# INSTITUTE OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN STUDIES

# NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LESOTHO

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**"The Response Of Institutions Of Higher Learning To Africa's Rapidly Deteriorating Social And Economic Conditions".**

**Monday 30th September, 1985.**

By:

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University of Zimbabwe.

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DETERIORATING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS".

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"Universities in Times of Change"


(a)       In my speech to the graduates of the National University of Lesotho
          last Saturday, I addressed myself to the question of the need
          for African Universities to see themselves as developmental
          institutions - institutions which are singularly animated and
          concerned, rhetorically and practically, with the solution of
          the concrete problems of societal development.


(b)       In Zimbabwe, I have made it a point to remind my colleagues of
          the fact that as a developmental University, its primary over-
          all objective, in its teaching, research, and public service
          and the provision of high level manpower, is to play an
          active, meaningful and effective role in the development of
          Zimbabwe. Its role must be central and not be peripheral to
          national development.

Let me at the outset dispel any misunderstanding that may occur.  I
have just said (quote (B)).  I wish to underline the words "... in
its teaching, research, public service and the provision of high-
level manpower", because these words encapsulate the essence of a
University, that is, the elements that distinguish a university from
other institutions.  In academic parlance, the imparting or dissemina-
tion of knowledge and its discovery entail:


          Intellectual training (the ability to think)

          the development of a critical mind (critical thought)

          the inculcation of objectivity

          the pursuit of truth

          the incitement of insatiable curiosity

          the stimulation of the urge to creativity (the

          generating of new ideas).

My argument for a developmental university does not in any way suggest
the abandonment of these elements nor question their validity.  If
anything my argument propels them to a higher level of intensity.  To
depart from them would be to deny the essence of a university.

My plea  is for the integration of the essence of a University and
the realities of the particular circumstances, the particular social
context, in which the university exists and operates.

At various periods in the historical evolution of universities -
particularly in the western world - the pursuit of knowledge for its
own sake has been prevalent.  Such pursuit of knowledge for its own
sake irrespective of the use to which that knowledge may be put is a
luxury that, particularly, one-university countries like our own, and
the Third World generally, cannot afford.

Even in the industrialized (the so-called "developed") countries, the
gigantic, rapid and intensive socio-economic and political changes over
the last half century or so have led to a shift of emphasis and re-
ordering of priorities.  In Britain eg. the universities are in a
state of crisis.  The need to justify what they do by reference to the
developmental needs of the country has come to the fore in a way that
has never happened before.  It is important to note that our
universities - NUL, UZ - are trying to do what in Britain is done by
at least 44 universities.

(c)      But in many respects, the reorientation that I urge entails a
         process of transformation, process of change on the part of
         the University.  Too often, Universities have been accused, and
         rightly so, of having their heads in the clouds, forgetting
         that they are part and parcel of the fabric of society which
         supports and sustains them, and in which they exist and
         operate.

(d)     I should like to discuss with you this whole idea of
        institutional change, and the whole notion of institutional
        relevance.

1.      CHANGE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

        (a)     Through the ages, mankind has attempted to cope with its
                awareness that change constitutes the essence of the
                Universe.  Heraclitus of Ancient Greece in the fourth
                century B.C. maintained that even those things that
                appeared to be stable were actually in a constant 'state
                of flux'.  Plato examined what he perceived to be ever-
                changing appearances; Aristotle saw change, interestingly,
                as the transaction of potentiality to actuality.
                Augustine in the fourth centruy and Aquinas in the 13th
                century tried to understand how change fitted into the
                divine plan.  Machiavelli, Galileo, Bacon, Newton,
                Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, among other metaphysicians, all
                spent their lives trying to unravel the mysteries of
                changing matter, the relationship between change and the
                human condition, and most importantly, the way individuals
                were able to deal with constant state of flux that was
                their Universe.

                Literature is full of examples of how man has grappled
                with the question of change, how man has resolved to
                master the physical, social, and psychological conditions
                that cause our environment to change.  It is clear that
                since the dawn of civilization, man has tried to come to
                terms with change in different ways - and that presently,
                our concern with change remains unabated.  It has been
                said that in life's equation the only constant variable
                is change.

2.    Change in Higher Education:

(a)   The idea of change - to make something different - is
      greeted with mixed enthusiasm.

(b)   Ironically, higher education as a Social System, because
      of its very missions, must respond to pressures for
      change while at the same time resisting change.
      Universities have been described as the curators, critics
      and creators of our culture.  As curators, their respon-
      sibility is to preserve our culture.  As critics, they
      should identify that which needs changing in our culture.
      As creators, they must play an active role in the
      development of the nation.  All this must surely chal-
      lenge our intellectual ability, tax on critical thought,
      incite own curiosity, test our ability to generate new
      ideas.  Universities have also been described as a
      mirror of society.  As such they must automatically
      reflect and accommodate the changes of society as a whole.

(c)   Regrettably, the forces for change in Universities are
      external to them.  These forces vary widely in their
      intensity and direction.  Many are predicatable but more
      often than not, they catch the academy by surprise.
      For example:  enrolment patterns

                    available revenue

                    students' expectations

                    parents and employers

                    Government, etc.

      These are examples of forces that Universities have
      little or no control over, but that greatly influence
      the make-up of an institution.

(d)  If external forces dictate the need for change, then it
     can be said that it is the internal forces that dictate
     its magnitude and direction. How Academic Staff,
     Administrators, and Students perceive the necessity for
     change and then exhibit a willingness to work for it,
     will ultimately dictate the final outcome of the change
     (transformation) process.

(e)  To paraphrase Henry  Bragdom in Woodrow Wilson: The
     Academic Years,  it is an academic truism that to change
     Universities is harder than trying to move a graveyard,
     and yet as Millard Upton, former president of Beloit
     College in the United States once observed, "When a
     University is on the verge of oblivion, there is no
     problem in its achieving instant curriculum revision".

     University dons are often too well known for their
     conservatism, etc. And yet it is a fact that the
     Universities are there not for their own sake but for the
     sake of the nation. Whilst there is no virtue in
     changing for the sake of changing, there is equally no
     virtue in resisting change for the sake of resisting it.

     There must be a middle ground between absolute permanence
     and instant change.

4.      Change. The University of Zimbabwe Experience:  A Case Study

(a)  Historical Background, the Royal Charter: was not an
     integral part of the country. The nature of the social
     and political environment in which it existed and
     operated distorted its role and inhibited the forging of
     a close relationship between the University and the
     community. It was an anachronism, an institution which

developed at best, a working misunderstanding with the
society at large.

The dramatic attainment of independence in 1980
immediately created an urgent need for the University
to play a more active  and meaningful role in the develop-
ment of Zimbabwe.

Development embraces those challenges posed by the need
to meet people's or national aspirations - challenges
posed by the search for national and cultural identity,
by the problems of poverty and the need for social
adjustment, the problems of economic progress.

Zimbabwe inherited an imbalanced though diversified
economy.  Alongside what is a relatively small and
highly sophisticated sector is a large underdeveloped
rural and peasant sector.  In order to rectify the
imbalance the focus of Government policy is on rural
development.

As a result Zimbabwe desperately needs not only high-
level and highly skilled manpower to man the civil
service,     industry, and commerce, but also men and
women who are well-equiped  to contribute to the
integration of the two sectors of the economy.  Needless
to say that the University has a major role in this
exercise.

In the area of research, the University should provide
leadership and should aim to place more emphasis on
applied research;  research directed at issues that
affect ordinary men and women.  The University should
take a more active role in identifying and investigating
development problems.

Need for closer communication and understanding between
the University and Government - for better understanding
of national development, manpower and other needs of the
country.

(b)     For the University of Zimbabwe to be an integral  part
of the nation, for University of Zimbabwe to play its
central role, it was necessary to effect certain changes.
Let me emphasise,and emphasise very strongly, that it was
    absolutely vital for the changes to emanate from, and
be effected from within the University, transformation
had to come from within.

It was necessary to effect reforms aimed at putting the
University into tune, into gear with the rest of the
nation:

- democratization of the university's governance
  structures;

- curriculum reviews (eg. Agriculture, Education,
  etc.); particularly to establish relevance and
  integrate theory and practice;

- research orientation towards applied research;

- staff development programme; - conditions of
  service review;

- massive increase in student numbers in response
  to the needs of the country

- improving, university - government relationship.

Let me point cut that the University of Zimbabwe Act of
1982 which replaced the Royal Charter, consolidated the
transformation that had been set in motion and provided
a framework for future progress of the University.

But this is only the beginning.  We have set the  tone,
we have charted the course.  The idea of a developmental
university is becoming a reality.

(d)   Autonomy Question

The development of the University is dependent on the
support of those who work in it and on the availability
of resources from Government.  If the University accepts
that University autonomy and academic freedom can only be
perceived in the socio-economic context in which it
operates, and that it depends on the goodwill of the
nation and the sense of responsibility of the academic
staff; if the government accepts that the University needs
a certain amount of autonomy to carry out its mission
effectively and efficiently, then there need not be a
conflict between national aspirations and academic
integrity.

(e)   Any unbridled provincialism on the part of the university
is as threatening to public and national interest, as is
the desire of the state to police the University for
the sake of control itself.  Put differently, some state
control is inescapable just as some substantial degree
of institutional autonomy is indispensable.  This is a
balance which needs to be worked at, all the time.  The
task is to develop consultative relationship that bring
the legitimate concerns of the university and the legiti-
mate concerns of government into shared perspectives.

5.   Summation:

Our universities must be at the forefront of development in
our countries.  But to do so  might entail changing the
universities themselves from their erstwhile slumber of
conservatism to active participants in the national programme
of development.