HELTASA/SAARDHE *HIGHER EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL SPACE* CONFERENCE WELCOME

Rhodes University
Eden Grove Red
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Officials of the South African Association for Research & Development in Higher Education (SAARDHE) and Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), conference organisers, presenters, participants, colleagues from other universities, the CHE, and other institutions, ladies and gentlemen – Molweni, good morning.

On behalf of Rhodes University a very warm welcome to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District, and the Eastern Cape; and to our international colleagues and visitors, an especially warm welcome also to South Africa.

I trust that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive conference that will generate insights and ideas that can help penetrate and push further the barriers to knowledge and understanding and the formulation and adoption of appropriate policies in the areas of learning and teaching, mentoring, staff development, quality assurance and related issues.

For transport, logistic and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes scholars have to work especially hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences, workshops and seminars. That we do so with considerable success is testimony to the quality of our scholars, recognition of their scholarship nationally and internationally, and also acknowledgement that Rhodes is one of our premier teaching and research universities. Certainly, it enjoys among the best pass and graduation rates and research output per academic of South African universities. I am especially confident of our standing in the field of higher education learning and teaching, diligently cultivated by colleagues in our Centre for Higher

Education Research, Learning and Teaching and our Dean of Learning and Teaching, Prof, Chrissie Boughey.

I am pleased that a conference of this nature on issues very close to my heart is being hosted by Rhodes University, and that we are an integral part of scholarly and wider co-operation to advance research and also contribute to policy-making and practice to address the challenges of higher education in South Africa and on the African continent.

The theme of this conference is *Higher Education as a Social Space*. It seems to me that *Higher Education as a Social Space* as a description in itself does little to advance our theoretical or analytical understanding of higher education or to advance policy and practice related to vital issues such as learning and teaching, mentoring, student success, the development of a new generation of academics and also the current generation, and quality assurance and promotion.

The notion of *Higher Education as a Social Space* is then, clearly, an invitation to imaginatively draw on theory and experience to critically reflect on our current understandings of higher education and how they have shaped policies and practices and to also advance new understandings and inform new policies and practices on the issues that are the principal concerns of SARDHE and HELTASA.

Theoretical and analytical work, it seems to me, would need to critically interrogate questions that include:

1. What is the nature of the social space of higher education and its distinctiveness, specificities and peculiarities?

2. How have the dominant discourses that characterise the social space of higher education developed and been reproduced historically?

3. What are the implications of the dominant discourses of this social space for social inclusion and social justice in higher education, for the affirmation and promotion of human dignity and rights, social cohesion and respect for difference

and diversity, irrespective of 'race', class, gender, nationality, home language and sexual orientation?

4. What are the conceptions of the contemporary social space of higher education of epistemology and ontology and to what extent have these been or are being deracialised, degendered and decolonised. We often speak of providing students epistemological access rather than just physical access, but to which epistemologies?

5. How do the dominant wider cultures of the social space of higher education affect student learning, progress and success and social equity and redress?

6. Similarly, how do these dominant wider cultures also affect the development and retention of a new generation of academics that must also, in the light of the current social composition of academics, be increasingly women and black?

7. Recent decades have seen the increasing intrusion of crude economistic conceptions of higher education and a concomitant emphasis on vocational programmes and skills, the emphasis on 'skills' being a demand on universities to address the problem of a lack of people with vocationally specific technical capabilities. In the process, there is

- An obfuscation of the difference between training and education
- A failure to grasp that the emphasis on adequate skills and technical proficiency is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition to enhance economic and social development - more is required than simply the narrow technical skilling of people, and
- That when it comes to university qualifications, 'skills' is not the only issue, and that the so-called 'skills shortage' must be approached from the perspective of the overall and particular *configurations* of *knowledge, expertise, competencies, technical skills and attitudes* that are needed by our diverse economy and society.

What are the implications of such an instrumental approach to higher education which seeks to reduce its value to its efficacy for economic growth, and the demand that universities should prioritize professional, vocational and career-focused qualifications and programmes and emphasise technical 'skills' development. What are also the consequences of a failure to grasp the value of universities and the possibility of denuding them of their considerably wider social value and functions?

In the wake of the banking and financial crisis of North America and Western Europe, 2008 could well mark the demise of the rampant free-market capitalism and the ideology of neo-liberalism that have held sway for the past few decades and have contributed to the economistic and reductionist conceptions of universities. One must, of course, be cautious of celebrating the death of celebrating the death of neo-liberalism prematurely – note how the human capital theories of the 1950s continue to be influential – but it may well be that we can now more freely re-imagine and reinvent higher education in more multi-faceted ways than has been hitherto been possible.

8. Finally, how permeable is the currently constructed social space of higher education to a critical reflexivity, learning and innovation and institutional change?

As we consider, debate and advance knowledge on these and other questions, it is important to keep in mind a number of key challenges that have been acknowledged by Higher Education South Africa, the Council on Higher Education, the Department of Education and government more generally.

1. Access and success

   Although black student enrolments have increased since 1994, the gross participation rate of black, and especially African and Coloured, South Africans continues to be considerably lower than for white South Africans.

Figure 4: Participation rates by 'Race'

'Race'	Participation rate	
	1993	**2005**
Africans	9	12
Coloureds	13	12
Indians	40	51
Whites	70	60
Overall	17	16

(CHE, 2004:62; Scott e al, 2007:10)

In 2001 the *National Plan for Higher Education* estimated the gross participation to be 15% and set a target of 20% gross participation rate by 2011/2016 (MoE, 2001). Clearly, there has been only a minimal improvement in the overall gross participation rate and severe inequities continue to exist in the participation rates of African and Coloured South Africans relative to white and Indian South Africans. Indeed, Ian Scott and colleagues argue that "given that the participation is expressed as gross rates and includes appreciable numbers of mature students – well under 12% of the (African) and coloured 20-24 age groups are participating in higher education (it) must be a cause of concern, for political, social and economic reasons, if the sector is not able to accommodate a higher and more equitable proportion" of those social groups that have been historically disadvantaged and under-represented in higher education (Scott, et al, 2007:11).

Related to the challenge of access, although postsecondary education is wider than a university education, in South Africa it is essentially constituted by public universities. As we strive for a 20% participation rate in coming years and seek to incorporate an additional 100 000 students by 2016, we have to give attention to the institutional landscape and structure of postsecondary education and what *other* kinds of institutions apart from public universities need to constitute post-secondary education.

Regarding success, and judging by drop-out, undergraduate success, and graduation rates a substantial improvement in equity of opportunity and outcomes for black students remains to be achieved. Contact undergraduate success rates should, according to the Department of Education (DoE), be 80% "if reasonable graduation rates are to be achieved" (2006a). Instead they average 75%. White student success rates in 2005 were 85%, while African student rates were 70%. The DoE's target for throughput rates "is a minimum of 20% which would imply a final cohort graduation rate of about 65%" (ibid). Instead, throughput rates for 2000-2004 were between 13% and 14%, and the cohort graduation rate was 45% in 2004. In the same year there was an overall drop-out rate of 45% (DoE, 2006).

It was agreed at the May 2008 meeting of the President's Higher Education Working Group to give concerted attention to the issue of improving success, including further consideration of a 4-year undergraduate degree. This is an issue that is being led by the CHE.

2. Developing a new generation of academics

We have to begin to address with much greater urgency and purpose the challenge of producing a new generation of academics. This is a triple challenge. On the one hand we need to ensure that the current ageing academics, who also tend to be the most productive researchers, are effectively replaced. On the other hand, the production of a new generation of academics must simultaneously address the challenge of producing many more black and women scholars so that the equity profile of the academic workforce is progressively transformed. Concomitantly, we have to ensure that the new generation has the capabilities to teach and research effectively and help to transform and ensure the ongoing development of our universities.

Arising out of the May 2008 meeting of the President's Higher Education Working Group HESA has mandated me to develop a proposal on the building of a new generation of academics that can be tabled for discussion with the Ministry

and I will work with relevant institutions in early 2009 to this end.

3. Enhancing the academic capabilities of our universities with respect to teaching and learning, research and community engagement

Adequate public funding is a necessary condition for better equipping our universities to discharge their functions but is not a sufficient condition. However, the extent to which academics are effectively equipped to ensure high quality learning and teaching, to innovate new curricula and new teaching and learning strategies in relation to the changing requirements of the economy and society, the diversity of students that now enter our universities, and the under-preparedness of students relative to the rigours of a higher education, have to also be honestly confronted. The shortcomings of our universities with respect to the quantity and quality of graduates that we produce may not be rooted entirely in inadequate public funding but also in the extent to which we have been willing to address curriculum and learning and teaching issues.

Again arising out of the May 2008 meeting of the President's Higher Education Working Group the HEQC of the CHE has been requested to address this matter.

At the same time, we have to also settle the important issue of the differentiation and diversity of our public universities. This has been a controversial issue, yet unless we resolve the issue of differentiation and diversity, which includes questions of institutional missions and academic programme offerings, the contributions of our public universities in relation to the diverse economic and social challenges that confront us will be less than optimal.

There has been a most welcome recognition on the part of the state that funding for capital infrastructure backlogs and new capital infrastructure to support institutional growth are vitally important if our public universities are to effectively contribute to our economic and social development needs. The R 2.1

billion provided for the period 2007/8 – 2009/10 and the additional R 3.1 billion to be provided for 2010/11 – 2011/12 will contribute immeasurably to better position our universities to discharge our educational responsibilities.

With these additional investments, together with greater support for NSFAS and needy students there will, of course, be pressure on universities to demonstrate improvements in quality and pass and success rates.

In as much as it is important for scholars to meet among themselves, it is also vital that there be spaces that bring together academics, researchers from other civil society institutions and policy formulators and advisors from state agencies. I am thrilled that present at this conference are colleagues from institutions other than universities.

It is my experience that the specific constituencies of academics, state and other public bodies, and civil society are not always easy to bring together, and especially to hold together.

This is not because there is not recognition among all such constituencies of the need to work together and to build mutually respectful, beneficial, reciprocal relations to address our common concerns and challenges. The reality, however, is that there are often different and divergent interests, and varying immediate concerns; and therefore, understandably, differences emerge around how issues are theorised and conceptualised, which issues are prioritised, the discourses and language through which they are discussed, and how approaches, strategies and the like are formulated.

This is an unavoidable element of the coming together of such different social actors and a not unhealthy aspect of these different actors finding each other and learning to debate, learn and labour together. Whatever difficulties and tensions may arise, it is important to appreciate the necessity and value of such coming together, to be sensitive and respectful of different views and to recognise that we need each other if we are to

address the concerns, problems and challenges that are our common lot.

To the extent that SAARDHE and HELTASA bring and hold together all these important social actors, my congratulations to you on this endeavour and on this achievement.

It may be useful to end this opening welcome to a conference on *Higher Education as a Social Space* with the reminder that in many languages no distinction is made between the terms 'policy' and politics. This usefully alerts us to:

- First, avoid over-rationalistic conceptions of policy and practice, and
- Second, appreciate that policies and practices are hardly ever neutral, technical and value-free matters and
- Third, changes in policies and practices at universities will necessarily be part of and the outcomes of contestations and struggles around the values and social relations that are to embody the university (and society) that we wish to create.

In closing, I wish you a very stimulating and productive conference, an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in iRhini/Grahamstown, and I am confident that you will find my colleagues engaging, friendly and hospitable hosts.