lang reis

long walk

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learn & lead

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Uittreerede
Valedictory Lecture

Die lang reis na uitmuntende hoëronderwys en opleiding:
Die stryd van rassiste en kamerade!

The long walk to excellence in higher education and training:
The struggle of racists and comrades!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

THE LONG WALK TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING EXCELLENCE: THE STRUGGLE OF COMRADES AND RACISTS
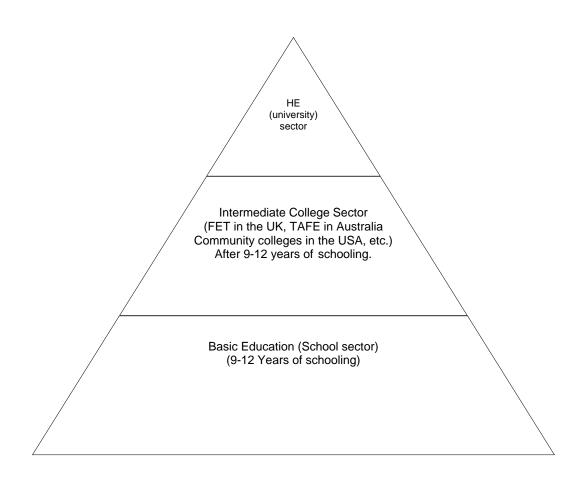
1. Politics in Higher Education and Training (HET)

I chose the terms long walk, struggle of comrades and racists, because I think one cannot make any worthwhile contribution to higher education as a field of study if you do not understand and recognize the devastating, but unfortunately unavoidable role of party politics as well as higher (university) education and training politics in HET.
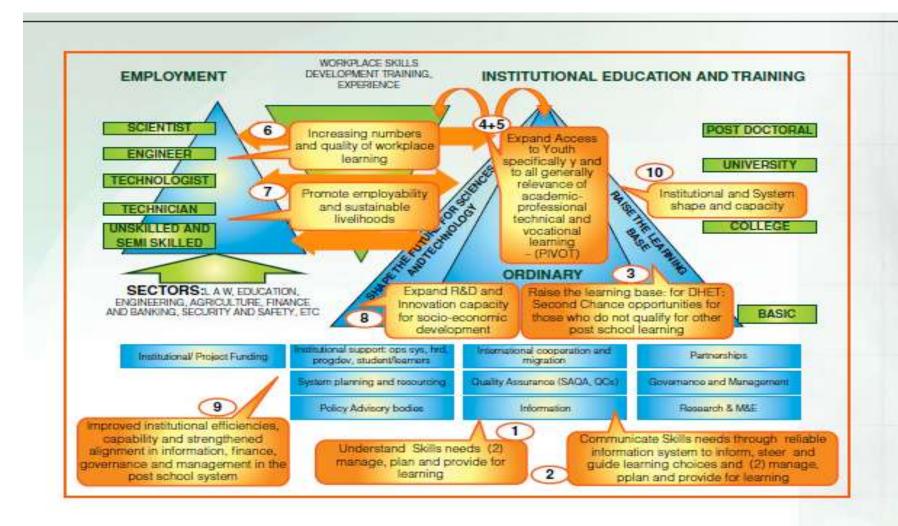
My personal experience with politics in HET can be illustrated on at least two levels with two examples:

1.1 The systems level

I was fortunate to participate with other educationists in the deliberations in the early nineties to prepare policy perspectives that could be used by the ANC in HET policy making after the 1994 elections. At these deliberations one of the important issues discussed was the typical educational and training pyramid recognized in many countries, to establish and maintain successful education and training.

HE
(university)
sector

Intermediate College Sector
(FET in the UK, TAFE in Australia
Community colleges in the USA, etc.)
After 9-12 years of schooling.

Basic Education (School sector)
(9-12 Years of schooling)

The educational pyramid in successful countries was compared to the SA "inverted" pyramid that already originated during apartheid for all races, but unfortunately exploded during the 16 years of democracy to a dangerous situation of 3 million out-of and post-school youth with very few education and training opportunities. **Why could we as higher educationists not persuade the new democratically elected government to create a successful education and training pyramid with a strong intermediate college sector in the nineties? What was the politics like in the early and late nineties about disallowing the acceptance of the successful pyramid of education and training? Why do we only now in the latest DHET strategic planning 2010 – 2015 have this successful pyramid as a basis for policymaking and planning?**

1.2 The institutional level

An example of the role of politics can be found in the discussion of racism in South African universities and specifically at the UFS.

The Reitz incident at the UFS and the infamous Soudien report on racism in higher education in South Africa highlight explosive racial situation in our university and the country. To understand this situation we need to acknowledge that we are battling with complex biases influencing the racial situation.

It can be stated that white and black, staff and students at our universities are constantly battling with the legacy of the past which is being used, abused and conveniently forgotten, as well as critical events that white and black experience every day of their lives, feeding polarisation of extreme views while eroding common ground. Examples vary from the indoctrination and prejudice that is continued within most homes, churches and schools; mass media full of murder, rape, corruption; political parties skewing difficult issues for indiscrete political gain; to frustrating non-delivery in almost all spheres of life which frustrates and irritates everyone, all feeding racial stereo typing and prejudice. A South African philosopher, Prof Willie Esterhuyse, recently used the metaphor of an "Elephant in our lounge" to describe the syndrome of racism that is part of the lives of white and black South Africans in very different ways. He indicated that all of us are aware of the elephant, but we choose not to talk about it, an attitude described by Ruth Frankenberg as 'colour evasiveness', which denies the nature and scope of the problem.

Constructs related to race are so contentious that most stakeholders and role-players are unwilling to confront the meanings that they assign to very prominent dimensions of their experience. Neither do management at the institutions have enough staff (higher educationists?) with the competencies to interrogate these meanings, or generate shared meanings amongst staff and students (common ground). A good example that could be compared with "the elephant in our lounge" remark, is the recent paper of Prof. J Jansen on race categorisation in education and training.

Universities in South Africa are increasingly becoming the battlegrounds for political gain which creates a polarised atmosphere on campuses and crowds out the moderate middle ground, thereby subverting the role and function of the university as an institution within a specific context, interpreted globally and locally.

These two examples at the systems and institutional levels hopefully illustrate what we face if we do not understand and acknowledge the issue of politics in different areas and at different levels influencing higher education studies. In line with the theme of this presentation I can ensure you that I experienced the pressure of politics starting as a racist then becoming a comrade and now again finding myself being called a racist by certain comrades and other better racists on the extreme arrogant left and right of the political spectrum. The UFS do excellent work as a university, but most media are just interested in how they might be able to link this work to the Reitz incident to promote politics fueling racism.

For higher educationists who would like to contribute, in a balanced way, to the formidable task of building an excellent higher education and training system, the following perspectives might be helpful:

- Striving for excellence is about better studying and understanding politics in HET. The little book of philosophy of André Comte-Sonville (2000) starts with the following question about the often controversial and unpalatable issue of politics.

  "What is politics? It is the management of conflicts, alliances and balances of power without resort to war – not simply between individuals (as in a family or some other group) but in society as a whole. It is the art of living together, within a single State or city (polis, in Greek) with others whom we have not chosen, to whom we feel no particular attachment and who, in many respects, are rivals rather than allies. This supposes shared power, and a struggle for that power. It supposes government, and changes of government. It supposes conflicts (albeit governed by rules), compromises (albeit provisional), and eventually agreement on how to resolve disagreements. Without politics, there would be only war and that is what it must prevent in order to exist. Politics begins where war ends".

That does not mean that I am going to change my personality at my age to become politically correct as higher educationist to either be just a comrade or a racist in advising on higher education and training. What I am saying is that an excellent higher educationist cannot disregard government policies and planning or unions in education and training (including solidarity) or the newspapers in our region/country etc. I will refer to this again in the next paragraphs, but first more about excellence in higher education studies as a field of study. Why not about equity comrades and racists? Any answer from my side to this question on the relationship between equity and excellence in South Africa will need another valedictory lecture probably in heaven, but at least I am prepared to say that I think that there is an overemphasis on equity due to political correct pressure that endangers excellence in higher education and training.

- Striving for excellence, mostly free from the negative influences of politics, in HET, from the point of view of the higher educationist, is that we should, through comparative literature review and research, re-conceptualise the university as an institution in a specific context. This entails carefully considering environment and the positioning of the university leading to a specific institutional culture and recognising the fact that institutional cultures are complicated by many subcultures in academe (faculties) and student life (residences/new generations of commuter students). These subcultures often tend to develop outside the institutional cultures. Not even mentioning the myriad of communication channels that are needed and must be maintained often under the most difficult circumstances to make progress towards excellence in a university requires a deep honest understanding of these complexities.

- Another way forward in striving for excellence, mostly free from politics, is to ensure that we understand the complexities of governing a university better. D.W. Leslie (2003) mentions formidable tasks related to governance influenced by politics.

➢ Balancing legitimacy and effectiveness.
➢ Leading along two dimensions: getting work done and engaging people.
➢ Differentiating between formal university structures and the functions of universities as they adapt and evolve.
➢ Bridging the divergence between cultural and operational imperatives of the bureaucratic and professional sides of the university.

It is possible to continue with an almost never ending list of important themes in HE studies adding perspectives on why it is so easy to misuse universities for politics instead of recognising our responsibility to carefully consider contributions to transformation in such an immensely complicated institution as the university within a higher education and training system. (Spare a thought for colleges at this point in time.)

The above perspectives are already linked to the most important phrase in my topic for this lecture, striving for excellence in higher education and training. What else should be considered?

2. Striving for excellence as higher educationists

In the book edited by E Bitzer I dealt with this topic extensively in the final chapter explaining the following points of departure:

- Understanding glocal pressures, trends, issues and challenges in higher education (including politics): the object of our study;
- Understanding the implications of the present expansion of higher education in relation to our field of study and research;
- Understanding the limitations of our thematic higher education authority;
- Understanding the necessity of one outstanding association or society for studies and research in higher education (networking).

It is possible to discuss these points of departure for many hours, but it is enough to emphasize that striving for excellence in higher education studies is not an easy task.

3. Striving for excellence in universities (colleges?)

As already mentioned the re-conceptualization of the university as an institution is of importance, but without compromising the **essential responsibility of a university, that is to create, deliver, and apply knowledge. Striving to be an excellent university in South Africa, universities should have the added responsibility of assuring the public good – sustaining the best in our society and equipping it for the future.**

However, judging the quality of the above responsibilities is no easy task. Bowen, *et al. 2005.* in their book on equity and excellence state that scores of students of higher education have recognized that defining and measuring "quality" at any level of study is excruciatingly difficult. The subjective nature of the concept, the different purposes served by higher education (and by different kinds of colleges and universities), and the lack of readily comparable data all contribute to the problem. But there is an even more fundamental source of difficulty that is less frequently discussed: the "best" educational environment for one student may well not be the best environment for another student, even when the two students are similar in many respects. Many of us spend much of our lives as university staff attempting to convince prospective students that the key in making choices about university studies is to find the right "fit" between, on the one hand, the characteristics, motivations, and interests of the student in question and, on the other hand, what a particular institution is like – how its course of study is structured, what teaching practices are followed, what opportunities it offers outside the classroom, what it does well, and what it does badly. But, of course, prospective students and their parents want simpler, unequivocal answers to the question of what is "best" – even when such answers are inevitably flawed.

4. Striving for excellence in our higher education system

If we look at applicable comparative literature, the different policy documents and reports and especially the latest DHET strategic planning document 2010-2015 the following criteria might be important in striving for excellence in the system:

- Has higher education and training got market value, made a marked economic impact on earning differentials and indicated clearly that we have productivity growth by taking stock of human capital: by the powerful combination of contribution of an educated workforce to "adoption and rapid diffusion of new technologies."
- The public good or civic benefits should also be expected from universities and should be part of educational attainment and have a strong positive effect on civic engagement within universities.

Judging excellence in our HET system should also be concerned with first and most obvious money spent on HET; the strong connection between levels of expenditures and outcomes; the wealth of South Africa and the vitality of its economic system will undoubtedly remain big plusses; a different kind of "resource", not unrelated to rands spent, the general shape and character of the SA system of higher education and training – if the word system is appropriate at the moment in South African higher education and training; a pluralistic mix of funding sources that allow the system as a whole to generate far more resources than would have been possible if it had been more monolithic; a variegated structure, combined with a commitment to freedom of expression, allowing students and staff to think creatively and independently, free for the most part of political tests and pressures to "think right".

5. Striving for excellence at the UFS

What should the UFS be looking at from the point of view of striving for excellence? Many priorities have been debated and discussed and maybe it would be acceptable for me to add the following humble view:

The UFS already has a vision, mission and values that could be compared to the above role/task. Maybe the UFS could ensure that they emphasize core values more in the context of the university as an institution. Specific UFS core values, recognising our context, should be considered instead of broad value judgements used for many organisations without being specific enough:

5.1 **Students and Learning:** UFS should be committed to help students determine their identity, develop their gifts, and build their understanding. By placing learners at the centre of the educational community, we should commit ourselves to develop them as co-creators of our future. Our values should be expressed through high expectations supported by a rich bridging and undergraduate learning environment, involvement in scholarship, openness to individual discovery, and strong student services.

5.2 **Opportunity and Inclusiveness:** At UFS we should recognize that opportunity and inclusiveness are closely intertwined. Opportunity should be enhanced through contact with diverse individuals/groups and ideas. We should be enriched by each other's presence and connected to more of what the country has to offer. In this way, opportunity is dependent upon inclusiveness. At the same time, inclusiveness depends upon opportunity. We should open wide the door of opportunity and inclusion and provide support that will bring diverse voices into our community and expand our connection to our country and the broader world. These twin values should be promoted through active recruitment and retention of staff as role models of lifelong scholarship, learning and exploration of new ideas, financial assistance, capacity development and the use of technology to overcome geographical and other barriers.

5.3 **Scholarship and Research:** UFS should take seriously its charge to seek out, develop, and disseminate new ideas. Research, creative activities, and innovation should be central to our existence and a vital gift to the community. A high standard of rigor and a devotion to a lifelong process of critical reflection should be at the heart of our commitment. This value should be expressed in patents and publications, symphonies and symposia, and exhibitions and inventions. These expressions should be supported by rich library resources and growing research facilities bearing clusters in mind.

5.4 **Community and Connectivity:** At UFS we should recognize the value of community, and we should foster an atmosphere of collegiality, collaboration, and synergy that generates creative

energies and nurtures new ideas. We should also recognize the importance of a sense of belonging and shared commitment created through a welcoming environment, well designed facilities, and personal connections among students, staff and administrators. This value is expressed in service to the community, and in shared activities that involve the university and its surrounding communities.

5.5   Partnership and Service: UFS should function within local, national, and global communities with whom we share ideas, resources, and opportunities for our mutual benefit. As a truly engaged university, UFS should commit to finding ways to apply knowledge to the realities of everyday life. Partnership should be embodied in service learning, fellowships and internships, and collaborative work in the central region of SA and more broadly.

5.6   Integrity and Stewardship: At UFS, each of the preceding values should be upheld by an unwavering commitment to our fiduciary and ethical responsibilities, including the highest standards of truth, humaneness, justice, stewardship, and freedom. As we reach for the highest level of excellence, we should hold ourselves accountable for our actions. We should endeavour to maintain the utmost integrity and use our resources efficiently and effectively.

The above core values should be within our branding and strategic thinking at all times.

6. In conclusion

In research done within a collaborative project with the OECD/IMHE an extensive self-evaluation was done by me and other colleagues in connection with the characteristics of South African higher education and training at this point in time. This research concluded with some reasons why it is still a long walk to higher education and training excellence in South Africa.

The overview of challenges, achievements, concerns as well as new expectations through the creation of a new Ministry of HET do not

only indicate high policy and planning expectations from the new Department as well as HET institutions, but often fail to realistically recognise the constraints of human and financial resources, infrastructure and lack of expertise and capacity needed for policy/planning implementation within national government departments and HET institutions. The demand overload of policies and planning, based on complicated challenges and barriers, leads to despondency and resistance that can only stifle necessary change. The DHET strategic planning 2010-2015 can only succeed and lead to excellence, if careful prioritization of expectations with the necessary resources supports, drives the implementation process. The new strategic planning is a first bold step in the right direction, but only time will tell how successfully this plan can be implemented without adding to the demand overload.

More active national/regional engagement and collaborative development has been constrained due to the orientation of public national, provincial and local policies and planning influenced by unstable politics, inadequate funding and other resources/infrastructure, limits to leadership within HEIs' and in the National and Provincial Education and Training Departments, and limited capacity of local and regional stakeholders to get involved with higher education.

The governance, leadership and management of individual Higher Education and Training Institutions (HETIs) cannot only constrain, but eliminate active engagement and development on a *ad hoc and* voluntary basis. Without national and provincial legislation linked to earmarked funding for collaborative work in partnerships, excellence will not flourish.

It was also recognised that traditional academic values through rankings often support internationalisation (globalisation), but unfortunately give little weight to engaging with regional/local communities. It is a fact that institutional structures within HEIs often offer limited incentives or resources to pursue collaboration that serves the region, above international recognition and interests. The visible trend that donors are emphasising regional/local collaboration in partnerships as an important criterion in the evaluation of project proposals is not yet well recognised in most universities applying for

donor support for HE. This statement is even more true in small, sparsely populated and poor, mostly rural regions like the Free State.

The immense expectations for change or transformation in higher education and training in SA will not be fulfilled if the top-down (centralized) process of policy and planning of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is not informed and supported by a bottom-up (regional/local) process from the institutional/local/ regional levels of governance, management and administration with financial backing for intense capacity building. It cannot be emphasised enough that on the one hand successful change (transformation) expects a perculating process recognising top-down national policy making, planning, budgeting and quality assurance as steering mechanisms in higher education, but on the other hand, recognition and respect for bottom-up implementation and operationalisation with continuous feedback on progress made within the top-down expectations. This perculating top-down and bottom-up process is the only realistic way to ensure understanding of capacity and resources challenges that will make or break needed transformation.

I hope these perspectives have illustrated the high expectations of expertise needed from higher educationists to contribute to and support all the work required to at least continue the long walk and the immense struggle to find solutions for our complex challenges, with unwavering commitment to excellence in HET.

Finally I am pleading with Covey, 2006 that we as comrades and racists urgently find common ground to start building the one thing that is common to every individual (higher educationist), relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy, and civilization throughout the world – one thing which, if removed, will destroy the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, excellent higher education and training, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love.

On the other hand, if developed and leveraged, that one thing has the potential to create unparalleled success and prosperity in every

dimension of life. Yet, it is the least understood, most neglected, and most underestimated possibility of our time.

That one thing is **trust.** In higher education and training I firmly believe that a first step towards earning trust in HET should be well informed higher educationists modestly advising and debating critical issues like excellence in higher education and training without destructive political and other hidden agendas so prevalent in our society at the moment.

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