

**DCS Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture at Rhodes University, Grahamstown
delivered by the Honourable Minister of Education, South Africa, Naledi Pandor,
MP**

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AFRICA UNIVERSITIES AND THE CHALLENGES OF A DEVELOPMENTAL STATE

South Africa is fortunate in being an African democracy that has a well-functioning, viable and, in some fields, vibrant higher education sector. Our universities and former technikons have played an important role in supporting access to higher education and in creating a pool of skilled graduates in South Africa.

Universities do not exist in vacuum; they are a fundamental part of the development structures of any society in which they exist. History has shown that it is impossible for universities to seek isolation or insulation from social forces that influence progress and development.

In the developing world our experience of under development, colonialism and poverty creates a complex set of challenges to which governments, universities and other institutions must find adequate responses.

It is true to say that one of the reasons we celebrate such lectures is linked to the fact that universities, and more often governments, have not always been able to respond in reasonable and rational ways.

Some of the reasons lie in the history of the emergence of "mass" higher education in post-colonial Africa. At independence in the 1950s and 1960s the critical task new administrations faced was that of producing intellectuals and skilled professionals.

Unlike many other higher education systems, on our continent governments have been the initial and primary sponsors of universities, and have demanded that they merely provide the necessary trained graduates. This gave rise in many instances to a notion of state proprietorship of higher education.

South Africa's history in this domain is a little different from the rest of post-colonial Africa; especially in the creation of historically black institutions and the Afrikaans-medium institutions.

An unsurprising yet unanticipated development in higher education caused a fundamental shift in the initial positive perceptions of governments. Intellectual freedom often led to increased intellectual scrutiny and criticism of the principal university benefactor, the state.

In the early condition of strong academic freedom and limited state regulation, African university academics turned their attention to the state and reflected negatively on many of the practices of new governments. New states failed to grapple effectively with the burden of underdevelopment and increasingly became less democratic and less

accountable. Governments came to be characterised by patron-client relations with donor agencies, foreign exploiters and other corrupt and corrupting elements.

The reaction of the state to critical scrutiny was often heavy handed; it led to university closures, the erosion of academic freedom and direct challenges to any notion of autonomy.

These state excesses did not occur overtly in apartheid South Africa. However, the known collusion between the state and some universities suggests that there existed a tacit acceptance of a "state-steered" autonomy, an autonomy that most universities, academics and administrators exercised without protest in response to apartheid laws and practices.

The experience of homeland-based institutions 'mirrored' the post-colonial African experience to a great degree, training for new public service, primarily a teaching institution, inadequate science and technology base, poor postgraduate infrastructure and heavy state steering by the homeland government.

Today we live in an 11-year-old democratic South Africa and our universities are the beneficiaries of a free society. Yet we have regular and public contestations of the state of freedom enjoyed by higher education. The competing demands of self-regulation, public accountability and development seem to be conundrum that causes much of the hostile discourse we see in the public domain.

President Mbeki recently set out a widely held perspective on the subject of universities and development when he spoke in November 2004.

"At the same time, education must be accorded recognition as a space for unfettered intellectual enquiry. It must be trusted for its critical objectivity, its quality, and for its capacity for public accountability.

President Mbeki provides a concise statement of the relation between academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Higher education needs to accommodate our nation's quest for regeneration and its commitment to the alleviation of poverty and the acceleration of development.

Professor Barney Pityana reacted to the President's speech in the following way:

"What is important for our purposes is the notion that higher education is at the centre of the human development strategy of this country. Second, is the acknowledgement that universities require recognition, public confidence support and trust to enable them to succeed in the mission for which they have been set aside. And, third, however, the President advances an innovative and dynamic notion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, namely, self-regulation and public accountability".

The competing demands of public accountability, self-regulation and development seem to be the thorny nettles that lead to the hostile discourse we often observe in the public domain.

The absence of an agreed elaboration of the concepts contributes greatly to the absence of a shared perspective.

Government holds the view that universities have to contribute to the progress and development of our society. They have to do this in the intellectual and development context referred to by President Mbeki. Universities cannot pretend that apartheid did

not exist, that we are not in the main a poor nation, that development has to be the core focus of all public institutions and that higher education is a critical national development resource for South Africa.

However, matters are not so simple. Government must take the following caution from Professor Ndebele seriously: "Currently, higher education is viewed as a service producing educated workers, rather than as a strategic value-adding asset. In like manner, higher education leadership currently exists in the margins of the nation's consciousnesses." (3)

The time has come for all of us to assert our concrete expectation of the sector more definitively.

We entered public mass higher education provision very late in the 20th century; only after the removal of the racial state and at the beginning of the transformation of our racially segregated society in 1994.

Our commitment to eradicating poverty and to changing the racial profile of intellectuals in South Africa mandates very direct development tasks for universities.

Government has to ensure we provide support to universities that allows them to act on this and the other developmental state mandates.

The place of universities as the core intellectual resource in our nation requires that research and development will be a thriving part of university activity.

Some research institutes and facilities respond by saying they are prepared to play a role, but they do not want state control. The same institutes are often very happy to do exactly as the private sector demands when it funds research.

What then of universities in free South Africa? Despite the sharp exchanges between higher education and government, we have been successful on a number of fronts, but in each area much more must still be done.

First, we have transformed access and opportunity for students and staff so that those who had been excluded by decades of race policy now have a chance to grasp fully the meaning of freedom. However, student access has been more positive than staff transformation. Universities still have to do much more to address this aspect.

Second, we have begun to create a responsive higher education system without giving in to an economic reductionist approach to scholarship and research. More needs to be done in this regard especially in regard to what Wole Soyinka refers to as the indigenisation of knowledge on the continent.

Third, we have established the space for a rich culture of public debate on our university campuses. Not all universities have pursued this challenge: some are still cloistered places of teaching; without engaged discourse, and characterised by poor research and poor public engagement with current social issues.

Fourth, on some campuses we have grappled with the need to transform curricula, to infuse an African and developmental content. Some institutions have banished insularity and irrelevance, while many remain parochial and fairly distant from our intellectual challenges.

Finally, we are working toward overcoming fragmentation and duplication. Our work with mergers and other policy challenges is part of our move toward efficiency and effectiveness.

Along with other countries at similar levels of development, we have to attend to the urgent need to secure appropriate levels of funding for higher education and the creation on conditions in universities that allow us to attract and retain excellent teachers and researchers. We are acting on these challenges and have begun a conversation with Treasury, which will probably support the creation of a transformative sector that is fully engaged in the pursuit of intellectual success and national development.

A free society that does not promote intellectual inquiry does not deserve quality higher education. Intellectual inquiry, which ignores the social condition of a changing society, does not deserve universities. South Africa has the institutional base, a democratic state and a people thirsty for education; these are prime conditions for building a sustainable and responsive higher-education sector. Every free society should seek to achieve and sustain such conditions.

As President Mbeki said in the European Parliament last year: "this is a new Africa in the process of birth ... This is a new Africa that has taken firm steps to give concrete meaning to the goal of the political and economic integration of Africa ... It is a new Africa that has finally made the statement to itself that it must take responsibility for its destiny that it must take ownership of its own future". (4)

Our universities in our free South Africa can support us in taking responsibility and control of our own destiny.

1. President Mbeki, "Renewing the African University", The Association of Commonwealth Universities/Mandela Rhodes Foundation and the African Leadership Award Inaugural Lecture, University of Cape Town, 4 November 2004.
2. Barney Pityana, "Renewing and Transforming the new University of South Africa", Commencement of the academic year address, 26 January 2005.
3. Njabulo Ndebele, "Higher Education and Political Transition", IZWI, 9 July 2004.
4. President Mbeki, "Pliny: always something new out of Africa", European Parliament speech, 17 November 2004.