



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT TO SENATE

On 21 October the Council on Higher Education held a Consultative Conference on Higher Education in South Africa. The Conference was held to mark the publication of the CHE's HE Monitor No. 8 which bears the same title. The report published in October, is based on research undertaken by the CHE Advice and Monitoring Directorate. It presents a detailed statistical and policy analysis of South African Higher Education since 1997. It ends by examining policy options for South Africa and makes recommendations.

The point made is that South African higher education has grown in response to policy and social developments in our country and region. Enrolments have grown exponentially, graduations have improved and research output has never been better, while at the same time funding for higher education has responded fittingly to the challenges. At the same time higher education feels and behaves somewhat defensively, as if it is in a state of siege. Public confidence is perhaps not as it should be, there is unrest at many campuses, and an insatiable thirst for transformation does not always balance with the stated academic needs of the country. Many of the debates about higher education tend to be tendentious and charged with political rhetoric, and perhaps higher education has itself to blame for failing to drive debates about higher education and the national development agenda. It was gratifying to note that with the increased enrolments throughout the sector (861 000) some 53 000 students come from countries largely from Southern and East Africa; there is a growing number of

expatriate academic staff in South African universities, and greater levels of internationalization and partnerships. Unisa accounts for about one third of such enrolments. Graduate enrolments have also increased, as well as those in Science, Engineering and Mathematics. By and large, the goals of higher education are being met.

Given all that, South African higher education ought to be very confident and even assertive. Concerns are being expressed about the quality of graduates and the relevance of research, and there is continuing alarm about the drop-out rate and dissatisfactions with through-put. It was in the light of such concerns that the Conference addressed some of the critical issues in the higher education landscape in South Africa: access and success; national development; differentiation and Knowledge. It was evident that enrolments at higher education institutions may have reached saturation point, and yet, the country was nowhere near reaching its target of 20% participation rate by 2010. There are moves to establish more universities, namely in Mpumalanga and Northern Cape. It has even been suggested that South Africa should open up to more private higher education, especially of the not-for-profit kind.

What was refreshing about the debates, though, was that for once, there was a desire to move away from the stagnant, defensive posturing, finger-pointing and smugness. There was recognition that access and success are often tied up with the prevailing cultures in our institutions, and acknowledgement of the alienating environments in many of our establishments and our failure to be affirming of diversity of cultures. Transformation, therefore, has become a necessity for success. Some ideas that emerged suggested that South Africa should look again at, and accelerate moves towards, a 4-year basic degree, as well as specialist pre-university academies to provide bridging courses for those destined for higher education but who need extra studies in certain disciplines like Maths and Science. Even on as vexed a subject as Differentiation there is recognition that the system is differentiated according to the missions of various institutions, albeit that much of this has come about by stealth! But now institutions are beginning to craft their own missions, and we may see in future a variety of specialist institutions like MEDUNSA dedicated to health and medical sciences, or an Institute of Mathematical Sciences, or of Engineering and Technology, or of Education etc, as is the case in India and China. The relationship with the FET sector also comes under scrutiny, inasmuch as FET Colleges, now part of the HE sector, could end up as conduits to universities, or may well serve as university colleges. If I may say so, it may well be that Unisa's collegiate system may become a prototype for specialist institutions around a cluster of related or cognate disciplines.

At a higher level, it has been suggested that it may well be that South African higher education is in need of a new purpose. Clearly much has developed in higher education thinking since the Report of the Commission for Higher Education and the Higher Education White Paper No 3. We should now be taking account of the outcomes of the 2nd UNESCO World Conference on Higher education 2009, of the changing social and political environment in our country and region, of the advances in technology, and in our country and Continent, of the greater sensitivity to cultural diversity. This may well suggest that a new Purpose of Higher Education may need to be stated or re-stated, which could bring a new impetus to the emerging paradigms in higher education.

Granted it is the case that higher education institutions in South Africa continue to battle with transformation. It is also true, however, that hardly any two South Africans understand alike about transformation. The events unraveling at the UFS, however, raise pertinent issues about transformation and reconciliation that are worth pondering over. It cannot be difficult for higher education institutions to agree that as executives we must guard against the invasion of institutional autonomy, not least in those instances where controversy is courted by our actions. Higher education institutions must have inner resources to deal with and address all the consequences of our actions. That means that we must be aware that debate will and must ensue, but that government must avoid interfering; that governance structures must entrust institutional leadership with space to make appropriate judgments about what is best for the institutions. It was with that in mind that I wrote to Prof Jonathan Jansen to offer him our support at a time of difficulty. That does not mean, however, that I agree with the manner in which a very sensitive issue was handled. I can assert, however, knowing Prof Jansen as I do, that he would have applied his mind, would have been aware that his pronouncements would have been provocative, but would have judged that that was no bad thing for the university. The second substantive matter, however, is about transformation, our understanding of prevailing racism in our campuses and the mechanisms for reconciliation. There can be no doubt that Prof Jansen took too many leaps and short-cuts, for which he is now paying the price. That means that at Unisa, as well we need to become aware of the dynamics of racism in our society. Fortunately, we have a Statement on Racism and Policy on Racism and Racial Harassment which will guide us as to the manner of addressing such incidents should they affect institutional cohesion.

One such paradigm is clearly ODL. It clearly is the case that ODL has become an intrinsic feature of ways of learning for modern people. It has advantages and challenges. Enrolments in all ODL institutions continue to escalate, and moves towards quality assurance and accreditation across borders are

becoming critical. But ODL can hardly be unaffected by developments in technology: the trend for younger students to enroll in ODL institutions at increasingly younger ages is being experienced everywhere. It has become evident that this is becoming a matter of choice, because younger learners prefer to work in a technology intensive environment in a digital age. Martin Bean, the new Vice Chancellor of Open University UK observes that “the concept of not having to *go* to university but doing study wherever you wish to, appeals to the imagination of younger people in the digital age”. In other words they are attracted by the excitement of creating a university wherever they are. Social networking could become learning specific. Why not! ODL must also catch up with developments in technology and embrace elements of e.learning. At Unisa we are having to explore open source learning and examine how we can digitalise our lectures, make them available on line and share with all users. May I pause to observe that I find it inexplicable that some academic colleagues have declined to participate in the satellite broadcast sessions, and even fewer are using *myUnisa* to support learning. Colleagues in ICT are battling to get buy-in for the utilization of these new learning aides.

This has significance in regard to technology. The trouble with those of us operating from developing world contexts is that we need to contend with the availability, and access into the digital world because of scarcity and cost of broadband. There are indications that broadband access will increase in South Africa with the recent advent of SeaCom. HESA has noted, however, that much work needs to be done to make broadband more affordable for higher education and is appealing to government for urgent interventions in this regard.

For all those reasons Unisa needs to be serious about ODL. At the meeting of the ODL Management Team, we resolved that a new initiative needs to be undertaken in order to drive ODL forward at Unisa. I am glad that Prof Rita Mare and the Academic portfolio are preparing a new strategy for implementation of ODL. This matter has caused us to look afresh at promoting innovation in new learning techniques, at focusing our energies on learning and teaching, and at coordinating our efforts better; equipping staff with multiplicity of skills to navigate the ODL world and appropriate technologies, to develop innovations in learning techniques; to develop the ‘killer instinct’ that assures success.

It is with such ideals in mind that I am pleased to report that on 30 November – 2 December we shall have the honour of hosting CIES at Unisa for a series of engagements with academic staff on innovations in curriculum, experimenting with new learning tools and drawing from experiences in other for a where experiments had been undertake to review curricula and address effective learning. I am grateful to the

Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor and Dr Sabine O'Hara, Executive Director of CIES with whom Unisa has signed a long-term agreement to help with learning innovations, curriculum reform, and revised assessment tools. It is hoped that over the years as part of this partnership Unisa will host scholars from the US for periods of residence. We trust that during this time we shall re-skill academic staff especially into becoming passionate educators in the ODL mode.

You will have noticed that at the Chancellor's Dinner I was proud to report that Unisa is making advances in terms of its declared mission of improving success and throughput and increasing research output. In that regard, according to the 2007 HEMIS submissions, Unisa was placed 6th among South African universities on the basis of research outputs and graduation rates for Masters and doctoral degrees. I am also particularly proud that we seem to be making advances with our graduation numbers. This year about 21 000 students graduated in diplomas, and degrees – a pleasing and continuous improvement. Of these, we had 113 doctoral degrees and 655 Masters degrees. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate everyone who has contributed to this performance.

Prof Narend Baijnath will be presenting later in our Agenda the final draft of the 2015 Mission and Vision Statement, *Unisa 2015: An Agenda for Transformation*. Consultations on the draft are now underway and we hope to present to Council in November for adoption. Once again I take this opportunity to thank Prof Baijnath, Dr TND Sidzumo-Mazibuko, Liana Griessel and everyone who has steered this process to conclusion.

N Barney Pityana GCOB

Principal and Vice Chancellor

28 October 2009.