

Source: CITY PRESS

Date: 10-Nov-2002

Topic: 25

Ref No: 6682



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Higher education in a new South Africa is in the throes of transformation. Prof **Jonathan Jansen** below, of Pretoria University looks at the challenges facing universities

Higher learning faces struggle to change cultures in a new century

CABINET this week approved the broad approach dealing with the language policy framework for higher education, which suggests the country needs to begin to develop other South African languages, in addition to English and Afrikaans, for use as scientific and academic languages and the promotion of the study of languages and literature in higher education.

Cabinet's approval came as Parliament debated the second bill, the Higher Education Amendment Bill, which is intended to clarify and bring legal certainty to issues related to the merger of institutions.

The bill includes discussions on the authority to merge, labour relations implications and the implications for students. It seeks to streamline and strengthen the governance structures of higher education institutions. The bill limits the size of institutional councils to a maximum of 30 members, requiring that at least 60 percent of them be from outside the institution.

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But as government continued to put into place its intended vision of a higher education system, Pretoria University director, Professor Jonathan D Jansen, has sketched out some of the major problems facing higher education in the country.

He says there are seven major challenges facing higher education. It's all about changing institutional cultures:

- Racism

The racist and sexist election posters parading under the banner of free speech; the abuse of women staff and students; the ease of racial desegregation is now confronted with the difficulty of social integration; the problem of "feeling at home"; the mechanisms for claiming ownership; the building of an academic and social culture that is generously inclusive, without alienating black staff and students or scaring off white staff and students – this will take exceptional leadership.

- The challenge of post-merger leadership and stability

The single most important challenge facing higher education in the medium term is to lead merged institutions into more effective, efficient and equitable futures. This means dealing with the enormous capacity for legal chaos, institutional disruption, and heavy financial losses (eg, wide-scale pre-merger promotions, appointments of vice-chancellors on the eve of a merger, and the failure to declare debt); it also means capacity for bringing together rival and different institutional cultures and re-motivating staff through periods of uncertainty.

- The dumbing down of the professoriate (equity games)

The wholesale promotion of young black academics without any record of scholarship into full professorial appointments – especially the technikons and not a few former white universities; this immediately terminates the career of the black lecturer (no further incentive to develop) and creates a permanent class of inferior academics who cannot supervise graduates or

lead major research programmes or be replaced easily (given salary scales). The system-wide effects of such practices are devastating and can reverse hard-won scholarship gains through the painfully slow and systematic building of capacity in some institutions.

- The creation of a credible class of black (and white) leadership in higher education

There is a critical need for universities and technikons to be led in this new century by persons who are credible scholars, strong managers and ethical leaders, with the capacity to create and define the new institutions that will occupy the new higher education landscape.

Such persons are in short supply, but they can be trained and developed, nurtured and supported; this means the quality of

leadership of the CHE, SAQA, SAUVCA and the DoE (among other state and state-affiliated agencies) should also project the kind of leadership that can inspire confidence in higher education.

In this regard, the Afrikaans universities face a special challenge: to deracialise the upper tier institutional leadership – that is, vice-chancellorship (who will be the first?); and the English universities face a different challenge: to deracialise the second-tier managerial leadership. Either way, we have a crisis with respect to stable and credible leadership drawn from among the class of scholars.

- The crisis of ambiguity and confusion around autonomy

What the restructuring of higher education has done is to render ambiguous, if not meaningless, the principle and practice of autonomy. Institutions are confused; government intervention has been unequal but intrusive on some matters (like the appointment of interim council members), while yielding on others (like the appointment of vice-chancellors).

There is the need for redefinition of what is sacred and the domain of higher education autonomy, and what may be grounds for state involvement and participation. Leaving this shifting terrain undefined is to court political and legal dangers in the short term, and institutional decay and demoralisation in the long term.

- The need to recast the identity of the new higher education institutions

There is a need to give character and meaning to the new institutions being formed after this historic restructuring of higher education.

This means, signally, that government has to be clear about the role of language in universities; confusing signals (like indigenous language universities) do not

help; it means clarifying – substantively – what university-technikon combinations mean for the higher-education system; it means deliberating on the curriculum of the future within institutions (preferably without government intervention); and it means leadership.

- The building of a new class of researchers, scholars and intellectuals in higher education.

Universities do not run on the basis of their junior lecturers or administrative staff; they attain distinction because of a small set of outstanding professors.

But these are not borne overnight; and yet our long-term strategies have failed – too little money, for too many students, for too short a time, with wrong-headed assumptions about local supervision capacity (the NRF).

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ID: 02889621-03 Source Page: 26

It is time to rethink national strategy, given institutional capacities. I propose a national institute for advanced studies that sets the simple objective of taking young but highly promising staff out of their institutional contexts for regular and sustained periods of time (three months per year) to develop the character and qualities of scholarship required for creating a new and resilient group of world-class academics that can be diffused into the restructured institutions of higher education.

Unless we do this urgently, we might create a new physical and organisational context for higher education but very little of substance to fill the shoes of the small but rapidly retiring group of senior professors who have given South African institutions a reasonable prestige and standing within the international arena.

- The provision of high-quality education to rural African students

The restructuring process has not taken sufficient account of the reality that transferring promising rural students into established urban universities is simply not sustainable. The drive should be for limited focus institutions offering high-quality programmes that are not only relevant for the immediate context, but also relevant for future contexts as students are "bridged" into top universities for postgraduate studies.

We have to live with the fact that many black students with minimal matriculation passes will only enter competitive higher education through a veritable second chance in rural institutions. But this still obligates the state and institutions to ensure the second chance (eg, through "senate exemption" rulings) is of sufficient quality and status to enable further education beyond the rural setting (which should be primarily high-quality undergraduate institutions).