

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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South Africa

Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

Note2: Authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in signed articles and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

South Africa

**Speech of Prof. S.M.E. Bengu
South African Minister of Education**

Mr. President, the Director-General of UNESCO, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates.

We are approaching the end of the term of office of the first democratically elected government in South Africa, during which time we have come to take our place in the international community. Yet, I continue to be excited by the opportunity to participate in forums such as this - not only because we have much to learn from your experiences but because we, too, have much to offer the international community, especially in relation to the changes that are taking place in almost every sphere of South African society.

The transformation of higher education has been high on the agenda of my Ministry. Higher education must play a key role in the political, economic and cultural reconstruction of South Africa. Thus, our challenge has been to develop and implement a policy and legislative framework enabling us to:

- redress past inequalities,
- meet pressing national needs and
- respond to new realities and opportunities

A White Paper, adopted in 1997, outlines the framework for change - fundamental to which is a higher education system that is planned, governed and funded as a single coordinated entity. The development of a system-wide and institution-based planning process, and a responsive regulatory and funding framework are the key mechanisms identified as the basis for enabling the development of a coordinated system.

Our emphasis on planning and the inter-related set of proposals on governance and funding are premised on the notion that the higher education system has to be:

- accountable for the expenditure of public funds
- responsive to societal interests and needs and
- governed on the basis of co-operation and partnerships between the state, higher education institutions and civil society.

The implementation of our transformation agenda is all the more challenging given our emphasis on redressing historical inequalities. We are committed to increasing and broadening access to higher education, especially for black, women, disabled and mature students. While it is possible to achieve rapid enrollment growth without concomitant increases in expenditure, the penalties for doing so can be severe. Our approach has rather been towards the planned, affordable and targeted expansion of the system.

The costs associated with greater student participation, redress of inequalities and the restructuring of academic programmes will be met by a strategic mix of funding sources, including a greater volume of private contributions.

We believe that the costs of higher education should be shared equitably between the State and private beneficiaries. However, we are aware that there are limitations to the capacity of many students to pay fees. To ensure that talented students from poor backgrounds are not denied access to higher education, we have put into place a National Student Financial Aid Scheme.

The new Higher Education Act, adopted in 1997, shapes the relationship between the State and higher education institutions, the basis of which is the desirability of higher education institutions to "enjoy freedom and autonomy in their relationship with the State". However, the Act locates institutional autonomy within the context of public accountability.

The Act also provides for the establishment of an independent Council on Higher Education to advise the Minister on higher education matters.

Finally, it would be an error on my part to conclude without giving you an insight into how we see the development of the South African higher education system in relation to our region.

At the recent Mindedaf VII Conference held in South Africa, we offered to make our higher education infrastructure available to other countries in Africa as part of a continent-wide collaborative programme to promote human resource development through high level training and capacity building.

My Ministry locates this offer within the context of a regional programme, committed to promoting partnerships across the continent. Our commitment is to multi-national exchanges, which draw on the strengths of the higher education systems of all member states.

I hope that this outline of developments in South Africa higher education has given you a flavour for the challenges we have assumed - with the full knowledge that the journey will not be an easy one.