically and socially; and with producing high-level skilled graduates and new bases of knowledge to drive economic and social development, and to enhance the overall levels of intellectual and cultural development” (CHE 2004 Ch1 p.14).

That power of discernment and political commitment must shape your strategic orientation. I beg you to move away from self-serving, personal aggrandisement – the graveyard of all would-be leaders, because they soon become corrupt, abuse power, and show no respect for the people they are supposed to serve. Be careful of empty populism and empty rhetoric! Understand clearly what a leader stands for. Exercise your critical faculties, and never be an unthinking follower – my leader right or wrong.

You need to understand the importance of ensuring that your actions now, will impact on students not only of your generation, but of generations to come. You need to realise that your lack of action or irresponsibility will have a similar effect. You need to develop that same sense of leadership and vision as you grow both as students and

young men and women, that our forefathers had when they forged the Freedom Charter back in 1955.

And this is achievable, in fact now more so than ever before. With the advent of our new democracy the role of students has changed and the student voice has been acknowledged via their statutory inclusion in the formal structures of Higher Education Institutions, with representation on a number of bodies, including the Institutional Forum, Senate and Council. These are the three “highest” bodies in the Institution, so SRCs (and their unions) now have representation - and access - at the highest level. Where previously the various universities and technikons provided for student representation in one form or another, it is now a statutory requirement of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act 101 of 1997) that SRCs form part of HE governance structures.

What this requires of you as SRCs and in a broader sense, as a union, is to fulfil your mandate with intelligence, foresight and most of all, responsibility. It means working together with all stakeholders, including management, towards common institutional goals, while ensuring that the interests of your constituents - the students - are protected and promoted. It means ensuring that you and your members have an in-depth understanding of your institution’s, strategic plan and especially it’s vision, mission and goals, so that you understand very clearly every aspect that has to do with students – from fee structures to student support in its various forms. If you take your mandate and responsibility seriously, as indeed you should, there is absolutely no reason why you should not be informed right up the highest level, of what your institution plans to do, or is doing, for its students. Equally there is no excuse for your voices not to be heard at those fora.

Changing the perception that student leaders never pay attention to their studies; they are poor students; that their purpose in life is to disrupt as much as and as frequently as possible the study programme of the university and thus put at risk the futures and careers of others; or that they simply abuse university resources and the funds entrusted to them and the money set aside for SRC business ends up supporting themselves – that must change. What is now required is a leadership and a calibre of student who is not afraid to accept a challenge and who is able to understand what

Albert Einstein meant when he said: “Problems cannot be solved by the same level of awareness that created them.”

As access to higher education has opened for an increasing number of previously disadvantaged South Africans, so the demand for higher education has increased. With it have come calls for free or greatly subsidised higher education, unrestricted access, learner support in the form of bridging courses and other forms of bridging assistance. Both Government and HE Institutions realise that now more than ever before, students need support. In addition to this, globally, higher education is changing and so we have the added imperative of ensuring that we can hold our own and provide a sound education in a very competitive environment. So we have to deal with equally important but competing interests, all of which demand our ongoing attention. This is a big ask. I think this underscores the point I made earlier that perhaps the time has come for a new, more creative approach to problem-solving.

All stakeholders in HE are in a process of change, so maybe we should be looking at moving from the “traditional” conflictual student/management approach to problem solving, to one of consensus. This will require a very real level of honesty, mutual trust and accommodation, and again, this boils down to effective leadership. (Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders*) says: “The leader does not just vaguely affect others. He or she takes others towards the object of their joint quest... A leader whose qualities do not match those of the potential followers is simply irrelevant.” And Michael Le Boeuf says: “Anybody can come up with new ideas. What’s in short supply are motivated people – persistent mavericks who believe so strongly in an idea, they will do whatever it takes to make it a working reality.” That is the type of student leadership we look forward to working with. That is the type of leadership that will ensure a better education for all.

This country owes a debt of gratitude to those students who showed selflessness and leadership at a time when the future seemed bleak and hopeless. 2006 is, of course, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soweto Revolution. This country has never been without selfless and dedicated student leaders – from the NUSAS, SASO and SASCO generations – the student movement has contributed to the leadership of our country. Their dedication and persistence contributed in no small measure to your very

presence here today. If you accept the challenge to display those same characteristics in your representation of student interests in higher education, then I have no doubt that together we will achieve those goals to which we all aspire.

We once again congratulate you on your new South African Union of Students and we wish you well in your future endeavours.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?article=35076&area=/the\\_teacher/teacher\\_reat...](http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?article=35076&area=/the_teacher/teacher_reat...)