

On Higher Education

With respect to five issues that have great salience for the future wellbeing of South African higher education, and also major implications for the extent to which it can contribute optimally to South Africa addressing effectively its diverse developmental challenges, the current situation is as follows:

- Student access, opportunity and success: Expansion and greater equity, low participation, high attrition and low completion, and variable quality
- Research and postgraduate education: expansion and greater equity, low participation and graduations, and possible stasis
- Epistemological transformation: a critical issue yet poor progress
- Securing the next generations of academics: strong consensus, clear development programme, lack of state funding
- The higher education institutional landscape: *de facto* differentiation and diversity yet not fully settled policy

While the apartheid legacy continues to weigh heavily on contemporary higher education, South Africa's higher education problems and shortcomings are not rooted entirely in the apartheid past; nor are they a consequence only of financial constraints. Both in higher education and more generally, the state and key actors appear to lack the will to act courageously and decisively at the levels of policy, personnel, and performance when it is clear that problems remain intractably entrenched. As the Governor of the Reserve Bank, a governing party stalwart, has put it, "South Africa faces significant challenges" that "require a co-ordinated and coherent range of policy responses" – "the government [needs] to be decisive, act coherently", demonstrate "a co-ordinated plan of action to address them" and "exhibit strong and focused leadership from the top."¹

The development of higher education and the achievement of key goals require negotiating consensus, building legitimacy and ensuring that there are effective policies, planning and implementation. Realizing the ambitious transformation vision and goals of *White Paper 3* entails establishing new institutions, reconfiguring old ones, changing institutional cultures and practices and mediating numerous and difficult paradoxes that arise in the pursuit of a variety of equally desirable goals. It also involves ensuring the availability of well-qualified academics and support staff, infrastructure, facilities and equipment and adequate funding for undertaking effectively the key social purposes and roles of universities. Visions, goals, strategies, plans and people with the necessary knowledge, expertise, skills and appropriate values and attitudes have to be stitched and held together effectively to ensure progress and success.

On the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes: "The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning" (Mandela, 1994: 617). Realizing a transformed higher education system that builds respect for and enhances the freedom of all requires Mandela's qualities of unifying and bold leadership, commitment and keen sense of responsibility. There is still a considerable 'long walk' to a transformed higher education system in South Africa.

¹ <http://www.bdlive.co.za/economy/2013/06/07/marcus-in-strong-plea-for-decisive-leadership-in-sa>, accessed on 8 June 2013