



**MINISTRY  
HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**Keynote Address by Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande to the Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation**

**Cape Peninsula University of Technology; 22 April 2010**

Chairperson, Professor Malegapuru Makgoba

The Deputy President;

Vice-Chancellors and Deputy Vice-Chancellors;

International guests;

Members of the various higher education constituencies including the academic community, workers and students;

Ladies and gentlemen

The term 'transformation' is sometimes used rather narrowly – almost as if it were synonymous with black economic empowerment. More broadly, it is also used to refer to the process of overcoming racial divisions. This is more accurate and acceptable. However, I believe that transformation should be understood to be about more than eradicating the purely racial aspects of apartheid, as important as this is. It is essentially about radically changing our society, including our education and training system and all other areas of life to ensure that they can serve the interests of *all* South Africans in a democratic, equitable and prosperous society. Put differently it is about confronting the deeply interrelated challenges of class, race and gender inequalities, including confronting the HIV/AIDS pandemic and being an inclusive society for the disabled. This means ensuring that the working class and the poor, women, youth and the disabled, become significant beneficiaries not only economically and politically, but also in terms of cultural and

educational development. All of us here have a duty to ensure that the higher education system serves this purpose.

As most of you know already, our new Department of Higher Education and Training assumed responsibility to the whole range of post-school education and training institutions, including the universities, the vocational and continuing education and training colleges, adult education and the institutions responsible for ensuring skills training for workers and the unemployed such as the SETAs and the National Skills Fund. This is in a way a return to the original pre-1994 idea of an integrated education and training system and we now envisage the department's main responsibility as the provision of an integrated and differentiated system of post-school opportunities for youth and adults. This provides exciting new opportunities on a new terrain to realise our goals.

The universities, as providers of the highest level of academic education among these institutions, have a special role to play in strengthening the post-school system as a whole and play a central role in national development. There is much to be celebrated and nurtured in our higher education sector. It contains many dedicated and brilliant academics and institutional leaders and includes world leaders in a number of academic fields, from archaeology and human evolution to mining engineering, geology, bio-technology, medicine, marine biology, materials science, legal studies, various humanities and social sciences and others. South African universities attract almost 70 000 students from countries on all continents and particularly from Africa – thus contributing to the development of our continent.

South African universities have taken some important steps in responding to the legacy of apartheid. The demographic profile of students the former white, coloured and Indian universities has changed considerably and many African students and others from poor families have gained admittance to opportunities that were formerly unavailable to them. The proportion of African students in universities increased from 49% in 1995 to 63% in 2007 and is estimated to be around two-thirds at present. This trend still has some way to go to reach the 79% of Africans in the population, but it does show steady and considerable progress since 1994. Before 1995 male students outnumbered females in public higher

education institutions, by 2007 this had changed and women represented 55,5% of student enrolments, higher than the 52% of women in the population.

Many poor, particularly black, students have been beneficiaries of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which, despite the shortcomings highlighted in the recent review of the scheme, has successfully distributed over R12 billion in financial assistance to over 600 000 students over the past decade. All universities have introduced innovative programmes including new curricula and academic development and student support programmes. A few excellent programmes have been introduced to support the development of black and female academic staff. The responses of the sector to the Soudien Report, generally demonstrate a seriousness among most universities to tackling the issues of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. The establishment of system-wide, quality assurance mechanisms, especially the CHE's Higher Education Quality Committee, and the improvements in the functioning of the National Research Foundation have helped strengthen the system.

Sadly, as I am sure that we all recognise these and other positive developments in the university sector are not enough. The legacy of apartheid is still clearly discernible in higher education as it is in many aspects of South African life. The relative deprivation of the formerly black, rural institutions still exists – they constantly teeter on the brink of bankruptcy, much of their infrastructure is inadequate, teaching and study facilities are poor, libraries and laboratories are badly stocked, accommodation for many of their students is over-crowded and its quality appalling, and the staff qualifications do not begin to compare with those at the better-off universities. It is little wonder that one of the Vice Chancellors recently admonished me for referring to these former bantustan universities as 'previously disadvantaged,' asserting the obvious fact that they are still very much disadvantaged to this day. As I mentioned in my budget speech last month, I will soon appoint a task team to review the universities' funding framework and it will focus, among other things, on the special situation of disadvantaged universities with a view to improving their situation and conditions. Another task team, led by Prof Ihron Rensburg, will make recommendations on expanding and improving student accommodation.

As the Soudien Report shows, racism and discrimination still persist in universities and make life difficult for many students and workers, and even unbearable for many. The report has been criticised by some who have raised questions about methodology or approach. But whatever the merits of these arguments, what the report provides is a stark and credible picture of the challenges that face our students, academics and staff at our institutions. I will say no more about this now as it is due for a more thorough discussion later this morning.

Access to a university education for many qualified youth is still a serious problem. This is partly because of problems of affordability and we are hoping to progressively address this problem through the expansion and improvement of the NSFAS. The report of the NSFAS review committee has now been released for public comment and I expect useful comments to assist us in responding to student funding in higher education and colleges. But even if we discount the problem of affordability, many young, qualified people still find it difficult to find study places. We are expecting to expand university enrolments over the next few years, including through the establishment of new universities in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape. In addition we will significantly expand the number of places available in further education and training colleges and other vocational institutions which must become colleges of choice rather than merely a place for students who cannot make it to university. As we do this, we will expect the universities to assist with the training of FET lecturers and greatly expanding their research on vocational training. We are also working towards the establishment of an institute that is dedicated to support FET colleges and we will expect universities to play a role in this regard.

If we focus on the universities themselves, the expansion of access is not enough. Academic success is equally important and it is clear that in this respect we have a long way to go. Less than half of students who enrol in first year actually graduate. The CHE has estimated in 2007 that only 44% of those who enrolled in 2000 would go on to graduate. (Our data for this kind of information that requires cohort studies is sketchy and inadequate, but that is another story). It is also clear that underprivileged, mainly black, students do not perform as well as their fellow students from wealthier families and better-off schools, even when they study in the same universities. This represents not only a deep disappointment and a tragic

sense of lost opportunity for individual students and their families, but is also a loss for our national development potential and a waste of talent and scarce resources.

The reasons for low success and high drop-out rates are multi-fold and include problems associated with inadequate funding, poor student accommodation and living conditions and inadequate academic preparation for university studies. These reasons need to be studied in greater detail and the government must find more resources to tackle the problems.

Universities, too, must intensify their efforts to improve the situation. We intend for instance to appoint a team to assess the scale and challenge in student accommodation.

This will clearly need further curriculum reform and the expansion of student support programmes. I have learnt to my consternation recently that some foundation and student support programmes have actually been closing down. It's possible that there are good reasons for this – and possibly the foundation programmes have been replaced by a better approach – but I must confess that I am puzzled by this. I urge the commission on the student experience of higher education, to examine this problem.

Universities understandably lament the quality of today's matriculants, but we cannot remain with complaints. We have to adapt our curriculum and teaching strategies to suit the student population that we have. We are not likely to get a radically different type of student anytime soon. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) is working hard to improve the levels of literacy and numeracy in our schools and to improve the quality of the educational achievement among matriculants. I am confident that the DBE will succeed, but this is a slow process. Meanwhile, we must adjust our universities to the students that we have because realistically, we can't adapt the students to the universities. This may mean better foundation courses or increased student support (and I do want to acknowledge the very serious work *some* universities are doing in this regard), but it may also mean that we need to adjust our curricula to make them more relevant to student needs. I am not suggesting the lowering of academic standards. However, an institution that does not take its students' needs seriously cannot do its job.

It is questionable whether our system values teaching and learning sufficiently, especially at under-graduate level. Is it given equal weight, for example to research when it comes to funding? And if, as I believe, it is not, doesn't this penalise those universities whose main challenge is teaching and which have a much weaker research infrastructure? In other words aren't we just perpetuating the unequal relationship between universities by focussing funding on precisely the things that the strongest universities are best at and under-valuing the activities that will most benefit the poorest students at the poorest universities? This is one of the issues that I hope the commission on institutional differentiation will pay attention to.

There is general agreement that we need a differentiated higher education system, but we have an undifferentiated funding formula. Our higher education system is highly differentiated, but the differentiation that exists still owes as much to the legacy of apartheid than to our post-apartheid reforms. Our policies, and especially our funding formula must be tailored to a rational and fair differentiation that leads to the strengthening of the entire system to the benefit of its students and the country as a whole. I look forward to the advice of this summit on these issues.

An important curriculum issue that some (but by no means the majority of) universities have started to take seriously is the study of African languages. In some of our leading urban universities as well in some of the rural ones, African language departments have actually become weaker over the years. Strengthening them is a central strategy in developing the languages of the majority of our people, in particular because of the role these departments can play in producing African language teachers and developing African language literature, something that can help in developing a culture of reading among children and young people. I'd like to suggest that universities and professional bodies such as those representing teachers, doctors and lawyers consider making some study (perhaps for a year) of an official African language other than English and Afrikaans compulsory in order to obtain a qualification. This would not be a first for this country; it was used successfully in the past to promote Afrikaans among non-Afrikaans speakers. It would be beneficial to all the students, help strengthen the African language departments and raise the status of African languages.

Another important issue on the curriculum is the broad challenge to have innovative methods to expand the intellectual horizons and critical faculties of our students. For example most of our social, economic and management sciences are dominated if not enslaved by a single idea that the market is the answer to all of our societal and developmental problems. Yet this idea has just been cruelly exposed by the current global economic crisis, such that it is an idea that in itself is in crisis. One does not get a sense that these matters are being critically examined in our academic institutions and public discourse.

If our universities are centres for free and critical generation of knowledge and ideas why, for instance, is it correct to tell the students that profits fundamentally are determined by the laws of supply and demand in the marketplace? Yet it is regarded as intellectually incorrect to also tell the students that no, but this is just one view, and the other view is that the source of profit is the amount of surplus labour extracted from workers' labour power? A few ministers have for instance approached me to complain about the type of economics graduates they are getting, who have no clue about a developmental state, industrial policy, etc., and yet these are major concerns for our country and future if we are to tackle unemployment and poverty.

The question that arises out of these matters relating to our curricula is whether there are any interventions needed to support diversification of curricula and promotion of African languages? Do we need earmarked funding to support this? Let this summit reflect on some of these issues

While I have emphasised the importance of improving teaching, learning and curriculum transformation, I also want to stress the importance of research and innovation. Most research in South Africa is done in universities. It makes an invaluable contribution to our economic and social development and assists our country to compete internationally and, just as importantly, to collaborate with a variety of international partners. The government will continue to fund research through my department as well as through the National Research Foundation and other government departments and we are committed to increasing this steadily. Research is a fundamental function of higher education institutions

and is crucial to transformation as well as to all matters associated with national development.

A matter that has raised the concern of the higher education sector for over a decade now is the rising average age of academics and the need to sustain the academic profession. Despite this concern, we have not made a great deal of progress. The average age of South African academics is over fifty and is not getting any younger. The Council of Higher Education's 2009 report on *The State of Higher Education in South Africa* notes a drop in the number of staff under the age of 30 in the period 2003 to 2007 and an increase in the number of academics over the age of 50.

It is important that we identify all the reasons for this situation and that we draw up a comprehensive, medium to long term national plan to deal with it. This will involve persuading larger numbers of young graduates to go on to post-graduate studies and to take up an academic career, ensuring salaries that they find acceptable and conditions of work that can provide job satisfaction. This will not be easy to do and, I must confess, the job would be made a lot easier if academics were a better organised constituency and able to speak more forcefully for themselves.

The salary gap between managers and academics (as well as between the vice-chancellors and the lowest paid workers) has grown enormously over the past fifteen years and there is no consistency in the criteria used for determining executive salaries among institutions. I see this as a serious problem that needs to be addressed and I have taken it up with the Chairs of University Councils. On the basis of our discussions as well as work done by my predecessor in this regard, we have agreed on a process of establishing clearer guidelines for each Council to follow in setting the remuneration of their executives.

In the early days of South African democracy, there was great concern to ensure the establishment of representative democratic institutions in the education system. The reasons for this were both because of the intrinsic value of democracy and also because the negotiations processes at a national level had taught us how dialogue could contribute to conflict resolution. The Higher Education Act provided for the establishment of Institutional

Forums involving all stakeholder groups in each institution. These have not been functioning as well as was hoped and I wonder if this is not one of the major contributory factors to the frequent conflicts and confrontations in universities. In some cases where my Ministry has become involved, it is fairly clear that a lack of real communication and a lack of trust between management and students or workers is a factor. In my experience, academics also often express frustration that their views are not being heard. Getting the Institutional Forums working effectively should be a priority and must be one of the key issues for discussion here.

At a national level I intend establishing a permanent Higher Education Stakeholder Council which will meet possibly once or twice a year. Its purpose will be to interrogate various issues and processes in the higher education sector and keep me as the Minister informed of the thinking of major stakeholders in the sector. It will also serve as a forum for dialogue between the various stakeholders. I would welcome any advice that this summit can give me on the structure and functioning of this Council. At this point I would also like to point out that the holding of this Summit and a possible establishment of such a council is not meant to replace or sideline the very important role played by the Council for Higher Education (CHE). The two bodies are distinct but also have complementary roles. I want to strengthen both.

An issue that has come to concern me a great deal is the corruption that appears to be growing in our higher education and training institutions, including universities. It seems that many conflicts involving university Councils, managers and even unions and student representatives are the result of attempts to gain corrupt access to public higher education resources. Honest and committed leaders, it seems, can find themselves on the receiving end of campaigns to discredit or even to oust them by those who seek to influence tenders for their own illicit benefit. Corrupt practices are potentially one of the biggest dangers standing in the way of transformation because they divert the people's resource into private pockets so that they can no longer be used for the benefit of those for whom they are meant or for strengthening public institutions. I am now considering legislation to make it illegal for members of Councils, management or staff of institutions to tender for, or be associated with companies that tender for, contracts at their own universities. We must just

root out ‘tenderpreneurs’ in our higher education and training system. Legislation alone will not, of course, stop corrupt practices and I hope that we can all reflect on this and come up with possible strategies to uproot corruption in our institutions.

Another issue of concern relating to protest action is the wanton damage to property and violence we see on our campuses. No matter how legitimate the issues under protest are, I firmly believe that nothing justifies the damage and destruction to campus property and deliberate injury to others. We must fiercely defend the right to protest and the right for all our voices to be heard. However, we must know where to draw the line.

During the course of this year, the Department of Higher Education and Training will develop a Green Paper for public discussion. This paper will analyse the post school education and training system, setting out objectives and priorities for the various sub-system, including higher education, and setting out a vision for the integration of education and training. After thorough public scrutiny and debate, my intention is to convert the Green Paper into a White Paper, an official policy position of government and a guide to the department’s approach and activities over the years to come. The proceedings of this summit will be a crucial input into the Green Paper and thus help to shape the higher education and training system for the future. It is therefore a very important summit that we find ourselves in. I hope that we can all participate fully, to express our views and to listen seriously to the views of others.

Different constituencies with a stake in the higher education system don’t always agree on the problems and challenges that exist and do not always agree on the ways of tackling them. One of my main reasons for calling this conference is to bring stakeholders together to exchange ideas, to influence one another and discuss their differences with a view of finding a way forward (at least in some key commonly agreed areas) in which we can create a stronger higher education system which will serve the interests of the country and all of its people. We have one higher education system and ways must be found for it to meet all our needs and aspirations.

In closing I want to say that much as we expect management to play a leading role in universities, we must all accept that universities are broader communities. They have students, workers, academics, communities and other role players who all have an interest in their success and have a critical role to play.

I also wish to urge you all that let us not turn this historic summit into a lamentation session or some kind of bargaining chamber. Let us use it critically do a concrete analysis of the real and distinct conditions facing our higher education system and focus on what is to be done.

Thank you.