

A PRIVILEGE TO BE CALLED UPON, SAYS A CHE PIONEER

By Rivonia Naidu-Hoffmeester

Professor Mala Singh who has served with the CHE for 25 years shared a poignant account of how the CHE was formed.

At a recent dinner to celebrate the work of outgoing Council members of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), Professor Mala Singh, who was instrumental, together with Professor Saleem Badat, in the establishment of the CHE in 1997/1998, shared a poignant account of how the CHE was formed.

Taking guests down memory lane, Professor Singh said it was a great pleasure and privilege having been involved in the CHE for 25 years. She explained that following the political transition in 1994, the then president, Nelson Mandela, established the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in 1995 to advise him on the restructuring, reform and transformation of higher education. This was followed by a range of policy and discussion documents, a Green Paper, the White Paper on Higher Education, and eventually the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, which then laid the basis for the establishment of the CHE.

“We came from academia, Professor Badat from the University of Western Cape, and I from the then University of Durban Westville. We had both been involved quite intensely with the work of the NCHE, and we had been quite involved in the discussions around the White Paper and also the Higher Education Act, especially some of the discussions about what the CHE should look like, how it should be composed, and what should some of its functions be?”

She said it was decided that the CHE would be a body of “wise people who would have a deep knowledge and vast experience of higher education, and wisdom in relation to providing advice and analysis in terms of the needs and challenges of the upcoming transformation of higher education in South African”.

TRANSLATING ANTI- APARTHEID STRUGGLE VALUES INTO CHE SYSTEMS

Professor Singh said: “Those of us who were in the CHE felt immensely privileged, we felt that it was such an exciting time. I mean, how many academics get a chance to be told, ‘come and set up this national structure to transform higher education in your country’? This is not something which happens very often in many people’s lives, so we thought that it was a huge privilege to be called upon, to be involved in this kind of work.”



Prof Mala Singh



“We understood our task as having to translate the values and the principles that had informed the anti-apartheid struggle into systems and structures that would actually advance the progressive development of higher education. For us, as academics who came from a whole range of disciplinary backgrounds, it was that challenge of translating values into systems and how to make them work. So it was very exciting.”

Professor Singh also highlighted that the CHE started with two people – the CEO and an administrative assistant who were based in an office in the building that housed the then Department of Education – and a budget of R1million in order to carry out its duties. Given the limited budget, they began with fundraising.

“Donor organisations were happy to fund South African initiatives, and therefore we raised money quite successfully in order to get going with the preparatory work for the systems, criteria and frameworks, among other things, in order to carry out the core business of the CHE.” She added that aside from financial issues and subsequent capacity issues, there were also simultaneous and contrasting perceptions of the CHE – there was both wariness among the higher education institutions, especially related to institutional autonomy, but also enthusiasm.

THE CHE AS AN INDEPENDENT STATUTORY BODY

Addressing the challenges that the CHE currently faces, Professor Singh spoke on the many subcommittees and the range of reporting requirements. “We did not have the administrative, bureaucratic and technocratic reporting requirements which left us able to concentrate on the strategic work of the CHE, which is to concentrate on the intellectual and policy work as mandated in legislation. So I think that this is really a challenge for the CHE going into the future.”

“There are new demands and a whole range of functions that the CHE didn’t have at the time and because you are kept busy with doing all these administrative, support and reporting activities, when will you find the time to engage with the big questions that actually inform what is happening in higher education and what should be happening?”

She then reminded guests that the CHE is a statutory body, which means it is part of the state, but it is not part of government, though it shares the task of giving effect to common constitutional and policy goals in higher education. “Even though it’s absolutely necessary to have a good working relationship with the Department of Higher Education and Training, and a whole range of other government departments, it is important to remember the value of this independent statutory body. It means that when it’s necessary, the CHE must be able to take a different and independent stand from government, higher education institutions, student organisations, staff organisations, as well as from a whole range of stakeholders and interested parties in higher education.”



Prof Mala Singh giving her speech during the Council Dinner



Furthermore, Professor Singh said that the CHE is fortunate to have this independence. “My view has always been that the CHE, even when we don’t get things right, is an absolutely important and crucial body in the governance and accountability landscape of higher education.”

THE TRANSFORMATION JOURNEY IS FAR FROM OVER

She added: “As I said earlier, the CHE is the result of the many struggles of the people who worked in the early days of setting it up, but also of those involved in the early policy debates about what should the new transformed higher education system look like. So the CHE has a crucial role to play in this transformation journey in higher education. And of course we all know that that journey is far from over. And I think that the CHE could play an absolutely vital role in drawing new reference points for transformation in a vastly changed contextual environment, which I acknowledge, is immensely more difficult than we had it in the early days.”

“My wish for the CHE going forward is that it will be seen by all its stakeholders, all the constituencies that it works with, as a credible and a respected organisation that provides intellectual and policy leadership in the continuing transformation of higher education in South Africa.”

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