

LETTER TO THE NEW GOVERNMENT

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Introduction

In Dickens' terms, the global financial and economic is 'the worst of times', an 'age of foolishness', an 'epoch of incredulity', 'the season of Darkness', 'the winter of despair' with 'nothing before us'. And yet, the global crisis could also become 'the best of times', 'the age of wisdom', 'the epoch of belief, 'the season of Light, 'the spring of hope', a time when 'we ha(ve) everything before us'.

For good reasons, recent events must signal the demise of the uncontrolled, soulless and destructive free-market capitalism to which humanity has been subject the past 20 years. These events also provide the opportunity for a new imagination that is freed from the stifling and dangerous orthodoxies of the past decades. "We need to rekindle our capacity to imagine, and to see through the...storm to what lies beyond".ⁱ

The current global crisis creates the space for new ideas, and for the recovery of important values related to human development, justice, solidarity, freedom and internationalism. It enables us to think about and act to construct a different kind of world and different kind of citizenship, "a world where markets are servants, not masters".ⁱⁱ

Whether and to what extent this happens, whether amidst these 'worst of times' and 'winter of despair' we move into 'the spring of hope' with 'everything before us' depends on us. It depends on whether, as scholars and citizens and as universities and governments, we take on the responsibility of re-thinking and re-making our world and our societies on the basis of other principles and logics than the ones that have dominated in recent decades.

This new logic must first and foremost put human development, people's needs, justice and human rights at the centre of all our actions. It must more greatly appreciate, respect, and affirm difference and diversity related to race, gender, language, sexual orientation and culture as well-springs of social vitality and strength. It must embrace the idea that we have inherited the earth in safe-keeping for future generations and must abandon the reckless degradation of our environment in the name of 'progress' and 'development'.

The orthodoxies of the last two decades have been especially harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge. The have also sought seeking to reduce universities to simply training schools for the production of technicians and instruments of the economy and business. The new logic must revalue knowledge and education as cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their important and 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 discharge their vital public good functions.

Issues and Challenges

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 have defined for themselves or have had defined for them as a consequence of institutional restructuring.

2. As a newly created ministry, the Ministry of Higher Education provides the welcome opportunity for 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.

On the one hand, there is a growing demand for higher education. On the other hand, 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. All of these issues mean 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.

3. There should be a continued strengthening of relations between universities, Higher Education South Africa, the Council on Higher Education, government and other key social actors in higher education.

The President's Higher Education Working Group served as valuable forum and should be retained under the new administration. At the same time, attention should continue to be given to creating at various levels dense networks of relationships and partnerships between universities and other constituencies.

4. 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.ⁱⁱⁱ These duties on the part of universities, academics and administrators include advancing the public good and being democratically accountable. They also encompass a deep and bold engagement with economic and social orthodoxies and resultant public policies that could seriously misunderstand and distort the functions of universities, stripping universities

of their substance and leaving them “universities only in name”,^{iv} Lastly, they also entail that “the legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation” should be recognised “as threats to academic freedom”^v and that “the powers conferred by academic freedom go hand in hand with substantive duties to deracialise and decolonize intellectual spaces”.^{vi}

5. 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, according to the Department of Education (DoE), be 80% “if reasonable graduation rates are to be achieved”.^{vii} 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 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, with an overall drop-out rate of 45%.^{viii}

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

The conclusions are clear: “this has central significance for development as well as social inclusion”, and “equity of outcomes is the overarching challenge”.^x Clearly, 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”.^{xi}

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.

6. 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) of especially indigent students.
7. 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 since the 2007-2008 financial year is a welcome contribution and must be continued. At the same time,

and in the face of the infrastructure challenges, the extent to which such funds can be creatively leveraged to provide more funding for universities should be explored.

8. 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. 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. Moreover, one reason for the very high rate of drop-outs among black students is almost certainly inadequate state funding in the forms of scholarships, bursaries and loans. The overall funds available to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme fall far short of providing effective support for all eligible students in need and facilitating the achievement of a 20% participation rate.
9. 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 various constraints that will have to be overcome.

One of these constraints is the lack of any real confluence between thinking, policy and planning in science and technology and in higher education. If important goals are to not be compromised, an important task is to ensure an effective confluence in specific areas between the new Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Science and Technology.

10. In the face of an aging academic workforce, an additional 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 also ensure that the social composition of the academic work force is simultaneously transformed.

Currently, there are important and innovative programmes at various universities designed to build a new generation of academics. These are all, however, largely donor financed. Not too long ago vitally necessary academic development programmes that were donor-funded were debilitated because of the absence of state funding. This resulted in the dissipation of valuable expertise and experience. If a similar tragedy is not to recur, it is essential that dedicated state funding is made

available to support programmes at universities designed to build a new generation of academics and to extend and generalize these.

11. 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 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.

ⁱ Mulgan, G. (2009) 'After Capitalism'. *Prospect*. http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=10680

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan, R. (2006) 'Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in Higher Education: A Framework for Analysis of the "State-Sector" Relationship in a Democratic South Africa'. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education

^{iv} Boulton, G. and Lucas, C. (2008) *What are Universities For?* Leuven: League of European Research Universities, September

^v Du Toit, A. (2000) 'From Autonomy to Accountability: Academic Freedom under Threat in South Africa. *Social Dynamics*, 26, p.76-133

^{vi} Bentley, K, Habib, A and Morrow, S. (2006) 'Academic freedom, Institutional Autonomy, and the Corporatised University in Contemporary South Africa'. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education

^{vii} Department of Education (2006) *Aspects of the Higher Education Planning Context*. Pretoria, 17 July

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Scott, I., Yeld, N. & Hendry, J. 2007. A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education: *Higher Education Monitor No. 6*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

^x Ibid

^{xi} Boughy, C. (2008) Private communication