



Transformation: The time is now

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Over the past two years, South African public universities have been engulfed by a wave of protests by students demanding free education, social justice for contract workers of university outsourced services as well as transformation of the sector.

For obvious reasons, the #FeesMustFall campaign has gained prominence that has eclipsed the calls for both insourcing and transformation.

This is hardly surprising when one takes into consideration the persistent intergenerational poverty in our country, ever-growing levels of inequality and unemployment, as well as underemployment.

The demand for access to free higher education is seen as key to opening vast work, leadership and entrepreneurial opportunities in our society.

With Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges currently seen as less attractive, public universities are under extreme pressure to absorb the majority of students.

Universities have been primary and often soft targets of protests by students demanding free education, but university funding in general terms is not something that universities can resolve on their own.

It is primarily a government that can make changes in the university funding formula through fiscal and policy intervention.

The Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training as well as current interventions by the government through increased National Student Financial Aid Scheme funding for poor students and the “missing middle”, are a clear indication of this.

Complex yet necessary

The issue of transformation is more complex and yet more central to the academic project of a university as a knowledge and training institution.

Moreover, it is an area that is within the competence of any university.

Transformation has many dimensions that include, but are not limited to, curriculums, symbols that define public spaces, gender, institutional culture, language, procurement and employment equity.

Given the colonial and apartheid history of our country and the African continent, transformation is an imperative that goes to the very essence of what the role and purpose of a university in our society and the continent are.

The appointment of former president Thabo Mbeki as Unisa’s chancellor and his clarion call for an embrace of an Africanised university that is relevant and linked to the society it serves will give us a new impetus to accelerate the implementation of our transformation agenda.

Currently, the call for transformation has been articulated in general terms that sometimes conceal the complexity of this essential process.

As we deal with curriculum change, there is a need to pose and answer pedagogical and epistemological questions to guide the process.

Decolonisation of our curriculums, wherein dismantling of colonial, apartheid and Eurocentric systems of education are major factors, must also be informed by clarity on what constitutes a relevant, Afrocentric education system that is still globally competitive.

At the heart of this project are the past, present and future experiences and realities of our society and the African continent.

For this to happen, an institutional arrangement that will create an infrastructure for multistakeholder engagement within and outside the university is an important vehicle to create ownership of the process and its co-created output.

Universities, as centres of knowledge, ought to embrace and lead transformation rather than being reactive and sometimes defensive.

Transformation is a complex yet necessary imperative that has no single template.

A meaningful role

Being an open distance-learning and comprehensive university with a nationwide and continental footprint also compounds Unisa's transformation reflection and implementation.

It is important to reflect on how a transformed, Afrocentric science, engineering and technology programme that still complies to set international norms and standards will take shape.

It may be easier to answer these questions in many social science programmes than in natural sciences and engineering programmes, and yet we ought to be imaginative and creative to provide answers.

Contact resident universities often have all their stakeholders within a reasonable distance for engagement and Unisa has to contend with the fact that it has more than 300 000 enrolled students across the country, the continent and the world.

This necessitates the use of online forms of engagement to enable broader participation in crafting and implementing a transformation programme.

The programme of embracing multilingualism is yet another important aspect of our transformation agenda that will also need significant deployment of resources in developing the marginalised indigenous languages.

The time for endless debates on university transformation without implementation is gone and failure to lead transformation carries the enormous risk of reacting to an externally imposed change or social disorder that may destabilise and ultimately weaken the university sector.

We are in a process of studying examples of various universities that not only successfully transformed but became agents of societal transformation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Makerere University in Uganda and Dar es Salaam University in Tanzania were leading knowledge institutions that generally informed the African policy agenda.

If our universities successfully transform, they may be in a position to play a meaningful role in leading societal development, including the implementation of the Africa Agenda 2063.

The inauguration of Mbeki, a globally recognised champion of the African Renaissance, as Chancellor of Unisa, is a significant boost to the transformation programme of Unisa and the university sector in general, especially at a time when the demand for change is more likely to grow once finality has been reached on the student funding engagements currently happening.