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# Report of the Council on Higher Education's Consultative Conference, 2009

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## Introduction

With the creation of the new Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) and the accompanying shifts in emphasis, the higher education sector is at a cross-road. This was considered an opportune time for the Council on Higher Education's consultative conference to identify and discuss proposals to address major challenges facing the sector. The goal of the consultative conference was to formulate a coherent sector response to these major challenges and to questions of policy direction.

The annual consultative conference of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) was held at the CHE offices in Pretoria, on the 21 October 2009. It was attended by vice-chancellors or their representatives from the 23 public universities, representatives of four private higher education institutions, representatives of other sector bodies and interest groups, the members of the Council of the CHE and the Board of the Higher Education Quality Committee, and senior members of staff from the CHE.

## Proceedings

The CHE CEO, Dr De la Rey was the Convener and Chairperson for the conference proceedings.

The conference was opened by the Chair of the Council on Higher Education, Professor Manganyi, who welcomed the delegates.

The welcome was followed by a review of the State of Higher Education report recently published by the CHE. Dr De la Rey introduced the Report by noting that “state “reports may take various forms and the CHE’s reports have varied over time. The approach taken in the current report is based on a “Report Card” model informed by the new Monitoring Framework being developed by the CHE. The Director for Advice and Monitoring, Ms Backhouse, presented highlights from the report focusing on key findings regarding access and equity, the success of teaching and learning, research and the resourcing of higher education.

Dr Qhobela, Deputy Director-General in the Department of Higher Education and Training, identified key concerns of the Department. Dr Qhobela pointed out that some of the policy intentions of the NPHE have been realized. The new Department of Higher Education and Training intended to “establish a policy framework to provide for a diverse and differentiated post school system”. This would have to cover a “broad swathe” that includes youth to adult, employed and unemployed people, and covers training and education from workplace skills to research.

He emphasized that a wide range of policies had been put in place and that the department would build on this base going forward. He also enumerated a number of principles that would form the basis of any future developments. These would include (1) moving towards a coordinated, national planned system, (2) maximizing equity of opportunity and (3) developing a diverse and differentiated institutional base.

He confirmed that universities would continue to be important in the future and suggested that the current juncture presented an opportunity to redefine their role. Diversification of institutions meant looking for a range of institutions that were all excellent, and not a stratified system. The challenge would be to look for mechanisms that would support such diversity, including appropriate governance, funding and quality assurance. He also suggested that a priority for universities should be to improve the quality of staff and staff qualifications, and that the sector needed to consider how to keep higher education from being only for the rich.

Delegates were then asked to discuss and report on four theme areas, focusing on specific proposals.

- 1) The challenge of access and success
- 2) How higher education contributes to development
- 3) What kinds of knowledge are valued and supported?
- 4) Encouraging diversity in further and higher education

The deliberations of the conference and specific proposals are reported on in the sections below.

## The purpose of higher education

The conference referred back to the purposes of higher education reflected in the White Paper 3 and reiterated in the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE). These are:

1. Human resource development: the mobilization of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of a rapidly changing society.
2. High-level skills training: the training and provision of person-power to strengthen this country's 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.
3. Production, acquisition and application of new knowledge: national growth and competitiveness is dependent on continuous technological improvement and innovation, driven by a well-organized, vibrant research and development system which integrates the research and training capacity of higher education with the needs of industry and of social reconstruction.

Some felt that higher education had not contributed sufficiently to national development and social transformation as envisaged. It was suggested that the sector needed to understand the concept of the developmental state and in particular how it is expressed by government. From there it would be possible to consider how higher education could contribute, what kind of education and training would be required, and how to move towards a more developed state. The sector would also need to benchmark itself internationally against appropriate countries.

Being more responsive to development needs would also entail curriculum renewal and different approaches to teaching. Teaching and learning could be better aligned to the needs of society if greater emphasis was placed on community engagement, service learning and work integrated learning.

**Proposal 1: The CHE should convene a forum to discuss the purpose of higher education and how it could better support development.**

## Diversity, differentiation and new institutional forms

There was wide-spread agreement that this was going to be necessary. There was wide agreement that the goal was not to create a hierarchical system in which some institutions were in an "ivy league" and where positions in the hierarchy were seen to relate to quality. Rather the goal should be to create a sector comprised of high-quality institutions which focused on their particular strengths.

The historical positioning of institutions had to be acknowledged and any system proposed to encourage diversity would need to support those institutions that come from a less conducive environment. Also, it was agreed that there would need to be pathways for students to move across institutional types and that articulation would need to be carefully considered.

A range of dimensions were identified along which the sector could be differentiated. These included: mode of delivery (contact/distance); the basis of funding (public/private); level of educational programmes; training or education focus; research; knowledge areas; size; location; and degree of internationalization.

There was a strong sense that diversity and differentiation would not work if it was directed centrally. That is, policy should not dictate which institutions will be of which type. Rather there were suggestions that differentiated funding, planning and quality assurance mechanisms should be used to support the development of institutions in improving quality in their identified areas of excellence.

It was noted that HESA has initiated investigations into diversity and differentiation, but it was felt that, since HESA represents only public higher education, it would be necessary to expand these debates. The CHE was deemed the most appropriate body to lead these deliberations.

**Proposal 2: The CHE (this could be in collaboration with HESA) should prepare and make public a framework for the discussion of diversity and differentiation in the sector. Such a framework would form the basis of ongoing debate about diversity and differentiation and how these could be supported.**

## Private higher education

The past ten years have seen the successful regulation of private higher education, but there has been no policy that spells out the role of this sub-sector or supports its development. Private higher education in South Africa currently absorbs a very small number of students, while in other countries this sector is substantial. Given the demand for higher education and the constraints on growing the public sector, expanding private higher education could be beneficial to South Africa.

Discussions included how to create an enabling environment to encourage the development of private higher education. This could include more mixed options for funding since a thriving private higher education sector has the potential to lighten the financial burden on the state to provide education and training. Areas that could be considered include tax concessions for institutions or individuals contributing to institutions, allowing access to academic networks for Internet and library resources, allowing staff and students access to research funding and study grants, and rewarding private institutions for research outputs or graduates in areas of national need. Putting in place favourable conditions for start-up institutions could also be considered.

Private higher education includes both for-profit and non-profit institutions and these two sub-sectors might need to be addressed in different ways. Concerns were expressed as to how to ensure that private higher education supports national imperatives for equity and redress.

Private higher education in South Africa appears somewhat disconnected from the higher education sector and this should be rectified by a more comprehensive regulatory framework. Many of the elements of such a regulatory framework are already in place, including legislation that provides a statutory basis for the operation of private institutions, procedures

for establishing new institutions, quality assurance processes, and the reporting obligations of private providers. What is lacking is a clear articulation of the role of private higher education, clarity on the nature and forms of support that such institutions might expect, and guidelines for private-sector participation in student grants or loan schemes and research funds.

**Proposal 3: The potential role of private higher education needs to be recognised and more fully defined. Leading private institutions should convene a task team, including a range of stakeholders, to identify and propose mechanisms to develop and grow the sector.**

## Other institutional types

Delegates felt that it was important to have a strong vision for the desired post-school system. Significant changes will only be achieved by taking a long-term view.

Fundamental to developing the post-school system is the recognition that a 16% participation rate in universities means that 84% do not attend university. Even if the target of 20% participation is reached, there will still be 80% who don't attend university. Institutions need to be developed to cater for the people who will not attend university. This can be done through existing institutions such as FET colleges, and by introducing new institutions.

Suggestions were made for introducing new vocational institutions that specifically addressed vocational training. These would generally not lead into higher education, but would lead to employment. Such institutions would help to address the backlog of untrained adults that need to get into employment.

In order to address the challenges of those who have left school without the requisite skills to enter university, a system of colleges, equivalent to the community colleges in the USA, was proposed. These colleges have no entrance requirements, offer 2 year programmes that provide a range of skills that can lead to employment. Some courses lead into university degree programmes. Such colleges will be able to improve the skills of school leavers and serve to better identify those most likely to succeed at university. They will thus help to address problems caused by the poor results from schools and the wastage at universities when students do not graduate. Another suggestion was that 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges could serve as a bridging year to improve the skills of school-leavers.

If other institutional forms are to be introduced, their relationship with universities will have to be defined. This might include having universities partner with colleges as the degree-awarding institutions. Different institutional types would also imply differences in the profile of staff and academic staff who have not achieved master's and doctoral degrees could appropriately teach in community colleges. Colleges could also move away from traditional understandings of what a lecturer is and the ways in which their work is organized within institutions.

It was noted that establishing such colleges should take priority over the expansion of the university sector and could be approached along the lines of post-war development plans that have been used to quickly address educational backlogs.

**Proposal 4: Alternative (non-university) forms of institutions, their roles in the sector and the feasibility of establishing them should be further investigated. Such an investigation is probably best driven by DoHET at present, but the CHE would be willing to consider an expanded mandate going forward.**

## Access and success

Constraints to growing the sector include the poor school results, a lack of institutional capacity, lack of funds and an inability to attract more and better-qualified staff. Language barriers, student's limited experience of life, lack of funding, and unequal social relations were identified as problems for student retention and success.

Delegates discussed ways to reduce the failure rate and time to completion. The high failure rates at universities of technology could be the result of opening access and lowering admission requirements. Some felt that there needed to be greater emphasis on transforming institutions because, for many students, universities present a hostile and alienating culture. It was noted that universities are slow to change.

Some felt that students have little contact-time with their educators and as a result are short-changed in their educational experience. As universities grow there is a need for a corresponding growth in the number of academic staff at institutions. Indicators such as FTE's (full-time-equivalents) do not provide a clear picture of staff-student ratios. Others argued that, while universities appear to be time-poor, this could also be a function of established management models. A view was expressed that growing student numbers could be dealt with using technology and creating virtual institutions.

Several delegates made reference to the ongoing discussion about the duration of the Bachelor's degree. They suggested expanding the duration of programmes and the funding for these programmes.

It was pointed out that the success of students depends on admissions policies, curricula, pedagogy and assessment and these are all factors within the control of institutions. They felt that these matters were could be addressed by institutions.

Another challenge to increased participation and success is that many young people have no great aspiration or ambition to obtain a degree. There is a lack of positive, public voices about the value of higher education. As a result many young people see no value in pursuing higher education and may enter higher education with insufficient motivation to complete their studies.

**Proposal 5: There is a need for better measures of student success, and for consistent understandings of the extent of throughput and dropout concerns. Stakeholders in the sector, including DoHET and the CHE should develop meaningful indicators of student throughput and these should be incorporated in policy goals and monitored.**

## Knowledge

Current pressures to focus on meeting the skills needs of the economy, as well as concerns for greater relevance for local development, call into question what knowledge is privileged in universities, both in teaching programmes and in research.

There were discussions of who drives teaching curricula and research agendas. It was suggested that the sector needs to consider how to develop people for the future society, looking towards inter-disciplinary training, leadership and developing a more rounded student. Some suggested developing relevant ethics courses for all disciplines in order to counteract the profound lack of morality within society. As far as research goes, South African higher education needs to decide whether to remain on the receiving end of knowledge generation or to actively generate new knowledge that may contribute to solving our problems.

Some felt that universities in South Africa try to cover too many research areas with a very low resource-base. Others felt that universities have enough resources and funding, but that human capacity in higher education is spread too thinly.

A consequence of differentiation is that not all universities can be specialists in all areas of research. It was argued that each university should determine its own research focus area and then be supported in these chosen fields. Institutions should make realistic decisions on what they are good at and be responsible for evaluating the sustainability of their chosen mandates. This would imply a “bottom-up” approach.

There was a plea not to forget the long term needs of the economy in the light of more pressing issues. Some expressed caution that there should not be a blind pursuit of skills development in the sector.

It is considered important to develop the highest levels of academic skills and to support research. For universities in South Africa to be internationally competitive they need to continue with high-end research. The most highly- skilled people and research will be the driving force of the economy in the future and will provide the employment for all the other people in whom skills are being developed.

**Proposal 6: As a starting point, the NRF should articulate mechanisms to support the development of institutionally-selected research focus areas into centers of excellence.**

**Proposal 7: The NRF should convene a national initiative to identify ways to measure the value of research that reflect how research contributes to national development. Such measures could be used alongside traditional measures such as publication outputs and citations.**

## Funding public higher education

In addition to the discussions about funding to support increased diversity, some more specific concerns about funding were raised. These are summarized here:

- The current system is considered to disadvantage Universities of Technology and Comprehensive Universities and needs to be revised.
- While universities receive funding for academic development, such funding is not ring-fenced and funds are distributed by the institution in terms of priorities that do not always include academic development. There should be mechanisms to ensure funding is used as intended.
- Funding as a steering mechanism should support quality instead of quantity. Funding that is based on outputs will divert efforts away from quality and towards quantity.
- Each university needs to focus on pre-selected areas for teaching and research and state funding should be distributed accordingly.
- The current funding model constrains the time available for completion. A more realistic view would be to support an extended time to completion.
- Some expressed the view that the system has saturated their resources and could not do more.

**Proposal 8: The CHE should convene a task team to consider specific funding proposals for a differentiated funding model that would address the shortcomings listed here and support diversity in the sector.**

## Disability in the student body

Concerns were raised in the report on the State of Higher Education about the quality of data that is collected nationally on disability. The lack of reliable data is hampering efforts to understand the extent of disability in the sector and hence appropriate responses. Delegates at the conference expressed concern about this lack of data and suggested that the situation be rectified.

**Proposal 9: Stakeholders in the sector, including DoHET, the CHE, HESA and higher education institutions should work together to refine the classification of student disability and to improve the reliability of the data collected.**

## Gender equity in senior management

Concerns were raised about the lack of women in senior management positions and the lack of progress on the 2008 declaration of support for developing women in management. Investigation was also needed into why fewer women move into postgraduate education.

**Proposal 10: Stakeholders in the sector, including DoHET, the CHE and HESA, should work together on advancing gender equity at a senior management level in higher education. This should include specific policy goals and measures to monitor progress toward these goals.**

## Schools

The conference recognised that dialogue between the Department of Higher Education and Training and the Department of Basic Education would need to be ongoing. Such communication is important in ensuring alignment of school and university curricula. In



addition, the higher education sector would need to support the development of schooling through teacher education.

**Proposal 11: UMALUSI should convene a workshop to examine the points of interface and communication channels between basic and post-school education.**

## Concluding comments

The government's focus on and continued support for education in general, and higher education in particular, was welcomed by those at the conference.

While there was considerable excitement about the opportunities presented by this "crossroads" in higher education, this was balanced by a plea not to introduce too much further uncertainty in a system that was still reeling from the mergers. There was a call for maintaining some stability in policies and to "keep what works" in the system.

The conference felt that significant budget would have to be set aside for the development of post-school education.

This CHE consultative conference emphasized several areas of general consensus in taking the higher education sector forward and in developing a complementary skills and vocational training sector. The proposals presented here will support the directions indicated by the sector in those areas where there is consensus and will deepen the debates and enhance our understanding in those areas in which there are ongoing disagreements.

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