

D.C.S. Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture

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The Role of Universities in a Transformed Post School Education and Training System

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Vice Chancellor, Members of Council, etc

Thank you for the invitation to deliver this year's D.C.S. Oosthuizen Lecture. I am very happy to be here to share some of my ideas and to have the opportunity to discuss them with you.

Over the past two years my Department has been conceptualising and building a single system comprising of all institutions involved in post-school education and training. The inevitable changes have affected some of the institutions and institutional types more than others, but it will inevitably affect all of them, I believe for the better. We are aiming at creating an integrated, accessible, flexible, differentiated and highly articulated system of post school education and training which will benefit our youth, our society more generally and our economy.

Today I will talk about the role we see for universities in this transformed system. In the course of the lecture I will also

address the issue of academic freedom with which the D.C.S. Oosthuizen lecture has traditionally been associated. I am also firmly of the view that academic freedom, important as it is, must not be tackled in isolation from the immense developmental challenges facing our nation, including the challenge of education. Failure to do so can only relegate the issue of academic freedom into an abstract debate amongst the still racialised and gendered elites, away from the burning issues facing the overwhelming majority of our people.

In 1994, South African embarked on a process of transformation, but our understandings of what this means differed (and still differs) widely. Of course there were some aspects of transformation that almost everyone embraced: our new democratic constitution and the principle of democratic rule, separation of powers and an independent judiciary, formal equality before the law, and the formal protection of certain human rights and liberties as laid down in the constitution. But beyond this, the meaning of transformation is disputed and there is no common understanding of it. Basically, different sections of the population have different expectations of it.

The following are caricatures and gross simplifications, but I believe that they have an element of truth in them that illustrates my point that there is no common understanding of what transformation should mean. The poor expect that transformation will result principally in better conditions of life for themselves: free and accessible education and health, decent housing, the possibility of finding a job with a living wage, and so on. Members of the black middle class think of transformation as giving them the same rights and opportunities that middle-class whites have

always had: the opportunity for a good education, the possibility to progress to positions of leadership in business, government, and other social institutions. The white business and professional elites see the constitution as a protection against majority intrusion on their rights and living standards. They know that transformation means that they will have to share leading positions in the country with those they formerly oppressed. But they seem to expect the class structure of the society to remain fundamentally unchanged – i.e. they expect to integrate a black elite in much the same way that the white English-speaking elite accommodated Afrikaners into the top echelons of business after 1948. But they tend not to believe that transformation means they must make significant concessions to the black working class and the poor (except reluctantly, and on a limited basis, with the trade unions with whom they are compelled to interact).

Capitalists of all colours tend to think transformation can only be attained through the establishment of non-racial capitalism.

Workers and the left, see transformation as an important step on the road to socialism.

Despite our differences though, some things should be clear. The majority in South Africans can fairly be classified as poor.

Unemployment, if we include discouraged job seekers, is around 40% of the able-bodied workforce. South Africa can surely not be transformed without appreciably raising the living standards of the poor. As I have pointed out many other groupings have aspirations – often if not always legitimate – but if we do not meet the fundamental needs of the poor and increasingly disaffected, nobody can prosper in South Africa in the long run. I have pointed out in the past two years that we have approximately three million

young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who are not in employment, education and training. These youth are only part of the problem there are many more over the age of 24 in a similar position. This can only result in widespread poverty and misery and it can have the potential to lead to the kind of social instability that will make a peaceful and prosperous life all but impossible for all of us.

To tackle these problems, we must not only have progressive social policies but we must grow our economy significantly in such a way that creates jobs and allows everyone to make a decent living. We also need to provide every citizen with the possibility to enjoy an enriching cultural and social life and participate meaningfully and responsibly in the political life of the country.

If this is the essence of transformation, as I believe it is, what then is the role of universities and the post school education and training system in the attainment of a transformed South Africa? Firstly, we often hear that education and training do not create jobs – or at least not very many. This is no doubt true and the large numbers of unemployed graduates in many countries, including our own, attests to it. Indeed, the revolutions in North Africa have partly been fuelled by mass unemployment among youth with degrees and technical qualifications who are unable to make a living. But it is equally true that without an educated population our prospects for economic development are limited. Job-creation must be driven by our economic policies – particularly the New Growth Path, the Industrial Policy Action Plan – but it is also clear that the workforce required to bring these visions and plans into effect needs an educated and skilled population. And beyond the purely economic needs of our people,

education is needed to help to raise the quality of their social, political and cultural lives in a modern society and our education system should not be reduced as merely a means to meet the needs of the economy for skills.

The university system is obviously vital in raising the educational level of our people and in helping to lead the transformation of South Africa. We are fortunate in having a system which in parts is well developed and it is clearly the best functioning part of our post school system. But it does face very real challenges.

Firstly, we have challenges with the distribution of resources within the university system. In a differentiated system not all universities have to be equally resourced: they differ in function, in size, in location and in capacity. But every university ought to have the resources necessary to fulfil its purpose properly. While we may not, for example, expect a university in a poor rural area to develop high-level expertise in space science in the near future, we must expect it to provide a good under-graduate education to its students and provide the basis for the students who are capable to go on to post-graduate studies in the same or another university.

Government must decide where to put its resources and I want to say that one of my first priorities will be providing the basic necessary infrastructure to the poorer, especially rural universities to ensure that they have decent student residences, adequate libraries, laboratories, classrooms and other basic infrastructure. And beyond that, my department will attempt to ensure that the staff in these institutions has opportunities to upgrade their qualifications. As far as infrastructure is concerned this may mean a temporary shift in the proportion of resources going to

infrastructure at the better-off institutions, but this is necessary in the interests of fairness and of increasing the efficiency of the system as a whole.

Secondly, there are challenges for the universities associated with integrating, expanding and strengthening the post-school system as a whole. Improving articulation and interaction with the FET colleges is, I believe, one of the main challenges in this respect. This entails a number of things, most of which would entail cooperating with my department and with the colleges.

Universities ought to work to ensuring that systems exist for college students to enter university studies and have their college education recognised. They also have an important role to play in conducting research on the colleges, the SETA system and the labour market and feeding that research to the colleges and the SETAs themselves, as well as to the rest of the post school system, including the DHET, the quality councils, and employers who interact with the colleges.

The department is already working with some of the universities to ensure that they start to train college lecturers. This is becoming very important as we try to improve the quality of education and training in our colleges and at the same time radically expand the college system. Universities are already feeling the pressure of increased demands for access to post-school education and will not be able to meet it on their own. Although the university system must and will continue to grow, this needs to be supplemented by a vastly expanded college system and this can only be built with the support and active involvement of the universities.

Although universities do work with SETAs and the National Skills Fund, on the whole this relationship has not been very close. SETAs are responsible for using skills levy funds for increasing the skills of the workers and the unemployed. Universities and the particularly (but not only) universities of technology have a role to play in expanding this relationship and ensuring that the skills levy funds are used increasingly for the attainment of full qualifications at public education and training institutions rather than short courses provided by private providers.

A third set of challenges facing universities are associated with curriculum and with teaching and learning. They include the need to deal with many students who are not well prepared for university studies by their schools. The solution for this is, of course, fixing up the schools. The state of school education has definitely moved up the nation's priority list in the past two years. Unfortunately though, we can't expect this to happen quickly and the post school system must deal with it. Traditional universities were designed to educate an elite and despite the fact that they have been offering bridging or foundation programmes as well as academic support services for years they have yet to come to terms with the enlarged and less prepared student body in our universities.

The research challenges include the need to continue gearing research more resolutely towards dealing with development challenges and the needs of the working class, the poor in rural and urban areas and the underprivileged as well as the needs for economic and technological innovation geared to the particular challenges facing our country and our continent. I also believe that there is a need to revitalise research in the social sciences

and the humanities and I hope that the academic community will respond to the report on a Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences prepared by Prof Ari Sitas and Dr Sarah Mosoetsa which I have put out for comment.

Both teaching and research are clearly closely related to the issue of academic freedom. I have been asked to speak to the question of whether academic freedom is under threat. I should start off by saying that academic freedom, like freedom of any kind, is fragile and we must always remain vigilant to defend it. But from whom should it be defended?

During the apartheid period in particular, we developed a tradition of defending it against attacks from government. While this is still something that universities and academics need to remain vigilant of, the situation today is a long way away from what it used to be despite the fact that some may like to pretend it is not. Let me just remind you briefly that it's not so long ago that books by left-wing authors and much anti-racist literature, including publications of the liberation movement, were banned. Even some classics of philosophy and the social sciences were not available to students or academics – or were kept in special collections under lock and key and only available by special arrangement. Political censorship extended beyond scholarly writing to films, television, radio, newspapers, magazines and even light fiction and this inevitably affected academic life as it affected the knowledge and perspectives available to academics and students as well as to others. The expression of certain ideas – especially by those considered to be political activists could lead to detention without trial. Overhanging all of this, the universities themselves were racially segregated with all the implications this meant for freedom

of association and enquiry. Communication between academics and students of different races (and even of different racial groups), while not altogether impossible, was strongly discouraged and there were different academic associations for blacks and whites and even, among the whites, for English and Afrikaans speakers.

Student protests were invariably met by violence from campus security or the police. This was especially so at universities for blacks although white anti-apartheid white students and academics also felt the impact of police batons on occasion. So as we talk of academic freedom, I think we need to recognise how far we have come in the past two decades and how the nature of the threats to it have changed. The struggle for academic freedom has its roots in the struggle against the apartheid government and we developed a tradition of defending it against government to the point where we hardly see other threats – or are little concerned with them.

Academics do still need to remain vigilant against the erosion of academic freedom by government – there will always be a tension, hopefully a healthy one, between freedom of academic enquiry on the one hand and, on the other hand, accountability to a society with a vibrant democracy but also in dire need for development and an end to poverty, unemployment and ignorance.

As the threats to academic freedom from government have receded, threats today are far more subtle than they were in the past and I would submit that they come increasingly from commercial interests rather than from government. Has the increased funding from the private sector to universities had an

influence on curricula? What about the research agendas? Are universities more likely to do research aimed at benefitting the interests of private business than those of poor communities – and if so, why? And how much pressure are universities put under to shape their curricula by Professional Councils? My advisor was told last week by the Vice Chancellor of one of our leading universities that the Institute of Chartered Accountants had told her that the accounting academics should not do research so that they can focus on teaching. The Institute was rebuffed on this occasion, but one wonders at the type of power that it has become used to exercising over universities that it could make such a suggestion – a suggestion, in fact, that academics should cease to be academics. It appears there appears to have been very little independent research yet by academics to reveal and explain the commercial influences on academic life and I must say I look forward to seeing such research.

Another form of limitation on academic freedom, it seems to me, comes from the lack of diversity of views which has gripped not only social sciences and humanities in academia but even the mainstream media. Over the past twenty to twenty five years, the neo-liberal paradigm has gripped most social enquiry. Critical examination of the capitalist system has all but disappeared in our universities. It was in fact more prominent in the last decade of apartheid than it is now. Despite 3 years of crisis in the world economy, neo-liberal economics is still a dominant paradigm in our universities. Radical critiques of the socio-economic system – critiques that would greatly displease big business and also displease many in government – have almost (thankfully not entirely) disappeared from our social science and humanities faculties.

Have most progressive academics – by which I mean those who see their work as contributing to the struggles of those suffering from class, race, gender or other forms of oppression and who see democracy primarily as something that gives a voice to the voiceless – simply retired into their shells, quietly doing their work and not participating publicly in the larger social and political debates? Do they feel cowed by the prevailing consensus? My interactions with many suggest that there is an element of truth in this observation. This too is a threat to academic freedom that needs to be fought.

Lastly, let me briefly tackle the issue the perceived threat emanating from the Protection of State Information Bill being debated in Parliament. Every country requires protection of sensitive state information, especially that in the hands of organs of state that are responsible for security and law enforcement. At the same time we need to ensure that such legitimate protection of information is not abused to, for instance, hide instances of corruption. It is this delicate balance that needs to be struck and that is where the debate should be located.

It must be made clear that government has no intention to use this piece of legislation to muzzle academic freedom or freedom of the media. I am of the view that this matter has not been honestly debated but instead has been used by some lobby groups as a platform to attack government. One would, at the very least, have expected universities to provide platforms for sober debate on this and many other related matters, than the kind of hysterical engagement we have seen.

The ideas that we have of academic freedom and the threats to it have of course been shaped by our history. As that history moves

further into a new era, we must examine it further, looking at it broadly and looking at it in all its ramifications. It must be examined in its full social, political and historical context and in all its ramifications. I look forward to sharing ideas on this with the academic community, not only this evening, but on an ongoing basis.

I thank you.