Programme Director

Vice-Chancellor

Vice-principals

Distinguished guests

Staff

Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon

Strategic Challenges, and Pertinent Paradoxical Opportunities, through an Era of Fluidity - a Higher Education Perspective (Policy Perspective)

Thank you for the invitation to this very important *strategic risk leadership conversation in Higher Education* and for the topic you have asked me to address. I am indeed humbled by the honour.

The Problem

A few weeks ago in a discussion on international mobility of knowledge, I was asked, 'What do I think is the future of university within the context of the fast developing and dominance of technology, in many spheres of our lives'? At the time I responded without much thinking about the answer, but I instinctively based it on the history of resilience of the university in surviving the most challenging circumstances and vastly different encounters across the world. In essence, I partly based my answer on instinct and faith.

On further thinking about the question, I came to the factually and evidence-based conclusion that the university has indeed withstood the test of time, which stretches several centuries[1]. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that it is about to fail now or in future, regardless of the challenges.

Throughout its existence, like a chameleon, – both in physiological condition (or change of skin colour) and in its motion, - so has the university always adapted to its challenging environment. Professor Andre Keet (2018) uses a different analogy of "plastic university" and argues that "the 'origin' of the university, from which it has detached itself, is plastic: flexible, with an inscribed transformative ability rooted in the 'nature' of the knowledge and the disciplines with which it works. The university's essence is transformability"[2].

First, however, the university bears the scars of its survival from major disruptions of the 'normal' order of life. History tells that the university has both **survived** and **contributed** to the following life's social orders and disruptors. On social or societal aspects, the church (the remnants of their shared terminology such as chancellor, dean and proctor provide evidence from the crime-scene); and, the university has both survived and contributed to the state, with all its vastly varied approaches and relationships with the university (state subsidies; the binary division of public - private higher education institutions; and, the recurrent ebb and flow of debates and declarations on institutional autonomy and academic freedom again present evidence from that crime-scene).

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[1] The oldest university is said to be Karueein University, founded in 879 AD in Fez, Morocco and the oldest that is still operation to date is said to be Al-Azhar in Egypt, founded between 970-972 AD. See, Teferra, D., and Altbach, P. (2004). African Higher education: Challenges for the 21st century. *Higher Education*, 47: 21-50.
[2] Keet, A (2018) The Plastic University: Knowledge, Disciplines and Decolonial 'Circulations'. Inaugural Lecture, 23 July 2018. Nelson Mandela University.

On disruptors, the three preceding industrial revolutions, (the discovery of steam engine (1698); the age of science and mass production (1798) and the rise of digital technology (1950s – 1970s), were fiercest challenges at their times, and the university was there; and now, yet again, it is faced with its fiercest challenge in the form of fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres (or collectively known as the cyber-physical systems), and generally referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

So, unlike a chameleon and more like plastic, the university needs to adapt fast. In fact, Gleason observes that, "thus far the changes in higher education have been slow and inadequate, though some are trying to adapt. In the past few decades, higher education has generally experienced only small incremental improvements. Better classrooms, better support, and advanced libraries … but the 4IR requires higher education institutions to depart from the current 3 or 4 year undergraduate model to prepare for lifelong learners"[3].

The question, though, which I will address shortly is, how should the university adapt fast? If it were a chameleon an inducement in the form of prey (an insect) would stimulate some relative speed, but if it were plastic some exertion of pressure and temperature variation would bring the desired result.

Over centuries we have experienced that challenges to the education system and to society change and or evolve over time and that the university has always been there and continuously adapts in order to remain relevant. The adaptation process of the university to its environment does not happen naturally, but

[3] Gleason, Nancy, W., (2018) Introduction. In Gleason, Nancy, W. (Ed) Higher Education in the Era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0194-0_9. Pelgrave Macmillan: Singapore

purposefully driven. I therefore consider the university's mission and research as primary drivers of its adaptation process.

For the university to have relevant mission it must have a good mix of understanding of its strategic challenges; a firm grasp of national strategies and policies; good understanding of student needs and good leadership. In a South African university context by leadership I refer to a student class representative; student representative council; student parliament; shop stewards; leadership of student political formations, organised labour and professional staff associations; heads of departments; deans; senior professoriate; institutional forum; senate; management and council. However, in terms of our national policies the principal or vice-chancellor manages the university.

In taking this approach, I am not in any way insinuating that our education system must be entirely driven or focused on the labour market. First and foremost, I am a firm believer that we must educate for its sake, then derive specialities and skills therefrom. According to Gleason (2018:6) "the necessary cognitive flexibility needs to be there first and the education, even if specifically targeted, needs to emphasize cognitive agility". In other words, the skilling for growth and socio-economic development must, thus, build on the foundation laid by our education system. This should be our strategic approach nationally and institutionally and I have stated this view within the Department.

So chair, I believe that a further examination of a response to the question, *What is the future of university in the context of the dominance of technology in our lives*?, could assist with the navigation of the theme: *strategic challenges, and pertinent paradoxical opportunities, through an era of fluidity*, and of course I would like to give my response from the *perspective* of *higher education policy*.

The current

Understanding 'strategic challenges' facing higher education is, first and foremost, the first logical step towards identification of opportunities for the higher education system, particularly in South Africa. According to Baldrige Glossary of Business[4], the concept of "*strategic challenges* **refers to pressures that exert a decisive influence on an organisation's likelihood of future success**. These *challenges* frequently are driven by an organisation's future competitive position relative to other providers of similar products". In the case of the university, therefore, it will be the services it provides and production of knowledge and graduates which all other universities also produce.

In turn, therefore, the first step towards the realisation of opportunities presented by pertinent paradoxical circumstances must be the ability to diagnose genuine strategic challenges. That is, those that have a potential or threaten the university's 'likelihood of future success'. Some of these may even be routine or default challenges[5].

Higher education policies and strategies are awash with observations of challenges confronting our higher education system which, indeed, present opportunities to the university to research and seek to resolve and, in the process, possibly adapt to how such challenges influence or change our environment, the society. Some challenges have and are exerting influence on the university's likelihood of future success. Some are, somewhat, 'default' challenges. For instance, the *White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher*

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[4] www.baldrige21.com
[5] By default challenges I mean the recurrent, but no less important, ones such as access; quality; funding; et al.

Education Transformation (1997) identifies challenges confronting higher education in South Africa, some of which are, that,

- There is an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for students and staff along lines of race, gender, class and geography.
- There is a chronic mismatch between the output of higher education and the needs of a modernising economy.
- Higher education has an unmatched obligation, which has not been adequately fulfilled, to help lay the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests.
- While parts of the South African higher education system can claim academic achievement of international renown, too many parts of the system observe teaching and research policies which favour academic insularity and closed-system disciplinary programmes (WP3, 1.4).

The challenge to policy makers and the university leadership is to diagnose threats brought about by the challenges and whether they can be classified as strategic or not. Such classification would help with identifying priority challenges, with those classified 'strategic' prioritised ahead of the 'default' ones, and for the purposes of developing appropriate strategies.

The historical context of higher education in South Africa, according to the *White Paper on Higher Education*, is of "inequities, imbalances and distortions" and higher education itself requires transformation in order "to meet the challenges of a new non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society committed to equity, justice and a better life for all" (WP3, 1.6).

The *White Paper on Higher Education* further observes that "this national agenda is being pursued within a distinctive set of pressures and demands characteristic of the late twentieth [and early 21st] century, often typified as globalisation" (WP3, 1.7). It then concludes that "the policy challenge is to ensure that we engage critically and creatively with the global imperatives as we determine our national and regional goals, priorities and responsibilities" (WP3, 1.8). Moreover, that "the South African economy is confronted with the formidable challenge of integrating itself into the competitive arena of international production and finance which has witnessed rapid changes as a result of new communication and information technologies. These technologies, which place a premium on knowledge and skills, leading to the notion of the "knowledge society", have transformed the way in which people work and consume" (WP3, 1.9). These observations and the call remain relevant to the current context.

Not only does the *White Paper on Higher Education* present the strategic challenges which remain relevant today, but also illustrates the fluidity of the national and global contexts. In fact, these contexts have escalated in complexity and sophistication since the turn of democracy in South Africa, and so require equally tough responses, that is, leadership, research, strategies and policies.

The *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET)* (2014) identifies similar challenges and adds that "quality challenges are varied and relate to governance, management, teaching, curriculum, quality assurance, infrastructure, and the insufficient cooperation among post-school institutions and between them and employers" (p.2). The policy encompasses the entire PSET system.

Furthermore, it is, indeed, a fact that we have high levels of poverty; unemployment (especially among youth); and inequality (which has many facets and permutations). Thus, we require the university and the higher education system that is poised to address the strategic challenges.

Furthermore, in order to fully comprehend transformation of policies and the university, Jansen (2018) reminds us that "the majority of youth now entering university are poor and have weak academic backgrounds. The new student profile brings with it two principal challenges – **student poverty** and the pressure on universities to address the social (as opposed to purely academic) needs of their new clientele as well as the need for **universities to compensate** for what was lacking in the preparation students received at school". He contends that, "these weak foundations of the school system have direct implications for universities both in terms of the low participation rates (about half the students starting in Grade 2 do not reach Grade 12), but also in low throughput rates". Add to this, is the rising cost of education.

Therefore, strategic challenges and the evolutionary fluidity of the context demands adaptable strategies, policies and institutions of higher learning which simultaneously contribute to resolution of pertinent challenges. Moreover, the university is challenged to produce graduates that relate and drive the cyber-physical system whilst simultaneously adapting to the same environment. If the university does not poise itself to address itself to these challenges, it seriously faces irrelevance in not so distant future.

So, Where to?

After all it has been said and done, **Research** and **Leadership** are key to the adaptation of universities and in their ability to address strategic challenges that confront higher education. Research, generally as conducted in different fields of study and as the university ought to conduct, as one of its three mandates[6], and, research to inform evidence-based policy[7], and using relevant methods. Whilst research may not necessarily inject pace in the transformation agenda of the university, with appropriate methodologies applied, it will certainly ground its transformation programme and provide certainty.

Such research should be grounded on the needs of today's student[8] and the requirements of the labour market. The university must seek to be **student-centred**. (see Jansen, 2018)

The university requires **visionary, strategic** and **transformative** leadership.

Two of the current main buzzwords in higher education parlance internationally are "**entrepreneurship**" and "**innovation**", and by extension, entrepreneurship and innovative university. I am sckeptical of the buzzwords, however, if they are research or evidence-based, then the university must consider them in its strategy, policy and planning. Therefore, our universities must adapt to infuse innovation and entrepreneurship in their learning cultures. It is entrepreneurship that is going to sustain growth and development of our economy and the country.

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[6] Others being teaching and learning and community engagement.
[7] According to Duncan, 2005, Towards Evidence Based Policy Making, Social Science: "We cannot begin to understand what works unless we understand what whole bodies of research tell us in broad areas of policy".
[8] See different literature on "student-centred" university services.

The Department of Higher Education and Training is embarking on up-scaling of the entrepreneurship development programme in the sector. The programme has three main focuses: entrepreneurial students; entrepreneurship in academia (curricula and staff capability) and entrepreneurial universities. The programme is to be expanded to bring in all partners (including TVET colleges, CET colleges and SETAs) so that it incorporates the whole PSET system.

In other words, if one needs to be successful in the era of 4IR, one has to embark on a life-long learning journey. Gleason (2018:7) further argues that any qualification at any level, up to PhD, is not enough but "it is the skills that will carry you through; the content will always be changing".

In conclusion chairperson. As though the topic was posed to ask: *What are strategic challenges, and pertinent paradoxical opportunities, through the current era of fluidity (higher education policy perspective)?* Based on my experience of national policy and knowledge of our higher education system in South Africa, genuinely existing 'strategic challenges' to the higher education system in South Africa are:

- Adaptability of the higher education system to the fluidity of its environment;

- Relevant and grounded mission;

- Student centredness;

- Entrepreneurial university;

- Innovation;

- Collaborative approach to learning and production of knowledge;

- Research and research of practices; and

- Visionary and transformative leadership.

Thank you