Higher Education as a Lever for Socioeconomic Development: Challenges and Possibilities of the ODL University

Prof Makhanya Mandla
Principal and Vice Chancellor
University of South Africa

Chaired by: Ms Florence Nakayiwa-Mayega, Director of Planning, Makerere University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

This presentation will examine the role of higher education in fostering economic growth and human development in the African context. Theoretically the paper is informed by a critical perspective to the study of higher education and socioeconomic development in sub Saharan Africa. First the paper will tease out the role of the university and in particular the ODL University in a developmental State. Secondly using critical theory the paper will examine key issues in the provision of higher education such as access, equity, quality assurance and effectiveness of the African university in an era of globalization and the marketization of the academy. The paper will end with pointers on how an ODL institution making use of ICTs can be an important partner of a developmental state in the difficult road in pursuit of the MDGs.

1 INTRODUCTION

In South Africa and the African continent as a whole, higher education is now seen as central to the social, political and economic development of our countries because of its role in the education and training of highly skilled human capital. The pivotal role of higher education in the education and training of people with high level skills and the production and dissemination of knowledge makes it an essential partner in current attempts in South Africa and the rest of the continent to increase the rate of economic growth and human development. In fact, the social and private rates of return to higher education are now regarded as higher
than the returns to primary and secondary education. Thus higher education and training especially in the developmental state plays an essential political and “social role in forging the national identity of the country and offering a forum for pluralistic debate”\(^1\) in countries that are either recovering from conflict or from the negative impact of colonialism and the vicissitudes of globalisation. In the South African context, higher education institutions have an added responsibility: that of increasing access to higher education and training by an African majority that was once denied their right to university education by the apartheid regime until the advent of independence in 1994. Hence the massive investments in higher education by the South African government to increase access, throughput rates and the quality of graduates. In order to understand South Africa’s endeavours to re-structure higher education and training so that it serves the needs of a developmental state, we need to understand what is regarded as the crisis of higher education in South Africa and the African continent.

**Methodological and theoretical orientation**

As I weave through this presentation, my analysis is predicated on a critical approach to the study of the university because as a sociologist by training, I am interested in how cultural, historical and political influences shape the developmental trajectory of the continent and our countries. Furthermore, I am interested in the analytical merits of Michael Foucault’s concept of genealogy and its concern with the relationship between knowledge and power. Contestations such as these reverberate in the university as we try to expand enrolments and address issues of quality, equity, research and retention of our academics. A critical perspective is essential because it enables us to examine the often hidden relationships between cultural practices, structures and ideology in education and the university in particular. Additionally, a critical approach helps us to understand “issues of power and the politics of social change”\(^2\) in the university; and at the same time enable us to conduct a disciplined questioning of how power “works” through the various practices in higher education. In fact, this is why some authors assert that education or learning in particular is a political act because epistemological issues are about: “who generates an understanding of the experiences” of our students and how knowledge in the academy is “legitimized or not

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legitimized”. As a person who is responsible for managing the largest university on the continent, methodologically I draw my impressions from auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography is utile because it helps me to engage in critical reflection of what I do on a daily basis both as a Vice Chancellor and as an organic intellectual. I am able to critique my experience of culture itself. In other words, by adopting an auto-ethnographic approach, I am able as a sociologist to do “a critique of self and society, self in society, and self as resistant and transformative of society”. This enables me to consider myself and my experiences and practices within Unisa, an African university. As part of my day-to-day existence in the university, I am able (and required) to think reflexively of what I do as a manager and servant leader in the academy.

2 THE CRISIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In South Africa and the African continent what we term a crisis in higher education has largely been brought about by the inability of the university to cope with increasing demands for higher education and training. While participating rates in education on the continent have not been as high as they are in Europe, North America and Asia, enrolment rates (especially for women and rural poor students) have increased significantly since independence in most of sub-Saharan Africa. In the South African context government intends to increase enrolments in tertiary education by 2030 to 1,5 million students from the 2011 figure of 890 120. Our current participation rates are 16% of the age cohort. Government intends to raise this percentage to 23% by 2030. Judging on our performance at the moment, especially considering our current growth rates and funding patterns, the projected figures will put a lot of strain on the current system of Higher Education. The recent Green Paper for Post School Education proffers Open Distance Learning (ODL) as a means of expanding the system of higher education and for increasing access while reducing cost to the student, the university and the State.

Continently, it is recognised that the phenomenal growth in this sector has not been matched by increases in the funding for the sector. In fact, in a number of cases, funding per student has been dramatically reduced as most developing countries face economic problems

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5 Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011
and a fiscal crisis that is almost endemic. This financial situation in a number of African countries has resulted in a crisis in the quality of teaching and research and in some cases impacted on staff morale resulting in a flight of academics from the university to the private sector or abroad as is the case with the brain drain in most African countries.

Such a crisis in teaching and learning has led to *inter alia*, the following problems: overcrowding and lack of physical facilities and human resources essential for teaching, research and innovation. In some cases, as we have seen in the horn of Africa, the political crisis of the African state has resulted in the demise of higher education and training as universities have been closed due to political conflict and lack of financial support from a weak developmental State. In my own country, excessive demand in some cases has led to a serious political and governance crisis in the academy that has resulted in violent student riots with some institutions being placed under the “administration” of the State. As an ODL institution we have been, so far, immune to such student related problems. Furthermore, the challenges we face in higher education in the South African and continental context are also a result of a burgeoning crisis in the quality of primary and secondary education. Universal primary education did not factor in issues of quality. Moreover with large numbers of learners being moved through the school system, the university is now faced with large numbers of under-prepared students seeking admission in the academy. Universities are required to provide additional support to compensate for low quality schooling.

The increasing enrolment of school leavers has mean that the age-profile of Unisa students has changed dramatically over the past three decades. Traditionally, as an ODL institution the average age of our students was higher than those in residential institutions. However with the increasing numbers of learners completing their schooling, there is an influx of younger students resulting in a completely different profile of student with completely different needs. However, as an ODL institution we do not face the same challenges that other universities have in this sector because the distance learner is required to be highly motivated to study autonomously and, for those who are employed, is able to derive immediate benefits from studying - thus a further motivation for the student.

### 3 QUALITY ASSURANCE

A more serious internal crisis that the African university has to contend with at this historical juncture is associated with quality assurance issues – in particular with regard to high attrition and repetition rates, declining throughput rates and high staff: student ratios. These
challenges have a deleterious impact on the quality of the graduates produced by the academy often giving rise to complaints from both the public and private sectors that the graduates we are producing in the academy are not prepared for the world of work or for their roles as entrepreneurs who would usher in a new era of economic development on the continent. Since we receive funding from the public sector, we are subject to regular quality audits from the Council for Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Committee with the Department of Higher Education playing a key role in ensuring the quality of our programs, curriculum renewal and teaching. In response to the need to improve on the quality of our graduates, my own institution has developed what we call the development of a student’s success framework so that we are able to implement and manage “an integrated student success and support framework” that will enable us to address risks associated with student learning, teaching, learner support and graduation.

4 CURRICULUM REFORM
This situation has now led to a drive to renew and revitalize the African university by focusing on reforming the curriculum to meet the demands of the knowledge economy and to harness the advantages of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In the South African academy there are calls for “Africanization” of the curriculum and the introduction of ethics in teaching, learning and university management at the institutional, college/faculty and departmental levels. We are now faced with a need to educate and train a graduate who is committed to the social, economic, technological and even moral development of Africans and our institutions in both the public and private sectors. Grant Farred (2010: 68-69) has termed this university product in a developmental state a meta-intellectual. For him, a meta-intellectual asks the following questions:

1. What kind of thinking does the state make possible?
2. What does it mean to think within the political ambit of the state?
3. What does it mean to think for the state, to think as the state?
4. How does the intellectual pose the problem of politics from within the state?

For the academy to produce such a graduate, we need to pay particular attention to the way we teach, assess, examine and certify our students. Thus every university on the continent is trying very hard to grapple with change management so that the university can be more

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productive in terms of the quality and quantity of its graduates. This brings me to the next issue I want to address which is access and equity.

5 ACCESS AND EQUITY
Let me start first with access. Here I am not just concerned with the issue of number of students entering the university. I think in this respect every African university has done an excellent job although our participation rates are still lower than those in countries with similar economic growth rates and GDP in Asia and Latin America. For me, epistemological access is much more fundamental than just access to a degree or diploma. According to Cross and Mahomed, epistemological access inter alia refers to:

1. The way students relate to the academics in the university and how this relationship is managed in the academy;
2. The manner in which we distribute responsibilities between the student and the academy as far as teaching and learning is concerned;
3. Pedagogic distance which refers to the manner in which, “cognitively” the student is distanced from his or her knowledge repertoires in relation to what is being taught in the academy;
4. The manner in which most of us use and disseminate knowledge that is outside the world of the students’ vocabulary;
5. The student’s inability to unpack the rules and guidelines that make it difficult for him or her to understand how the university works and its intricacies;
6. And, how the student appropriates research and at the same time distances himself or herself from the production of knowledge in the academy. This challenge of epistemic access is at the heart of the African university as far as knowledge production is concerned and those that work in it.

Epistemological issues lie at the heart of what others in the developing world have called the beginning of an “epistemic de-colonial de-linking with all its historical, political and ethical consequences”. This is where the African university can begin to formulate its own identity distinct from the British, French or Portuguese university which was the progenitor of the

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African university before independence. In my view, real and meaningful change in the academy begins in the realm of epistemological and philosophical predilections that undergird, how we teach, what we teach, why we teach, the content we teach and how we manage the academy at the departmental, faculty and institutional levels.

For Mahmood Mamdani, epistemological issues are also important because higher education is where:

1. Teachers are trained;
2. Curricula are developed;
3. The range of leadership of an independent country is cultivated; and
4. Research is located... it is the strategic heart of education”.

Therefore as higher education practitioners from a Continent with the lowest economic growth rates and human development indices, we have to ensure that the African university is poised to play its critical role as an entrepreneurial and developmental university whose essence is the socio-economic and political development of the African landscape. In terms of just sheer numbers especially in the physical and natural sciences we either have to go the route of a blended mode of teaching and learning or go the full length of an ODL university (ie become an e-learning university).

6 KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND RESEARCH
We have to find a mid-point between the university as a producer of knowledge and the university as a vehicle for both economic growth and human development. But here we must always shy away from the influences of a neo-liberal discourse in the academy so that we are also concerned with the development of the human and social sciences which are essential in the development of values and issues associated with the development of democratic principles on the Continent. The university should be our vehicle for helping Africa and the developing world to chart a new path to human development, economic growth and democracy and good governance. I am a firm believer of the view that we should differ with the neo-liberals and ensure that the university assists our nations in producing knowledge that will enhance the creation of more employment for our people. We are all familiar with the concept of the triple helix as a model of how the university should link with industry and the

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State. As argued by Etzkowitz and Dzisah, it is essential that we re-configure the triple helix model so that we accentuate the following:

1. The transition from an industrial society (in our case rural and dual economies) to a knowledge-based society in which knowledge producing institutions, like universities, potentially play a greater role in innovation and development;

2. The emergence of polyvalent knowledge, in such areas as biotechnology, computer science and nanotechnology, that is at one and the same time theoretical and practical; patentable and publishable;

3. The transition from large scale physical technologies that mandate bureaucratic forms of organisation to increasingly autonomous individual and teams that can introduce innovations easily; and

4. The rise of an entrepreneurial university model that incorporates classic ivory tower and Humboldttian elements with a culture of entrepreneurship, innovation and technology transfer.

I agree with this formulation of the role of the academy because it enhances our ability as the African university to respond to the needs of our societies that are still characterised by poverty, disease, illiteracy, conflict, crime and in some cases bad governance and lack of democracy. The university I am arguing for needs to be creative and agile in terms of its organizational culture or what we call “organizational architecture” in my university. We also need to re-think the role of the professor so that he or she has time to teach, do research, supervise students and yet at the same time be linked to industry in what some regard as the research professor or the “professor of practice”. Some authors have called this model the “institutional convergence”. The boundaries between the university, the state, civil society, commerce and industry must now be blurred. As such we expand the original triple helix model.

One area in which the African academy should play a key role is in the education and training of master’s and doctoral programs. The statistics we have in South Africa do not paint a good picture.

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As an ODL institution, we are now experimenting with a model that enables our supervisors and academics to develop programs that that students can take online at the pre-proposal and proposal stages. In fact now our students have to register for the proposal module. Some of our academics are trying to develop a model that is between the American and the British mode of training post graduate students. The PhD is at the apex of the system in terms of producing knowledge workers for the university and society in general. It is in the university that high level skills are developed and there our attention should focus on how we train students at the PhD level. In fact, as Anthony Bogus points out, the process of epistemic decolonization should start at the university level as we ponder “where new knowledge comes from.”11 In addition to these issues we need to think about the time it takes for one to complete a PhD apart from examining the main causes of attrition rates. In South Africa it is five years in certain fields and I see this as problematic. At a more fundamental level we should now borrow a leaf from the American university in beginning to identify outcomes and indicators for post graduate education and training.

Within this formulation, the African university needs to be creative in terms of its approach to research and the space it accords its academics to conduct research. Here my concern is not just with research in the physical and natural sciences but with social science research as well. Emphasis needs to be on research and development, research and teaching and research and learning. In the process our research activities are linked to development, our pedagogy and the manner in which our students learn. Our concern should also be on how science enters the public domain and not just industry. As for social science the emphasis needs to be on grounding societies ethically and morally. Social science should not just focus on policy and on helping us to build sustainable societies. According to Yusef Waghid, the African university should be a responsible university which:

“... constantly disrupts or resist the possibility that its knowledge producers have moved towards or attained completion ... instead space must always be created for new narratives in the making, or perhaps moving towards some unimagined possibility”12.

In my view the university can only succeed in achieving this goal if it is oriented towards addressing the needs of the developmental State. It has to be an African university for African interests and challenges and not the university in an African country!

7 ICTS AND NEW WAYS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

To address issues access fully, we have to think of the utility of ICTs in the academy in a creative manner. Most of you will agree with me that ICTs are changing the way we teach, conduct research and how students learn. The higher education landscape on the Continent will never be the same again as our campuses are being wired so that students and academics can use ICTs anywhere on campus wirelessly. In my own institution, we are now moving towards a fully online delivery mode for post graduate studies thereby enhancing access to tertiary education in a manner unimaginable a few years ago. As noted by Tedd Dodds, ICTs if responsibly deployed in our institutions will lead to the development of an innovative and responsible university by enabling:

1. Building communities of innovation;
2. Radically changing institutional processes and practices; and
3. Implementing infrastructure and tools that enable people to excel.\(^{13}\)

In fact for me ICTs will enable the development of situated learning and the development of communities of practice with a university and across universities in South Africa, the continent and globally. The introduction of ICTs enables the university to introduce new modes of delivery faster and cheaper. I do not want to use this platform to market my own institution. But I just want to briefly note that we are an ODL institution and we have been in existence for almost a hundred years! In our case, the responsible deployment of ICTs has enabled our academics to develop new ways of teaching and learner support. Our experience at Unisa shows that the introduction of ICTs has enabled us to improve our service within and outside the university. In the process we have been able to create new possibilities for collaboration in terms of teaching, research, community engagement and academic citizenship. It is in teaching that we have made big strides by developing a virtual learning environment and creating facilities for students to access learning 24/7. In the process academics have been able to develop new pedagogical models that have helped us to create

“a network which is teaching-oriented and itself a learning system”\textsuperscript{14}. Thus we have taken Peter Senges’s notion of the learning organization to a different level.

Even in the African context, ICTs have transformed teaching, learning and the geography of education. ICTs have helped to increase access in the academy especially in the ODL institution like Unisa thereby helping us to satisfy our social mandate of increasing access to the historically disadvantaged on the continent. Even the residential university is now realising that it cannot survive without going the blended mode. As noted above, ICTs engender the development of 21\textsuperscript{st} century learners or what others have termed as “digital natives”. According to the report of the American National Science Foundation (2008: 15-19), the introduction of ICTs in higher education enhances:

1. A new participatory Web culture;
2. The ease of deploying software at Web scale;
3. The introduction of OERs with a potential of revolutionizing teaching, learning and research;
4. The development of economies of scale in terms of student numbers and reduced unit cost of education;
5. The advent of ubiquitous computing, mobile and broadband networking;
6. New collaborative modes, media richness and virtual world in the academy;
7. The development and deployment of a cyber learning infrastructure based on knowledge about learning

What is however revolutionary about ICTs in the academy is that they engender a new kind of academic, learner, researcher and administrator/manager. Even our notions of knowledge production change. Thus knowledge is no longer the sole responsibility of the academic but it is jointly co-constructed by the academic and the student. Students are very active knowledge producers in this new environment. They construct, discover and transform knowledge as they experiment with different forms of devices and software which includes cloud computing. In fact, as we all now know mobile computing and the use of tablets and smart phones will change the way we learn, construct knowledge and communicate with each other. These devices may eventually change our construction of the university.

It may look as if I am painting a very rosy picture regarding the use of ICTs in Africa. I know quite well that the digital divide still exists on the continent. We have communities that still do not have access to the internet and mobile devices such as smart phones because of poverty and the high cost of bandwidth. But as we all know the situation is fast changing especially with the advent of marine sea cables that have been deployed around the continent. Within the next few years, the situation will have changed completely. In my own country South Africa, the price of bandwidth and connectivity is coming down every six months. Therefore, most of our students should be able to have access to the internet for educational purposes.

8 CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD
I would like to end my presentation by arguing that if the ODL University in particular, and the African university in general are to play their central role in the socio-economic role of the development of the continent, we must focus on producing knowledge that can be used by our people. In a globalized world the danger is that as small nations, we may be flattened as Thomas Friedman would say by the big powers. Therefore, as African universities we must guard against what Mahmood Mamdani and Dan Nabudere have termed the marketization of the university and the comodification of the knowledge we produce and continue to accentuate the developmental role of the university and its academics. We must make strategic choices as managers of the African university that enable us to bring about a meaningful change on the continent.

Three issues will continue to be central to the developmental university as noted by Ami Zusman\textsuperscript{15}:

1. Who pays for higher education and training? Shall we go the route of privatization or education is a public good.

2. Who benefits from studying at the university? Even by 2030 South Africa’s participation rates will be 26% of the age cohort. Compare this figure with Singapore and South Korea.

\textsuperscript{15} Ami Zusman “Challenges Facing Higher Education in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century”, http://www.education and democracy.org/ Resources/ Zusman.pdf.
3. Who decides what happens in the university? In other words how do we grapple with issues of accountability, governance and coordination as we get accused by academics of managerialism and destroying academic freedom in the university?

As leaders and intellectuals in the African university we must also adopt an oppositional methodological stance that challenges western “cannons of neo-positivist research-impartiality and objectivist neutrality ... because the world is an inter-subjective creation and as such we cannot put our commonsense knowledge of social structures to one side”\textsuperscript{16}. This is why I prefer make use of auto-ethnography as a method of interrogating and problematizing the African university and its developmental role reflexively from where I sit in the academy as Vice Chancellor.

Colleagues, what I have attempted to sketch is to reconceptualise my own understanding of what the African university should do if it is to assist the continent in avoiding what others have termed the “growth tragedy” in Africa. We owe it to our people to develop systems, processes, structures and strategies that will enable the African university and the African intellectual to produce, share and store knowledge that should free us from underdevelopment and lack of growth especially among the poor and in the urban periphery of Johannesburg, Nairobi, Lagos, Dakar and Nouakchott. It is our role to take forward former South African President Thabo Mbeki’s Africa’s renaissance if there is to be hope for Africans and the African Continent.
