

SOUTH AFRICA: Academics, executives embrace dialogue

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There is a dearth of critical voices on what direction higher education should take. More often than not academics and executives do not share views although they are fighting for the same purpose. When the two 'sides' met at Rhodes University in South Africa for a second round-table last month, the debate was wide-ranging - and included how to continue talking.

There were academics and-or executives from the universities of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Rhodes and South Africa, as well as from Princeton Theological Seminary in the US and Utrecht University in The Netherlands.

This was an attempt to create space for higher education intellectuals, so that their views could influence decisions at universities as well as national policy, said Saleem Badat, Vice-chancellor of Rhodes, opening the meeting organised by the university's Centre for Higher Education, Research, Teaching and Learning, CHERTL.

The first round-table was held in February and, said Badat, provided a platform to engage on academic freedom and social responsibility and the conflicts between them. The intellectuals discussed a report published in 2008 that reflected growing concern over the South African government's 'steering' of higher education, which risked becoming interference.

The second round-table was titled "The Aims of Higher Education" and CHERTL kicked off discussions seeking, among other things, to feel the pulses of academics and administrators, draw expertise from their daily experiences, assess the value of education taught, how students ought to be taught, define universities' identities and formulate ways to deal with challenges.

"We hope to create an intellectual space for social transformation," said Professor Pedro Alexis Tabensky, the round table organiser, adding that the whole idea was to empower academics to engage with issues, which will feed into policy and benefit society.

"An intense and focused discussion on issues relating to higher education among academics and academically-minded administrators who are having a deep impact on the way the tertiary sector is evolving in South Africa, is what we hope to sustain," Tabensky told *University World News*.

South Africa, he said, was in a unique position to think about the nature of universities and the tertiary sector in general, given its history and nefarious legacy.

In April Dr Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education and Training, told a stakeholder summit on higher education transformation that positive developments in the sector were not going far enough as the legacy of apartheid was still clearly discernible in higher education - as it is in many aspects of South African life.

"The relative deprivation of formerly black, rural institutions still exists. They constantly teeter on the brink of bankruptcy, much of their infrastructure is inadequate, teaching and study facilities are poor, libraries and laboratories are badly stocked, accommodation for many of their students is over-crowded and its quality is appalling, and staff qualifications do not begin to compare with those at the better-off universities," Nzimande said.

Tabensky said Rhodes was a university that had largely catered for the privileged, yet it was located in a town divided between a small largely white elite living in a 'settler village', and a growing 'location' consisting largely of unemployed adults and young people with little prospects of a future outside of poverty.

"The contrast between these two 'worlds' is staggering. And it seems to me that the question that those who make up Rhodes University should be asking themselves is: how should we be as scholars and teachers in a context such as this one?"

Adam Habib, a Deputy Vice-chancellor of University of Johannesburg, was worried about the fact that the brightest graduates were staying away from universities while an ageing group of senior white academics was teaching, with no guaranteed solution to this problem.

He said too much of the higher education conversation was over policy or protocols associated with human resources, labour or financial administration.

Heila Lotz-Sistika, who holds the Murray and Roberts chair of environmental education and sustainability at Rhodes, said since the university had emerged in human history as a place devoted to a common universe of discourse within enlightenment, her quest was how people can participate in universities.

"Critical thinking, spectator science and reflective judgment are some of the purposes put forward for higher education in universities. These are all framed in analytical forms of reasoning and are presented as a quest to escape narrow views - to access the universe," Lotz-Sistika said.

Andrew Nash, academic freedom chair and associate professor in the department of political studies at the University of Cape Town, offered a relook at excellence in higher education, which he said was seldom critically examined and often compared with mediocrity as if there were no alternatives.

Nash said academic values could be spread by example rather than competition, and norms of achievement could be assessed by debate over the values of competing projects rather than by a bureaucratic process.

By following such ideals the university remained open to serving the needs of society as a whole, rather than serving wealth and power. "If we are not careful we end up mimicking power instead of seeking what is it we can contribute to authority," said Nash.