

Defining our Purposes and Roles and Meeting our Challenges

Introduction

This section briefly articulates the social purposes and roles of universities; highlights some of the key strengths and achievements of our universities post-1994, and identifies some critical issues and challenges that we face in relation to our purposes and roles.

Social Purposes and Roles

We live in a changing society, in which the need for fundamental change is widely accepted, if not always necessarily the goals, strategies and pace of change. As universities we must change and also contribute to social change. However, in doing this we must be clear about our *social purposes* and *roles*.

The former Principal of Edinburgh University, Lord Sutherland, writes that we need to define our identity in the changing and 'new diverse world of higher education'. 'The most essential task', he suggests, is to create 'a sense of our own worth' by fashioning 'our understanding of our identity' – our understanding of what it means to be a university (cited in Graham, 2005: 155). However, as the philosopher Gordon Graham notes, we 'cannot have a satisfactory sense of (our) worth if (we have) no sense of what (our) purpose is' (Graham, 2005:158). He usefully also cautions that 'but equally, no sense of worth will be forthcoming if (we aspire) to an ideal which (we) cannot attain' (ibid:258).

The meaning of a university is not to be found in what we teach and research, or how we do these. Instead, what it means to be a university resides in our being institutions:

- That produce and disseminate knowledge which advances our understanding of our natural and social worlds, and enrich our accumulated 'cultural inheritances' and heritage
- That cultivate and form the cognitive character of students so that they: 'can think effectively and critically'; have 'achieved depth in some field of knowledge; have a 'critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves'; have 'a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times; are 'able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it'; have 'some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems'; and can 'communicate with cogency' (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000)
- That are committed 'to the spirit of truth', and which allows intellectual inquiry 'to go where it will' without any 'boundaries' (Graham, 2005:163), and
- That possess a considerable degree of academic freedom, self-rule by academics, and institutional autonomy in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

In as much there is value to holding onto such an idea of a university, we must recognise that there are many conceptions and models of the 'university' and that these have changed over time. We must also accept that the 'name "university" now applies to institutions with widely different functions and characters' (Graham, 2005:157), and that this means that the 'ideals each can aspire to' will be different (ibid:258)

Our universities admit students with different abilities. Beyond the minimum standards that we all adhere to, our qualifications are of different standards and our programmes differ in content and purposes. The pool of academics available to us means that not all departments at all our universities can offer postgraduate programmes, and especially doctoral programmes. It also means that not all academic departments and scholars at all our universities can undertake the 'scholarship of discovery' in contrast

with the ‘scholarship of teaching’ (Boyer, 1990). It is, therefore, simply not true that all our academic departments and all our universities are the same in all respects.

As South African universities, we *are* different from one another – not better or worse – but different. This is a source of strength, because the economic and social needs of South Africa and our continent are highly diverse and call for a diverse spectrum of institutions that are differentiated in terms of their missions, qualifications and programmes, kinds of research, entrance requirements, and so forth. There is no virtue in homogeneity, where every university seeks to be the same and to undertake exactly the same purposes and functions. We need to honestly acknowledge that we are different, and that there is virtue in being different. We should avoid aspiring to ‘ideal(s) which (we) cannot attain’. Otherwise, ‘no sense of worth will be forthcoming’ and we can have no ‘proper self-confidence’ (Graham, 2005:157).

Based on our understanding of our core characteristics, our tasks are three-fold.

First, we must provide imaginatively, thoughtfully, and rigorously conceptualised, designed, and implemented teaching and learning programmes and qualifications. These must take into account the kinds of knowledge, competencies, skills and attitudes that our graduates require to function in a rapidly changing society, continent and world. Our programmes must enable our students to graduate as professionals who can think theoretically and imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives and communicate orally and in writing.

Our second task is to produce knowledge through different kinds of imaginative research and scholarship and the pursuit of truth and critique without fear of reaction. On the one hand, research must engage with the huge and varied developmental challenges of our province, country and continent. On the other hand, we must also support and mobilise funds for basic scholarly research and not sacrifice such research at the altar of ‘relevance’, defined in the most parochial manner and reduced, ultimately, to market or economic relevance.

Finally, our universities must undertake community engagement through mutually respectful, reciprocal and beneficial partnerships with various communities. Carefully conceptualised and planned, such engagement can create and advance economic, social and cultural opportunities and development respectively. In turn, it can enrich and enhance research and learning and teaching, and facilitate the development of critical consciousness, citizenship and new competencies and skills.

In pursuing our purposes and tasks we must be alive to the state of disciplinary knowledge, the abilities and needs of our students, and the social, cultural and economic contexts in which research, learning and teaching, and community engagement take place. Necessarily, therefore, our universities must engage with the challenges of our local, national, and wider African contexts.

This requires universities to be dynamic, vibrant and innovative incubators of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination, and of the formation of new generations of professionals, thinkers and actors. The particular contribution of any university will necessarily be the product of the complex intersection of its institutional history and biography, institutional choices and decisions regarding principal purposes and roles, goals and strategies, social structure and conjuncture, national policy goals and imperatives, the market, state steering and the nature and extent of public support. The contributions of our universities must be testimony to and strengthen public appreciation of the pivotal and vital role of universities in a changing South Africa.

Achievements

Since 1994, universities have been in great flux. A common experience of universities has been ‘demand overload’, meaning that institutions have had to cope with a vast array of varied, differing policy goals and imperatives, expectations, and demands. Universities have had to meet new challenges with difficulties in securing and retaining specialist personpower; without any significant increase in public finance; with limited scope for increased finance from tuition income, and with the distortions that can arise from the pursuit of income from other sources.

The flux is understandable in a context where we seek to pursue a comprehensive transformation agenda that seeks to overcome our apartheid past, including the creation of a single, co-ordinated and differentiated university system that is more suited to the needs of a socially equitable and developing democracy.

Contemporary South African universities evince considerable strengths. In a number of areas of **learning and teaching**, we offer academic programmes that produce high quality graduates with the knowledge, competencies, skills and attitudes that are appropriate to our economic and social needs.

During the past 12 years attention has been given to

- Issues of curriculum development, learning and teaching strategies and modes of assessment, including flexible learning programmes and use of information and communication technologies
- The introduction of new qualifications and programmes as a response to the changing needs of the economy and society
- Academic development initiatives (including bridging, foundation or extended curriculum programmes) that can support the widening of access and ensure equity of opportunity for under-prepared students
- Producing graduates with the skills and competencies for lifelong learning, including, critical, analytical, problem-solving and communication skills, and the ability to deal with change and diversity
- Improving the quality of teaching and learning through quality assurance and promotion mechanisms
- Improving the capacities of academics through staff capacity development programmes.

Various areas of **research** are characterised by excellence and the generation of high quality fundamental and applied knowledge for scientific publishing in local and international publications, and for economic and social development and innovation and public policy (see, CHE, 2004). Post-1994 South Africa has also witnessed important and innovative **community engagement** initiatives that link academics and students and communities (see, CHE, 2004).

Notwithstanding various strengths and achievements, there remain a number of conditions internal and external to South African universities that are obstacles to the achievement of key national goals. They raise critical issues and represent fundamental challenges for government, the Ministry of Education, and universities.

To the extent that key actors address the critical issues and challenges that are discussed below, South African universities show great promise through their social purposes of knowledge production and dissemination to contribute to social equity, economic growth, social development, and democracy in South Africa, and to the economic and social development needs of the Southern African region and the African continent.

Critical Issues and Challenges

Any serious institutional transformation agenda, if it is to ensure the integrity of the university, advance knowledge production and dissemination, equity of opportunity, and contribute to economic and social development, must have at its heart innovation, renewal and transformation in teaching and learning and the curriculum, in research and the production of knowledge, and in community engagement. It is these key areas, together with the adequate public funding of universities, which are the cornerstones of the improvement of the overall effectiveness and efficiency of universities in terms of the reduction of drop out rates, the enhancement of pass, throughput, and graduation rates, and the quality of graduates.

With respect to **teaching and learning**

1. Greater attention has to be given to the *content* of programmes and specifically to *curriculum innovation and renewal*. In a rapidly changing economy and society, curriculum innovation also means the introduction of new qualifications and programmes.
2. A crucial challenge is to build institutional capabilities to provide under-prepared students with the academic literacy and numeracy to graduate as professionals and critical citizens that can contribute to the development challenges and needs of our society.
3. There is huge variation in the drop out, pass, throughput, and graduation rates of universities. In this context, quality has to be prioritised as a key policy driver and as a critical policy goal in developing the overall effectiveness and efficiency of universities. However, other key issues include historical institutional inequities, the abilities of poor students to finance university education, and the extent to which institutional environments and cultures promote higher learning.
4. Our universities must look outwards to a much greater extent, and build stronger collaboration with the private and public sectors, and develop mechanisms towards these ends so that we can respond effectively to the changing high level personpower requirements of the private and public sectors. Such collaboration is a necessary condition for providing timely and useful information for the construction of qualifications and academic programmes that are congruent with the needs of our economy and society. At the same time, we must also give consideration to how the boundaries between universities and private/public sector institutions can become more permeable in the interests of a greater cross-flow of academics, scientists, students, and knowledge and information.
5. Given the diversity of defined social goals, and the varied graduate needs of our economies and societies, no single university can address the full range of goals and needs. Government is also strongly committed to a differentiated and diverse university system. Our universities are therefore obliged to make choices, which include: the options of or balance between levels of provision, breadth of qualifications, the nature of programmes (the mix between general formative, vocational, professional, etc.), and the modes and scope of provision.

Turning to **research**

1. In as much as each university must cultivate an environment that facilitates the production of knowledge through different kinds of research and scholarship, we need to make choices which include the options of or balance between different kinds of scholarship (of discovery, integration, application) and the nature of research (fundamental, applied, strategic, developmental).
2. The university sector continues to display uneven capabilities for the undertaking of research and the production of high quality postgraduates. The twin tasks are to sustain research environments at those universities that have research capabilities, and to promote the development of research cultures and capacities at those that evince potential.
3. The numbers of students enrolled in postgraduate programmes and post-doctoral work continue to be low in relation to our economic and social development challenges. We are not generating 'new researchers in sufficient numbers to achieve the economic and social outcomes that are possible only through investment in science and technology', and must 'identify practical interventions to overcome

the shortage of critical skills for R&D and knowledge production in South Africa' (*Conference Declaration: Human Resources for Knowledge Production*, Cape Town, 23 – 24 June 2005).

4. An ongoing challenge remains promoting 'collaboration and the development of partnerships between universities, and between higher education, science councils and industry, to maximize overall institutional research development capabilities to achieve a critical mass of researchers across institutions and to support the national R&D agenda' (ibid).
5. There also continues to be a need for a greater confluence between the Ministries of Education and Science and Technology with respect to 'a well-resourced plan of action to increase high level skills for research and development through: increasing the number of researchers; improving institutional capacity and providing an enabling environment and appropriate infrastructure for R&D' (*Conference Declaration*).
6. The research output of South African universities largely rests on a social group that is ageing, and essentially white and male. An urgent challenge therefore is to ensure the reproduction of the next generations of researchers and also transform their social composition.
7. In much as universities must be responsive to economic and social development challenges, it is also important to ensure that there is a distinctive role for universities in the National System of Innovation'. It is crucial to guard against university research 'tending in the identical direction as all other elements of the national system'; given that universities have 'purposes related to, yet distinct from, those of government and industry, this cannot be either satisfactory or right' (CHE, 2004).

With regard to **community engagement**

1. It has been noted that 'the prevailing perception that community engagement and service is an add-on, nice-to-have, and philanthropic activity, remains a key challenge to its integration as a core function in the academy' (CHE, 2004). In the current climate of financial challenges of universities, there are two requirements if community engagement is to be embraced substantively as a core role of a university: a *clear policy signal* on the part of the Ministry of Education, *and* financial support.
2. It must be recognised that 'implementing community engagement at institutional level poses a range of conceptual and practical difficulties'. For one, 'effective and sustainable community engagement must rely on partnerships between communities, the academy and service agencies – yet, achieving these is complex and time-consuming. For another, 'transportation between community-based sites, service agencies and the (university) can be time-consuming and costly for students (CHE, 2004).
3. Given the diversity of our social goals and our varied needs, universities have to make choices with respect to community engagement. These choices include the options of or balance between relations with different kinds of communities (mining, manufacturing, agriculture, commerce, government, non-governmental organisations, social movements), which operate in different spaces (national, provincial, regional, local), and have different requirements.

Conclusion

It is not in dispute that there are currently areas of lack of effectiveness and certain inefficiencies in the university sector and that these must be vigorously addressed. Yet it is equally clear that the quantum of public funding for universities is inadequate in the face of the legacy of past inequities and the new demands on and expectations of universities.

At least six areas of higher education are in need of urgent additional funding:

- The current public subsidies, which are inadequate for our universities to effectively discharge our social purposes and roles
- Curriculum innovation, renewal and transformation to enhance the capabilities of institutions to meet the personpower needs of our changing economy and society
- Academic development initiatives to support under-prepared students to succeed

- The better remuneration of the current generation of academics and the reproduction of the next generation of academics and researchers if the futures of our universities are to be secured
- The current investment in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, which is inadequate to fully provide access and equity of opportunity to eligible and talented students from working class and rural poor families and from even lower middle class families
- Capital infrastructure, facilities and equipment, which is a handicap to high quality provision

At the same time, given our urgent contemporary economic and social challenges, serious consideration must be given to a differentiated approach and strategy, which takes note of the different missions and capabilities of our universities and

- Recognises and builds on the contemporary strengths and achievements of our universities
- Effectively addresses the weaknesses and shortcomings of our universities, including those that are embedded in past institutional inequities
- Prioritizes the production of high quality graduates and research with social equity, and
- Adequately resources universities to effectively undertake their core purposes and roles.

References

Council on Higher Education (2004) *South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy*. Pretoria: CHE

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Graham, G. (2005) *The Institution of Intellectual Values: Realism and Idealism in Higher Education*. Exeter: Imprint Academic