

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING,
DR BLADE NZIMANDE, AT THE HELTASA 2010 ANNUAL CONFERENCE.**

23 November 2010

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Executive Director, Council for Higher Education: Dr L Lange

Senior Manager: Statistical information and Research, UMALUSI: Mr E Sibanda

Distinguished Guests

Conference delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning,

It is a pleasure to be present here today to address this important gathering at the annual conference of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa. Learning and teaching is a crucial challenge in our country, especially given the large numbers of underprepared students in our institutions. However, it is also important that we also ask ourselves, as posed in our Higher Education Summit in April this year, on how prepared are our own universities to deal with the type of students in our higher education institutions or are they themselves extremely underprepared.

I regard HELTASA as an important initiative since as a country we need to pay particular attention to teaching and learning as an integral component in widening access and improving success in higher education and training. Indeed many of our under-graduate students aim to study and finish their degrees on time in order for them to go out to work.

The challenge of learning and teaching in our universities

It is indeed a fact that one of the most important levers in improving the quality of life in a society is access to education in general, and higher education in particular. It is for this reason that government has placed education as an apex priority in its programmes. As the Minister of the DHET I am aware of the tremendous responsibility that rests on our post-school system as we have both a moral and social imperative to provide quality education that has an immediate and a long-term impact on the development trajectory of our country.

Education is the engine that drives personal, social and economic development in the country, and must rightfully be prioritized if we are to achieve a society that provides adequately for all of its members. The work of this organization is particularly pertinent in this regard. It has an important contribution to make towards ensuring our higher education institutions provide quality teaching and learning experiences for all the students that we must serve, and that these institutions become places that builds on the cultural outlook, expectations and the world-views of all of our students.

We recognize that part of the critical mission of our higher education institutions is that of focusing on academic development, whose critical components are effective learning and teaching. The academic development movement in the past could perhaps be criticized for a somewhat lopsided and skewed focus on learning, and the warped understanding that students are the only ones that need to be developed on the grounds that they come into academic environments severely lacking in the competencies required to succeed in these environments. This is clearly a deficit view of students, which does

not take into account the role that the institutions themselves have to play in preparing and transforming themselves to deal with these challenges.

Of course we cannot deny that a large proportion of our students come to our institutions inadequately prepared to meet the demands of higher education studies. We also cannot deny that the extent of the unpreparedness still reflects the race and class inequalities that still remain a feature of South African society today.

It is however for the above and other reasons that my department has undertaken to review the funding formula for universities in order to ensure that much as reward for research outputs is important, but that such a funding formula must recognize and reward excellent teaching and learning that still remains a fundamental requirement for success in higher education.

Rewarding intensive learning and teaching in our higher education institutions is part of ensuring that our institutions become welcoming environments for our students, and that the culture and ethos of our institutions does not become a barrier to access and success.

A necessary component to access and success in our institutions, and an integral component to the success we all want, is that lecturers our institutions are adequately developed to respond to the specific needs of a diverse range of students, and not just a select few. It is a fallacy to assume that, by virtue of advanced study in a particular field, someone automatically becomes a good teacher in that field. Teaching, like learning, needs development, and academics at our institutions have to recognize that improving pedagogical competency is a critical factor in improving success.

Another important challenge that is crucial to our improvement of teaching and learning in our institutions is that of developing a differentiated model of higher education, where each of our institutions have dedicated foci and specializations through which they can excel in both teaching and learning, as well as research activities.

Specific challenges facing our former black universities

Much as all our institutions have to focus on improving learning and teaching, there are particular challenges that face our former black, and predominantly, rural universities.

The former black universities face an overwhelming challenge to improve learning and teaching as they are populated by students who predominantly come from poor and under-prepared backgrounds. In addition, these students are beneficiaries of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, but this assistance is normally inadequate to meet all their needs, including inability to pay for the full cost of study. This in itself tends to aggravate their conditions of study, thus creating further barriers to success.

Further barriers to success include the lack of the necessary infrastructure to provide an appropriate learning environment, including lack of proper residential facilities and other infrastructure for an appropriate learning environment. It is for these reasons that our department aims to focus on prioritizing the provision of adequate infrastructure to these institutions over the next four to five years.

HELTASA is an important role-player in the higher education terrain. In my preparation for this talk tonight, I briefly examined the history of the organization, and I have noted the very important attempts and endeavours to address all the above shortcomings in our higher education system in general, and in former black universities in particular.

I am heartened to see how the organization has attempted to reinvent itself to become more relevant and responsive to the needs of the time, and how the organization has tried to ensure that its responsiveness is grounded in understanding the overall developmental challenges facing our higher education system.

I am at this point reminded of an old man from Ga-Mothapo, a village near the University of Limpopo Turfloop campus, who had this to say, *“Every day we can see the University*

buildings. We also wonder if these big buildings with all its knowledge can help us. But we don't know how to ask and we are afraid they will send us away".

Universities as institutions of higher learning have to fulfill their core business of teaching, learning and researching within the context of responding to local, regional and national needs.

The urgent necessity of curriculum transformation

It is also important for all for us to recognize that curriculum transformation is an integral and key component of improving learning and teaching in our institutions.

I am very concerned about the extent to which our universities, especially former black universities, are consumers rather than producers of knowledge. Our curricula still largely reflects what is passed onto us by the developed world, without adequate critical interrogation of these as paradigms and thoughts that emanate from the developed world often without any relevance to us, or if there is any relevance at all, it is only in so far as to perpetuate the subjugation of the South to the North!

In government, we are concerned that most of the students produced by our universities are not grounded in the developmental challenges that face our country. Our students are daily being taught to reproduce some of the very ideas that today have led to the current global economic crisis that we face, and are not adequately equipped to critique some of these paradigms and advance ideas that are more appropriate to our own challenges and those facing the South in general.

At this point I must also point out that even the international exchanges and relationships that we have through our institutions, our former black universities are lagging far behind. These international exchanges are also important for purposes of developing our own capacity to critically learn and critique of what normally passes as 'global knowledge'.

As part of the transformation of our curricula it is also very important that we develop more participatory methods of teaching and learning. Knowledge production and reproduction is not just a matter of passing knowledge from lecturer to recipient, but that it is also a function of interaction between the lecturer and the learner.

Making full use of the new higher education and training landscape

As most of you already know, our newly established Department of Higher Education and Training assumed responsibility for the whole range of post-school education and training provision, including through institutions such as the universities, the vocational and continuing education and training colleges, adult education and the institutions responsible for ensuring skills training for workers and the unemployed, such as the SETAs and the National Skills Fund. The universities, as providers of the highest level of academic education among these institutions, have a special role to play in strengthening the post-school system as a whole and play a central role in national development.

Universities are one of the critical institutions in giving effect to the objective of “Access to Quality Education” as highlighted in government’s Medium Term Strategic Framework (2009-2014) .

There are several critical questions that we must address together with the universities, such as:

- How can we increase access to our universities, especially for students from rural and poor communities?
- How can we ensure that increased access is accompanied by measures that will ensure a reasonable degree of success for the students? In particular, how can university curricula, programmes, structures, facilities and cultures be more welcoming and responsive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds? While we note increased enrolments in higher education, and are heartened by

this, student retention, throughput, and graduation rates, especially in certain fields, and for particular sectors of our population remains highly problematic.

- How can we ensure that the work universities engage with, their research and the graduates that they produce are relevant to local, national and regional needs?
- What role can universities play in the development of local communities?

The new landscape for education and training does indeed provide a new impetus for improving learning and teaching in our institutions.

Our department is also prepared to support and foster co-operation around best practice in this area, beyond just formal conferences as these. We would like to foster co-operation, rather than just competition, amongst our South African institutions so that we can effectively learn from one another.

With these words we wish you a successful conference.

Thank you