

Address by the South African Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, to the Association of Commonwealth Universities General Conference Queen s University Belfast, Belfast

HIGHER EDUCATION IN A CHANGING WORLD: OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATION AND RENEWAL

The Vice-Chancellor of Queen s University Belfast and Chairperson of the Association of Commonwealth Universities Council, Professor Sir George Bain
The Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, Prof. Michael Gibbons
Vice-Chancellors of Commonwealth Universities
Other Dignitaries and Guests
Colleagues

Introduction

Thank you for the privilege of addressing this august General Conference of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU).

It is indeed an honour to deliver the first keynote address on Higher Education in a Changing World, as part of the overall conference theme of Universities: Engaging with their Communities.

That we live in a changing world, indeed a rapidly changing globe, is self-evident. That higher education must engage with its communities, with its highly diverse communities, is beyond argument.

That said, what is at issue, however, is the character of this changing world, the challenges it poses to the purposes and role of universities and what should be the nature of the engagement of universities with its communities.

This is a fertile area for debate. And since Professor Sir George Bain s invitation to me states that a key role of the ACU is to provide the opportunity for debate on pressing issues of relevance to higher education let me take to heart this role and give vigorous expression to the matters that are at issue.

As Minister of Education, I enjoy the unique opportunity to participate in addressing a wide range of the challenges bequeathed by the apartheid legacy in higher education. Equally, I enjoy the privilege of participating in truly exhilarating and significant initiatives, full of promise and potential, creativity and determination, all designed to transform South African higher education so that it contributes to the realisation of important national goals. I have no doubt that the benefits of these initiatives will be revealed in the years to come.

In addressing you this morning, I wish to draw on the knowledge and experiences of the challenges of transforming South African higher education, challenges that are shared in common with many developing countries, and the myriad initiatives towards harnessing higher education towards creating a better life for all South Africans

A changing world

Amilcar Cabral, a great African leader, stressed during the national liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau that we must proceed with our feet firmly on the ground, from what is, what exists. In other words, we should be deeply aware of our context, our changing world, and not confuse present realities with what our visions and aspirations are. This is sage advice and we would do well to heed it closely. Three dimensions of the contemporary changing world are especially relevant for higher education.

Globalisation

The first dimension is beautifully captured by the following observation, which I paraphrase:

The advanced capitalist countries have through their exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. The advanced capitalist countries create a world after their own image. By the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, they draw all, even the most undeveloped or underdeveloped countries into the global economy.

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish this epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air.

This is a wonderful description of globalisation, the defining feature of our epoch, of the compression of time and space resulting from the huge increase in the speed of communication and the contact made possible by the new information and communication technologies and air travel; of the rapid growth in trade; of the expanded and more rapid flows of capital, of the global organisation of production through transnational corporations and the development of a global culture symbolised by brand names like Coca Cola, Nike and McDonalds.

Under globalisation, knowledge is the wellspring, the electricity for our countries economic and social development. It is therefore imperative that our higher education institutions become innovative, high quality powerhouses of knowledge production, dissemination and diffusion and producers of knowledgeable, competent, skilled

graduates that are nurtured to be life-long learners. This is an important issue that I wish to return to later.

Trans-nationalisation

A second dimension of our changing world is the increasing trans-nationalisation of higher education and more troubling also its commercialisation, marketisation and commodification. Higher education is defined as a multi-billion dollar industry and viewed as a new source of profit. This is well-illustrated by the characterisation at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) of higher education as a service like any other service and the attempt to make it an object of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) negotiations.

The designation of education as a service is a problem. Education and knowledge are surely not commodities to be bought and sold. The South African Minister of Trade and Industry Alec Erwin is forthright on this issue. He argues: Knowledge is not a commodity and can never be one. Knowledge is the distillation of human endeavour and it is the most profound collective good that there is. Minister Erwin goes on to argue that the more knowledge is turned into a commodity and privatised the more it will either corrode the collective knowledge base or itself corrode as it distances itself from that collective wellspring .

It is important that we remain vigilant to ensure that increased trade in education also does not undermine our national efforts to transform higher education and, in particular to strengthen the public sector so that it can effectively participate in an increasingly globalising environment. Trade considerations cannot be allowed to erode the public good agenda for higher education. Higher education must play a central role in the achievement of equity, development, justice and democracy, in nurturing the values of democracy, in building a critical citizenry and in the formation of new generations of thinkers and actors.

Our response to GATS should be firmly located within a commitment to genuine international collaborations and partnerships in education, which is critically important to the health of any higher education system. It should not be informed by parochialism and narrow chauvinism. However, the unintended consequences and costs of trade liberalisation in education cannot be underestimated. We must ask whether there should not be a fundamental re-thinking of the inclusion of education in GATS. We must engage with GATS in a way that holds promise for our own agendas and needs. We must avoid at all costs a GATS in education that puts our education, our culture and our future in peril.

It is quite clear that the real money is in training, at technical and higher education levels. We cannot simply open up our countries. Freer trade is after all a quest for money rather than enlightenment, which surrenders our own national needs. As for us in South Africa, I will advise my Government not to enter into any bilateral relations in this regard under

GATS, which can then be generalised to the world at large under the most-favoured nation clause.

Our Commonwealth universities have a rich history of partnerships with each other and with other institutions across the globe. These relationships include staff and student exchanges, support for capacity building, research linkages and so forth. They are partnerships between peers, shaped for mutual benefit and not for commercial purposes.

The internationalisation of higher education, the international exchange of students and scholars, bilateral and multilateral agreements around knowledge, research, transfer of expertise and skills and flows of learners and scholars are all vitally important and must be pursued energetically and extended. These activities do not have to become the object of trade agreements through GATS and the WTO. They have been taking place for a long time outside of GATS and the WTO and must continue in the spirit of true internationalism, a spirit that is evident in the diversity of persons, languages, cultures, religions and institutions present here this morning.

Since 1994, South Africa itself has witnessed a tremendous increase in the flow of students from other parts of Southern Africa and Africa and elsewhere — from about 5 000 students to some 40 000 today. I am pleased to announce that I am in the process of issuing regulations to institutionalise public subsidies for all undergraduate students from the Southern African Development Community countries that enrol at our higher education institutions and for all postgraduate students whatever their country of origin. This is a major financial commitment on the part of South Africa as a developing country but we make it gladly in the spirit of the African Renaissance, the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the noble practice of internationalism. We also make it in the knowledge that our own students will be all the better prepared and our institutions all the more vibrant through the presence of students from the SADC and other countries.

Growing inequality

Finally, it is unavoidable to draw attention to a third and rather shameful dimension of our changing world.

It is a reality that for millions of people, human rights and a just, caring and humane world remains an illusion. Injustice, racism, sexism, homophobia and intolerance, starvation and greed, and power and powerlessness, all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that creates and exacerbates the cleavages that exist in the world and within countries.

Millions experience a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities are growing, where economic and social rights seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful. A world in which there is no shortage of condemnation of political violence but all too little outrage at death through hunger and disease — which can be avoided through more humane and just economic and social policies.

This is a powerful indictment of the world that we live in and perhaps the countries that we live in. It must challenge us, especially in developing countries and in higher education, to imaginative and bold action.

The three dimensions of our changing world that I have just sketched — globalisation, increasing trans-nationalisation and commercialisation of higher education, a world characterised by widespread inequalities and injustices — have huge implications for higher education. We must engage with them and they must shape our efforts and work. It is fatal to think they can be ignored. They represent fundamental challenges to higher education thinking, policy and practice and demand the improvement, renewal, reform and transformation of higher education systems and institutions.

The purposes and role of higher education

Implicit in my comments is a particular conception of the purposes and role of higher education. However, let me articulate this conception more explicitly.

In the thinking and practice of higher education reform and transformation, it is all too easy to become seduced by the excitement and practice of change without addressing sufficiently the fundamental purposes of higher education change. These purposes, I wish to assert, must include:

Æ Attention to the pressing local, regional and national needs of our countries to the problems and challenges of our broader contexts

Æ The mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of our rapidly changing societies

Æ Laying the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests

Æ The training and provision of human resources to strengthen our countries enterprises, services and infrastructure. This requires the development of professionals and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, but who are socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation, and

Æ The production, acquisition and application of new knowledge through well-organised, vibrant research and development systems that integrate the research and training capacity of higher education with the needs of industry and of social reconstruction and renewal.

The key questions are how can these diverse social purposes be achieved? Can these purposes be achieved by a single institution? Or must they necessarily be distributed across institutions and the system? What kind and spectrum of institutions are required? Is there any virtue in homogeneity where every higher education institution seeks to do

the same thing and all aspire to be a (research) university? Or is there a strong case for a highly differentiated and diverse higher education system that is made up various kinds and types of institutions that are congruent with the diversity of our socio-economic and educational needs and goals. Given the missions and goals that some institutions define for themselves, can they still be considered to be universities? Is the concept of the corporate university not an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms? What are the necessary conditions, within and outside higher education, for institutions and higher education to fulfill these purposes?

The demands on higher education are indeed daunting. This is even more so for higher education in the developing world. In many parts of Africa, the higher education capacity has been seriously eroded by, amongst others, the effects of short-sighted policies of international agencies and internal economic and political conditions.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, there is much hope for the renewal of higher education on our Continent, especially in the context of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). However, this transformation must be determined in ways that truly support national and regional development.

The road to renewal of higher education on our Continent will be a long and hard one. There are no quick fixes or instant solutions. Much hope is being placed on the role of distance education and transnational e-universities in the expansion of access to higher education. Clearly, there is an important role for high quality distance education provision that is responsive to local conditions, but this cannot be the panacea for all the challenges that we face.

It cannot replace or dilute the need for considered, sustained and targeted investment in the building of national universities and regional centres of excellence. Such institutions are key to the production of future generations of scholars and intellectuals who are critical to social, political and economic development.

Globalisation and the development challenges of especially developing countries require that we critically interrogate the core purposes and functions of higher education and its institutions — teaching and learning, research and community service. And above all that we prioritise innovation and renewal in these crucial areas.

All too often in the reform and transformation of higher education, there is a propensity for governance, financing and other areas, to become the key issues. And all too often too little or inadequate attention is given to the transformation of the heart and soul of higher education — of learning, teaching and the curriculum, and of research and the production of knowledge. And yet what we do or do not do in these arenas, of course, has a huge bearing on what kind of graduates, professionals and human beings our institutions produce and what kind of contribution they make to our societies.

The critical issues are whether we:

Æ Provide for the varied learning needs of our hopefully diverse student body through well-conceptualised, designed and planned teaching, learning and research programmes

Æ Provide our students with the opportunity to develop and succeed as intellectuals, professionals and researchers, who can think theoretically, analyse with rigour, gather and process empirical data and do all this with a deep social conscience and sensitivity to the development challenges and needs of our societies

Æ Provide institutional environments and cultures that are safe and secure and respectful, are intellectually nurturing, promote higher learning and embrace our students as partners in this learning.

The production of thinking and committed graduates will, of course, not happen automatically, but will depend crucially on the reform and transformation of learning and teaching and the curriculum. In this regard, there are a number of critical questions that much too often are simply not posed:

Æ What are the orientations of our learning and teaching programmes in the different disciplines and fields? What are the outcomes that they seek to achieve and what kind of graduate do they seek to produce?

Æ What is in our curricula? Equally, what is missing, what are the silences? What texts are being used? Where do these texts come from and who writes them?

Æ What is the nature of learning and teaching that is being practised and the modes of interaction? What are our assessment strategies and methods?

Æ Is there congruence between the outcomes that we profess to want to achieve and the curriculum, modes of learning and teaching and assessment practices?

Æ Finally, are our programmes purely oriented towards narrow technical outcomes in terms of mastery and proficiency of the practice of a discipline or field? Or do they also address issues of critical citizenship and the context and needs of transforming societies in which the professions have to be practised. Are we producing excellent technicians and technocrats only, or simultaneously enlightened and critical citizens?

Put in another way, what discourse of social responsiveness prevails in our academic departments today? — a narrow market responsiveness and the needs of economic productivity alone, or a broader responsiveness that also addresses knowledge, skills, competencies and commitments related to building and consolidating democracy and a vibrant civil society.

Today, any serious higher education reform and transformation agenda must also prioritise quality as a key policy driver. The building of environments and cultures in which students can, through academic support, excellent teaching and mentoring and

other initiatives, genuinely have every chance of succeeding and graduating with the relevant knowledge, competencies, skills and attributes that are required for any occupation and profession, to be life-long learners and to function as critical, culturally enriched and tolerant citizens must surely be a critical policy goal.

Too often, poor quality is justified in terms of providing access and opportunities to traditionally disadvantaged social groups. This is, of course, a cynical and distorted notion of equity - equity as rhetoric - which does not in any substantive and meaningful way erode the domination of high-level occupations and knowledge production by particular privileged social groups. Without the provision of high quality learning and research programmes, we do not in any substantive and meaningful way contribute to the production of graduates that can contribute to the economic and social development of our societies and to the public good. There may indeed be private benefits for individuals but no or little public benefits for society.

Quality and equity are not in competition. They are two sides of the same coin. Equity without quality is meaningless. At the same time, quality cannot be pursued in isolation from the goals of equity in higher education and contributing to greater social equity through social advancement via higher education. It is difficult to pursue equity with quality, but certainly not impossible.

The engagement of universities with its communities

Finally, the issue of the engagement of universities with its communities will be addressed in the coming days of this conference. The recognition of the plurality of communities is vitally important, as is the diversity of their interests and needs. I wish to address only one issue in this regard, connected to the purposes of higher education.

A much expressed and emphasised goal is making higher education institutions more responsive to the needs of economy. Increasingly the contribution of institutions to economic development is questioned and there are complaints about the quality of recruits from universities, the nature and appropriateness of their qualifications and training, and the international competitiveness of graduates.

There is no argument that in many cases there is urgent need for extensive restructuring of qualifications and programmes to make curricula more congruent with the knowledge and skills needs of a changing economy, the labour market and the world of work. No argument also that there is great need to forge higher education-industry partnerships and to become clearer about employers' needs (though, unfortunately, in many cases they themselves are not entirely clear about short and long term workplace needs).

The responsiveness of higher education institutions is sometimes seen from the point of view of the needs of industry and commerce alone. Their needs are often treated as synonymous with the enterprise of scientific and technological knowledge production.

However, I wish to strongly emphasise that higher education institutions must be geared to be not only economically responsive but also socially responsive. They are also fundamental to the development of a conscious citizenry, the process of democratisation and a vibrant civil society. Our concept of development must be broader than industrial and commercial strategy, even though they are integral to development. The demands of knowledge production must therefore go beyond the imperative of industrialisation and commerce. They must speak equally to social empowerment, political engagement, cultural production and high levels of public participation in all aspects of society. For this to happen it demands the enrichment of individual capabilities and educated and cultured citizens. It is here that higher education institutions can and must develop creative partnerships, plans and roll out processes for the improvement of public life and for fostering public participation of citizens in the critical issues of the day.

The resources of higher education institutions must be harnessed to serve the larger society. This requires a fundamental change in the relationship between higher education institutions and society and communities. Let me emphasise, while in the past higher education could have been described as an institution in society, now it must be an institution of society. The social contract that links higher education institutions and society must be accordingly revised.

In this regard the notion of the Civic University, an institution that is rooted in and serves the needs of the broader society must be placed at the fore. While institutions are national assets, they, however, also have a role to play in serving the cities, towns and communities in which they are located.

The fundamental point is that education is and must be more than about skills and competencies narrowly defined in relation to the needs of industry. Skills and competencies related to economic development are vitally important. The key issue, however, especially in the light of the Enron scandal and the lax business ethics it revealed, is to ensure that the skills and competencies we develop are embedded within the broad set of ethical and moral values and principles that give meaning to human existence. These values and principles must be safeguarded against the incursions of despots and international trade regimes alike.

Higher education institutions must therefore exercise vigilance against these incursions that seek to redefine the meaning of education in ways that profoundly affect the core of the values and social purposes that our institutions must serve.

In summary, we must take great care that we do not allow the demand on universities for responsiveness to be thinned down to purely market and economic responsiveness. Take great care that the traditional knowledge responsibilities of universities (research as the production of new knowledge, teaching as the dissemination of knowledge, and community service as the applied use of knowledge for social development) do not become solely located within the demands of economic productivity.

It is imperative to advance, especially in developing countries where higher education reform and transformation may be part of a larger process of democratic reconstruction and development, a more extensive, thick, complex and multi-faceted notion of higher education responsiveness that incorporates its wider social roles and other crucial social purposes. In this regard, a key goal must be to develop the high level and varied intellectual and conceptual knowledge, abilities and skills to meet the local, regional, national and international requirements of a developing democracy.

Conclusion

Distinguished guests and colleagues

Each country must cast a searching spotlight on its higher education, analyse its strengths, weaknesses and problems and fashion for itself the social and educational purposes of its higher education, its goals and the policies, and the strategies, mechanisms and processes that are appropriate for realising its purposes and goals.

We must have the courage to be the authors of our own destiny, to be pioneers rather than just imitators, to push the bounds of possibility. In asserting the need for each country to determine its own solutions I am not for a moment suggesting that we should be averse to considering and learning from higher education reforms and transformation initiatives elsewhere, that there should be no policy borrowing. On the contrary, excellent ideas, innovative thinking, novel policies and exciting strategies must be celebrated and become part of the pool of global higher education wisdom from which we must draw. But, ultimately, we must develop our own thinking and ideas and devise and determine our own policies and strategies as appropriate to our own contexts.

As higher education leaders we must be conscious of the great expectations that communities and citizens have of our institutions. In many of our countries, scholars, researchers, the learned intellectuals, enjoy respect.

It is to the universities that citizens and communities look for intellectual engagement with the challenges of economic development, job creation and the reduction of poverty; the development of human resources; the effective delivery of social services; the threat of HIV/AIDS; the pathologies of racism, sexism and homophobia; the imperative of equity and redress; and the building of a substantive democracy, including a vibrant and intellectually and culturally rich civil society.

It is to the universities that citizens and communities look for the intellectual critique - of globalisation and its effects on cities, regions, countries and communities and of well meaning but poorly implemented policies or the unintended consequences of social policies.

It is to the universities that they look for intellectual vision and above all an intellectual contribution to the development of an equitable, just and humane democracy.

This is perhaps a heavy burden on universities but a necessary and exciting one, full of promise for the renewal of our societies and of universities themselves. As institutions of society, universities must, with the necessary support and enabling policy frameworks, respond with boldness, imagination and vigour.

I thank you and look forward to engaging with you on my arguments and propositions.
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