ANNEXURE 6

TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Discussion paper prepared for the second national
Higher Education Transformation Summit, 2015**

Council on Higher Education

Introduction

More than two decades into the democratic era, the legacy of exclusion and marginalisation, and skewed representivity in South African higher education remains pervasive. Its depth and impact has been brought to public attention periodically through disruption at our universities, often finding violent and destructive expression.

Much as the violence and destruction have been [correctly] roundly condemned by several higher education leaders and commentators, what is brought sharply to our attention is that the most critical challenges facing the reconfiguration of higher education continue to be the social justice imperatives of equity and redress.

Undoubtedly, reform efforts in higher education have led to noticeable changes since the 1997 White Paper. Restructuring has indelibly changed the landscape of higher education from the racially imbricated architecture of the apartheid state to that of the democratic one. Student enrolment has

changed markedly to come ever closer to national demographics. However, while the South African higher education sector today is profoundly different from the apartheid inheritance, it has some distance to travel before it can be declared that the imbalances of our past legacy have been eradicated, and that transformation goals have been fully achieved. It is apposite therefore to be gathered at this conference convened by Minister Blade Nzimande to reflect on the transformational challenges that should preoccupy us for the foreseeable future, triggered in part by the restiveness experienced on many campuses with the perceived slow pace of change in a number of institutions.

Higher education can and should be a major catalyst for development in all its dimensions, and the wider transformation of our society. We therefore should take particular notice when key constituencies and interest groups in our society are persistently arguing that higher education is not fulfilling these purposes, and might in instances be a conservative force reproducing the status quo. Candid and dispassionate reflection is therefore called for.

We are of the view that in the context of the knowledge economy, the focus on high level skills development and the need for redress, the transformation of what Ngara (2003) refers to as the 'core function domain' of higher education, has the potential to address the enduring inequalities of our society and play a critical role in an emerging, non-racial, progressive democracy. Moreover, producing critical, independent citizens and skilled and socially-committed graduates who would be capable of contributing to social and economic development (CHE, 2013) must cement the pre-eminence of HE's role in the development of our society to its full potential. Central to this mandate is for higher education to give attention to the challenges, obstacles and affordances which might inhibit or enhance the university's capacity to fulfil its core functions – research, teaching and learning and social engagement (Cloete & Maasen, 2015). This again underscores the importance and value of periodic reflections like the one that brings us together here.

Transformation and knowledge production

The rapid advancement of new technology has had disruptive influences on HE administration and delivery, opening up new avenues for recruitment, student support, research collaboration, staff development, and teaching and learning resource development. Formerly exclusive sources of knowledge production, custodianship and dissemination continue to recede in dominance as knowledge becomes widely and often freely available to a global student population, catching the traditionally dominant knowledge producers in a defensive stance, or having to play catch-up in this seemingly unpredictable and largely uncharted terrain. Social media platforms such as Wikipedia, YouTube and Google, and the MOOC phenomenon, have dramatically and possibly irreversibly altered the ways in which knowledge is created and consumed, and educational opportunities made

accessible to legions of the marginalised in society. Increasingly amateurs are involved in compiling and curating knowledge. In this ephemeral world, the credentials of higher degrees as the markers of expertise have diminished in status and influence. It would be remiss of us not to give attention to these forces and consider their implications for strategic action as a transformational imperative.

A central transformation challenge in knowledge production is the extent to which we continue business as usual while the requirement is to take a fresh look at knowledge production processes, repositories, and avenues for dissemination, and the role of private enterprise in this. The most critical challenge we confront in public higher education is that the bulk of knowledge produced is funded by the public purse at every step of the way, then placed in private repositories which public institutions and scholars have to pay exorbitant amounts to access. This must change. Publicly funded knowledge outputs must as a principle, be placed in the public domain. A radical overhaul of the knowledge production, publication, dissemination and funding processes is called for.

Higher education institutions will have to question traditional paradigms, drive new approaches to teaching and learning which harness the affordances of technology, and give sustained attention to the persistent challenge of promoting access with success in our developmental context.

To be truly transformative in our approach, institutional missions and plans must support national developmental goals. A corollary is that HE must be adequately funded and the quality of provision boldly and robustly assured by the agencies tasked with these functions. The burgeoning demands in delivery, expansion, accountability and reporting have occurred in the face of resourcing which has not kept pace.

Transformation, however it is conceived, is about shifting a learning and teaching institution from one state to another and involves the people who teach and who conduct research, those who come to learn and those who are employed in the organisation to support its core work (Soudien, 2013). Transformation of knowledge production extends far beyond the achievement of an equitable demographic composition of the student body in terms of access and success, the achievement of equity in the staff body, improvement in research outputs, and the production of high-level skills for the economy, much as all these are vitally important. To be truly transformative, our higher education system will play a significant role in helping to build an open, democratic, post-apartheid society and an informed, critical, and socially aware citizenry. Central to this challenge is to address the legacy of inequality, the wealth gap, and increasing polarity in our society by exploring avenues that will take us towards greater equity.

A transformed higher education system will be one in which deserving students have a range of higher education and other post school opportunities to access education. The White Paper on Post-School Education canvasses this point sharply in that these opportunities would include ones which

are more directly vocational, to those that prepare students for professional practice, or that lead to socio-economic development. Others would prepare them to join the ranks of the next generation of academics, thereby ensuring the sustainability and growth of the higher education system. It is a higher education system in which energies are focused on the core functions of teaching and learning, and research, and in which those energies extend to scholarly engagement with a range of different communities for their upliftment. It is also one in which matters such as accommodation, finance, institutional cultures, and extra-curricular activities are conducive to the knowledge project, and one in which the campuses are safe, nurturing and stimulating environments, ensuring the primacy of academic activity. Finally, it is one in which the probabilities of dropping out or failing are remote. Battering down the doors to gain entry into our HE institutions will be a pyrrhic victory politically and in terms of policy goals while the patterns of dropout and failure continue.

Work in progress

The transformation of the HE system as described above is plainly work in progress, beset by many challenges. It is also a highly contested space, with different and sometimes competing conceptions of where it should be headed and what needs to be done to get there.

It is clear from performance data, however, that much needs to be done to achieve the idealised state sketched above. In terms of output overall and equity of outcomes in particular, graduate production remains very low and is far from meeting the country's needs in relation to both development and social cohesion. A substantial improvement in equity of opportunity and outcomes for students remains an elusive transformational goal. The CHE's report on curriculum reform indicates that on the basis of the performance of the 2006 first-time entering cohort, one in four contact students drop out before their second year of study and only 52% of contact students, graduate within the regulation time, resulting in an attrition rate of 40%. The CHE's *VitalStats 2013* publication indicates that 27% of the 2006 cohorts, 27% of the 2007 cohorts and 29% of the 2008 cohorts completed a 3-year diploma, a 3-year or a 4-year degree in regulation time, which indicates an enduring problem (CHE 2015, Figure 125). A transformed higher education system would make it possible for students who put in the necessary effort to be able to complete their studies in the requisite time, without the distractions of funding difficulties, and the hurdles that inappropriately designed curricula and non-conducive learning environments impose.

Many of the difficulties experienced by students when they reach university flow from problems in the schooling sector, but these are unlikely to be fully resolved in the near future and the higher education sector is responsible for addressing the needs of the students it serves. This will require

rethinking many of the current curriculum structures, including teaching and assessment approaches, and reflecting carefully on institutional cultures.

Transformation is fundamental change process meant to overhaul thinking, attitudes, ethos, belief systems, policies and behaviours – all underpinned by sustained reflection and action. The transformation of teaching and learning, coupled with broader debates about knowledge and social justice, will be negatively affected if transformation is not viewed holistically.

Managing the demands of different stakeholders, while fostering the independence of a healthy higher education sector focused on quality in teaching, increasing knowledge production and increasing relevance to a developing African country, requires extensive skill in negotiation and prioritisation and inspired leadership towards a clear vision of the future for the system. The CHE has been a significant national structure in steering a shift towards a more reflective approach to teaching and learning and in opening debates about the extent to which the system is fulfilling its role. Through the institutional audits and the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), the CHE has adopted a deep understanding of quality, resonant with institutions making explicit their teaching and learning goals and strategies, and then reflecting on whether such goals and strategies are appropriate for their context. It also involves thinking through, in regard to the national transformation and development agenda (fitness of purpose), whether their internal processes, structures and activities enable them to fulfil these goals and strategies (fitness for purpose). The promotion of student access *with* success is at the heart of such projects.

Responding to challenges

One of the most important transformational challenges is to produce and retain a new generation of academics, while changing the historical social composition of the academic work force. To achieve this, the necessary intellectual, academic and teaching and learning capabilities essential to produce high quality graduates must be cultivated assiduously. While access has increased significantly, equity of opportunity and outcomes are dependent on transformed environments within institutions, and mentoring and support, and should be viewed as a wider movement towards democratising education and facilitating students' possibilities to succeed. Innovative pedagogical approaches, sustained student support and the development of flexible curricula all offer potential means of addressing the high dropout and low throughput rates. In order to achieve the aim of better output of critical graduates, policy and scholarship on teaching and learning is a dire necessity.

Curriculum responsiveness to transformation challenges should be an integral part of achieving the wider societal goals of a socially committed and critical citizenry that embrace the values of non-discrimination and tolerance (Ogude, Oosthuizen & Nel, 2005). Teaching and learning strategies and

curriculum development should take into consideration global standards, while at the same time be based on contextual learning needs. In the digital era, particular attention needs to be given to what has crystallized in the discourse on graduateness as 21st century skills.

Transformation should also improve the learning experience for students with disabilities – one of the most marginalised and under-served constituencies. Attitudinal and environmental barriers preventing students and staff members with disabilities from participating fully in the teaching and learning process should come under appropriate scrutiny and lead to a barrier-free environment. Transformed higher education institutions would respond to the challenge by creating an enabling institutional culture sensitive to diversity and social inclusion, with conditions that stimulate development, and which result in providing lifelong learning opportunities for all students and staff.

Knowledge of transformation is dependent on knowledge for transformation and has to be shared, discussed and confronted in order to identify strategies for implementation. A sober view of the power of executive management, and the roles of staff members, students and stakeholders is necessary to challenge higher education institutions to interrogate the underlying assumptions of their transformation trajectory.

Unbundling what is

While there appears to be no contestation about the importance of transformation in the sector or a shortage of public commitment, frameworks, charters and strategic plans – there seems to be no 'common' window through which progress (or the lack thereof) of the sector can be assessed. The difficulty is that we do not have agreed upon indicators across the sector which would enable us to obtain a snapshot of progress that is being made towards the achievement of transformation. There is also little agreement about what it is and what it could and should be. In taking it forward, it is not essential that there is complete consensus around what is meant by a 'transformed higher education sector'. However, broad agreement or 'reasonable consensus' on the key indicators/benchmarks of transformation and how we reflect and report on them is required, taking into account the complexity of what transformation entails. This is especially necessary given the historical configuration of the system, and the post- 2004 restructuring of the higher education system and its concomitant challenges as we see them across the sector.

Scrutinising the successes and failures of teaching and learning in terms of both the equity and development agendas is not a straightforward matter. While numerical reporting on quantifiable transformation indicators such as figures for race, gender in staff and student bodies is relatively simple to produce across the sector, it is much more difficult to evaluate those aspects of the White Paper goals that cannot be quantified. Transformation appears in many cases to have been reduced to

the pursuit of demographic equity. While this has a firm place in understanding societal change, it does not help an understanding of the true political or moral imperatives for transformation. Measuring certain dimensions of transformation such as equity focuses only a particular dimension or aspect of rather than the concept as a whole.

Challenges include different conceptions and interpretations of transformation, whether transformation can actually be measured accurately, and how the measures are used in assessing progress or the lack thereof. The over-reliance on hard facts and aspects that can be measured quantitatively often means universities are only assessing the formal side of 'how things are done' and losing sight of the principles behind the concept itself. This approach in isolation could encourage playing the numbers game in order to beat the reporting system, and underplay the qualitative interactions required for a critical and robust discourse.

While the goals of the development of a transformation measurement tool seem highly desirable, the question is how one would achieve this kind of overview and detailed assessment on a system-wide basis. As Professor Gordon Zide has argued, 'no one university in South Africa can claim to be totally transformed' (Zide, 2013). While indicators such as research throughput rates are sometimes used as a measure of the success of an institution, 'the real measure of a university's transformation is how well it responds to societal needs'. The challenge is then to produce something that is useful while at the same time does not oversimplify issues of great complexity. Given that transformation is a multi-layered concept, the means to achieve it must similarly be multifaceted. One project or programme will not lead to success on its own. A multiplicity of programmes addressing different aspects of higher education transformation taken together in a holistic way – the support elements such as funding and housing, making academia attractive to a new generation of academics, and above all, addressing all aspects of curriculum and teaching and learning - will together lead to a transforming higher education system. The result will be a system in which students are achieving their full potential, in which knowledge is continually being stretched and deepened, and in which the outcomes are such that higher education leads the economic, political and social development necessary for equity.

Asking the difficult questions

What kind of education do we provide to students who pass through our institutions, and how does this contribute to the principles of social justice and equity? Are we sufficiently sensitive to the diversity among our students and do we cater adequately for this in the educational process?

How do we achieve student access with success on sufficient scale? How can we harness the affordances of technology optimally in pursuit of this goal?

What are the layers of knowledge that a student needs to negotiate in order to be successful? What adaptations are necessary for lecturers to teach a transformed curriculum to a transformed student body?

References

Council on Higher Education (2013) *A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure* (CHE: Pretoria).

Council on Higher Education (2015) *VitalStats: 2013* (CHE: Pretoria).

Cloete, N., Maasen, P. (2015). *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education* (African Minds: Cape Town).

Ngara, E. (2003). *A Holistic Approach to Transformation* (University of KwaZulu-Natal).

Ogude, N., Oosthuizen, M. & Nel, H. (2005) *The challenge of curriculum responsiveness in South African Higher Education* (CHE: Pretoria) Available at: http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/che-events-presentations/challenge-curriculum-responsiveness-south-african

Soudien, C. (2013) *Managing the planning of transformation* (unpublished paper).

Zide, G. (2013) 'A compass for university change' in *Mail & Guardian*, *5 April 2013*. Available at: http://mg.co.za/article/2013-04-05-a-compass-for-varsity-change