



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Address by the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, MP, at the opening session of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) colloquium on 10 years of democracy and higher education change, Glenburn Lodge Country Estate, Wednesday 10 November 2004

Chairperson of the CHE, Mr. Saki Macozoma

Vice-chancellors

Honoured Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure to be here this evening at the start of what I am sure will be two days of robust debate.

Let me start by congratulating the CHE and its partners, SAUVCA and the CTP, for organising this colloquium in the year that we celebrate ten years of democracy.

I have spent a good part of my first six months in office engaging with a whole host of key constituencies in the education sector, including higher education, and with interest groups in civil society and the private sector who have a stake in education.

My observations confirm that higher education stands at the precipice of weighty decision-making. It could take a leap into a strong revival of all institutions and a firm role in influencing and shaping the process of transition in South Africa.

Or it could choose to reside in isolated mediocrity, satisfied with a few star performers, and a majority that refuses to accept the mantle of change.

It has to be acknowledged that several institutions have made great strides and have managed to reflect internationally accepted criteria of positive achievement. They produce peer-referenced research, have able scholars who understand the intellectual enterprise, and offer teaching programmes that lead to the emergence of graduates who confidently take up their places in any society.

Alongside these successes we have programmes and institutions of somewhat dubious academic credentials, some not pursuing research, many lacking high-ranking scholars, and some offering teaching programmes that will almost certainly fail the looming stringent scrutiny of their peers.

This suggests that there are at least three imperatives that directly confront the sector.

First, we need to confound the sceptics by openly communicating the many positive achievements of our institutions. This is necessary because in my interactions with many South Africans, I have received the strong impression of a cynicism about higher education. People seem to feel we are wasteful, irresponsible, and unresponsive.

Second, higher education will have to articulate its views clearly on its role and place in our society. Arm-chair debates between the convinced will not secure national support, nor will obscure debates about “what is a university”. Higher education must say firmly, and show concretely, that it is the sector that provides high skill training, the sector that promotes confident evidence-based intellectual scrutiny and also that it will not rely on government to stimulate renewal, but will collectively use its sectoral strengths to address weaknesses and to extend and sustain its abilities.

Third, higher education must find a way of making these assertions while also locating itself in the change processes under way in South Africa, Africa, and the world.

There have been many exciting developments in the past ten years and also many new challenges. In fact, the successes in widening access to higher education for blacks and women have given rise to new problems and challenges in relation to planning, growth, the shape of curricula, and the retention of talented young scholars.

Given the significant changes that have taken place over the past ten years, it is now time for a period of consolidation in the policy arena over the coming two to three years. However, I must emphasise that this will provide us the opportunity to strengthen the system and build up public confidence in our universities and technikons.

At the same time we will constantly reflect on progress with new initiatives and I will therefore not hesitate to revise or augment policy if it is warranted in the light of unfolding experience.

Transformation has driven change in higher education over the past decade. For much of this period, transformation meant a focus on ensuring that our institutions are representative of all the people of South Africa.

Clearly transformation is much more than a numbers game. It must permeate to the core of the academy if it is to deliver on the visions and goals that we set for the sector in Education White Paper 3, almost seven years ago. I hope that a feature of the coming period will be the deepening of transformation as it impacts on the core work of higher education, that is, teaching and learning and research.

Three key areas need close attention if South Africa is to realise the promise of transformation in higher education and the education system more broadly.

The first key area is the challenge of attracting and retaining black and women scholars in higher education.

The composition of academic staff has changed little over the past ten years. Much of the research that is produced in this country still comes from white male scholars, and it is worrying that many of these productive researchers are in an age cohort that is close to retirement. The statistics on the number of post-graduates in key disciplines are also worrying.

Unless there is a concerted effort in the coming years to create the next generation of academics and researchers, we stand to lose not only valuable capacity in higher education to meet the high level human resource needs of the country, and increasingly the region, but also the opportunity to build our competitive edge in research and innovation, an edge that is the key to positioning South Africa in the global economy and to responding to the challenges of social transformation.

We must move rapidly towards a plan with the necessary targets, timelines, and the requisite resources. This could be an aspect on which we share ideas and develop strategies.

I am pleased to report that my Department has begun to discuss strategies for coordination with colleagues in the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the National Research Foundation.

This work has also gained new momentum having been identified as an area of priority for the President's Working Group on Higher Education. Sector concerns about sustainable funding of education must also be attended to.

The department is currently in discussion with the Treasury on a joint study into the overall funding of higher education. The Terms of Reference will be finalized before the end of the year and it is anticipated that the study will be concluded in the first half of next year.

As part of the study, attention will have to be paid to salary levels of academics in higher education, better coordination of funding support to research from different government departments and agencies, and enhancement of institutional cultures that are supportive of black and women academics.

The second key area is the role higher education should play in strengthening the quality of the education system as a whole.

Leaders in higher education are always complaining that there are not enough students matriculating with exemptions, especially in fields of study that require a high level of competence in mathematics and science.

Potentially, higher education has a central role to play in redressing this situation.

First, as a nation we must give priority to improving teacher education and professional development. The ministerial task team on Teacher Education and Development will be reporting to me shortly and its work will assist us in formulating a teacher education and development plan for the country.

Education faculties must shed their Cinderella status so that they are better positioned and resourced to meet the challenge of producing well-qualified and motivated teachers for all levels of the education system.

Second, higher education can play a role in the development of the further education and training (FET) colleges so that we improve the articulation between the colleges, higher education, and the world of work.

Third, higher education could provide research support for curriculum development and quality improvement in schooling. Higher education has a central role to play in research-based developments in the schooling system, especially in areas such as teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms, special needs and inclusive education, use of ICTs in education, assessment and evaluation practices, race, class and gender in schooling and so on.

The third key area is the challenge of transforming curricula in higher education.

Last week, President Thabo Mbeki, in his address at the University of Cape Town, posed the question of whether our universities have sufficiently transformed “on the issue of curriculum content which would simultaneously prepare students adequately for the challenges of the world of modern technology, science and commerce while not losing their identity, their history, their culture and their responsibility to their African countries”.

He went on to talk about the African university and in particular the vibrant intellectual life that existed in the 1960s and 1970s at Dar es Salaam, Makerere, Nairobi, and Ibadan. He referred to the lost spirit and soul of the African university. He said, and I quote: “I would suggest that our entire continent remains at risk until the African University, in the context of a continental reawakening, regains its soul. Among other things, a successful continental reawakening requires multiple sources of creativity.”

The pursuit of development in Africa would surely benefit from a new concept of the African university that would promote African scholarship in the way that the African Union promotes the development of Africa and in the way that the Pan African Parliament will promote democracy and good governance throughout Africa. We need to rejuvenate the African university to teach and stimulate the production of students rooted in self knowledge and skilled in innovation and creativity. Graduates who are confident about Africa and manage its passage to development.

We need to know more about our continent and we need to learn from the values of our great teachers. Five centuries before Charles Darwin discovered the specific features of evolution, Ibn Kaldun wrote that humans developed from the “world of the monkeys” through a widening process in which the species become more numerous. Nearly half a millennium before Karl Marx sketched out his labour theory of value, Ibn Kaldun wrote that labour is the real source of profit. And four hundred years before Auguste Comte’s invention of sociology, Ibn Kaldun unveiled his “science of culture”.^[1]

Attention to scholarship on and of Africa will create the possibility for enhancing the record and recognition of the African contribution to the world. Such recognition will enhance African confidence, develop world knowledge, and offer African scholars a chance at ensuring education leads to development.

While I have set out three areas that I believe deserve to be flagged as national priorities, in concluding I would like to flag a number of other areas that will be attended to.

My colleague, the Minister of Labour and I are close to finalising proposals for changes to the structure and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

I am strongly hopeful that this will bring to an end the uncertainties that have arisen in the wake of the review of the NQF and strengthen the synergies between education and training. It will also pave the way for the long awaited finalisation of the qualifications framework for higher education, early in the New Year.

The consolidation of the institutional landscape through mergers and incorporations is underway. This process is, amongst others, intended to give rise to stronger institutions that are diversified, more representative in terms of student and staff composition, more efficient in the use of human and infrastructural resources and better placed to respond to the high level human resource needs of the country and region.

A key factor in the consolidation process will be the leadership role of the councils and senior managements of the new institutions.

As I indicated in the recent meeting of the President's Working Group on Higher Education, the government will play particular attention to the strengthening of historically disadvantaged institutions and more specifically the three institutions earmarked as flagships, that is, UWC, Fort Hare (already augmented by the incorporation of the East London campus of Rhodes University) and the University of Limpopo. The judicious use of the recapitalisation funding due to these universities will go a long way to reposition these institutions.

South African higher education institutions are also becoming increasingly active in the rest of Africa. I believe that such involvement cannot take place in a policy vacuum, especially given the potential to inadvertently harm local systems. In this regard, I will be seeking the advice of the CHE and other key players on the draft code of conduct to inform the role and responsibilities of South African institutions operating beyond our borders.

Let me say in conclusion that I have not forgotten or bypassed the institutional autonomy/academic debate.

It is a debate that is typical of our time. I would ask you to shift the paradigm, to move the debate away from whether the state is entitled or not to ask for greater accountability for the use of public resources.

I call once again on Vice Chancellors to focus academic minds on the real debate, which is about the degree and nature of state steering, the balance between self-regulation and state regulation and the efficacy of the steering instruments.

I wish you well in your deliberations over the coming days and I look forward to receiving a summary report on the conclusions of the colloquium.

I thank you.

[i] George Katsiaficas, "Ibn Khaldun: a Dialectical Philosopher for the New Millenium" in Teodros Kiros (ed), *Explorations in African Political Thought* (Routledge, London, 2001).