

ANNUAL REPORT 09|10



THE VOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

LEADERSHIP VISION OF HIGHER EDUCATION





THE UNIFIED BODY OF LEADERSHIP

in a transforming, dynamic and diverse system of Higher Education in South Africa

Higher Education South Africa (HESA) was formed on 9 May 2005, as the successor to the two statutory representative organisations, the South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) and the Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP). The launch of HESA was in part driven by the restructuring of the higher education sector which resulted in the establishment of new institutional types but also by the need for a strong, unified body of leadership.



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CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

Dr. Theuns Eloff

When the Department of Education was first set up it was largely understood to be based on a compromise. In 1994, the priorities for government, in the field of education, were as diverse as they were immense. The dismantling of apartheid bias and the normalisation of the sector was paramount. Although the primary focus was on basic education, it was equally understood that higher education required its own set of solutions.

Even given the mergers and other transformative agendas, 2009 was felt, by many, to be the year in which higher education was finally placed on the front burner. The establishment of the Department of Higher Education and Training was long overdue. It heralded, for the first time since the advent of democracy, a serious re-conceptualisation of what the university needed to achieve. This was in itself a revelation. Questions and resulting positions relating to the university had – since the first policy stirrings in 1996 – been based on the more ethereal question of identity. Now the question relates to purpose. 2009 describes a subtle but important shift from “what does the higher education animal look like” to the more pressing question of “what can and should it do”.

This re-conceptualisation was therefore structural rather than driven by policy. There were no green or white papers driving the process. There was simply political will. In this sense, the newly established Department was a placeholder for change. And that in itself was significant because of two reasons.

After the recalling of former President Mbeki the higher education sector was invited, with the other sectors comprising the Social Cluster, to a meeting with the incoming government. The theme of the exchange was one that, on the surface, seemed remote from the supposedly more lofty pursuits of our universities: ‘what was the role of higher education in poverty alleviation’. By way of preparing for this meeting, our institutions put together a short publication that outlined the existing initiatives underway in which both rural and urban universities were addressing this pressing need. These stories covered a wide range of activities – from blue sky research to assisting farmers in Nguni cattle rearing – and which taken as a composite whole provided a fascinating picture of the way that our universities are currently engaged in making a significant change in the quality of life of all citizens, especially the poor.

The year under review was, in many ways remarkable. It saw the establishment of a new order – for those in higher education at least – that was felt to be a long time coming.

The picture that emerged was as fascinating to our universities as it was to government because it produced a sense of the radically different ways that various universities were contributing to the bigger picture of development.

Secondly, soon after the formation of the new Department we met with the new Minister of Higher Education and Training, and it became clear to the Vice-Chancellors at that meeting that there was space for a different kind of engagement. Here was somebody who was not only open to suggestion but, more importantly, was open to co-shaping the future of the sector. With this impetus, the board set about a visioning exercise of how it wanted the sector to look like in the future. Prior to this, the stresses and strains placed on the sector meant that it has been largely reactive and defensive. Here, at last, was an opportunity for higher education to dream a future that would not only produce a critical citizenry, but to do so in a manner that was aligned with the human resource needs of the country. It is generally accepted amongst Vice-Chancellors that there was no point in simply fulfilling the mission and vision of the individual institution without taking into cognizance broader societal needs.

What resulted was a vision document put together by the leadership of higher education in the country. It spelled out a far more utilitarian understanding of the purpose of higher education and it will be the document that will govern our approach to the future. I must say that as the Chair of HESA for the past two years, I cannot think of any time where the important role that this organisation can play is greater. The sector is on the verge of ‘greatness’ – in the way that it can contribute to the greater good of the country (and by this I mean an effort that transcends political manoeuvrings and posturing) – or it can become negligible, another white elephant.

What happened in 2009 was a fortuitous dismantling of an old order in order to allow for something new to emerge. What that is, is still not clear but the fact of the matter is something good can come of this and it remains up to the sector and government to bring this new, more optimistic entity to birth. Judging by the healthy and creative participation of the HESA Board at our regular meetings and workshops, and by the wise counsel that I gratefully received from the Executive Committee – sincere thanks to each of you – I think we can look forward to a new chapter in the way HESA functions and the future impact it will have on higher education.

Dr. Theuns Eloff



REPORT OF THE HESA CEO

Prof ED Malaza

2009 ushered in a new kind of education vehicle, but not one that anyone could have realistically foreseen a year earlier. The formation of the Department of Higher Education and Training admittedly took the sector by surprise. Its formation went against the ways that policy were historically formulated in South Africa. Normally, there was a long and drawn-out process: a Green Paper put together by various stakeholders, then offered up to a bigger group of stakeholders for public and private comment before finally making its way into the White Paper. This laborious process offered those most affected by the policy the time to make their minds up, to lobby, to grow acclimatised to the policy implications and to assume a position in this regard.

The higher education sector, in 2009, was not so much offered this opportunity as confronted by its reality. That's not necessarily a bad thing. When first placed behind a steering wheel when one is only accustomed to a horse requires a rapid and sudden reevaluation of priorities. That was the experience of 2009.

What it meant was that HESA had to re-assess its modus operandi in order to figure out if the organisation's present structures and foci were indeed best suited to finding a means of relating productively to this new educational channel.

As the Chair's report makes clear, much of this process was taken up with a visioning exercise conducted by the Vice-Chancellors and prioritising the ideal elements needed to have an effective higher education sector over the next decade.

For myself and the Executive Office however, a parallel but slightly different exercise took place over the course of the year. The question that we needed to answer was whether the existing structures – especially in the form of the strategic groups, standing committees and communities of practice – and strategic focus areas were suitable for doing business within a landscape that now included Further Education and Training Colleges as well as the Sector Education and Training Authorities. So while the Board focussed on the vision for higher education over the next decade, the Executive Office re-evaluated the internal structures and how they fitted into this expanded landscape. The result of these double enquires was largely positive.

The Board has managed to produce a vision document that speaks to the broader environment without losing focus on the core mandates of the university. The findings of the Executive Office were as revealing.

“If I'd have asked people what they wanted,
they would have asked for a better horse”
Henry Ford

The structures that have been put in place over the past four years have created a network of leadership expertise that is far larger than the Board itself.

Obviously HESA's structures end with the collective Vice-Chancellor voice, but now there is a larger expert community that feeds into it and offers different proficiencies and perspectives. Aligned communities of practice feed into strategy groups, which feed in turn into providing opinion and advice for the Executive Committee and, beyond that, into Board debates and decisions.

Perhaps more importantly, it is the diversity of these structures that allows for a amalgamated picture of activities and initiatives that comprise the sector's take on events as they happen. A case in point was the meeting with the Presidency in February in order to discuss ways in which the Social Cluster was contributing towards poverty alleviation within South African. HESA, within an extremely short period of time, collated sector responses and compiled a document that detailed the many ways in which universities were working towards poverty alleviation. This document was subsequently published as *Making a Difference*. A similar process occurred when HESA gave input into the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme in August 2009. What emerges from these examples is that HESA is now in a position to rapidly mobilise expertise within the sector through its structures and to provide both government and civil society with composite pictures of higher education in action. It is hoped that – in the coming years – this capability is further honed and enhanced.

A less obvious outcome of the examples above, lay in the way that HESA began to get to grips with one of its major historical challenges: higher education's relationship with the media and society at large. As Lord Hewart's aphorism goes “justice should not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done.”

The same can be said for the work of both HESA specifically and higher education in general. It is not good enough for institutions to quietly go about their work whether in teaching, research or engagement with the community; the sector has to collectively and repeatedly show South Africa what it is delivering and to showcase its achievements. This need to advocate sectoral accomplishments is a non-negotiable for the Board and will increasingly shape HESA's work in the future.

In the same way as HESA's structures and layers of expertise are working in tandem to achieve results, I must express my gratitude to my management team and staff for their sterling work over the year. It has not been without its challenges, but the dedication and team-work of the Executive Office has been crucial to me personally as well as contributing significantly to the successes that HESA has been able to achieve over the year under review.

Prof. ED Malaza



A RENEWED VISION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION



Early in 2009, Vice-Chancellors were invited to write open letters to the incoming government on higher education issues.

Some of the issues highlighted were urgently pressing while others were focused on longer-term concerns that would help make for a more effective sector. The identified concerns were seen as important in strengthening and enhancing the quality and diversity of our institutions of higher learning as well as enabling them to respond more efficiently to national development priorities. The response from the Vice-Chancellors was overwhelmingly positive. At a strategic workshop of HESA Board members (Vice-Chancellors) in June, HESA was able to finalise a synthesized vision for the higher education system together with system and policy considerations for the coming 10 years.

Underpinning the document was an understanding that government is facing tough policy challenges and choices, exacerbated by the local and global economic crisis and uncertainties. This climate also means higher education has the opportunity to reframe its relationship with government and to deepen and strengthen its role of providing solutions to the most critical national challenges.

The publication *Pathways to a Diverse and Effective South Africa Higher Education System* captured that vision and outlined the challenges that would need to be overcome. This vision is critical for stakeholder engagement and also informing what the HESA Executive Office should focus on in the coming years.

