

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE ON THE OCCASION OF THE VIRTUAL HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SUMMIT

09 December 2020

Prof Sibongile Muthwa, Chair of the USAf Board and Vice-Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University;
Prof Ahmed Bawa, CEO of Universities South Africa (USAf);
Chairs of University Councils, Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Heads of Schools and Academic Departments; Esteemed international guests and speakers;
CEOs and officials from private higher education institutions and other organisations represented here today;
Officials from the Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation and other Government Departments present today;
Academics and administration professionals;
Universities South Africa management;
Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to open the first virtual Higher Education Leadership and Management Summit, to be held under the theme “Leading and managing the University in Africa, for disruption, complexity, and change.”

On Conference Theme:

The theme of the Conference – “Leading and managing the University in Africa, for disruption, complexity, and change” - is critically relevant to those in higher education wishing to grapple with the transformational challenges facing not only the post-school education and training system, but arguably, wider society.

I say this because I do not think one can properly understand ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ of the University in Africa, or for that matter, issues of ‘disruption’, ‘complexity’ and ‘change’ outside of a critical understanding of the wider contradictions of our time.

Right now, the whole world is rightly seized with the struggle to combat the pernicious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our Universities have been in the forefront of the struggle to achieve this. It has correctly dominated our minds and hearts for almost the entire year. And 2020 has certainly been an unprecedented challenge for the leadership and management of our Universities and the wider PSET system.

But the COVID-19 crisis is also connected to a wider set of crises; of social inequality, of climate change, of technological disruption, and linked to all of the above: a crisis of the global capitalist system. What is clear to me is that unequal ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic is manifesting itself, together with climate and technological changes, are all deeply connected to the nature of this system. In fact, we cannot speak of a sustainable, let alone equal society, unless and until we fundamentally change the nature of the global economic and social order.

Referring to the Conference theme, I want to suggest that delegates might want to consider debating the issues of 'disruption', 'complexity' and 'change' in the context of three (3) inter-related historical concerns facing the entire PSET sector.

Firstly, and related to the point made earlier, is the central question of the role of public universities in promoting fundamental structural transformation of society: that is to say, the struggle for a more inclusive, equal society. How can our universities be in the forefront of the quest for a more sustainable alternative?

The FeesMustFall struggles of 2015-2017 have produced a new wave of ideals and energies which have sparked a wide range of curriculum, pedagogic, research and innovation experiments at almost all our universities. The question we have to ask is how is this energy leading a movement from universities into society?

Secondly, for universities to promote the goals of an equal, inclusive society, they themselves must be equal and inclusive, and key to this is the challenge of transforming the dominant relations of knowledge production within our universities - which are still largely patriarchal, racialised and reproduce the dominant class inequalities in societies.

How can we use the COVID-19 moment, to pose deeper questions about the knowledge producers and types of knowledge of the academic system: how far are we in the development of black and women academic in scholarship? How far are we in the redress of institutional inequalities faced by our historically-black and rural universities? And where are we in the reconstruction of curricula that presents fresh alternatives to the dominant discourses of the wider economic and social order?

Thirdly, I think Conference is also presented with an opportunity to address the challenge of conflict management and resolution at our universities. This is an issue of serious concern today.

I come from a political and intellectual tradition that argues that without struggle there will be no change. But this belief does not mean that such struggles must be violent and destructive – especially in a democratic society. We have to replace traditions where stakeholders destroy public buildings and threaten others with campaigns that are transformative, constructive and co-creational in its power.

It cannot be that present and future struggles for change by some stakeholders are lived out in the same way in which we struggled as students in the 1970's and 1980's under Apartheid.

Another issue that I would like to place very high up on the agenda of this webinar, is the absolute necessity to build a durable and sustainable public university system. Building strong public universities is one of the key challenges facing the African continent in Africa.

South Africa has built a relatively strong, if not equal, public university system but that is increasingly facing huge challenges and threats - increasingly relying on

student fees with diminishing public investment by government, whilst simultaneously bursting at the seams.

A related question is what kind of partnerships do we need to forge between a public university system with the private sector, and most importantly with communities and civil society.

On the Challenges of the Current Academic Year:

Under Covid-19, we have noted that a number of universities are pointing to better student performance in comparison to previous year's performance.

We have interrogated the reasons for this performance and found multiple contributory factors although inconclusive at this stage because we are yet to conduct more assessment across all our teaching and learning parameters, especially after the completion of the 2020 Academic year.

Our initial assessment indicates that during this period we had positive impact in many areas in respect of (i) the multimodal, blended approach to teaching and learning, (ii) opportunities provided to students to learn in different ways, and (iii) multiple assessment methods.

It is therefore unavoidable that blended and multimodal learning, including digital and online learning should become a standard feature for our future PSET system.

In this regard, I intend to set up a Ministerial Task Team to help us develop strategies to make online learning a reality in our sector beyond the existential challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having said that, we will have to take into consideration the class and spatial legacies of the past which continue to impair the ability of many of our students to fully take advantage of learning opportunities presented by digital platforms.

Part of our major consideration should be the selection of our programme offerings, resource allocations, enrolment planning processes, as well as the identification and development of new qualifications and programmes in line with the needs of our economy and society as a whole.

This is a relevant concern in reference to the latest National List of Occupations in High Demand (OIHD) in South Africa which I announced a week ago.

This list tells us which occupations are likely to have such vacancies and which occupations are likely to grow due to new investments, especially by government.

In this list, we have identified 345 occupations that are in high demand out of a total of 1 500 registered in our Organising Framework for Occupations.

During the past two decades the world of higher education has also changed dramatically, with significant implications for university governance, leadership and management.

It is again unequivocal that the South African PSET sector is in transition and grappling with major challenges arising from these global and local development imperatives.

There is no doubt in my mind that the sectoral and institutional disruptions and protests by students and other stakeholders in South Africa, in the form of the '#RhodesMustFall,' '#FeesMustFall' and '#OpenStellenbosch' movements, have presented a new and challenging environment for current and future managers and leaders of higher education to operate in.

It appears nowadays that traditional methods of governance, leadership and management have been challenged by demands from students and other stakeholders like organised labour, for more democratised forms of governance, leadership and decision-making.

Another threat facing our PSET is the growing corruption characterising some, though not all, of our universities. As the PSET sector, we therefore need to intensify our campaign against corruption and state capture tendencies, and redeem the image of our institution.

We need to work very closely with our law enforcement agencies and expose those individuals within our system who continue to work with corrupt business individuals and networks.

We must always remember that our institutions are places for education and intellectual empowerment of our youth, not places for tenders and self-enrichment.

I cannot even begin to stress the necessity for us to turn our institutions into safe havens for all the women who works and study at our institutions.

We must wage a war again gender-based violence and patriarchy. We must adopt deliberate and guided programmes to ensure that we transform our institutions to reflect the social and intellectual diversity of our society by ensuring the representativity of women and blacks in the management echelons of our universities and emergence of new unorthodoxed ideas capable of challenging the dominant ones.

Some writers and commentators also suggest that the higher education sector has a leadership crisis and requires a new kind of leadership and management that is attuned to transformation, pluralism on the one hand and performativity and efficiency on the other.

Programme Director,

In South Africa, the notion of university leadership has only recently expanded to a broader understanding that includes Head of Academic Departments, Head of Academic School, Deans, and Deputies as well as Administrative Leadership, such as Registrars' functions and Faculty Managers.

Their need for “structural and systematic training development programmes” is acute in both the academic and administrative domains of universities.

It is for these reasons of advancing management that my Department of Higher Education and Training partnered with Universities South Africa to develop and implement the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme.

Although the HELM programme has been in existence since 2002, it achieved a focused strategic direction in 2017 with financial support through the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) and direct input from the Department of Higher Education and Training, in partnership with Universities South Africa.

Reconfigured in 2018, HELM offers valuable perspectives on the contemporary leadership and management context, complexities and challenges facing universities. The need has never been greater for HELM to provide all levels of university leadership and management with skills, strategies and insight into this ever-shifting terrain.

HELM’s mission is to explore and create relevant and cutting-edge solutions that build organisational and individual capacity needs in universities. The overarching objective is to ensure that the higher education system is endowed with leaders and managers able to drive their institutions towards a transformed future in this challenging environment.

It is evident that the successful partnership between the DHET and HELM has already resulted in some exciting outcomes such as the pilot in Women in Leadership programme which was launched online on the 1st September 2020 and ends in March 2021, with twenty-six (26) participants from seventeen (17) universities.

Another new development on the horizon is the University Lecturer Development Programme (ULDP) that HELM is designing and will implement with financial support of the ETDP SETA in 2021.

There is no doubt in my mind that HELM will grow from strength to strength with these dynamic partnerships and collaborative ventures.

We have witnessed, globally, a temptation within some parts of the higher education sector to indulge in a kind of short-termism where universities deal with immediate crises in the belief that if we hold out, it will be business as usual again. I am sure you will agree with me that the sector cannot go back to the old ways of operating and that we have to think, plan and act in view of the long-term challenges facing us all.

The HELM Summit is based on a series of probing questions that seek to provoke new ways of thinking about higher education in South Africa. In the presence of abrupt change, methods and notions which may have applied before might not necessarily remain relevant.

Fresh and dynamic thinking is required during periods of disruption, complexity and change, that is the platform which the Summit provides. In a time of uncertainty and anxiety the need for profound and meaningful reflection, and the subsequent learning that emerges is vital.

Thus, the intention of these proceedings is to engage by deeply questioning and reflecting on our 'taken for granted' assumptions of the ways we think about higher education as well as our practices.

Furthermore, the Summit has been organised along five (5) thematic questions with the intention of guiding participants into a process of creative thinking that sparks new and insightful thinking.

Allow me to briefly reflect on these questions which will form the basis of the inputs and generative discussions at this Summit

How can leadership lead in the age of complexity?

The intention is to invite a comprehensive approach to the notion of leadership within higher education.

We are experiencing cumulative, disruptive trends emanating from social, economic, technological, environmental and climatic changes and presenting a new, as yet unknown, ecosystem. Navigating the complex ecosystem presents an unprecedented challenge and opportunity for innovation in leadership.

How do we develop sustainable, resilient Higher Education Institutions?

The underlying assumption is that higher education institutions will have to brace themselves beyond the present moment of survival and adjustment to a post-Covid 19 future of a society never imagined before. The ability to 'bounce forward' (to coin an EU phrase), to confront difficult issues, to critically engage with emancipatory alternatives and to move ahead within the context of chaos and disruption is required.

"Normal" as we know it will not return. Higher Education institutions must take up their leadership role in demonstrating what this might entail in the ways in which it relates to its immediate and wider communities.

How do we develop critical, compassionate and creative citizens of the future who will manage the complexities of the future?

Students, academics and professional/administration staff need to understand now what future generations might be dealing with and the implications for their educational experiences.

While critical citizenship is required in strengthening and deepening democracy, recognition of each other and compassion towards each other is required in building strong communities within a democracy.

How can this understanding and worldview be nurtured on our campuses?

What does technology disruption and the virtual space mean for the university?

The Covid-19 pandemic has foregrounded both new opportunities and threats posed by the 4IR in respect of our collective goals of a more equal, inclusive society. Considering the impact and implications of new technological innovations such as AI, robotics, machine and deep learning, automation and the changing nature of work, and its implications on higher education, is a crucial leadership task.

What might be the implications of virtual teaching and learning for on-campus and off-campus experiences?

What might be the implications of the new technologies for investment decision for on-campus infrastructure utilisation?

How can technology mediated and supported teaching and learning help us to overcome the historical challenges of class, racial, gender and spatial inequality?

Question 5: How are institutional cultures impacted in an age of complexity and disruption?

If institutional cultures reflect dominant relations of power in society, we will have to grapple with the question about how the drivers of new technological change and its disruptive effects will promote the emergence of new elites on our campuses.

If institutional cultures at our universities can interrogate and challenge these dominant relations of power, we can hopefully disrupt the reproduction of new patterns of dominance so that 'disruption' and 'complexity' do not become a mask for new forms of exploitation, exclusion and dominance on the back of pre-existing inequalities and relations of power.

My sincere wish ladies and gentleman, is that these questions will not only stimulate critical thinking but also begin to propel us on a creative journey towards new solutions and possibilities for not only South African higher education, but also wider society.

Thank you for attending the HELM Summit especially during these challenging times.

I wish to take this opportunity to wish you well as we come to the end of 2020. I am acutely aware that whilst some of our universities have completed the academic year, many others are still charged with the task of completing in the first quarter of 2021.

To all of you, I wish you well for the coming festive season and for the New Year. Let us always remember to adhere to the COVID -19 health and safety protocols, by wearing masks, keeping physical distance, avoid shaking hands and sanitising all the time.

I thank you