



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

The Role of Higher Education in a Developmental State

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Our honoured guest, Mr Ahmed Essop, CEO of the Council for Higher Education,

The leadership of Unisa in all your various portfolios,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this very important reflective summit convened with the intention of our reflecting on the journey travelled by UNISA in order that we might consolidate on the achievements made, effectively address the weaknesses evidenced and reposition this great institution to claim its strategic role as we are poised to take a leap into the future. I will now extend on the metaphor of the 'journey travelled' by Unisa but using the example of a car that must undergo a major service when it has reached a certain threshold in terms of kilometres or miles with the aim of making it fit and ready for the journey ahead.

Judging by the range of topics to be presented over the next two days, and considering the themes of commissions, there is no doubt that this gathering will be a festival of ideas. Indeed a forum of this nature creates an opportunity for us, as managers at Unisa, to share information on what is happening in our various units and to debate ideas on Unisa's journey into the future. We are also afforded a unique opportunity on the second day to interact and engage Unisa Council leadership.

South Africa, Africa and the whole world is at the crossroads, particularly when we look at the plethora of socio-economic and political challenges that have engulfed many regions, from the Northern parts of Nigeria to Mali and Libya, from South Sudan to Kenya, from Syria to Iraq, from Greece to Ukraine. Within our own

society, we witness the persistence of poverty, unemployment, inequality, violent crime especially against women and children, corruption and relentless protests and violent strikes. On the other hand, there are vast opportunities in the sphere of technological innovations and Africa's demographic dividends and vast reserves of natural resources present a great potential for this continent to claim its place and redeem itself among nations of the world.

To paraphrase Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, the fierce urgency of the moment does not allow us to engage in the luxury of entertaining ideas for the sake of ideas in the face of such challenges that have trapped a considerable section of humanity. We ought to engage in this critical introspective exercise by challenging ourselves on how we must turn Unisa's compelling vision into value for our society and internal and external stakeholders especially our students. We must forever challenge ourselves by asking the question, "How can we make real, in a practical sense, the promises of our mission statement? We must challenge ourselves to live and internalize our values of *excellence with integrity and social justice and fairness*. This speaks to the very purpose of this workshop that seeks to provide a space for raising difficult questions, constructively engage in identifying solutions to challenges facing our institution and society and, most importantly, implement those solutions to improve the lives of the people we serve. We are aware that South Africa is notorious for being an over-conferenced and an over-work-shopped country with few practical outcomes. However, I am confident that this

workshop will give rise to visions and directions to map out the next part of our journey.

In April 2014 an extended Management Lekgotla was held and this larger forum dovetails perfectly with that earlier exercise and will make a valuable input into the outcomes of the lekgotla. As a way of providing the broader policy context for this workshop I will make a few remarks which locate this university within a South African developmental state. South Africa has reached an important milestone of 20 years since its transition to a non-racial inclusive democracy in 1994. Whilst it is important to recognize the numerous achievements of this period, there remain serious challenges which we as an institution of higher learning, need to address. We need to ensure we equip our staff to tackle these challenges through relevant research output, the quality of their teaching and learning and the quality of graduates that we produce. In the absence of thriving and productive sectors of our economy, there is a growing dependence on government social security programmes, something that is not sustainable in the long term. The global financial crisis of 2008 had evolved into a full-blown economic crisis by 2009, and this negatively impacted on the South African economy at the time when the country needed more resources and faster economic growth to resolve some of its problems. At the beginning of the 21st century, the ANC-led government declared its intention to transform South Africa into a developmental state. This meant that the state would play an active

role in producing developmental success. This reinforces Peter Evans' assertion that:

Neither theorists nor practising policy-makers can ignore the crucial role of state institutions in producing developmental success. History and development theory support the proposition 'no development state, no development.' The idea of a developmental state puts robust, competent public institutions at the centre of a developmental matrix. Unfortunately, translating these basic insights into concrete proposals for the construction of effective state institutions is anything but simple.¹

It is important to refute the misconception that South Africa is already a developmental state. South Africa has only declared its strategic intent of being a developmental state and it has to work hard to earn that status. It is, therefore, the work of public institutions like higher education institutions that can assist the state to conceptualize and actualize a developmental state suitable to the South African conditions as neither Asian nor Latin American or any other models can be reproduced as they were without factoring the unique historical and contemporary environment of South Africa.

¹ Evans, P. "Constructing the 21st Century developmental state: potential and pitfalls." In Edigheji, O. (ed) *Constructing a democratic developmental state in South Africa*. Cape Town, HSRC Press. 2010. (p. 37)

The size and scope of Unisa in the South African higher education landscape and its unique position in terms of open distance learning locates this institution in a special position to influence the evolution and realization of a developmental state or a developmental society while also influencing the African Agenda. The state capacity to deliver services is severely challenged and the corporate sector's ability to transcend its profit-seeking motives is equally constrained, with few exceptions. Institutions such as Unisa can play a vital strategic role as catalysts for such development.

Unisa will have to critically reflect on its capacity and come up with concrete and practical solutions if it is to reposition itself as a key player in assisting in the realization of a developmental state. It will take a brutally honest diagnosis of Unisa challenges and weaknesses as well as a creative crafting of implementable and measurable solutions with effective monitoring and impact assessment tools. This will require a radical shift in the mind-set of each and every one of us (managers and staff in both core and support services) as well as a fundamental reconfiguration of our systems. A new deal for our primary clients, students and those who receive our services is critical if we are to have a new social compact. A giant leap rather than an incremental approach in resolving our problems is needed.

Having said all this, I have chosen to spend my time today reflecting on the role of education in a developmental State. Education has always played a critical role in the development and transformation of societies. A proper education is imperative for raising peoples' consciousness, inculcating values of honesty, communality, courage, dignity and hard work. I take it for granted that we share a similar perspective on what constitutes 'education': education, essentially, is a system made up of various branches and aspects aimed primarily to inform. As for the notion of developmental states, our colleague, the Head of TMALI, Prof Vusi Gumede (2013) – in a recent book chapter on educational reforms in South Africa – views a developmental state as 'a state that is active in pursuing its agenda, working with social partners, and has the *capacity* and is appropriately organised for its predetermined developmental objectives.' Indeed, among the key aspects of what makes up a developmental state, as literature indicates, are the various capacities necessary for crafting a long-term vision for a country, for designing programmes and projects and the implementation thereof as well as capacity to think through policies and provide effective leadership. Without a doubt, higher education must ensure that these requisite capacities are taught and/or provided.

In twenty years of democracy, South Africa has made some commendable progress in improving access to education, especially for previously disadvantaged groups. However, concerns exist over the quality of the education being provided. Comparative

experiences of the role of education in successful developmental states in South East Asia and Latin America show that investment in conventional (formal), vocational and technological education is fundamental to development. In the particular case of South Africa where a deliberate dysfunctional educational system was put in place by the apartheid regime to disempower the majority of the population, there is a need to intensify radical and progressive educational reforms geared towards reconstructing the distorted historical narrative of the peoples of South Africa as a result of colonisation.

Post-apartheid South Africa is confronted with serious social upheaval which is threatening the very foundation and the fabric of our society [as my colleague, Adam Habib (2013), argues in his recent book] – many others have made this pertinent point which calls for a reinvigoration of both formal and informal education. While the formal part takes place within the formal education institutions, the virtue of education in informal settings must be strengthened as a first step towards socialisation into community life.

There is no doubt that colonial and apartheid education policies grossly negatively affected the education system in South Africa. As various scholars have argued, colonial and apartheid educational systems did not only lay the basis for inequality in the past and the present but were actually oriented towards producing an African elite

that cater for the interests of the colonial masters and their progenitors [as Prof Toyin Falola (2004) has argued] - Isaac Bangani Tabata and Es'kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele, among others, have made similar points for the specific case of apartheid education in South Africa (and Es'kia Mphahlele has actually written extensively about what should be done about South Africa's education).

In order to address the various challenges that confront our country and to build a developmental state, the vestiges of racist educational forms and patterns must be completely discarded to reflect the historical trajectories and contemporary challenges of our country. As our colleague, Morgan Ndlovu (2014) argues, “the process of decolonising education in Africa needs to be accompanied by that of decolonising development so that there is no mismatch between the education that is imparted on the peoples of Africa and the manner in which they conceive development”.

In twenty years of democracy, access to education has increased, especially for the previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa. Increase in access to educational opportunities is particularly important in building a developmental state. For instance, in 2009, 834,000 students were enrolled at university compared to 670,000 who enrolled in 2000 (Mwawenda, 2014). Despite concerns about the quality of graduates from our various universities, the universities are reinventing themselves to address this challenge. However, there

is need to ensure a greater complementarity between our educational system and the African society. Our colleague, Prof Odora Hoppers and her co-author (2011), (cited in Ndlovu, 2014:10) has argued that:

Two centuries of politicised and scienticised denial of the existence of the metaphysics of indigenous people has not eradicated their knowledge systems, their rituals, and their practices...at least not completely. Whenever we look deeply at African society, or indeed most indigenous societies, the empirical fact that stares back at us is a reality of life lived differently, lives constituted around very different metaphysics of economics, of law, of science, of healing, of marriage, of joy, of dying, and of co-existence. The problem before us is therefore that the academy has not adapted to its natural context, or has resisted adaptation epistemologically, cosmologically and culturally.

This above noted constraint to the knowledge production is of utmost importance in a bid to produce informed citizenry that will not only be fit for the workplace but that will be confident of who they are as a people and contribute to a comprehensive strategy of achieving the goal of a development state. The change in the current order of things in the educational policies and paradigms should aim at reproduction of the existing, critique of the existing, and expanding the understanding of the existing knowledge base. In the context of a

paradigm shift, quality education is defined as education that provides Africans worldwide with the type of foresight, knowledge, skills, experiences and passion that enables them to make significant contributions to the development of the continent and the Diaspora. Implicitly, the type of quality education that is envisioned at this juncture is an education that would assist in breaking the socio-economic and political rigid grip that outside entities have imposed on the continent and on the Diaspora over the centuries (Braithwaite, 2014).

The attainment of a developmental state in South Africa is hinged on paying greater attention to the content, context and structure of the education provided to the citizens. In view of the contribution of science and technology to industrial revolution and automated technological manufacturing complexes around the world, an aspiring developmental state must invest more education that can ensure that content is also about entrepreneurial and enterprise development. Incentives should be given to students to enrol for courses in science education. Laboratories and machine workshops should also be established to ensure that students gain practical knowledge of their various fields. Provision of adequate laboratories and workshops should be complemented by industrial training and internship programmes. The White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (2014) is clear about the importance of workplace training and work-integrated training as a critical part of skills training. Besides, training programmes should also be introduced for those

who for one reason or the other lack capacity to attend formal school settings. This will provide them with the requisite skills to work as artisans in various sectors of the economy. Innovation is also very crucial in achieving the goal of a developmental state and this must be factored in overall educational design of the country.

South Africa presents a unique context in which education can play a very critical role in advancing the realisation of the goal of a developmental state. With vast mineral deposits and arable land, the country must invest in building skills and capabilities that are geared towards ensuring transition from mineral exporting to manufacturing. Such transition will require building competencies along the value chain.

Given the history of the country and the need to bridge the gap in racial inequality, access to education should be made more inclusive and affordable. Within the context of the current skill shortages in several critical sectors of the economy, it is imperative that funding be given to South African citizens (especially the previously disadvantaged groups) to study at the university level both locally and internationally. Some of the countries in Africa that boast of high levels of capacity today adopted this strategy immediately after their political independence.

Structurally, the form of education that will enhance the actualisation of a developmental state in South Africa should be globally conscious but locally specific. Countries have different existential and historical trajectories. Consequently, the design of our educational policies should reflect such variations. Similarly, critical consciousness is of central importance to the citizens in our quest for building a developmental state. This will help the citizens to be politically, ethically and socially active with the intention of not just living responsibly but also holding political leaders accountable [as our colleague, Head of TMALI, Prof Vusi Gumede, argued in his recent inaugural professorial lecture].

It is a given that education must contribute to the critical capacities that are needed to achieve a fully-fledged developmental state in South Africa. It is clear, from the literature that examines the developmental experiences of Asian developmental states, that education is the single most important tool for development and transformation.

At the heart of all this is cracking the paradox that afflicts many universities, that of tenaciously clinging to the conventional ways of doing things or preserving the status quo when they are assumed to be centres of innovation and theatres of experimentation of new solutions. These habitual tendencies are best apprehended by Samuel Johnson's simple and yet profound statement, "*The chains*

of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.” Until there is a radical rapture of the chains of using the same methods in resolving new problems there will be little prospect for innovative solutions and a new deal for our clients. A call for a responsive African university is captured in the following observation by Olukoshi and Zeleza:

In the face of a rapidly globalising and technologically intensive world, traditional disciplinary boundaries are crumbling and new interdisciplinary configurations and research agendas are developing that require new organizational forms of knowledge production, dissemination, and consumption. Similarly, new local-level and transnational alliances in the higher education sector are emerging, designed to take advantage of openings offered by processes of globalization and to force reconstruction of the basic principles that underpin the entire higher education system.²

This observation reinforces the notion that in a fast changing world, universities must adapt or face a long excruciating decay. We must, therefore, use workshops of this nature to creatively identify

² Zeleza, P. and Olukoshi. A. (Eds) *African Universities in the twenty-first century*. Dakar: Codesria, 2004. (p.2)

mechanisms of making our university responsive, agile, sensitive to the changing environment and innovative to keep up with the times while adequately servicing its students, academics and targeted clients who utilize our service and expertise.

Given the crisis of under-educated youth, Unisa has responded to this social mandate by increasing its enrolment of students. The challenge now is to ensure that the access and success nexus is closely correlated by ensuring retention and throughput that is undergirded by adequate support for students and quality education and research. Academic transformation that will yield these results must focus on innovations that will improve all key components of the system and these include curriculum, teaching and teacher development, community and student support systems. These, essentially, must also involve transforming institutional culture through consultative and inclusive leadership that must involve all stakeholders in the institutional life of the University in order to ensure a sense of ownership of the processes of the University and the ongoing agenda of transformation.

All these are immediate efforts to realize a 'new deal' for quality service for students which in turn will improve the quality of their lives as well as their academic performance. In the final analysis, the success of any university is primarily in the quality of its graduates who in turn must play a productive role in a society as active citizens

and professionals. The quality of academic research and influence in policy making and in the general improvement of livelihood is the ultimate contribution in the realization of a developmental state.

South Africa spends more than 20% of its total budget on pre-tertiary education and this was at R140 billion in the financial year 2008/2009 and it climbed to R165 billion in 2010/11 and it is projected to progressively increase. No other African country spends as much on its pre-tertiary schooling and yet South Africa has had very little, in comparative and in absolute terms, to show for its massive investment. The poor quality of our basic education, a feeder to our university system, creates a serious problem for an institution like Unisa. We, therefore, have to think creatively on how we can make our modest contribution in turning this dire situation around in collaboration with all critical stakeholders including the Department of Basic Education and NGOs operating in that sector. We also have to think hard and innovatively on how the bridging programmes for our new students could be designed to ensure that they succeed in their university studies.

As managers, it is our collective responsibility to ensure the security, sustainability, growth and competitive edge of Unisa. Realistically, we will not be able to resolve everything over two days of the summit but I hope this will go down in the annals of this institution as a critical turning point –where a movement or a wave will begin and

gain momentum as we return to our units, colleges, Institutes and different offices. I look forward to the deliberations and appeal to you to engage robustly and constructively towards a positive end that will benefit Unisa and humanity.

I leave you charged with a sense that collectively and individually, as we are gathered here, we are the leaders we have been waiting for. As a great spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi proclaims, “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.”

I thank you.

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