A new path and urgent challenges

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The orthodoxies of recent decades associated with neo-liberalism have been hugely harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge. The have often sought to reduce universities to training schools for the production of technicians and instruments of the economy and business.

A new path forward must revalue knowledge and education as cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their varied educational and social purposes. Shunning the ideas of higher education as a market, universities as 'firms' and students as 'customers', it must also resource universities to effectively undertake their vital public good functions.

As a new Minister tackles higher education he may wish to give consideration to the following issues.

1. In much as it may be necessary to revise or augment policy where necessary, and to pursue certain imperatives with greater purpose and vigour, it is essential that there is also a high degree of *certainty, consistency* and *continuity* with respect to national higher education policy.

   Universities have only recently emerged from a period of great flux (institutional mergers and restructuring, myriad new policies and initiatives, etc.) and it is vital they be provided the space and support to pursue the trajectories that they have defined for themselves or have had defined for them as a consequence of institutional restructuring.

2. A new Ministry of Higher Education & Training provides the opportunity for (re)theorising and clarifying the scope, structure and landscape of higher education. This includes the purposes and roles of universities vis-à-vis further education and training colleges and other post-secondary institutions.

   There is a growing demand for higher education. The *National Plan for Higher Education* set the target of a 20% participation rate by 2011/2016. If this target is to be achieved, an estimated 100 000 additional students have to be incorporated within higher education, in a context in which the capacities of public universities are already stretched. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for increasing the output of high quality graduates.

   This means that it is important to give considered attention to the structure of higher education and the spectrum of institutions that are required in relation to economic and social development needs. Simultaneously, urgent attention has to be given to the creation of high quality post-secondary institutions that include but are not limited to further education and training colleges.

3. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary conditions if universities are to advance their social purposes and undertake their varied roles. Concomitantly, they are also values in which rights *and* duties inhere.

   These duties on the part of universities include advancing knowledge, producing high quality graduates, promoting the public good and being democratically accountable. They also encompass bold engagement with economic and social orthodoxies and public policies that seriously misunderstand and distort the functions of universities, stripping universities of their substance and leaving them "universities only in name".

   At the same time, we must recognize "the legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation" are "threats to academic freedom", and that "the powers conferred by academic freedom go hand in hand with substantive duties to deracialise and decolonize intellectual spaces".

4. Judging by drop-out, throughput and graduation rates a substantial improvement in equity of opportunity and outcomes for black students remains to be achieved. Contact undergraduate success rates should be 80% "if reasonable graduation rates are to be achieved". Instead they range from 59% to 87% with an average of 75%. White student success rates in 2005 were 85%, while African student rates were 70%. The target for throughput rates "is a minimum of 20% which would imply a final cohort graduation rate of about 65%". Instead, throughput rates for 2000-2004 were between 13% and 14%, and the cohort graduation rate was 45% in 2004, with an overall drop-out rate of 45%.

   A recent study notes that "the major racial disparities in completion rates in undergraduate programmes, together with the particularly high attrition rates of African students across the board, have the effect of negating much of the growth in African access that has been achieved. Taking account of the African participation rate, the overall attrition rate of over 50% and the below-average African completion rates, it can be concluded that the sector is catering successfully for under 5% of the African (and coloured) age-group".

   The conclusions are clear: "this has central significance for development as well as social inclusion", and "equity of outcomes is the overarching challenge". If higher education institutions "are to contribute to a more equitable South African society, then access and success must be improved for black (and particularly black working class) students who, by virtue of their previous experiences, have not been inducted into dominant ways of constructing knowledge".

5. In the light of unacceptably poor current pass and graduation rates and high drop-out rates, the enhancement of the academic capabilities of universities, and specifically academics, to ensure equity of opportunity and outcome, especially for students of working-class and rural poor social origins, is an urgent and important task.

   The enhancement of academic capabilities includes adequate public funding for academic development initiatives. Equity of opportunity and outcomes is constrained by

inadequate funding to address under-preparedness (conceptual, knowledge, academic literacy and numeracy, linguistic) of especially indigent students.

5. Concomitant with the building of academic capabilities is ensuring that institutions are provided the necessary capacities in terms of infrastructure and equipment for effective learning and teaching and the production of high quality graduates.

   The infrastructure funding that has been provided to universities in recent years is a welcome contribution and must be continued.

6. Severe inequities continue to exist in the participation rates of African and Coloured South Africans relative to white and Indian South Africans.

   One reason for the very high drop-out rate among black students is almost certainly inadequate state funding in the forms of scholarships, bursaries and loans. The funds available to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme fall far short of providing effective support for all needy eligible students and in moving us from the current 16% overall participation rate to a 20% participation rate.

7. Postgraduate student enrolments and outputs, and especially doctoral enrolments and outputs, are low and inadequate in relation to South Africa's economic and social development needs.

   In 2007, there were 1 271 doctoral graduates (45% black and 41% women). South Africa produces 23 doctoral graduates per million of population, compared to 43 by Brazil, 157 by South Korea and almost 200 by Australia. Black and women students continue to be under-represented in doctoral programmes, and only 32% of university academics possess doctorates.

   The National Research Foundation's 2007 *South African PhD Project* seeks to double the number of doctoral graduates by 2015, while the Department of Science and Technology wishes to increase doctoral graduates five-fold by 2018. These ambitions are welcome, but there are significant constraints that will have to be overcome.

   Key concerns must be the lack of any confluence between thinking, policy and planning in science and technology and in higher education, and that we currently do not provide financial support for all academically deserving postgraduate students.

8. In the face of an aging academic workforce, a key challenge is to develop a new generation of academics. If attention is not given to this issue, in the years to come academic provision, the quality of graduates and the research outputs of universities will be severely debilitated.

   Given the current social composition of academics, the development of a new generation must ensure that the social composition of the academic work force is simultaneously transformed.

Currently, there are innovative programmes at some universities to build a new generation of academics. These are, however, largely donor financed. It is essential that dedicated state funding is made available to build a new generation of academics.

9. Finally, as a consequence of the higher remuneration provided by the private and state sectors, universities experience considerable difficulties in attracting outstanding graduates to the academic profession and in also retaining academics and administrative and support staff.

   The improvement of public subsidies to facilitate the recruitment and retention of academics and administrative and support staff is vital for the future well-being and contribution of universities.